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Antonella Poncini

*The University of Notre Dame Australia*

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**Perceptions of large-scale, standardised testing in Religious Education:  
How do religious educators perceive *The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment*?**

Mixed methods research

Submitted by

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Diploma of Teaching and Bachelor of Education (Edith Cowan University),  
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This thesis is submitted to fulfil the requirements of the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

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## Abstract

This research provides a Western Australian perspective of teaching and assessing Religious Education (RE) in Catholic schools. The perspective recognises RE as a learning area reserved for classroom instruction. This educational focus aligns RE with other learning areas as well as highlights the important role that RE plays in the evangelising mission of the Catholic Church.

A pragmatic approach to research was implemented to focus on religious educators' perceptions of a large-scale, standardised assessment in RE called *The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment* (BRLA). This assessment is developed by the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia. The research surveyed 238 religious educators working in Catholic primary and secondary schools. These religious educators were teachers and school leaders responsible for delivering a RE curriculum common to all four Catholic dioceses in Western Australia. The religious educators were also responsible for preparing students aged eight to fifteen in three Year levels for the administration of the BRLA.

Three aspects regarding the religious educators' perceptions were explored using mixed methods research. The first aspect was how religious educators perceived the purpose and role of the BRLA. The second, how religious educators responded to the different components that comprise the administration and implementation of the assessment. The third, how the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA influenced their teaching and assessment practices in RE. The mixed methods research was conducted over two phases. Phase One involved the collection and analysis of response data from an online questionnaire. Phase Two used individual and group interviews to further investigate the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA.

The research findings suggest that the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA were contrasting and complex. This complexity seems to be a product of an interplay between individual and collective perceptions of teaching RE and using large-scale, standardised assessments. That is, the meaning that the religious educators attributed to the BRLA and the influence their perceptions had on their teaching and assessment practices in RE are interconnected. Furthermore, a connection is evident in how the religious educators interpreted their professional training and teaching experiences in RE and, in turn, prepared for and engaged with the administration of the assessment. These findings act as a stimulus for professional dialogue and collaboration between teachers, school leaders and system administrators who are willing to improve the quality of student learning in RE.

## **Declaration of Authorship**

The research discussed in this thesis investigated how and why teachers and school leaders of Religious Education perceived an assessment used in Catholic schools in Western Australia. The assessment has been used since 2007 to measure student learning of the content in the Religious Education curriculum.

The thesis contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other institution. To the best of my knowledge it does not contain material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text of the thesis.

The Human Research Ethics Committee of The University of Notre Dame Australia approved all research procedures reported in this thesis on 10 May 2012.

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Signature

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Date

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I extend my appreciation to Catholic Education Western Australia. I acknowledge the previous Director of Catholic Education, Mr Ron Dullard, the present Acting Executive Director of Catholic Education, Doctor Debra Sayce, my Team Leader, Ms Diana Alteri, my colleagues and the religious educators who work tirelessly in our Catholic schools. I thank Ron for allowing me the opportunity to explore the perceptions of religious educators under his administration. I thank Debra for her contribution and ongoing support. She ignited in me the desire to pursue further study. I thank Diana for her constant care that steered me through my journey and my colleagues who acted as a cheer squad, providing me with guidance and strength. Of my colleagues, I particularly thank Mr David Byrne, Dr Carmel Suart, Dr Pina Ford, Mr Stephen Harris, Mrs Rosa Ranieri, Mr Peter Higgins and Mrs Kerry Troost in the Directorate of Religious Education and Faith Formation, past and present, for their pearls of wisdom. A big thanks also to Mrs Robyn Valli in the Catholic Library of WA for her focus on helping me find relevant literature. With overwhelming joy, I thank the teachers and school leaders of Religious Education working in Catholic schools in WA who volunteered to participate. Their generosity of time and commitment made this research possible.

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## List of Abbreviations

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Definition</b>
ACARA	Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority
APRE	Assistant Principal/s of Religious Education
ATAR	Australian Tertiary Admission Rank
ACBC	Australian Catholic Bishops Conference
BRLA	Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment
CAPPA	Catholic Primary Principals Association
CCE	Congregation for Catholic Education
CECWA	Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia
CEOWA	Catholic Education Office of Western Australia
CPP	Catholic Primary Principals
CSP	Catholic Secondary Principals
CSPA	Catholic Secondary Principals' Association
ERA	Education Reform Act
GRQ	General Research Question
HREC	Human Research Ethics Committee
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IEA	International Association for Evaluation of Educational Achievement
LSA	Large-scale, standardised assessment/s
MCEETYA	Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy
NCEA	National Catholic Education Association (USA)
NCEC	National Catholic Education Commission (Australia)
NCLB	No Child Left Behind Act
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
P & F	Parents and Friends Federation
PADRE	Perth Archdiocesan Department of Religious Education
PAREC	Perth Archdiocesan Religious Education Course
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PISA	Programme for International Students Assessment
RE	Religious Education
REC	Religious Education Coordinator/s
RECC	Religious Education and Curriculum Committee
REFE	Religious Education and Faith Formation
SACRE	Standing Advisory Council of Religious Education
SCSA	School Curriculum and Standards Authority
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
SRQ	Specific Research Question/s
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
WA	Western Australia
WA Bishops	Western Australian Conference of Catholic Bishops
WACE	Western Australian Certificate of Education
WAMSE	Western Australian Monitoring Standards in Education
WALNA	Western Australian Literacy and Numeracy Assessment

## Glossary

### ***Accountability***

Accountability is considered as the responsibility assigned to individuals or groups (Wang, Beckett, & Brown, 2006). Confusion surrounding educational accountability exists because the word “accountability” has “multiple meanings and purposes and there are several models being used to support the various meanings”. The conflicts are based on the question, “Who holds whom accountable and for what purpose?” (Lee, 2008, p. 610).

### ***Accreditation***

An accreditation framework for all teaching and non-teaching staff working in Catholic schools in Western Australia is outlined in the *Handbook for Catholic schools* (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2001) and in the document entitled, *Accreditation Framework for Catholic Schools in Western Australia* (Catholic Education Western Australia, 2017b). As part of the framework, teachers and school leaders responsible for implementing the Religious Education curriculum are expected to complete tertiary and ongoing professional development for teaching and leading Religious Education. Professional development covers theological content knowledge and training in educational pedagogy, and assessment practices (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2013c). The training is firstly, through professional and accredited courses run by the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia; secondly, through aligned accredited programs offered by the Catholic Institute of Western Australia (Catholic Institute of Western Australia, 2017) at public universities; and thirdly, at a tertiary level by The University of Notre Dame Australia (The University of Notre Dame Australia, 2017). The courses for teachers differ in number and content from those for school leaders. Once teachers achieve an Accreditation to teach Religious Education certificate they can work towards an Accreditation for Leadership certificate (Catholic Education Western Australia, 2017b).

### ***Assessment***

Assessment comes from the Latin word, *assidere* (Stevenson & Waite, 2011, p. 78; Wiggins, 1993) meaning “to sit beside” and to evaluate worth (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013, p. 18). Educational assessment stems from psychology. The term refers to the systematic process or processes for collecting information or data. The information is used to make judgements and inferences about student learning (Reynolds, Livingston, & Willson, 2009, p.



3). Over time, assessment has replaced the word “testing” to include a broader variety of tasks and to avoid association with intelligence testing in psychology (Athanasou & Lamprianou, 2005). Also, in education, assessments are considered measurement tools. The term measurement refers specifically to the rules used in the design of tools or instruments, and methods for scoring student learning (Wu, Tam, & Jen, 2016). Measurement tools used in education include classroom tests, assignments, projects and standardised assessments (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013). Other measurement tools with built-in rubrics that are used to assess student learning include observations, surveys and oral presentations.

### ***Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority***

This Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) is governed by the State, Territory and Federal governments to work on educational matters. ACARA was established on 8 December 2008 under section 5 of the *Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority Act 2008*, No. 136, 2008 (The Parliament of Australia, 2008).

### ***Catechesis***

Catechesis is a form of evangelisation (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997; Holohan, 1999). As an evangelising activity, Catechesis is grounded in the mission of the Catholic Church and refers to the nurturing of faith through initiatory and ongoing formation (McKinney, 2013). In Western Australia, this formation of faith begins in the family and the parish community (Suart, 2007) and is supported by Catholic schools (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009).

### ***Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia***

The Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia (CECWA) was established by the Western Australian Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1971 to act on their behalf on matters relevant to Catholic education (Pendal, 2008). Father James Nestor was appointed the first chairman of CECWA and in 1981 also became the first Director of Catholic Education in Western Australia (Pendal, 2008; Tannock, 1979). CECWA is responsible for formulating policies and providing resources to ensure and maintain the quality of the Catholic education system in Western Australia. The work that is carried out by CECWA is in accordance with the expectations of the WA Bishops and the legislative requirements of the Australian Government for managing school funding and education standards.

Membership to CECWA is appointed by the WA Bishops. Those appointed are generally drawn from groups involved in Catholic education (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009; Catholic Education Western Australia, 2017c). At the time of the study and until 2016, CECWA operated with five standing committees that made recommendations and provided advice (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2001). Members of these committees were appointed by CECWA and included nominees from CECWA, the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia (CEOWA), the Catholic Primary Principals Association (CAPPA), Catholic Secondary Principals Association (CSPA) and the Parents and Friends Federation (P & F). One committee of CECWA was the Religious Education and Curriculum Standing Committee. Examples of actions carried out by this committee include:

- the religious dimension of Catholic schools;
- significant developments in education, including State and Federal initiatives;
- educational priorities in Catholic schools;
- all aspects of curriculum;
- the educational rationale for resource distribution;
- school operational matters, outside those with direct resource input; and,
- faith development matters.

### ***Catholic Education Office of Western Australia***

The Catholic Education Office of Western Australia (CEOWA) was established by the Western Australian Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1986 to act as the secretariat to CECWA. The CEOWA is tasked with the operational responsibilities and activities requested by the CECWA (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 107). These responsibilities include advising and supporting Catholic schools in Western Australia. The support is provided to ensure that Catholic schools comply with all policies and resource provisions from CECWA and the Australian State and Federal governments. The CEOWA has offices located in Perth and in the regional dioceses of Broome, Geraldton and Bunbury.

### ***Catholic school curriculum in Western Australia***

Religious Education is one of nine learning areas taught in Catholic schools and is considered the “priority” learning area (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 62). Other than Religious Education, the learning areas taught in

Catholic schools in Western Australia are categorised under the headings of English, Mathematics, Science, Humanities and Social Sciences, Health and Physical Education, Languages, the Arts and Technology (School Curriculum and Standards Authority, 2017). The standards, content and support material for developing and implementing all learning areas except Religious Education is known as the Western Australian Curriculum and is prescribed by the Ministry of Education for the Western Australian Government (Department of the Premier and Cabinet, 1999). Through the authority of the Western Australian Conference of Catholic Bishops, Catholic education in Western Australia adheres to the educational legislation through relevant curriculum policies (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, 2013c).

### ***Catholic schools in Western Australia***

Catholic schools in Western Australia are established by the Western Australian Conference of Catholic Bishops to fulfil the Bishops' episcopal, religious and educational responsibilities (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009). In 2017 there were 163 Catholic primary, secondary, composite, early years learning centres and care schools in Western Australia (Catholic Education Western Australia, 2017a). For Catholic primary schools, student enrolment is from age four in Kindergarten through to age twelve in Year Six. Catholic secondary schools enrol students from age twelve in Year Seven to age eighteen in Year Twelve. A composite school is one that enrolls students from Kindergarten to Year Twelve. The early years learning centres enrol children from six months to school age and the care centres enrol students who may not be able to attend mainstream schooling. Religious educators from 65 Catholic primary, secondary and composite schools participated in this study. The schools are located in metropolitan and regional areas across the Perth Archdiocese and similarly in the Broome, Bunbury and Geraldton Dioceses.

### ***Director of Religious Education***

A Director of Religious Education is appointed by the Western Australian Conference of Catholic Bishops to act exclusively on their behalf regarding Religious Education (Pental, 2008). The Director works from the CEOWA in Perth with a Religious Education Team. The responsibility of the Director is to develop the Religious Education curriculum and advise and support Catholic schools and parishes regarding catechetical and educational activities. These activities include professional development through accreditation courses. The appointment of principals and other school leaders of Religious Education is another of the

delegated responsibilities of the Director and is shared by the Executive Director of the Catholic Education Office in Western Australia.

Historically, with the establishment of CECWA, the initial appointment of a Director of Religious Education was a practical twofold decision by Archbishop Goody to ensure effective treatment of Religious Education in Western Australia (Pendal, 2008). Pendal writes, “First, to require CECWA to promote Religious Education actively and second, to integrate PADRE’s [Perth Archdiocesan Department of Religious Education] services for children in Catholic schools into that of the Commission” (pp. 261–262). PADRE was responsible for the Religious Education curriculum that was first developed for Catholic schools in Western Australia in the 1980s. The program implemented then and that which is adopted now in all Catholic schools in Western Australia, is authorised by the WA Bishops, promulgated by CECWA, and developed and supervised by the Director of Religious Education (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 104).

### ***Evangelisation Plans***

The first Director of Religious Education for the CEOWA, Father (later Bishop) Gerard Holohan, introduced the use of Evangelisation Plans in response to supporting Catholic schools and ensuring that education standards under the *School Education Act 1999* (WA) (Department of the Premier and Cabinet, 1999) for non-government schools were being met by all Catholic schools in Western Australia (Pendal, 2008, p. 286).

In developing Evangelisation Plans, school principals and their staff are required to acknowledge the priority of the Religious Education curriculum as an activity of evangelisation (Holohan, 1999, pp. 27–29). The school principals also document the catechetical activities of individuals, groups and the whole school community. The catechetical activities are intended to integrate the faith, culture and the life of the school (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, p. 13; Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 37, 1997, para. 11; Holohan, 1999).

### ***Large-scale, standardised assessments***

Large-scale, standardised assessments (LSAs) are usually developed by educational system authorities on behalf of governments in different countries (Gardner, 2012). The assessments have contributed to evidence-based, curriculum reforms focused on raising standards in student learning (Decker & Bolt, 2008). The use of the term “large-scale” refers to students across entire educational systems, locations or states participating in a common

assessment program. The term “standardised” refers to the measurement of student performance using consistent administration procedures, assessment items and strategies for scoring those items (Wang, Beckett, & Brown, 2006).

### ***Mandate: Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia 2009–2015***

*The Mandate: Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia 2009-2015* is a collective policy agreement developed by the Western Australian Conference of Catholic Bishops (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009). Initially written in 1981, the Mandate outlines the delegated responsibilities of CECWA, the CEOWA, all Catholic schools and staff. Together with *The Religious Education Policy, version 2-B5* (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2013b), the Mandate supports Catholic schools in their role. The documents identify the religious instruction (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, para. 75) and the educational components (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, paras. 69, 73) of the curriculum taught in Catholic schools in Western Australia.

### ***National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy***

The National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) is a national assessment initiative established in 2008 (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008a). The program is designed to assess students’ knowledge and skills in literacy and numeracy. Students in Years Three, Five, Seven and Nine participate in NAPLAN by completing four assessments: Reading, Writing, Language Conventions (Spelling, Grammar and Punctuation) and Numeracy. The administration of NAPLAN occurs in May each year (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2013).

### ***Perceptions***

The term “perception” comes from the Latin verb *perceptio*, (Stevenson & Waite, 2011), referring to a dual process of acquiring knowledge through sensory stimulation and experience (Bandura, 1993; Maund, 2003). The knowledge that is gained results in information that is managed and interpreted by the brain. Perceptions are considered in this study as emotions, opinions, values, attitudes, choices, judgements and understandings (Nelson, 2000) that are beyond sensory stimuli and are a result of human experience (Charon,

2010) and cognitive development (Bandura, 1999). This study is interested in the role of perception through social life as an instrument of the social construction of reality.

### ***Religious Education curriculum***

In Western Australia, Religious Education (RE) is considered an activity reserved for the classroom within the context of the wider curriculum taught in Catholic schools (Holohan, 1999). As a learning area offered in Catholic schools, RE has an educational role that is complementary to the role of Catechesis and is part of the evangelising mission of the Catholic Church (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, para. 39; Paul VI, 1975). Given the educational focus, the RE curriculum, includes policies, content and teaching and assessment practices.

The content of the RE curriculum is guided by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994) and the pedagogical principles outlined in the *General Directory for Catechesis* (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997). At the time of this study, RE Units of Work for school-aged students enrolled in Pre-Primary to Year 12 were used to outline the content of the RE curriculum. These Units were developed initially from the Archdiocese of Perth's *The Truth Will Set You Free Religious Education Guidelines* (the Guidelines) (Hackett, 2006; Pental, 2008). The process of development began in 1981 by Archbishop Lancelot Goody and first launched in 1987 by Archbishop William Foley. Between 1993 and 1996 the Guidelines were reviewed and "working drafts" of the Units were written (Hackett, 2006, p. 17). In 2003, full implementation of the draft Units occurred across all Catholic schools in Western Australia. Hackett states:

Like other Catholic education systems around Australia, the Perth RE Guidelines were devised to guide principals and RE teachers in developing their school RE programs. The Guidelines were designed to address the needs of many lay RE teachers who had neither the expertise nor experience in teaching Religious Education. (2006, p. 45)

Subsequently, the draft Units of Work have undergone further changes relevant to the needs of the Church community with its decreased number of consecrated priests and religious brothers and sisters working in Catholic schools (Pastoral Research Office, 2011).

In 2007, student resource books called *Come Follow Me* were written as part of the RE curriculum as support documents for students in Years Eight to Ten in Catholic secondary schools (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2007a). Other support documents are in the form of tailor-made resources to assist teachers with students enrolled in Catholic

schools in remote areas of Western Australia (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2004) and in early learning centres attached to Catholic schools (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2014). Support documents are also available for students with disabilities (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2009). The Units of Work and the support documents are augmented by accreditation courses and registration requirements (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2013c).

Since 2010, the Senior Secondary RE curriculum in WA contributes to the Western Australian Certificate of Education (WACE) course of study called Religion and Life (School Curriculum and Standards Authority, 2016b). As a course of study, scores from the Religion and Life external exam contribute to the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR), a criterion used for entry into most undergraduate university courses in Australia (O'Neill, 2014; Tertiary Institutions Service Centre, 2017). The delivery of the Religion and Life course is based on the social sciences (Berlach & Hackett, 2012) and not of a personal religious faith or confession (Holohan, 1999, p. 29).

### ***Religious educators***

Religious educators in this study are the teachers and school leaders responsible for implementing and leading the Religious Education curriculum. These educators are members of the Catholic school communities entrusted to educate students (Vatican Council II, 1965d) and give witness to the Gospel message (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, paras. 40, 49). They are expected to employ recommended educational pedagogies (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, paras. 43, 61, 62; Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, paras. 58, 60, 62, 70; Holohan, 1999; Ryan, 2007, p. 16) and use assessment techniques consistent with other learning areas (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 65). As part of these expectations, they are required to use large-scale, standardised assessments and understand the role these assessments play in education (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2014). Religious educators working in Catholic schools in Western Australia receive ongoing professional training in education and the Catholic Faith Tradition through the accreditation courses (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2013c). A total of 238 religious educators participated in this study. Of this number, 150 were classroom teachers responsible for students in Years Three, Five and Nine. There were also 57 leaders of RE and 31 school principals.

### ***School Curriculum and Standards Authority***

At the time of the study, the School Curriculum and Standards Authority (SCSA) was a Western Australian education authority considered to be an independent statutory body directly responsible to the Minister of Education (School Curriculum and Standards Authority, 2014). The Authority was established under the *School Curriculum and Standards Authority Act 1997* (WA). As an educational authority, SCSA develops curriculum policies and resources, sets standards regarding student achievement and develops guidelines for the assessment of student achievement. The Authority also develops and accredits courses for schools.

### ***School leaders (Assistant and Deputy Principals)***

Assistant Principals are school leaders working in Catholic primary schools. Deputy Principals are school leaders working in Catholic secondary schools. These leaders are second-in-charge to principals. Their role may include both teaching and administration work. The school leader of Religious Education is known as the Assistant Principal of Religious Education (APRE) in primary schools and the Religious Education Coordinator (REC) or Head of Department (Religious Education) in secondary and composite schools.

### ***School principal***

In Western Australia, the Catholic school principal is the religious and educational leader of Catholic schools. These principals are appointed by the Director of Catholic Education in WA and are given delegated responsibilities by the WA Bishops (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2016b). These responsibilities include understanding, embracing and communicating the Catholic worldview, promoting their school's Catholic identity, giving witness to the Gospel message of the Catholic Church and managing State and Federal government educational policies and initiatives. Prior to the establishment of CECWA, the clergy, with the help of religious orders, were given permission by the WA Bishops to oversee the running of Catholic schools in Western Australia. This is still the case in dioceses around the world (e.g. Elder, 2017). In Western Australia, the religious and educational responsibilities of a Catholic school are delegated directly to the School Principal by the WA Bishops.



### ***The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment***

*The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment* (BRLA) was first introduced to Catholic primary and secondary schools in Western Australia in 2006 (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2006a). The assessment is developed by the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia. Students in Years Three, Five and Nine participate each year in August. The intended purpose of the BRLA is to measure student knowledge and understanding of the content in the Religious Education curriculum. To date, an estimated 150,000 school-aged students enrolled in Catholic schools in Western Australia have participated (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2016a).

### ***Western Australian Conference of Catholic Bishops***

The Western Australian Conference of Catholic Bishops (the WA Bishops) is the governing body for Catholic education in Western Australia (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009; Tannock, 1979). The WA Bishops are Timothy Costelloe SDB, Archbishop of Perth; Donald Sproxton, the Auxiliary Bishop of Perth; Christopher Saunders, Bishop of Broome; Gerard Holohan, Bishop of the Bunbury Diocese; and Michael Morrissey, Bishop of the Geraldton Diocese.

# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **THE RESEARCH DEFINED**

### **1.1 Introduction**

The focus of this study is on religious educators in Catholic schools in Western Australia (WA) and, specifically, their role in administering and implementing a large-scale, standardised assessment (LSA) in Religious Education (RE). The LSA is called *The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment* (BRLA). The research problem motivating the study identifies that in recent times the use of LSAs has attracted wide attention and prompted numerous educational debates (Fullan, 2009; Gardner, 2012). Given these debates, there is a need for empirical evidence about how school-based religious educators perceive the BRLA. Furthermore, the quality of student learning in RE depends on “coherence” between the religious educators’ perceptions of the BRLA and the local intentions by system administrators for the BRLA. For “what is in the minds and actions of people individually and especially collectively” needs to be in line with “the purpose and nature of the work” (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, pp. 1–2). Confidence in such a proposition requires local systematic research. In turn, this leads to clarity about the value of the BRLA as a LSA and possible improvements in student learning in RE.

### **1.2 The Purpose of the Research**

The purpose of this study is to investigate and explicitly describe the personal and professional perceptions (Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2010; O’Leary, 2010) that teachers and school leaders of RE, including principals, have about the BRLA. The scope of the study includes an exploration of the basis for and development of the school-based religious educators’ perceptions. For this study, perceptions are considered as emotions, opinions, values, attitudes, choices, judgements and understandings (Nelson, 2000) that are beyond sensory stimuli and are a result of human experience (Charon, 2010) and cognitive development (Bandura, 1999).

### **1.3 The Research Problem**

The research problem identifies a specific lack of local, systematic research about teachers and school leaders of RE and their direct involvement and experience with the BRLA as a LSA used in RE. Other key stakeholders include the Catholic Education Office of

Western Australia (CEOWA) who are the developers of the assessment, students who participate in the assessment and the parents who support their children and receive reports about their children's achievements. Besides anecdotal evaluations completed by these stakeholders about the administrative components of the BRLA (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013, p. 13), little else is known about how these different individuals and groups perceive the BRLA. However, the teachers' and school leaders' direct involvement with and experience of the BRLA has potential implications for the other key stakeholders.

The study focuses on teachers and school leaders of RE because they are ultimately responsible for preparing students for the BRLA, administering the BRLA and potentially using the student performance data from the BRLA to help diagnose and improve student learning in RE. They are also responsible for leading and fully implementing the RE curriculum used in Catholic schools in WA (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2013b). How the teachers and school leaders of RE perceive the intended purpose and outcomes of the BRLA is important and may influence how students perceive the BRLA. How the religious educators may have been influenced by the BRLA is important too and may, in turn, influence student learning in RE. Also, how these groups of school-based religious educators differ in their perceptions of the BRLA is important and may influence the wider school community perceptions of the BRLA and RE in general.

Until now, the extent to which school-based religious educators recognise the academic nature of RE and understand the role that effective assessment practices play in improving student learning in RE has not been fully identified and understood. Teachers and school leaders of RE are trained professionals that belong to a broader community of religious educators working in primary and secondary Catholic schools in WA. As part of their role, these religious educators are required to have a sound understanding of the nature and purpose of the RE curriculum. They are also expected to effectively teach students and assess the students' learning of the content in the RE curriculum. Therefore, an exploration of the religious educators' perceptions about the BRLA is necessary.

The exploration considers three current and general issues in education. Firstly, the study presupposes educational scholarship about teachers and their fundamental role in the success of student learning (Dinham, 2016; Hattie, 2009; Voltz, Sims, & Nelson, 2010). The second is related to the first and is about the substantial role religious educators have in Catholic education to effectively implement the RE curriculum. The study supports the Church's stance about RE (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988) and the mission of

educators in Catholic schools (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982; John Paul II, 1979, 1988; Vatican Council II, 1965d). Pope John Paul II (1988) states:

The Gospel parable sets before our eyes the Lord's vast vineyard and the multitude of persons, both women and men, who are called and sent forth by him to labour in it.

The vineyard is the whole world (cf. Mt 13:38), which is to be transformed according to the plan of God in view of the final coming of the Kingdom of God. (para. 1)

The religious educators are recognised as managers of the classroom environment (Buchanan & Rymarz, 2008) playing a crucial role within education and within Catholic schools. As presented in the Second Vatican Council's *Declaration on Christian Education*, the Church:

Depends upon them [educators] almost entirely for the accomplishment of its goals and programmes. They should therefore be very carefully prepared so that both in secular and religious knowledge they are equipped with suitable qualifications and also with a pedagogical skill that is in keeping with the findings of the contemporary world. (Vatican Council II, 1965d, para. 8)

To have a focus on religious educators means a focus on the "target audience" (D'Orsa & D'Orsa, 2012, p. 3). To ensure that a curriculum works, there is a need to learn about the values, aspirations and commitment of teachers and school leaders of RE as religious educators who work in Catholic schools in WA. The teachers and school leaders of RE may or may not exercise their professional duties in RE, which, in turn, may influence their RE teaching and assessment practices. The influence of professional duties and practices or the lack thereof may influence perceptions of the BRLA.

The third issue is the ongoing debates about the use of LSAs in education (Thompson, 2012; Wang, Beckett, & Brown, 2006). The extent to which teachers and school leaders of RE perceive LSAs in general and engage in the relevant debates may or may not influence their perceptions of the BRLA and the future intended outcomes of the BRLA. The third issue relates to the second and is about accountability within the context of evidence-based curriculum reforms (Forster, 2009; Timperley, 2009). These reforms have evolved over time and are encouraging teachers and school leaders to work with system administrators to use data from LSAs to improve standards in education (Fullan, 2016; Gardner, 2012). The reforms attempt to close the gap between perceptions of different types of assessments: those developed by teachers for classroom use and those produced by system administrators for use across classrooms and schools (Hill & Barber, 2014; Masters, 2013). The reforms also aim to better align teaching and assessment practices (Kelly, 2005) so as to develop a culture of learning (Earl & Timperley, 2009; Fullan & Quinn, 2016). The degree to which the religious

educators in this study subscribe to the evidence-based reforms may or may not influence their perceptions of the BRLA, but their response to the use of the BRLA as a LSA in RE may imbue a response about evidence-based reforms.

#### **1.4 The Research Questions**

To investigate and address the research problem, a general research question (GRQ) and three specific research questions (SRQs) were used. The research questions together with contributing questions explore the degree to which the religious educators regard the intended outcomes of the BRLA and the possible influence the use of the BRLA has had in the alignment of standards, instruction and assessment in RE in Western Australian Catholic schools (Decker & Bolt, 2008).

The GRQ is: How do religious educators who work in Catholic schools in Western Australia perceive *The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment* as a large-scale, standardised assessment in Religious Education?

The three SRQs that support the GRQ are:

1. How do religious educators perceive the purpose and role of the BRLA as a large-scale, standardised assessment in Religious Education?
2. How do religious educators respond to the administration and implementation of the BRLA as a large-scale, standardised assessment in Religious Education?
3. How do the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA influence their teaching and assessment practices in Religious Education?

#### **1.5 The Research Design and Methods**

The research design and methods were informed by the nature of the research problem. The design of the study adopted a pragmatic approach to research that utilises a range of inquiry methods (Crotty, 1998; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005). The pragmatic approach is a philosophical worldview with theoretical assumptions used to focus on the research problem and how to best solve the problem (Creswell, 2007, pp. 22–23; Punch, 2009). Aligned to the pragmatic approach is mixed methods research. The mixed methods research used in this study applies the structures of the “sequential explanatory strategy” (Creswell, 2009, p. 211) for conducting complementary quantitative and qualitative research (Teddle & Tashakkori, 2009). The decision to adopt mixed methods research was to enhance the trustworthiness of the overall study (Babbie, 2008; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007) and to

provide breadth and depth to the research findings (Bryman, 2004, 2006; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The combination also helped to “better measure” and “tease out” the research findings (Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2010, p. 14). In keeping with the pragmatic worldview, neither qualitative nor quantitative research method was considered better than the other (Punch, 2009, p. 4).

Techniques from both quantitative and qualitative research were used in the study to collect and analyse data. Firstly, descriptive statistics for quantitative research was used. Included in the statistics was an analysis of variance (ANOVA). The use of descriptive statistics derives from Positivism and attempts to observe and measure social behaviour (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2007; Liu, 2014). Rasch analysis (Andrich, 1988; Andrich, Sheridan, & Luo, 2011) was also used in the pilot studies as a quantitative technique for evaluating the validity of survey items. Secondly, Interpretivism (Crotty, 1998) and Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Charon, 2010) as a strategy from the interpretive perspective were used for the qualitative research.

The methods of data collection and analysis were carried out in two phases from September 2013. In terms of data collection, survey research (Babbie, 2008) was used in both phases. An online questionnaire with 90 items was used in Phase One and 21 semi-structured, individual and group interviews were conducted in Phase Two. For Phase One, data were collected from 238 religious educators employed in one of the 65 Catholic primary and secondary schools located throughout WA. This number represents 44.2% (65 of 147) of the Catholic schools participating in the BRLA at the time of this study (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2014). A total of 43 of the 238 religious educators in Phase One volunteered to be participants in Phase Two. In terms of data analysis, the process involved the separate and later combined analysis of quantitative and qualitative data sets from Phase One, followed by those in Phase Two. Cross-referencing of all processed response data was also conducted. Each stage of the analysis process was cross-referenced against each of the three SRQs (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The aim was to triangulate the key research findings in order to validate those findings (Bryman, 2004; O’Leary, 2010). The identification of the research findings and themes that emerged from those findings address the GRQ regarding the religious educators’ perceptions of the BRLA. The research findings and themes relate to the major contexts of the study and play a role in highlighting the significance of the study.

## **1.6 The Significance of the Research**

The potential significance of this study is fourfold. Firstly, the research findings have the potential to contribute specifically to the future development of the BRLA. Secondly, the study provides opportunities for system-wide understandings about perceptions of the BRLA and how best to accommodate for improving student learning in RE. The study has the capacity to specifically influence curriculum design in terms of pedagogy and assessment practices in RE. Thirdly, the findings have the potential to build upon and contribute to educational research about the nature and purpose of teaching RE in Catholic schools. Fourthly, the findings have the potential to build upon research about the perceived use and misuse of LSAs in education.

The research findings offer insights about teaching and assessment practices in RE that support research relating to a range of aspects about RE as a learning area. For example, policy changes (Vidovich, 2007) in RE that recognise the need for a shared vision (Hattie, 2009; Heritage & Yeagley, 2005; Kelly, 2005) between the CEOWA and Catholic schools about the key components of teaching and assessment in RE are probable as a result of this study. The CEOWA and religious educators may collectively be better equipped to enter a professional dialogue about the use of the BRLA as one of many measurement tools used to diagnose and support student learning in RE. Within the context of the Catholic education system in WA, such dialogue may build capacity that leads to whole system understandings, reflections and responses to instructional and assessment decisions about RE (Fullan, Hill, & Crévola, 2006; Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

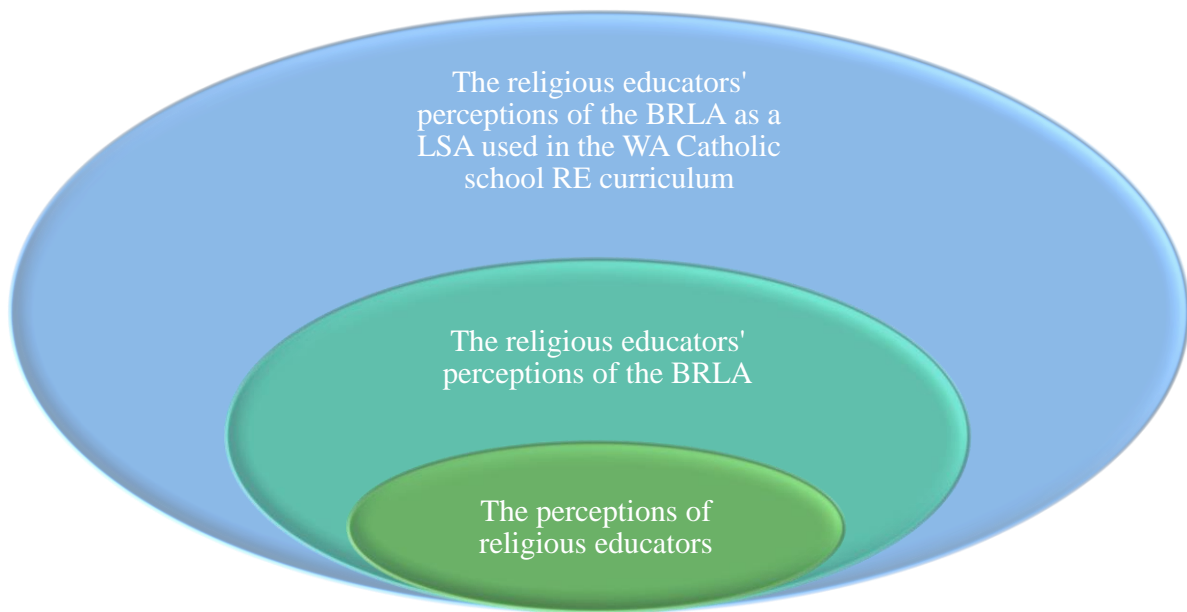
Furthermore, the findings align with research about the necessity for ongoing professional formation for teachers (Hackett, 2008, 2010; Ryan & Grajczonek, 2010) and school leaders responsible for implementing the RE curriculum (e.g. Buchanan, 2014; Frabutt, Holter, & Nuzzi, 2008; Lavery, 2012). Professional formation is said to strengthen the educational nature and role of RE (e.g. O'Donoghue, 2001; Ryan 2013; Scott, 2016) within the context of strengthening how Catholic schools understand the Catholic Faith Tradition and educate students through that Tradition (e.g. Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988; Crawford & Rossiter, 2006; D'Orsa & D'Orsa, 2012). The findings also align with research about the use of assessment practices in RE and the need for more professional development in this area (Healy & Bush, 2010; White & Borg, 2002). In addition to understanding assessment practices in RE, the release of the findings provides local evidence to assess the claims that it is possible to treat RE as an academic learning area that uses LSAs to collect data about student learning.

In terms of research about the use of LSAs in education, the study's findings provide further evidence to support local (e.g. Axworthy, 2005; Thompson, 2012), national (e.g. Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2012; Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013) and international (e.g. Brown & Harris, 2009; Burgess, Wilson, & Worth, 2011) research about the influence that the use of LSAs has on teaching, learning and assessment practices in schools. For example, the findings align with the national (Pettit, 2010; Thompson & Mockler, 2016) and international (Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, La Pointe, & Orr, 2010; Earl & Timperley, 2009; Guskey, 2007) research that identifies differences between teachers' perceptions and school leaders' perceptions of the use of LSAs. Until now these perceptions and the influence of the teachers' and school leaders' perceptions of LSAs on student learning was not understood from a Western Australian Catholic school perspective, specifically in terms of RE.

### **1.7 The Limitations of the Research**

The limitations of this study are confined to the scope of the study (Figure 1.1). The scope is specific to the Catholic perspective of RE in primary and secondary schools in WA. Also, the BRLA is only administered to students attending Catholic schools in WA. The Catholic perspective of RE is educational in nature (Holohan, 1999) and informed by policy decisions (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, 2013b). Within this scope, comparisons are only made between the Catholic education system in WA and other Catholic education systems in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom. Comparisons are also only made between the BRLA and other large-scale or system-wide standardised assessments, primarily, the National Assessment Program: Literacy and Assessment (NAPLAN) (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2016). The focus of the comparisons is firstly, to identify the similarities and differences in teaching and assessment approaches within the context of RE as an educational activity. Secondly, the documentation from the CEOWA identifies the BRLA as similar in its theoretical underpinnings, methodology and structural design to NAPLAN (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013, p. 7; Hackett et al., 2017). The religious educators in this study are involved with preparing students in Years Three, Five and Nine for the BRLA, and in most cases, particularly in Catholic primary schools, are also involved in preparing these students for NAPLAN. Thirdly, the comparisons offer insights about the perceived role of educational accountability by educators working in Catholic and non-Catholic education systems in western countries.





*Figure 1.1.* The scope of the research

The study is limited to explicitly describing the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA rather than the perceptions of any other stakeholder involved with the assessment. The breadth of the study focuses on religious educators and not, for example on students or their parents because religious educators are primarily involved with preparing students for the BRLA and, as educators are considered central to the success of student learning (Dinham, 2016; Hattie, 2009), particularly, in RE (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982, 1988; Vatican Council II, 1965d). The 238 religious educators as teachers and school leaders of RE, who are the focus of the study volunteered to participate in the study. The voluntary participation of the religious educators was without incentives and has three implications for the study. Firstly, there is a skewed representation of religious educators in Phase Two. Most of the 43 religious educators demonstrate support for the BRLA. However, there is a minority who raise concerns about the BRLA. For this study, consideration is provided to both groups. Secondly, no secondary principals volunteered to be interviewed. Therefore, response data from secondary principals only appears in the research findings specific to Phase One. Considerations for this limitation are made in the recommendations proposed from the study. Thirdly, no religious educators in the Bunbury Diocese are represented in Phase Two. The Bunbury Diocese is a regional diocese (National Geographic, 2014; The National Council of

Priests in Australia, 2017). Religious educators working in the regional Geraldton and Broome dioceses are represented.

Given the scope of the study is based on the pragmatic worldview, a key principle from that worldview is assumed. That is, the investigation for understanding the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA from the contexts of teaching RE and using LSAs in RE is beyond any individual perspective. Therefore, the literature presented in this thesis is not considered exhaustive nor mutually exclusive of literature about the study of RE, LSAs and the professional training and practices of teachers and school leaders responsible for RE.

## **1.8 Thesis Overview**

This thesis comprises twelve chapters as listed in Table 1.1. The overview of the thesis began in this chapter. The scope of the research was defined, and the main components were introduced. The components include, the religious educators as the focus of the study and the BRLA as the object central to the religious educators' discussions. The purpose for investigating school-based religious educators is described and the research problem that prompted the investigation is also explained. The research design used to guide the investigation and the methods that helped address the research problem were presented. That discussion was followed by the significant contributions the study offers to local, national and international research about religious educators. Finally, the limitations of the scope of the study were identified and clarified. The chapter concludes with this overview followed by a summary of the chapters that comprise the thesis.

Chapter Two sketches the landscape of the local context of the Catholic education system in Western Australia. Religious educators who are the focus of this study belong to and work in Catholic primary and secondary schools within this system. The chapter discusses the governance structures and policies regarding the role of Catholic schools, the delegated responsibilities for the development and implementation of the RE curriculum and the specific duties of religious educators. Also identified in the chapter are the religious educators as teachers and school leaders of RE who are responsible for teaching and leading the RE curriculum. A description of the BRLA, as one of many assessments intended for use in RE, features at the end of the chapter. This description includes the responsibility that religious educators have in preparing students for the administration of the BRLA and using the student performance data from the assessment to inform teaching and assessment practices.

Table 1.1  
*Thesis Overview*

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Chapter One:	The Research Defined
Chapter Two:	An Overview of the Local Context
Chapter Three:	Review of Significant Literature
Chapter Four:	Research Design and Methods
Chapter Five:	Finding One ( <i>from Phase One that addresses SRQ 1</i> )
Chapter Six:	Finding Two ( <i>from Phase Two that addresses SRQ 1</i> )
Chapter Seven:	Findings Three and Four ( <i>from Phase One that address SRQ 2</i> )
Chapter Eight:	Finding Five ( <i>from Phase Two that addresses SRQ 2</i> )
Chapter Nine:	Finding Six ( <i>from Phase One that addresses SRQ 3</i> )
Chapter Ten:	Finding Seven ( <i>from Phase Two that addresses SRQ 3</i> )
Chapter Eleven:	Discussion of the Research
Chapter Twelve:	Recommendations and Conclusion

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Chapter Three presents the contextual framework for the study and reviews the significant literature and research relevant to the study. Three specific contexts are defined and discussed. These are the nature and role of RE within Catholic education; the nature and role of LSAs in education; and the professional training of religious educators as teachers and school leaders of RE. The research contexts provide the background for the religious educators’ professional experiences individually and collectively.

Chapter Four describes the design and methods used to conduct the study. Early in the chapter, a theoretical framework signposts the key components of the study and their interconnectivity. These key components include firstly, the pragmatic approach to research as the underlying theoretical perspective for the study. Secondly, aligned to this approach is the “sequential explanatory strategy” in mixed methods research. This strategy was used to collect and analyse survey data from religious educators. Thirdly, the quantitative research methods drew from a positivistic perspective and used descriptive statistics and Rasch analysis. The qualitative research methods drew on the interpretive perspective and Symbolic Interactionism as the interpretive lens. Fourthly, two phases of data collection and analysis are defined. The decisions that led to the chosen design and methods focused on addressing the research problem.

Chapter Five is the first of the analysis and findings chapters. One key finding is identified in the chapter. This finding is specific to Phase One of the study. The finding addresses the first SRQ. This question relates to the religious educators' perceptions of the purpose and role of the BRLA. Aspects of the one key finding are identified. These aspects include how the religious educators differed in their perceptions of the BRLA in terms of its meaning, purpose, effectiveness and role as a measure of student learning in RE. The religious educators provided contrasting rationales for their perceptions. These rationales were based on their personal and professional experiences of teaching RE and using LSAs.

Chapter Six is specific to one key finding that is identified in Phase Two of the study. This key finding builds on the previous key finding in Chapter Five because it also addresses the first SRQ. The key finding provides depth and clarity to the religious educators' perceptions of the purpose and role of the BRLA. The religious educators compared their experiences of the BRLA to their experiences of NAPLAN. They perceived the BRLA as having a distinct purpose and role in RE. This key finding reinforces the argument that RE is an educational activity and that student learning in RE can be taught and assessed in the same way as other learning areas.

Chapter Seven identifies two key findings that address the second SRQ. The key findings emerged from Phase One of the study. These findings relate to the religious educators' response to the administration and implementation of the BRLA. Two aspects contributing to the key findings are identified. The first of these aspects suggests that the religious educators perceive the administration of the BRLA as a straightforward and familiar process comparable to NAPLAN. The second aspect suggests that the religious educators responded differently to the implementation of the BRLA in terms of the perceived time and pressure associated with preparing students for the BRLA and the perceived relevance and difficulty of the BRLA test items.

Chapter Eight discusses one key finding from Phase Two of the study. The key finding supports and builds upon the previous two key findings because it also addresses the second SRQ. This key finding suggests that the religious educators perceived the administration of the BRLA as an uncomplicated process. However, they raised concerns about features of the implementation of the BRLA. The religious educators' concerns included test item difficulty for students; a lack of communication about the BRLA by system and school leaders; and the stress to students and teachers associated with the BRLA as a LSA.

Chapter Nine identifies one key finding addressing the third SRQ. This key finding emerged from Phase One of the study. The finding suggests that the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA had a level of influence on their teaching and assessment practices in RE. The chapter discusses the aspects of this key finding: a perceived focus on students' learning; confidence to use student performance data from the BRLA; and perceptions about students and parental engagement with the BRLA and RE in general.

Chapter Ten identifies one key finding. This finding supports and builds on the previous key findings also addressing the third SRQ. The key finding emerged from Phase Two of the study. This key finding suggests that the religious educators who supported the BRLA and LSAs were open to changing their teaching and assessment practices in RE. These religious educators appeared to place a priority on improving student learning. They discussed several ways the BRLA had informed and guided their classroom practices. Alternatively, those religious educators who did not support the BRLA and LSAs also commented that such assessments had minimal influence on classroom practices.

Chapter Eleven presents a synopsis of the seven key research findings identified from the study. The chapter discusses six research themes to emerge from those findings. The research findings and themes are relevant to the significant literature and research reviewed earlier. This chapter discusses that relevance, signalling the interplay between personal and professional experience and the formation of perceptions. The religious educators' experiences of the BRLA within the context of teaching RE and using LSAs appeared to shape their perceptions of the BRLA. In turn, the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA illustrate how they responded to their professional training in RE, how they interpreted the role of educational accountability and how they preferred using particular assessment types in RE. The chapter concludes with a representation of the profiles of groups of religious educators in this study based on their perceptions of the BRLA.

Chapter Twelve considers the research findings and themes and proposes four sets of recommendations. These recommendations focus on improving student learning in RE. The first set of recommendations relates to understandings of educational accountability that may better nurture student learning in RE. The second set relates to the role of leadership in assessment for improving student learning in RE. The third set relates to professional formation focused on student learning in RE. The fourth set highlights the need to address community engagement that aims to promote student learning in RE. Each set of recommendations has implications for the Catholic education system in WA and for future research in RE.

## **1.9 Chapter Summary**

This chapter has introduced the main components of the study. The focus of the study is religious educators as teachers and school leaders of RE working in Catholic primary and secondary schools in Western Australia. These religious educators were responsible for teaching and leading RE. As part of their responsibility they prepared students in Years Three, Five and Nine for the administration of the BRLA. The motivation for the study that is central to addressing the research problem was the need to investigate how these religious educators perceived the BRLA and how their perceptions influenced or were influenced by their teaching and assessment practices in RE. The following chapters of this thesis will explain the results of this investigation, drawing upon a pragmatic approach to research that utilised mixed methods. The significance of the investigation is its identification of connections and disconnections between the perceptions of school-based religious educators of the BRLA and local policy expectations by system administrators. If unattended, the disconnections may have the potential to exacerbate attempts for the Catholic education system in WA to improve student learning in RE. Furthermore, the study provides new local knowledge that aligns with local, national and international research about religious educators, the nature and purpose of RE and the use of large-scale, standardised assessments in education.

## CHAPTER TWO

### AN OVERVIEW OF THE LOCAL CONTEXT

#### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the local contexts that helps to situate the extent of the research problem. Given the study focuses on investigating, identifying and understanding the perceptions that religious educators have about *The Bishops' Religious Education Assessment* (BRLA) as a large-scale, standardised assessment (LSA) used in Religious Education (RE), the chapter discusses the role of teachers and school leaders responsible for implementing the RE curriculum. The discussion is positioned within the broader context of the Catholic education system in Western Australia (WA).

#### 2.2 The Presentation of the Chapter

The literature discussed in this chapter is outlined in Table 2.1. This literature contains two narratives relevant to the Catholic education system in WA. Firstly, the people that make up the governance structures of the system and secondly, the development and implementation of the RE curriculum by those people. Historically, the narratives reflect how the Catholic education system is founded on “the unwavering determination of church leaders” who immigrated to WA, “to serve in Catholic schools” (Tannock, 1979, p. 123).

Table 2.1

*Overview of Chapter Two: Review of Local Contexts*

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2.3	Catholic Education in Western Australia
2.3.1	Governance and delegated responsibilities
2.4	The Religious Education Curriculum in Western Australia
2.4.1	Nature and purpose
2.4.2	Content, pedagogy and assessment
2.4.3	The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment
2.4.4	The role of teachers and school leaders of Religious Education
2.5	Chapter Summary

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### 2.3 Catholic Education in Western Australia

The religious educators who participated in this study worked in Catholic primary and secondary schools, which are part of the Catholic education system in WA. Figure 2.1 locates the Catholic education system in WA on a map of Australia. The map identifies the administrative and geographical divisions of the Catholic Church. (The National Council of Priests in Australia, 2017). As can be seen on the map, the state of WA is the largest of all states and territories in Australia. There are four Catholic dioceses, three of which are located in regional areas of WA. The Perth Archdiocese includes the Perth metropolitan area and regional areas eastward to the state border. The Catholic education system of WA spans across all four dioceses.

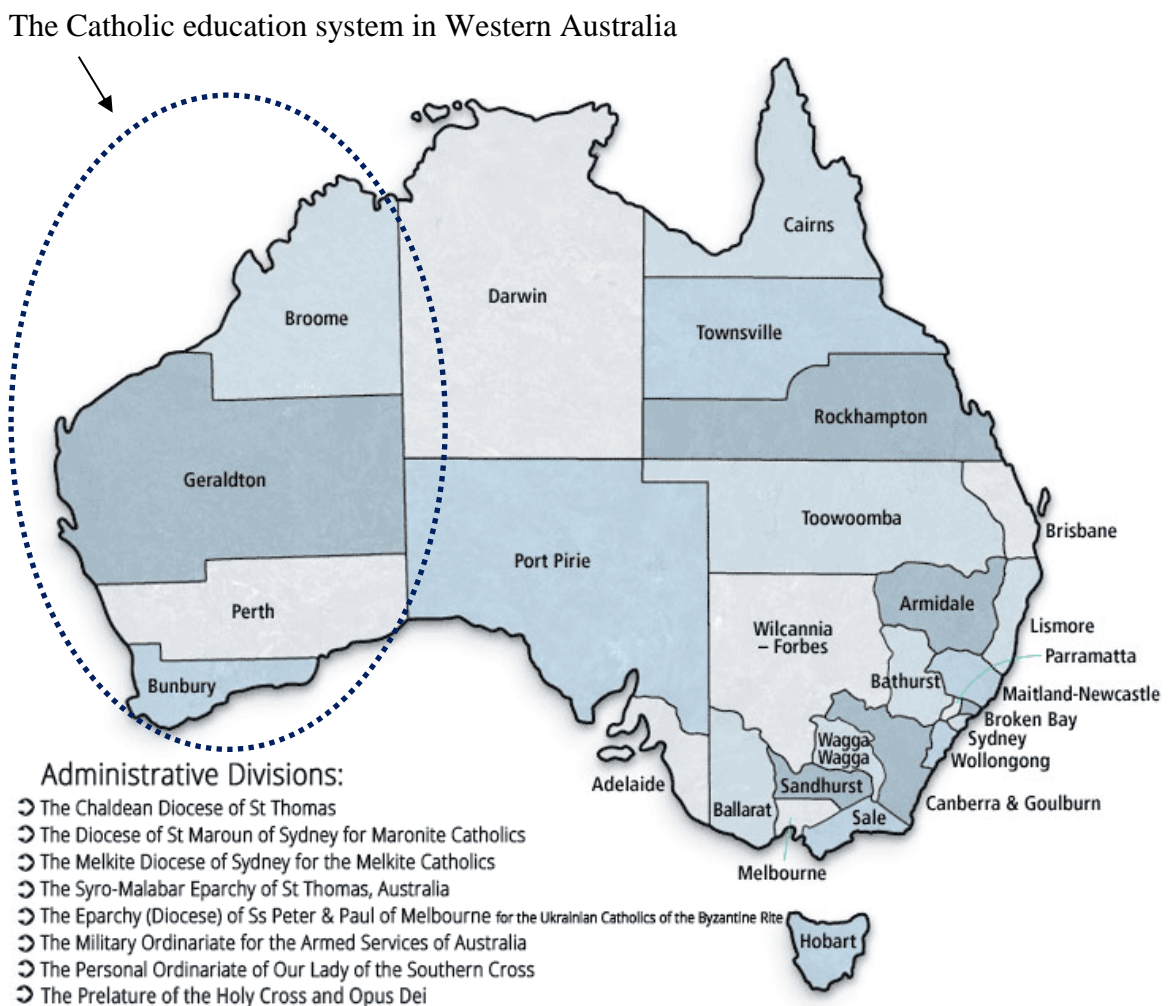


Figure 2.1. The location of the Catholic education system in Western Australia (The National Council of Priests in Australia, 2017)



**2.3.1 Governance and delegated responsibilities.** The administration of the Catholic education system employs a particular governance structure established by the WA Bishops with specific attention to delegated responsibilities (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2001; Pental, 2008). These delegated responsibilities are outlined in Figure 2.2. The responsibility means that those involved in Catholic education are accountable to the WA Bishops, the State and Federal governments and local communities.

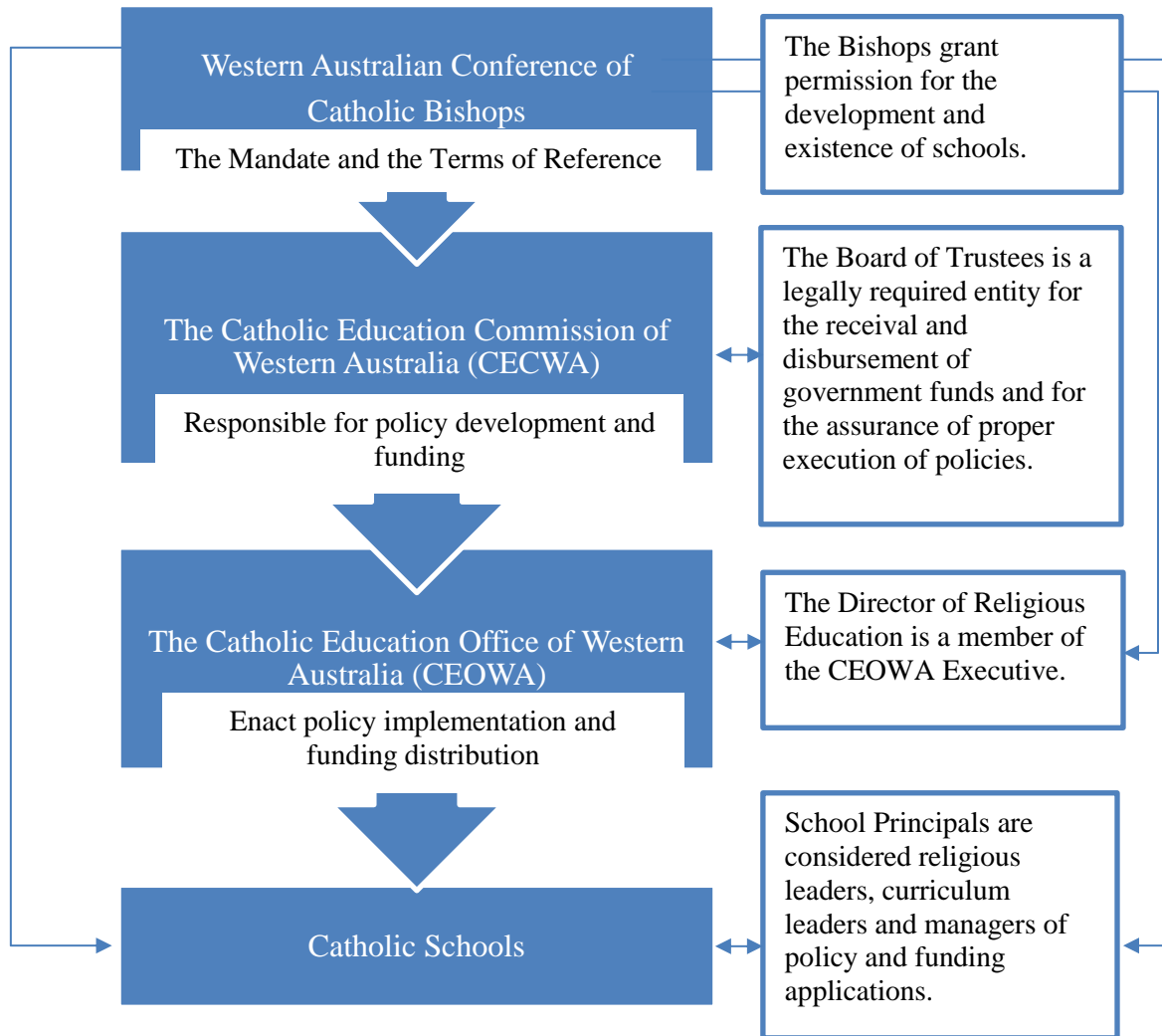


Figure 2.2. The governance structure of Catholic education in WA

**2.3.1.1 The Western Australian Conference of Catholic Bishops.** Typically, bishops separately govern Catholic education within their own dioceses (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1983, canon 804). However, Catholic education in WA operates as a state-wide system. This

is an arrangement, whereby the Archbishop of Perth and the Bishops of Broome, Geraldton and Bunbury have agreed to work in collaboration to oversee education as one Catholic school system (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009; Tannock, 1979). Together with the Auxiliary Bishop of Perth, the four diocesan bishops are collectively known as the Western Australian Conference of Catholic Bishops (the WA Bishops) (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009). One of the reasons the WA Bishops collaborated was to offset the costs for resourcing schools, especially in regional areas in WA where distance between schools and low population density are considered as major cost factors.

Although the responsibility for Catholic education lies with the WA Bishops, under the Commonwealth system of government in Australia, education is a State government responsibility and the funding of education is a shared responsibility between the State, Territory and Federal governments (Department of Education and Training, 2017). Part of the government responsibility of public funding for education includes funding for curriculum policy and development (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008a). The WA Bishops ensure that Catholic education in WA complies with all government legislation and standards for non-government schools (Catholic Education Western Australia, 2015, p. 21). They do so through delegating responsibility to various groups.

**2.3.1.2 The Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia.** In 1971, the WA Bishops established the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia (CECWA) to act on their behalf on matters relevant to Catholic education (Pendal, 2008). Unique to WA is the story of the establishment of CECWA as a Board of Trustees (Tannock, 1979). CECWA was established as a reform initiative that involved a shift from parish priests managing Catholic schools to the Catholic community. At the time of the study, CECWA operated under a joint policy agreement known as *The Mandate: Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia 2009–2015* (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009). The Mandate outlines the Terms of Reference that guide CECWA to effectively carry out the educational duties delegated by the WA Bishops (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, p. 49). These duties include the responsibility to act for the WA Bishops in specified matters concerning the education of students in Catholic schools in WA.

Specific to this study is the delegated responsibility within the Terms of Reference that the WA Bishops give to CECWA to oversee the RE curriculum (Catholic Education

Commission of Western Australia, 2009, paras. 62, 105). At the time of the study, the Religious Education and Curriculum Committee (RECC) was responsible for policy recommendations relevant to the implementation of the RE curriculum. The most recent RE policy version developed by the Committee is version 2-B5 (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2013b).

**2.3.1.3 The Catholic Education Office of Western Australia.** The operational responsibilities of CECWA are exercised through the Office for Catholic education (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 107). This Office is called the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia (CEOWA) and was established by the WA Bishops to act as the secretariat for CECWA. For example, CECWA policy decisions that serve Catholic schools are implemented by the CEOWA. Also, the CEOWA negotiates with governments, other agencies and administrators regarding government funding programs.

A Director of Catholic Education is appointed by the WA Bishops to oversee the executive duties of the CEOWA (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 104). The Director of Catholic Education is assisted by an Executive Team and various Directorates. Among other duties, the Religious Education and Faith Formation (REFF) Directorate of the CEOWA is responsible for developing and implementing the RE curriculum. The REFF Directorate is run by the Director of Religious Education.

**2.3.1.4 The Director of Religious Education.** The WA Bishops appoint a Director of Religious Education to act exclusively on their behalf regarding RE (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 106). This appointment ensures that principles and procedures from developed RE policies are executed (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 5). The Director of Religious Education and the staff working within the Directorate of Religious Education and Faith Formation are responsible for carrying out catechetical and educational activities that support Catholic schools. The support includes providing ongoing development and review of the RE curriculum and policy statements, assisting staff in Catholic schools to implement the RE curriculum, and providing professional learning opportunities for teachers and school leaders working in Catholic schools in WA.

**2.3.1.5 Catholic schools.** Catholic schools in WA and around the world are entrusted to fulfil the episcopal, religious and educational responsibilities of the diocesan bishops who

lead them (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 6; Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1983, canon 804). Governance documents issued by CECWA stress the importance of these responsibilities and support Catholic school members to carry them out. These include the Mandate (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009), *The Religious Education Policy, version 2-B5* (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2013b) and *The Curriculum Policy, version 2-B2* (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2013a).

The religious responsibility of a Catholic school is to give witness to the Gospel message (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, paras. 40, 49). The witnessing of the Gospel message is part of the evangelising mission of the Church (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, para. 39; Paul VI, 1975). Giving witness is considered a lifelong relational and formational experience (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, paras. 35, 86, 88, 90, 92) as “transmitted through the Church” (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, paras. 40, 49). To support Catholic schools in WA to give witness to the Gospel message, the CEOWA work with school leaders to develop Evangelisation Plans. The aim of the plans is to ensure that students develop a commitment to restoring God’s harmony in the world (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994, para. 376). To achieve this aim Catholic schools are further supported by the CEOWA to implement a Catholic curriculum that focuses on education and catechetical or faith-based activities. The Evangelisation Plans that are developed are required to outline how schools intend to “integrate faith and culture and faith and life” (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, p. 27, paras. 60, 73).

The Catholic school has a duty to provide students with educational experiences that reflect the Catholic worldview in all the subject areas taught, including RE (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 27). This Catholic worldview is concerned with education that develops the whole human person (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 29). This educational responsibility of a Catholic school in WA is to offer and successfully implement nine learning areas (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2013a, para. 4). RE is considered the “first” priority learning area mandated by the WA Bishops (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, paras. 61, 62; 2013a; 2013b). This priority is universally recognised by the Catholic Church (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, paras. 71, 72; Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1983, canon 756, para. 2). The WA Bishops present RE as the underlying reason for the existence of Catholic schools (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 62; Holohan, 1999). This

idea is also universally recognised by the Church (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 49, 1988, para. 66; Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, para. 80; Convey, 2012; D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012, pp. 18–19).

At the time of this study (2013 and 2014), Catholic education in WA consisted of 161 Catholic schools, comprising 112 primary, 27 secondary and 22 composite schools, with a total of 74,220 students and 4,834 full-time teaching staff (Catholic Education Western Australia, 2014). Of these schools, 147 participated in the BRLA in 2013 and 2014 (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2014). The religious educators involved in this study were employed in one of 65 Catholic primary, secondary and composite schools in WA. These schools represent 44.2% (65 of 147) of Catholic schools within the Catholic education system in WA that participated in the BRLA at the time of the study.

**2.3.1.6 Catholic school principals.** The delegated responsibility at the Catholic school level in WA is located with the school principals. Principals are considered the religious and educational leaders of a Catholic school because it is their delegated responsibility to promote the universal mission of the Catholic Church (Sayce & Lavery, 2010). This mission is one of evangelisation within their school communities (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, paras. 94, 95). Principals are expected to:

- understand, embrace and effectively communicate the Catholic worldview to their school communities (Buchanan, 2014; Convey, 2012; Sergiovanni, 2006);
- promote their school’s Catholic identity by “striving for deeper relationships with Jesus” so as to become “more effective leaders of Christ-centred school communities” (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 95; McNamara, 2002);
- understand and give witness to the Gospel message of the Catholic Church through the promotion of a Catholic religious life and through the appropriate delivery of the RE curriculum mandated by the WA Bishops (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 62); and,
- lead and manage State, Territory and Federal government policies and initiatives involving teaching, assessment and reporting (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011).

This study involves the voluntary participation of 31 school principals. At the time of the study, 26 of these principals were leaders of Catholic primary schools and five of Catholic secondary schools. Of these principals, eight primary principals also chose to voluntarily participate in Phase Two of the study, involving semi-structured, individual interviews. The findings from the study provide insights about the principals as religious and educational leaders of their Catholic schools in terms of their delegated responsibility for RE.

## 2.4 The Religious Education Curriculum in Western Australia

Hackett (2006) describes the Catholic RE curriculum in WA as “both a learning area and an integral part of the educational philosophy and structure of the Catholic education system in Western Australia” (p. 36). The RE policies developed by CECWA describe how RE is a learning area but must not be taught to students as “an accessory” alongside other important curriculum areas (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 62). Rather, RE should be implemented with its own importance as an academic activity with the “same systematic demands and rigour as other learning areas” (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, para. 66; Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, para. 73). As an academic activity, RE is reserved for the classroom and allocated appropriate class times for the different Year levels (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2013b). These times range from 15 minutes a day in Pre-Primary through to 220 minutes per week for students in Years 11 and 12.

The CEOWA provides a state-wide RE curriculum developed and implemented under the provision and guidance of the Director of Religious Education (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009) and ultimately prescribed in the Terms of Reference outlined in the Mandate (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, p. 49) by the WA Bishops. Figure 2.3 represents a model of the RE curriculum in WA, highlighting its key components.

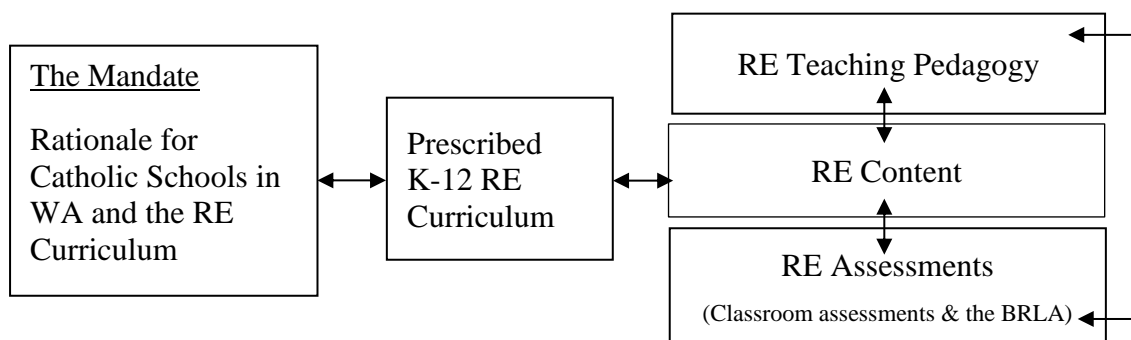


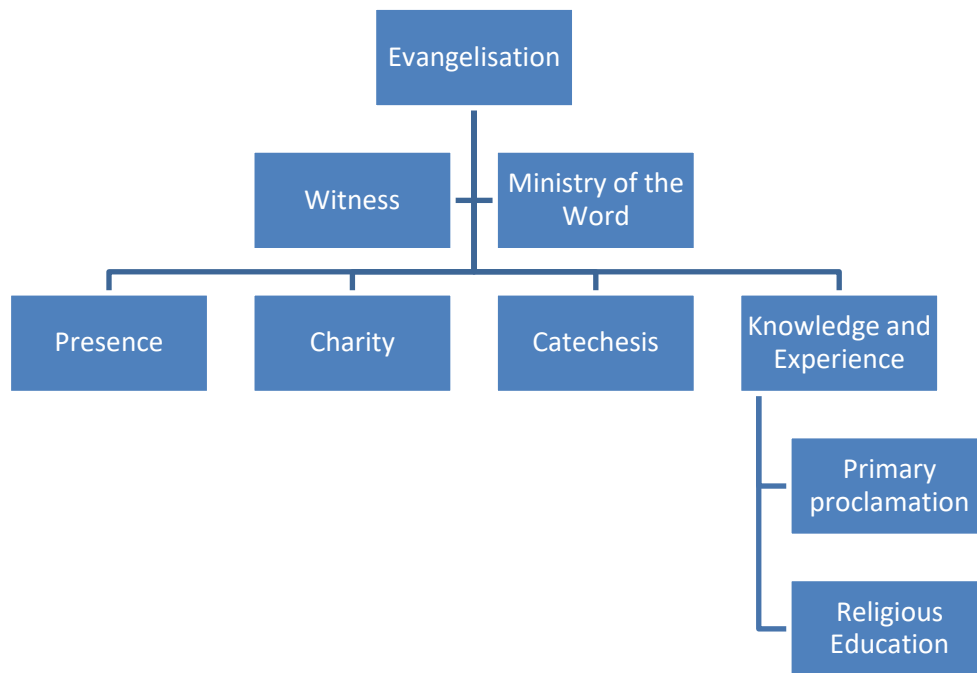
Figure 2.3. A model of the Catholic Religious Education curriculum in WA

**2.4.1 Nature and purpose.** To understand the nature and purpose of the RE curriculum taught in Catholic schools in WA is to understand divine Revelation (Holohan, 1999). The Church states that Revelation is the belief that God is actively revealing God's self beyond creation and throughout history (Buchanan & Rymarz, 2008; Vatican Council II, 1965b, para. 2). People can experience God's act of self-revelation especially through the Gospel message or the Good News story of the person of Jesus (Francis I, 2013; Paul VI, 1975). This is called Evangelisation.

The Church proclaims Evangelisation in two ways (Holohan, 1999, p. 17). One way is Christian witness and the other is the Ministry of the Word. In the first, people need to be present to receive the Gospel message. A person's presence and charity in terms of accepting God's love is required to give witness to others. In the second, people are assisted through Catechesis or lifelong faith development and knowledge and experience activities to become aware of God. RE as an intended knowledge and experience activity specifically aims to hand on the content of the Christian faith by addressing the factors that influence and challenge the "divine action of the Message" (Holohan, 1999, p. 19). However, RE is not just about teaching the Catholic content nor just about pedagogy.

To overemphasise content to the neglect of teaching process is to cooperate with the self-revealing God in a very limited way. On the other hand, to overemphasise pedagogy to the neglect of content is to deprive students of truths God has revealed. Without these truths, students will be more limited in their capacity to know and to "enter into real intimacy" with God. (Holohan, 1999, p. 12)

The specific interpretation regarding the nature and purpose of the RE curriculum taught in Catholic schools in WA is attributed to Father Gerard Holohan (Huebsch, 2003; Pental, 2008). Pental (2008) argues that Father Holohan (currently the Bishop of Bunbury) was instrumental in the development of RE in WA. Huebsch (2003) argues that Holohan's approach to RE cuts through the language contained in Vatican documents, which were considered difficult to comprehend. The question posed by Holohan, "What should Catholic schools be trying to achieve in religious education?" (Holohan, 1999, p. 7), highlights the focus of his work in addressing what religious educators should do to implement the RE curriculum. Figure 2.4 illustrates Holohan's interpretation of the place of RE as a learning area within the context of Catholic education in WA.



*Figure 2.4.* The place of Religious Education in Catholic schools in WA (Holohan, 1999, p. 37)

Holohan (1999, p. 29) explains that as an evangelising activity, the rationale for RE is based on a confessional character that promotes a critical understanding of the beliefs of a particular religious faith or confession. The effectiveness of RE depends on the extent to which educators respond to the needs of students who are believers, non-believers and searchers or doubters of faith (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, para. 75). The RE curriculum needs to contribute to the students’ understanding of the Christian faith (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2013b; Holohan, 1999) in relation to the world and the students’ experiences of the world. The appropriate selection of the content of the RE curriculum should be sensitive to what students’ faith situations require and should be presented in ways that relate to the students’ life questions, concerns and choices (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, para. 23; Holohan, 1999, p. 55).

**2.4.2 Content, pedagogy and assessment.** The content of the RE curriculum draws upon the teachings of the Gospel message and the Christian response to that message. By academically exposing students to this content, it is assumed that students are provided with a context to reflect on their personal experiences of a life in faith (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, para. 69). The aim is to help students learn to critically dialogue with the



world around them in the same way as they potentially do with other acquired knowledge (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, paras. 58, 60, 62; Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, p. 73, para. 41).

The content of the Catholic RE curriculum in WA is presented in Units of Work for school-aged students enrolled in Pre-Primary to Year 12. The Units are educational in focus and contain key understandings, teaching programs and support documents (Hackett, 2006). The language of the Catholic Faith Tradition is used in the RE Units of Work. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994) is a key reference document for that language and its interpretation.

There is a required systematic presentation of the content taught from Pre-Primary to Year 10 (Hackett, 2006; Pental, 2008). Students are generally taken through a three-step interconnected process involving discovering God through human experience; learning about the life and teachings of Jesus relevant to the human experiences presented; and responding as Catholics to those human experiences. In Years 11 and 12, the Senior Secondary RE program varies from this presentation. The Senior Secondary RE program is also aligned with the CECWA policies regarding RE but must fulfil the educational requirements of the State government regarding preparations for students to enter tertiary studies (School Curriculum and Standards Authority, 2016b). The title given to the Senior Secondary RE program is Religion and Life.

The implementation of the content in the RE curriculum from Pre-Primary to Year 12 is evaluated at the system level using formal assessments (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, 2013b). These assessments are developed by the REFF Directorate within the CEOWA. One assessment is the BRLA (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2007b; Hackett, Sayce, & Alteri, 2017). Other assessments include the Senior Secondary Religious Education Common Assessment Tasks for students in Year 11. The Religion and Life exam at the end of Year 12 also contributes to the evaluation process in RE. The exam is developed by the State government's educational authority (School Curriculum and Standards Authority, 2016b). These three assessment types are system-wide, enabling the evaluation of the RE curriculum to be conducted in and across Catholic schools with the same depth and rigour as other learning areas. This study is, however, only interested in the school-based religious educators' involvement with the BRLA.

**2.4.3 The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment.** *The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment* or BRLA was initially developed in 2006 by the CEOWA (Catholic

Education Office of Western Australia, 2006a). The assessment was originally called *The Archbishops' Religious Literacy Assessment*, as it was trialled across the Archdiocese of Perth with students in Year Seven. In 2007, the BRLA was formally introduced to Catholic schools in all four Catholic dioceses in WA (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2007b). The title of the assessment was changed to *The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment* to acknowledge the state-wide administration of the BRLA to large numbers of students in Years Five, Seven and Nine. In the early years, media attention identified the BRLA within the context of RE as “Knowledge of Bible to get same status as maths and reading as Catholic schools overhaul religious education: Catholic pupils to have faith exams” (Hiatt, 2006).

The BRLA is considered a local example of a LSA because firstly, student cohorts across WA are involved. Secondly, commonly developed test items are used to assess student learning in RE within classrooms, across Year levels and across Catholic schools. Thirdly, standardised marking and reporting procedures are developed and implemented (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013).

There were three possible catalysts that created a climate for such a LSA to be used in RE. Firstly, outcomes-based education focused on improving standards in education (Decker & Bolt, 2008) was at the centre of public and educational discussions. Based on these discussions the public (Zwartz, 2006) and Catholic (Coyne, 2008) media also drew attention to the lack of quality learning standards in Catholic schools, particularly, in RE. Secondly, evidence-based curriculum reforms entered the educational scene shortly after (Forster, 2009). Thirdly, the use of LSAs to collect evidence of student learning were part of these reforms (Shaddock, 2014).

Prior to the introduction of the BRLA, a local example of a LSA was being used by the State government that involved students in Years Three, Five, Seven and Nine in all schools, including Catholic schools. Student learning was measured in literacy, numeracy, science and the humanities subject Society and Environment. This LSA was called the Western Australian Monitoring Standards in Education (WAMSE) (Department of Education of Western Australia, 2011). The Director of Religious Education responded to the use of LSAs as part of the evidence-based curriculum reforms implemented by the State government. The response was the introduction of the BRLA for Catholic schools. The aim of the response was to improve standards in teaching and assessment practices in RE and, in turn, the quality of student learning (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2006; Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2006a). Figure 2.5 is a representation

of the key components of the BRLA's framework (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013).

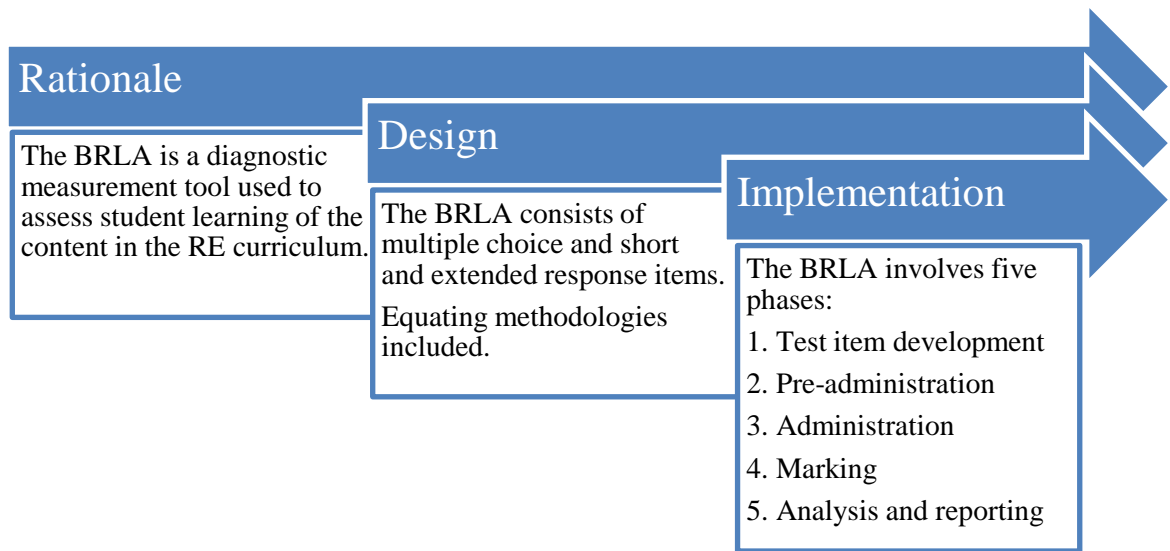


Figure 2.5. The key components of the BRLA

Since 2008, students in Years Three, Five and Nine in Catholic schools across all four Catholic dioceses in WA take part in the BRLA from late July to early August (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013). The participation of various student cohorts has changed over the years. For example, the Year Seven cohort originally participated and later was discontinued. The reason being that the State government allowed Catholic schools in WA to move students from Year Seven in Catholic primary schools to Catholic secondary schools. The change in school location for students in Year Seven meant that a large intake of students from non-government schools would potentially participate in an RE program in Year Seven in their first year of Catholic secondary education without prior knowledge of the content in the RE curriculum (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2008). Another example is Year Five and later Year Three students who originally entered the BRLA as part of an informal process (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2010). For those Year levels, Catholic schools were provided with the test papers and analytical marking keys. Teachers in schools were asked to score the students' responses to the BRLA. No systematic collation of student performance data was collected and reported (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013). Appendix A describes the historical developments of the BRLA (Hackett et al., 2017).

**2.4.3.1 Rationale.** The purpose of the BRLA is to measure student knowledge and understanding of the content of the RE curriculum within particular Year levels and across Catholic schools in WA (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013). The content of the RE curriculum is defined within the title of the BRLA as the ‘religious literacy’ that students are expected to know, understand and apply. The results from the BRLA are expected to be used in conjunction with student performance data from other RE assessments developed by classroom teachers. The outcomes of these expectations are to promote school and system-wide improvements in student learning in RE.

**2.4.3.2 Design.** The BRLA consists of multiple choice, short and extended test items (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013). The test items in the BRLA are criterion referenced against the content in the RE curriculum. Students receive common test items relevant to the content they are expected to have covered in that Year level. Generally, the different test items are presented in two separate sections within the test papers for each Year level. The two sections of the test papers are further subdivided into four key content areas: Jesus, Bible, Church, and Sacraments and Prayer. All test items focus on measuring students’ content knowledge and not the students’ faith responses. The time allocated for students to complete all test items is between 45 and 90 minutes. The older the student cohort, the more test items provided, and the more time given to the students to complete the items.

The design of the BRLA includes an ‘equating program’ (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2012b). This program precedes the administration of the BRLA and involves shortened versions of the BRLA test papers. The aim of the equating program is to establish a measurement scale that becomes the standard by which student scores can be compared over time and across Year levels. A one item or parameter Rasch model is used in the equating program (Andrich, 1988; Andrich et al., 2011). The methodology for the equating program is based on a sample group of approximately 1,000 students. Common test items embedded in the equating assessments are administered to a common group of students who participate in both the equating assessments and the actual BRLA for a particular Year group. At the time of the study, students in Years Five and Nine were involved in the equating program. The students’ responses were formally marked by a team of religious educators employed by the CEOWA. Furthermore, school and student reports were formally produced. Recent developments have focused on establishing online versions of the BRLA and online reporting of student performance (Hackett et al., 2017).

**2.4.3.3 Implementation.** The implementation into schools of the BRLA comprises five phases (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013). Each phase involves a sequence of procedures that lead into the next phase. In the first phase, known as the design phase, documents are sent out by the CEOWA to school principals advising them of the required procedures to be followed in preparation for the administration of the BRLA. This phase also involves the development of test items. As mentioned, the test items range in number and difficulty for each Year level. The second and third phases of the BRLA are known as the pre-administration and administration phases. During the pre-administration phase, school audits are conducted by the CEOWA to collect contact details of school coordinators that will assist in the administration of the BRLA. Principals and other school leaders of RE are provided with support documents for administering the various assessments during the administration period set for July through to August each year. Teachers of RE are expected to receive the support documentation as they play a major role in preparing students for the administration of the BRLA. A letter to parents (Appendix B) is drafted for schools to use as part of the administration phase to provide parents with the necessary information about the BRLA and the reporting of student performance (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013, p. 14).

The administration phase is followed by the marking phase. During the marking phase, Year Three test papers have generally remained at schools and are marked by teaching staff (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2012b). This practice is in keeping with the informal nature of the Year Three BRLA process. Analytical marking keys are provided by the CEOWA to achieve consistent marking across all test papers. The CEOWA encourages teaching staff to discuss results of the Year Three BRLA and to consider those results in future planning for student learning in RE. Alternatively, and in keeping with the formal BRLA process, Year Five and Year Nine test papers are sent away for marking. A team of religious educators are employed to mark the short and extended response items in both these test papers using analytical marking keys (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2016a). Until 2015, multiple choice questions were scanned and entered into a database by scanning technology managed by Edith Cowan University Australia. Scoring of student responses to multiple choice questions was collated using statistical software. Since 2015, the scoring of multiple choice and short answer test items has involved automated online processes provided by an online service provider (Hackett et al., 2017).

The analysis and reporting phase is the final segment in the implementation of the BRLA. Edith Cowan University Australia and The University of Western Australia are

involved (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2016a). This phase is a formal one that has generally only applied to the Year Five and Year Nine assessment results. The results are analysed using statistical packages and student, school and system reports are produced. The Year Five and Nine test papers are returned to schools so that religious educators can review the test items and results with students. The CEOWA recommends to schools to send test papers and student reports home to parents.

**2.4.4 The role of teachers and school leaders of Religious Education.** The implementation of the RE curriculum in Catholic schools in WA is the responsibility of a team of professional educators (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, 2013b). This team includes school-based religious educators such as principals, other school leaders and teachers of RE. As trained professionals, these religious educators are expected to understand and promote curriculum implementations including contemporary pedagogical, assessment and reporting designs and practices (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011; Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 65, 2013a, para. 4). They are expected to methodically deliver the content of the RE curriculum using contemporary educational standards (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, paras. 43, 61, 62, 2013b; Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, paras. 58, 60, 62, 70; Holohan, 1999; Ryan, 2007, p. 16). As part of the religious educators' role they may prepare students for the administration of the BRLA as well as engage in other aspects of the implementation of the assessment (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013). This study involves 238 school-based religious educators (150 classroom teachers, 31 school principals and 57 other school leaders) who are responsible for implementing the RE curriculum and preparing students for the BRLA.

To effectively carry out their role, all school-based religious educators in WA are encouraged to continually maintain their professional training (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982, paras. 59, 64–70) in Church history, Catholic theology (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, paras. 96, 97) and in content and pedagogy (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, para. 62). Professional training is available to religious educators through tertiary courses at The University of Notre Dame Australia (2017), the Catholic Institute of Western Australia (2011) and the CEOWA accredited program (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2013c). Until this study, the extent to which school-based religious educators understand, interpret and fulfil or respond to their expected

roles within Catholic education in WA was empirically unknown, and a source of the research problem.

## **2.5 Chapter Summary**

This chapter outlined the local context of the study. The presentation was in two parts. The first part was an overview of Catholic education in WA. The overview contained details of the governance structure of the Catholic education system. The second part was an explanation of the RE curriculum developed by the CEOWA. This is a mandated curriculum with educational requirements and standards that the WA Bishops expect religious educators to uphold as their delegated staff working in Catholic schools. The WA Bishops expect the same standards and approaches to teaching and assessment practices in RE as in other learning areas. This expectation extends to one of the assessment components of the RE curriculum called the BRLA. The chapter concludes with a local perspective of school-based religious educators who work in Catholic education in WA and their role in implementing the RE curriculum.

As an education system, Catholic education in WA has applied religious and educational principles outlined in Church documents (Holohan, 1999). At the same time, the system is influenced by national and world-wide trends and curriculum reforms in education (Buchanan, 2009; Ryan, 2007, p. 16). The next chapter reviews more contextual literature from a global perspective of RE as well as assessment practices in education. These practices are evidence-based and include the use of LSAs. In western countries the use of LSAs in RE has become a feature, showing further alignment between RE and other learning areas.

## CHAPTER THREE

### REVIEW OF SIGNIFICANT LITERATURE

#### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the research literature significant for understanding this study and its contexts (Table 3.1). The purpose of the study was to investigate how religious educators who work in Catholic schools in Western Australia (WA) perceived a large-scale, standardised assessment (LSA) called *The Bishops' Religious Education Assessment* (BRLA). This assessment is a component of the Religious Education (RE) curriculum. The study involved an in-depth, multi-disciplinary exploration of the personal and professional perceptions of 238 teachers and school leaders responsible for implementing the RE curriculum. The reviewed literature is drawn from local, national and international research about RE, the use of LSAs and the professional confidence of religious educators in implementing such assessments.

#### 3.2 The Presentation of the Chapter

Table 3.1

*Overview of Chapter Three: Review of Significant Literature*

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3.3	The Conceptual Framework
3.4	Context One: Religious Education
3.4.1	The nature of Religious Education
3.4.2	Religious Education as Evangelisation
3.4.3	The role of Religious Education in Catholic schools
3.4.4	Teaching approaches
3.4.5	Assessment practices
3.4.6	Context summary
3.5	Context Two: Use of Large-scale, Standardised Assessment
3.5.1	Assessment defined
3.5.2	Large-scale, standardised assessments defined
3.5.3	Evidence-based curriculum reforms
3.5.4	Examples of use
3.5.5	Perceptions of use
3.5.6	Context summary
3.6	Context Three: The Religious Educator
3.6.1	Role
3.6.2	Professional training
3.6.3	Context summary
3.7	Chapter Summary

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### **3.3 The Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework shown in Figure 3.1 provides a visual representation of the purpose, focus, investigative inquiry and contextual settings of the study. The general research question (GRQ) featured at the top of the conceptual framework illustrates its overarching purpose. That is to reveal the construction of the social, cultural and historical realities (Charon, 2010; Crotty, 1998) that the religious educators had about the BRLA. The framework is divided into four concentric areas. Situated in the central area are school-based religious educators who are the focus of the study. These religious educators are teachers and school leaders of RE. The three Specific Research Questions (SRQs) are also positioned in the central area. These questions identify how the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA (within the RE curriculum) were specifically targeted and investigated. The three other concentric areas identify the underlying and interconnected contexts of the study. The segmented lines used to divide the areas signify the fluid interplay between the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA as manifestations of their personal and collective, professional experiences of the contexts.

Context One is about the nature and role of RE as a discipline within Catholic education. Within this context, religious educators are exposed to the components of the RE curriculum: content, pedagogy and assessment (Ryan, 2006, 2013). Teaching and assessment practices are considered key components in the implementation of the RE curriculum and influence the quality of student learning. Given Chapter Two addressed local literature about RE, the scope of this review addresses a broader study of Religious Education.

Attempts beyond the Catholic perspective of RE were not explored in this thesis because the study focuses solely on school-based religious educators working in a Catholic education system in WA. Within the confines of a Catholic perspective, RE is considered first in this review of literature for two reasons. Firstly, this study focused on the teachers and school leaders responsible for RE as a learning area. Secondly, the BRLA is a component of the RE curriculum taught in Catholic schools in WA and, as such, is the springboard for the development of the survey questions used in this research and directed towards the school-based religious educators.

### General Research Question

How do religious educators who work in Catholic schools in Western Australia perceive *The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment* as a large-scale, standardised assessment in Religious Education?

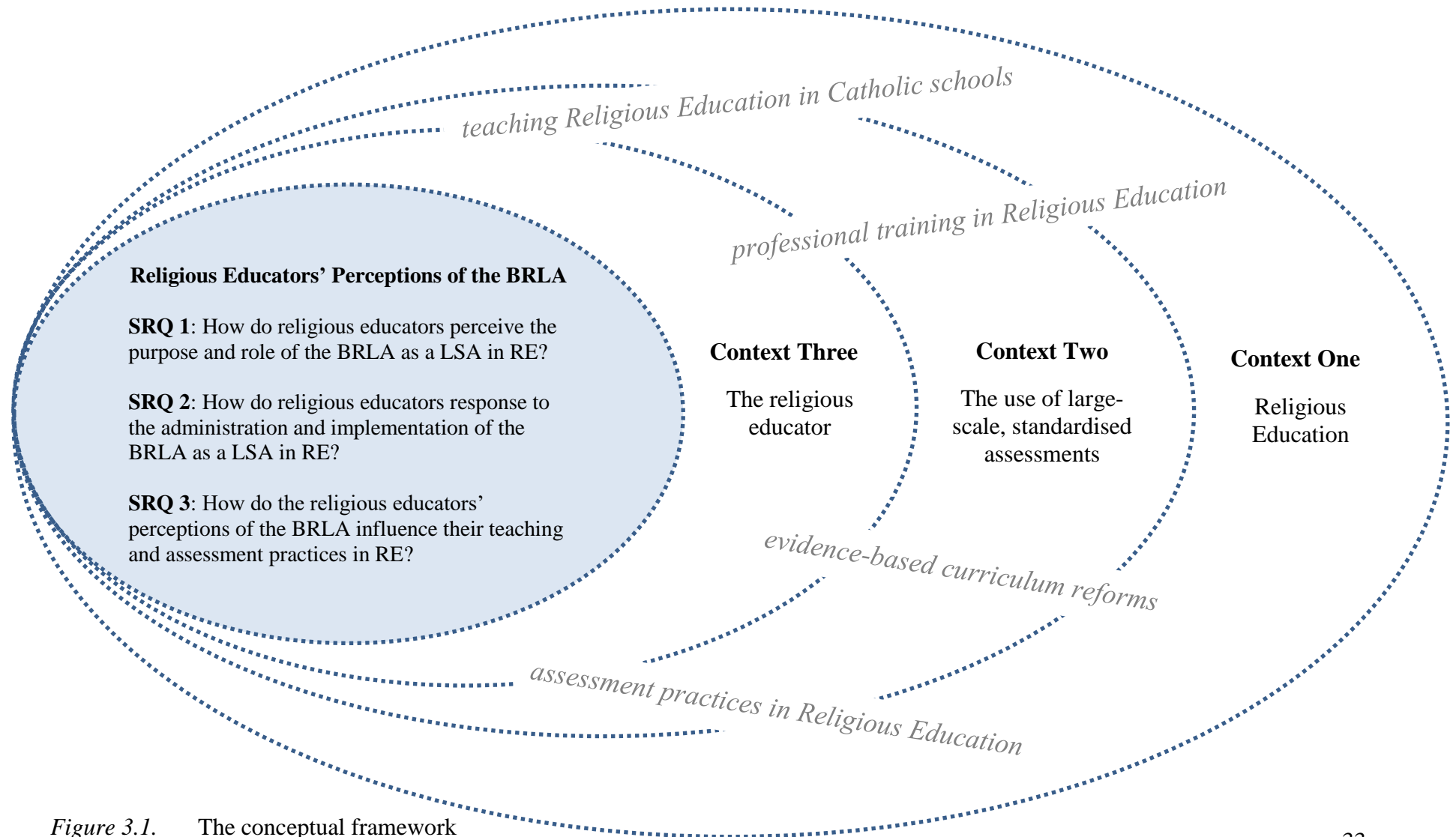


Figure 3.1. The conceptual framework

Context Two is focused on the use of LSAs within evidence-based curriculum reforms (Masters, 2013). At the time of the study, these reforms were relevant to the Australian educational landscape, to which Catholic education in WA belongs. For example, the Western Australian Monitoring Standards in Education (WAMSE) was a locally used LSA for measuring student learning in Science and the humanities subject Society and Environment (Department of Education of Western Australia, 2011). Also, the National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) was at the time of the study, and continues to be, an LSA used to measure student learning in literacy and numeracy across Australian education jurisdictions (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008a). Religious educators involved in this study prepared students in Years Three, Five and/or Nine for the administration of these LSAs.

The choice to address the use of LSAs as Context Two is based on the concept that LSAs are recognised as one type of measurement tool (Gardner, 2012) belonging to a formal assessment process that is an integral component of any curricula (Kelly, 2005; Ridden & Heldsinger, 2014). As mentioned, the key curricula components are content, pedagogy and assessment. As measurement tools used for the purpose of assessing student learning, LSAs are designed by education system administrators, external to classrooms, to contribute to the evidence-based curriculum reforms (Forster, 2009; Shaddock, 2014). The role of accountability for student learning is central to the reforms. Further developments of these reforms have paved the way for current ideologies about whole school and system responsibility for specifically targeting and progressing student learning (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

As an LSA, the BRLA was developed to measure student learning of the content in the RE curriculum (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013, p. 6). Aligned to the evidence-based curriculum reforms, local expectation assumes student learning is the responsibility of all teachers and school leaders of RE (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, 2013b). Hence, research such as this, that investigated the “coherence” (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, pp. 1–2) between the intended use of the BRLA as a LSA and the perceptions that school-based religious educators’ had, as they implemented the assessment, was necessary. Given Chapter Two provides a description of BRLA as a LSA used in the Catholic education system of WA, the scope of literature and research reviewed about LSAs in this chapter addresses a broader educational definition and use (Gardner, 2012).

Context Three is about religious educators. The scope of the reviewed literature addresses the role of religious educators as teachers and school leaders responsible for student learning in RE and the professional training to prepare them for these roles. The professional training involves knowing and understanding the content of the RE curriculum, understanding the nature of student learning and applying effective pedagogical and assessment principles in RE to engage with students and improve their learning in RE (Hackett, 2008, 2010; Ryan & Grajczonek, 2010). The school-based religious educators in this study were the focus of the research problem. They were considered as the synthesis between the local Catholic RE curriculum and the use of LSAs in RE.

The next section in this chapter addresses the historical and contemporary perspectives of each context in the conceptual framework. The literature and research reviewed about each context is aligned to the theoretical underpinnings of the study and the local settings and circumstances particular to religious educators working in the Catholic education system of WA.

### **3.4 Context One: Religious Education**

The review of literature about RE draws predominantly on the understandings and interpretations of RE as an educational activity and an academically recognised learning area (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009; Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, para. 73; Rummery, 1977), which is considered by the Catholic Church as significant to Catholic education (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 49, 1988, para. 66; Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1983, canon 756, para. 2). Specifically, the literature focuses on the approaches used to teach and assess student learning in RE in Catholic schools in Australia (Ryan, 2013). The literature identifies the complexity that an educational focus can bring to the context of RE (McKinney & Sullivan, 2013) and how this complexity has the potential to influence the perceptions of religious educators involved with implementing a RE curriculum.

**3.4.1 The nature of Religious Education.** Religious Education is complex because it is defined and treated differently in different countries and by different religious traditions in terms of approach and practice (Moran, 2016; Partridge, 2005). In broad terms, RE is referred to as religious education, religious instruction or religious studies (O'Donoghue, 2001; Ryan, 2013). In each case, reference is made to the study and teaching of a particular religious tradition and its various aspects. That is, the beliefs, doctrines, rituals and roles of a

religious tradition (Griffiths, 2008). As an area of study “there is a long history of curiosity and scholarship regarding the religions of people” yet the study of religions is a “newcomer to the halls of academia” (Partridge, 2005, p. 14). Consequently, the second half of the twentieth century has seen the revisiting of RE as a philosophical study (Knight, 1998) and, as such, a prominent and important field of academic inquiry within the social sciences (Gellel & Buchanan, 2015; Hamilton, 2005).

There have been various political and academic debates about the nature, purpose, role, approach and validity of RE as an academic discipline (Shanahan, 2016). These debates have increased the attention on RE by religious and non-religious communities (Taliaferro & Griffiths, 2008). Further to this attention is the increased presence of secularisation that has brought about questions regarding the need for religion in society (Hamilton, 2005). These questions have had policy implications regarding the appropriateness of teaching RE (Scott, 1984). Yet, collectively, all the arguments surrounding RE highlight the significant moral impetus that RE can contribute to society (Groome, 1998; Scott, 2016).

In Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, the treatment of RE is grounded largely in a sociological study of religion (Partridge, 2005) that draws on the seminal works of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) (Ryan, 2013). RE is generally considered a social science subject in its own right; such as Science, Mathematics and English (Hamilton, 2005; Sullivan, 2016). In this way, RE is no different to other disciplines in its quest to discovering meaning and truth (Ryan, 2013). Through RE, people explore and discover why and how things happen.

As a social science, the teaching of RE from a Catholic perspective within Catholic and non-Catholic schools in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States is generally categorised in two ways (Ryan, 2013). Firstly, RE is either considered as the study of religion(s) or an evangelising activity that attempts to immerse and enculturate those involved. The latter category may focus on purely the cognitive, content and educational dimension of RE and, or the faith and affective dimension of RE (Franchi, 2013; Rossiter, 1981; Scott, 1984). One example of RE as a phenomenological study of one or more religions is evident in government and privately owned, religious schools in the United Kingdom (Copley, 2008; Jackson & Everington, 2017). Catholic schools in the United Kingdom study the Catholic Faith Tradition. One example of RE as an evangelising activity is evident in privately owned Catholic schools in the United States. These schools are run by religious groups and parishes and assume students have a lived experience of the religion (Earl, 2008; Nuzzi, 2015). These international examples operate firstly according to their local diocesan

bishops, and secondly to respective governments responsible for developing education policies (Goldburg, 2008, p. 258).

In the United Kingdom, the academic approach to teaching RE is adopted in various ways (Shanahan, 2016). For example, in England the study of world religions, including the Catholic religion is the focus (Barnes, 2014; Long, 2016). This is because the education system in England is primarily responsible for the development and implementation of all curricula including RE that is taught in all schools. Up until the 1960s, the British system of teaching religion was a form of non-denominational confessional religious education based on the *Education Act 1944* (UK) (Barnes, 2014). The Act did not specify a religion because there was an assumption that Christianity was the only sanctioned religion. The current legislation from the *School Standards and Framework Act 1998*, in England requires State run schools as well as independent schools such as Catholic schools, to have an academic approach to the study of all learning areas including religion (Long, 2016). For Catholic schools, the Christian religious content is studied. In contrast to other learning areas, there is no national curriculum for RE. The content of the RE syllabus in public and private schools is agreed upon by local Church authorities and endorsed by a Standing Advisory Council of Religious Education (SACRE) (Bausor & Poole, 2002). Given the lack of a national RE curriculum, the teaching of religion may be influenced by a successive set of beliefs and values (Barnes, 2014).

In the United States, RE is referred to as catechetics, which is a political move based on a history regarding Protestant and other religious debates about the nature and role of RE (Moran, 2016; Ryan, 2013). Catholic schools in the United States are generally parish-based, educational ministries of the Catholic Church. Hence, RE is considered synonymous with community-oriented activities (Earl, 2008). Within Catholic schools, the evangelising mission of the Catholic Church is the focus of their work. The delivery of the RE curriculum is educationally grounded in a knowledge-centred approach but the focus is generally catechetical (National Catholic Education Association, 2011).

What makes RE unique in the United States compared to the United Kingdom is the peculiar language of “a wall of separation between Church and State” (Harris & Moran, 1998, p. 169). For the State, the question is about whether RE is educationally and politically appropriate. For the Church, the question is about whether RE is providing the students with a faith-filled experience of Christ. Harris and Moran (1998) explain that the United Kingdom “has a better defined and more professionalised meaning of RE than does the United States” and that RE demonstrates “serious academic purpose and religious tolerance” (p. 168).

Several years on, Moran (2016) continues to support the argument by saying, “For the present meaning of religious education and its future possibilities, a movement that began in England in the 1940s offers the best hope” (p. 218). In Australia, the teaching of RE assumes aspects familiar to the teaching of RE in the United Kingdom and the United States (Ryan, 2013).

Although, it is generally accepted in Catholic education in Australia that the teaching of RE occurs in Catholic schools as an evangelisation activity, diversity exists between different Catholic education systems regarding the specific approach used to teach RE (Ryan, 2013). Each approach identifies with a different title for RE and each title relates to a particular educational or faith-based pedagogy (Goldburg, 2008; O’Donoghue & Byrne, 2014). Prior to the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), titles for RE included “religious education” or “religious knowledge”, “religious instruction”, “catechetics”, “Christian doctrine” or “Christian living” (Rummery, 1977, p. 279). These titles are assumed as terms covering all aspects of teaching and learning as well as the experiences of certain religious activities such as participation in liturgies, sacraments and prayer.

**3.4.2 Religious Education as Evangelisation.** The teaching of Religious Education in Catholic education in Australia is grounded within the evangelising mission of the Catholic Church (Mark 16:15; Matthew 28:20; Vatican Council II, 1965b, para. 2). The Church’s evangelising mission is to reveal God and God’s salvation to all people (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, para. 77; Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994, paras. 51–67, 768, 775, 776). The Church believes God’s revelation (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, paras. 36, 38) is achieved through the process of evangelisation (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, para. 39) by which humanity is formed and changed by the Gospel teachings of the Church made known by Jesus (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 49, 1988, 1997).

The systematic process of evangelisation comes in five forms (elements or activities), of which RE is one (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997). The five forms of evangelisation are Christian Witness, Primary Proclamation, Initiatory Catechesis, Continuing Catechesis and Religious Education. Whereas the first four forms of evangelisation are formational exercises, RE is an educational activity that focuses on teaching the knowledge of the Catholic Faith Tradition (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, paras. 69, 70).

Within the Catholic Church community there are different interpretations of the evangelising mission of the Church (Ryan, 2013; Scott, 2016) and the different and complementary roles that Catechesis and Religious Education play in that mission (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, paras. 69, 70). In Western Australia, Holohan

(1999) and Suart (2007) refer to RE and Catechesis as forms of the Ministry of the Word, that is, activities of evangelisation that contribute to handing on the Christian faith. However, unlike RE, Catechesis refers to the nurturing of faith that is not restricted to a classroom activity but rather to an ongoing formation of faith that extends into the family and the parish community.

**3.4.2.1 Distinction between Catechesis and Religious Education.** Based on the different interpretations of Catechesis and RE that exist in Catholic education, religious educators appear to deduce and limit the teaching of RE into either a Catechesis or an educational activity (Rossiter, 2010; Scott, 2015). Rossiter (1981) initially argued for the separation of RE and Catechesis. At one point in time, Rossiter (1982) believed there was a need for a “creative divorce” in order to move forward in RE. Rossiter considered RE and Catechesis as “two orientations” or approaches to the teaching of RE in Catholic schools, which both required attention because religious educators were confused about how to best approach RE. Catechesis was considered an orientation towards an “education of faith”, and RE understood as an “education in religion” (Hackett, 2006, p. 37). Rossiter (1990) later identifies the close connection as well as the clear distinction between Catechesis and RE:

If Catechesis is to be properly focused on pastoral ministry, what is to be made of Religious Education in Catholic schools? Perhaps the separation should be formalised through taking out “divorce proceedings” in Religious Education theory. Perhaps Catholic school-based Religious Education should be reconceptualised more along educational than catechetical lines. Perhaps the title of the popular paperback, “Creative Divorce”, might be appropriate. A clearer differentiation between Religious Education and Catechesis, as far as a school is concerned, could foster more authentic and creative development of both aspects. However, the “divorce” analogy is not perfectly appropriate, because a revision of the foundations for Religious Education in Catholic schools would not want to exclude Catechesis but would critically determine the possibilities and limitations for “faith-sharing” with the matrix of a more general educational role for religion in the school. (p. 291)

Rymarz (2011) suggests that RE and Catechesis are distinctive, but both should not be seen as “tangential to each other or in opposition” (p. 545). D’Orsa & D’Orsa (2012) suggest that the Catholic school has an important role to play in defusing the challenge that potentially exists in RE for religious educators. In more recent times, Rossiter (2010) has



called for a “re-orientation” of the curriculum of a Catholic school including the RE curriculum. As part of this re-orientation, the education of the whole child is considered in and beyond the RE classroom.

Holohan (1999, p. 30) argues there is no need for confusion between RE and Catechesis. He believes that after the Second Vatican Council a clear distinction between doctrinal instruction (RE) and catechetical instruction (Catechesis) exists for religious educators. According to Holohan, the misconceptions or confusion about the aims of RE and Catechesis can lead to an incorrect expectation that RE can fulfil the aims of Catechesis. He provides a number of examples to support his argument (Table 3.2). Holohan (1999, p. 36) suggests that the distinction between RE and Catechesis is best recognised if Catholic schools ensure they are places of evangelisation striving to be communities of faith that give Christian witness and exercise the Ministry of the Word in all its forms. McKinney (2013) concurs by stating that “Catholic schools are physical, spiritual and symbolic sites of the integration of the Christian faith and education” (p. 24).

Table 3.2

*The Distinction Between Religious Education and Catechesis (Holohan, 1999)*

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- Church documents provide a clear distinction between Catechesis and Religious Education (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, para. 70; Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, para. 73; Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1983, canon 761).
  - Two different Magisterial councils known as congregations are responsible for overseeing Religious Education (Congregation for Catholic Education) and Catechesis (Congregation for the Clergy).
  - Religious Education and Catechesis are both part of the evangelisation process that contribute to the development of Christian faith but in different ways.
  - Religious Education and Catechesis are complementary to each other (Congregation for Catholic Education in 1988, paras. 68, 69, 70) as activities of the Ministry of the Word that draw on human experiences of God.
  - Religious Education is a classroom activity that helps students understand the religious meaning of their experiences whereas Catechesis is broader than the classroom. Catechesis aims to help students understand their individual experiences in light of the family and the parish community of faith to which they belong. Unlike Catechesis, Religious Education should not presuppose that students have Christian faith.
  - Religious Education involves a pedagogy based on Catholic educational principles whereas Catechesis is formational, based on the personal development of faith.
  - Religious Education requires sufficient time for students to achieve the cognitive and affective objectives of a topic before moving to another topic whereas Catechesis involves learning over several years and is part of a continuous act of conversion.
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**3.4.2.2 Church documents.** Some Catholic scholars argue that there is a lack of precision within many Church documents that has made the interpretation and application of the term “Religious Education” difficult to clarify (Franchi, 2013; Moran, 1971; Scott, 1984). Franchi (2013) remarks that “surprisingly, given the importance of RE to the missionary life of the Catholic school, the Magisterium of the Catholic Church has yet to offer a suitably authoritative document that deals precisely with the specific educational nature of this subject” (p. 469). Scott (1984) argued a “blessed rage for order” was needed in the field of RE. He states there is “no clearly defined field of RE exists today”, “no consensus exists on the usage of key terminology” and no “clearly defined purpose” (p. 323). More recently, Scott (2016) continues his call for order. His views are shared by other scholars who believe more attention regarding the academic theories of RE are required (Rummery, 1975, 1977; Ryan, 2013). This attention may ensure that as a learning area taught in Catholic schools, RE is not led by “ideological fundamentalism” (O’Donoghue & Byrne, 2014, p. 6) and is treated as a systematic educational enterprise (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, para. 66; Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, para. 73; Moran, 2016).

Unlike the scholars who claim there is a lack of precision within Church documents, Holohan (1999), McKinney (2013) and Nuzzi (2015) refer to the Church documents as the stabilising force that do provide consistency and leadership regarding RE. Nuzzi (2015) identifies within the Church documents the expectation for Catholic education systems around the world to develop RE curricula that addresses the growth and formation of students as fully integrated whole human persons (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 47; Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994) committed to Christ (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 40). The Church documents suggest that the “whole person” is developed through effective educational means (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, paras. 25–32) and Christian conscience (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 40).

Table 3.3 lists the key Church documents used by Catholic education systems in Australia for developing and implementing RE curricula. These documents inform the content and processes driving the RE curricula (Rymarz & Hyde, 2013). The Church documents stress the importance of RE in Catholic education as well as the importance that religious educators have in teaching RE. For example, *Gravissimum Educationis* (Vatican Council II, 1965d) as an earlier Vatican document identifies how highly valued education is to the Church community (McKinney, 2013). The document states that RE:

Has the duty of proclaiming the way of salvation to all ... of revealing the life of Christ to those who believe, and of assisting them with unremitting care .... The Church, ... is under an obligation, therefore, to provide for its children an education by virtue of which their whole lives may be inspired by the spirit of Christ. (para. 8)

Similarly, in *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith*, Pope John Paul II is quoted as saying, “The teaching of religion is, along with Catechesis, “an eminent form of the lay apostolate” (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982, para. 57). The Church community holds the lay religious educator, who is neither a priest nor a consecrated religious brother or sister, with the responsibility to pass on the Catholic Faith Tradition through the appropriate teaching of RE.

Table 3.3

*Key Church Documents Used for Religious Education*

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- *Gravissimum Educationis* (Vatican Council II, 1965d), directed specifically to Christian education.
  - *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Paul VI, 1975), broadly references Religious Education within the context of evangelising in modern times.
  - *The Catholic School* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977), discusses the scope of the work of schools and the implications of that work for Religious Education.
  - *Catechesi Tradendae* (John Paul II, 1979), discussion by the Pope about education in reference to Catechesis.
  - *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witness to Faith* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982), discusses the important work of the religious educator beyond the religious orders of men and women.
  - *Religious Dimension of Education in Catholic Schools* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988), discusses the religious character of the school.
  - *Chrsitifidelis Laici* (John Paul II, 1988), discusses the work of the laity.
  - *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), identifies the content required in RE curricula in Catholic schools.
  - *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997), sets out the vision for Catholic schools in a variety of educational and cultural contexts.
  - *General Directory for Catechesis* (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997), discusses the pedagogical processes involved in teaching RE.
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As previously mentioned, despite efforts by the Vatican, through letters by successive popes and Church documents from Magisterial councils about how RE is to be taught in Catholic schools, the teaching of the Catholic Faith Tradition as an educational activity is still understood differently within different Catholic dioceses (O'Donoghue & Byrne, 2014), and in most cases, legislated differently by governments around the world (Scott, 2016). For example, in Australia, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994) is one Church document used to guide the content of Catholic RE curricula. Religious educators in Australia use the Catechism as a resource rather than a text book (Catholic Education Office of Melbourne, 2011). The content in the Catechism is organised around Four Pillars of Faith: The Profession of Faith (Creed); the Celebration of the Christian Mystery (Sacraments); the Life of Christ (Christian morality, the Commandments); and Christian prayer (Prayer) (Hyde & Rymarz, 2009, p. 64). The *General Directory for Catechesis* (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997) is used in Catholic education in WA as a framework for pedagogical processes involved in teaching RE (Holohan, 1999). Further to these Church documents, local diocesan as well as State and Federal government policies and initiatives are referenced by different Catholic education systems in Australia in the development of standards for RE curricula (Rymarz & Hyde, 2013, p. 75).

Ryan (2013) explains that the greatest challenge for religious educators in the Catholic Faith Tradition is whether the study of the life and teachings of Jesus should be the focus of the instruction in RE classes or whether it is more appropriate and necessary to foster and nurture within the RE classroom, a particular way of life, that is in keeping with the life of Jesus. Ryan believes a balance is required that considers a “religious and educational dimension in the teaching of RE into the future” (p. 144). Sullivan (2016) also calls for a balance in RE, suggesting that religious education offers a unique “space like no other” if teachers are open to considering “different aspects of what is entailed when engaging with this curriculum area” (p. 21).

To achieve such a balance, Harris and Moran (1998) stated prior to Ryan and Sullivan that unless a Catholic school is set up to accomplish the aim of teaching people to understand their religion and practise a religious way of life, Catholic school staff may not be able to clearly distinguish the two aims. In turn, the Catholic school will be a place of “muddle and rebellion” (p. 43). Relevant to this study is the extent to which the religious educators working in Catholic schools in WA individually and collectively understand Church documents about the educational nature of RE and how to teach and assess RE. This is because without a collective understanding of RE, the evangelising mission of Catholic

schools is difficult to achieve (D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012). Furthermore, without a collective understanding of school curricula, improvements in student learning may be unattainable (Kelly, 2005; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009).

**3.4.3 The role of Religious Education in Catholic schools.** To understand the evangelising mission of the Church is to understand the significant role that Catholic schools play in the life of the Church, with RE as priority in that role (Vatican Council II, 1965c). The RE curriculum is generally considered within the broader context of the curriculum offered in Catholic schools (D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2011; Buchanan & Rymarz, 2008). RE is interpreted from an educational perspective (Holohan, 1999; Rymarz & Hyde, 2013) and recognised as one of the most important learning areas taught in Catholic schools (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982, para. 57, 1988, para. 66, 1997, para. 50; Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, para. 73; John Paul II, 1979). Yet, as mentioned earlier, the educational interpretation of RE is complex.

As outlined in Church documents, Catholic schools as part of Catholic education systems around the world have a distinctive duty (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977), through the implementation of RE and other learning areas they offer, to promote evangelisation (Vatican Council II, 1965c). Catholic schools are established as “important means of fulfilling” the episcopal responsibilities of the Catholic diocesan bishop to which they are entrusted (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 6; Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, paras. 71, 72; *Liberia Editrice Vaticana*, 1983, canons 805, 806). The bishops who govern and guide Catholic schools are considered the principal teachers of the faith (*Libreria Editrice Vaticana*, 1983, canon 804). Given the challenges for religious educators, Buchanan and Rymarz (2008) identify four aims of the Catholic school within the context of the Church documents and their close connection to the teaching of RE: first, the formation of Catholic believers; second, to foster Catholic principles; third, to give witness to the Catholic educational values; and fourth, to ensure that the spirit of Christ is permeated in everything that is carried out and achieved.

Catholic schools have a unique identity and responsibility whereby all members are called to proclaim the Church’s mission of evangelisation (Convey, 2012). This mission is within and beyond the RE classroom (Flynn, 1979, 1985; D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012). The evangelising mission is the responsibility of principals, teachers and support staff working in Catholic schools to meet the religious and educational needs of students who are baptised, non-baptised, practising Catholics, non-practising Catholics and non-Catholics.

Today the evangelising mission of the Church is referred to as the “new evangelisation” (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, para. 58c; Francis I, 2013; John Paul II, 1990, para. 33d). That is, the successful proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus requires all Catholic members in and out of Catholic schools to renew their faith and learn, understand and appropriately share the historical and ongoing narratives of God’s revelation and salvation for all people (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977). Again, central to these narratives is the life and teachings of Jesus. The aim of the Catholic school experience within the context of the new evangelisation is about the full integration of faith, life and culture (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 37, 1997, para. 11) that develops the whole person and revives the identity of Catholic schools (McLaughlin, O’Keefe, & O’Keefe, 1996, pp. 1–22). Leaders and staff in Catholic schools in Australia are encouraged to evaluate their practices so as to better align with the Church’s mission (National Catholic Education Commission, 2017a).

Over time, some Australian scholars have attempted to describe the role of RE within the place of Catholic schools (Holohan 1999; O’Donoghue, 2001). Holohan (1999, p. 36) argues that the Catholic school should consider itself a place of evangelisation that needs to strive to be a community of Christian witness. There is a need to experience the Ministry of the Word through primary proclamation, initiatory catechesis activities, homilies and RE, all of which need to be appropriate to the needs of students in their care. Through RE and liturgical worship, Catholic schools can teach people how to understand and engage with a religious way of life. This interpretation of the role of RE in Catholic schools suggests that every element and feature of the Catholic school should have a religious base, and the teaching of every learning area (not just RE) should openly allow for a religious dialogue. Within this interpretation, the role of RE is recognised as a classroom activity whereby the acquisition of knowledge of the content of the Catholic Faith Tradition is systematically and intensively considered (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 62; Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, paras. 69, 70; Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, para. 73). O’Donoghue (2001, p. 80) agrees, suggesting that the official position of the Church is that religious instruction or RE together with the entire “climate” of the Catholic school is “all-pervasive” allowing for the promotion of a Catholic worldview throughout all subject areas.

Religious educators in Catholic schools in WA are expected to know and understand the nature and role of RE within the wider context of the Catholic school setting (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, 2013a; Holohan, 1999). To assist

religious educators, McGunnigle and Hackett (2015) propose Catholic schools strive for academic excellence through awareness of the Christian mentality towards society. Their ideas align with the Australian curriculum and the goal of the curriculum to produce active members of society (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2016).

**3.4.4 Teaching approaches.** Unique historical and cultural (Ryan, 2013), political, geographical and social (Earl, 2008), and ecclesial and educational (Buchanan, 2005, 2009; McKinney, 2013) changes have continued to shape the nature and role of RE within Catholic education. As a result of these changes, different titles and teaching approaches are used in different Catholic schools and systems of education around the world (O'Donoghue, 2001). Given the differing interpretations that have surfaced about RE, approaches to the teaching of RE are varied and have included "traditional catechesis", "kerygmatic renewal", a "life centred" or "experiential approach", "shared Christian praxis" and academically focused "religious education" (Ryan, 2013, p. 5). Each approach can be further subdivided into various models of teaching RE (Buchanan, 2009; Goldberg, 2008) based on differing interpretations and applications to the term RE (Lacey, 2011). Furthermore, the approaches seem to follow the history of approaches in education generally (Ryan, 2013) that relate to curriculum planning (O'Donoghue, 2017).

In Australia, the titles for approaches to teaching RE also have historical significance grounded in educational change. The various approaches to the teaching of RE are historically a sign of educational changes in society and the Church's response to those changes (Hyde & Rymarz, 2009; Ryan, 2013). For example, in the post Second World War era, there was a strong Magisterial sense of Church, dictating and defining what Catholics had to believe, how they were meant to believe and how they were expected to live their lives. Students in Catholic schools in that era were expected to memorise Catholic beliefs by rote (Dwyer, 1986). Following the Second Vatican Council, known as the post-conciliar era, Catholic education and, in particular, RE experienced significant changes brought about through reforms of the Eucharistic liturgy, decreasing the number of consecrated religious brothers and sisters, increasing the presence of laity in schools, changes to society and changes in government funding to Catholic schools (Hyde & Rymarz, 2009).

Generally, the approaches to the teaching of RE emerged from outside Australia but have been reconfigured by the Australian Catholic landscape and have followed educational developments that began, for example, with Plato, Descartes and Kant and moved towards the works of Dewey, Vygotsky and Freire (Ryan, 2013). The educational developments

identify changes to curriculum processes that start as rigid and transform into dynamic and interactive teaching approaches (Kelly, 2005; Print, 1987). The changes in education evolved through philosophical debates about the acquisition of human knowledge. Over time, education moved from teacher-centred to child-centred teaching approaches (O'Donoghue, 2017). Developments in RE curricula are no different (Ryan, 2013). As trained professionals, religious educators may have gained knowledge and understanding about these educational developments that are general to all learning areas and specific to RE. These experiences may have influenced their perceptions of the teaching profession and, in turn, their teaching and assessment practices.

Figure 3.2 categories four approaches used to teach RE in Australia. These approaches are based on the collective work of various scholars of RE and date back to colonisation: Traditional Catechetical Approaches; Kerygmatic Renewal; Life-centred or Experiential Approaches; and the Educational Approaches. The approaches cover aspects of teaching and learning about the Catholic religion as well as the experiences of particular religious activities such as participation in liturgies, sacraments and prayers. Significant features and events relevant to Australia and the WA landscape since colonisation are included in the figure.

**3.4.4.1 The Traditional Catechetical Approach.** This approach is based on Catechesis and involves several methods or models of teaching RE that are considered as “Faith-Forming or Catechetical Models”. Such models focus on engaging believers in a faith community to grow and nurture their faith (Goldburg, 2008, p. 247). The approach is referred to as traditional because it emerged from the Reformation era (1517–1648) with the use of published Catechisms. The models that support this teaching approach to RE have been used throughout the centuries in Western Christian education (Rummery, 1977; Ryan, 2013).

It is important to note the word Catechesis is not only confused with RE but also often confused with this traditional catechetical style of teaching RE that is associated with learning answers from the Catechism (Hyde & Rymarz, 2009). This is because students were taught to memorise theological propositions, prayers and moral guidelines from various forms of the Catechisms of the Catholic Church.



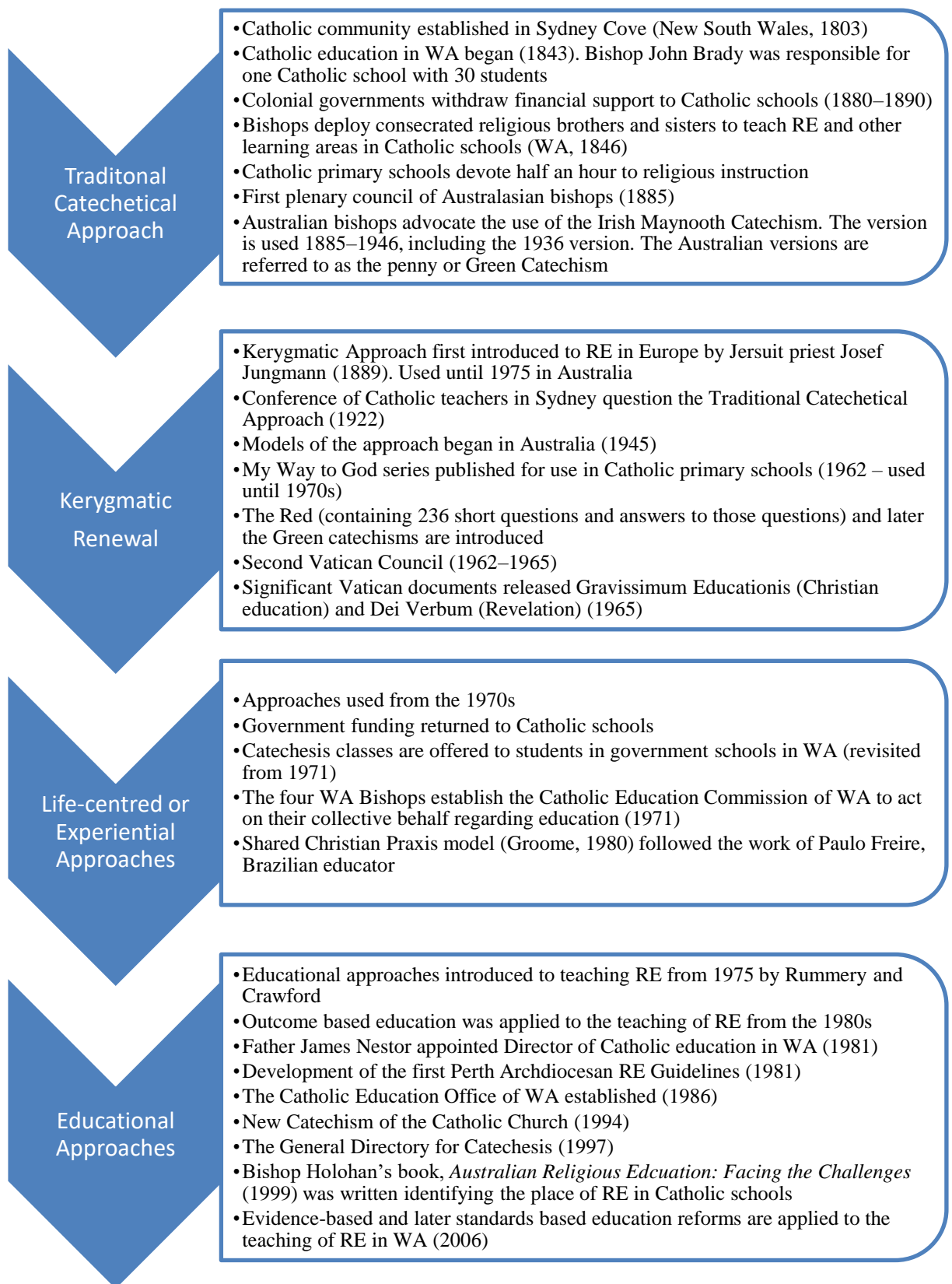


Figure 3.2. Teaching approaches used in Religious Education in Australia

The traditional catechetical approach to teaching RE was and continues to be heavily scrutinised for its “rote like learning”. According to Rummery (1977), Christian Brother, Michael B. Hanrahan considered the approach or the formal teaching of the Catechism as “nothing less than a millstone tied around the neck of teacher and child” (p. 271). Ryan (2013) concurs by writing that the approach “constrained the freedom of teacher and student, was unimaginative in its presentation of material and often did not match students’ conceptual abilities ... a prime cause for young people to abandon the practice of their faith” (p. 62).

Darcy-Berube (1995) and Ryan (2013) believe the Traditional Catechetical Approach was heavily reviewed in Australia as a result of criticisms by prominent educational theorists at the time who challenged rigid approaches to teaching. The work of these theorists continues to inform the more educationally grounded approaches to teaching RE that operate today. For example, Rousseau (1712–1778) who put the student at the centre of education; Pestalozzi (1746–1827) who viewed education as the natural and progressive development of the child’s powers and capacities; Dewey (1859–1952) who rebelled against conventional approaches to education; and Montessori (1870–1952) who believed each child is a unique and sacred individual, and that there is a gradual unfolding of the potential within each person.

**3.4.4.2 Kerygmatic Renewal.** This approach with its various models began outside of Australia from 1945 (Ryan, 2013). The approach is also referred to as Kerygmatic Catechesis. As an approach to teaching RE, Kerygmatic Renewal emerged from Britain and other Christian dominated parts of the world where the aim of RE was being questioned in response to widespread criticism of traditional authority and familiar institutions (Copley, 2008). In Australian Catholic schools, the approach was adopted from the mid-1960s. The models used under the umbrella of this approach are based on the teaching of RE that considers secular moral education theories (Barnes, 2014, pp. 58–59). The approach assumes that “students are active members of faith communities ... religious education was seen as being closely identified with catechesis” (Hyde & Rymarz, 2009, p. 5).

As part of the kerygmatic approach to the teaching of RE, religious educators engaged in the work of critical hermeneutics (Scott, 1984). Religious educators focused on teaching students to understand the knowledge of the Catholic Faith Tradition by analysing and interpreting the Bible or Christian texts from broader social, economic and historical settings. In turn, that knowledge was used to develop students’ personal experiences of the Christian

Tradition. The students were exposed to a critical analysis of the Christian Tradition as part of a broader social awareness exercise (Goldburg, 2008; Ryan, 2013).

O'Donoghue (2001) and Ryan (2013) both infer that the seminal work of Jesuit priest, theologian and liturgist Josef Jungmann (1889–1975) initiated the approach in Europe. Jungmann wanted to renew the traditional catechetical approach and its processes. “Jungmann’s central notion was that the focus should be on the essential message of Christian teaching, the *kerygma*; hence the name ‘kerygmatic catechesis’” (O’Donoghue, 2001, p. 79). Kerygma refers to the Christian message of Jesus and people’s experience of that message (Holohan, 1999). Johannes Hofinger was also associated with the kerygmatic approach. He shifted the emphasis from method to content in the teaching of RE and attempted to recapture the spirit and vision of the Church from the time of the Apostles (Goldburg, 2008; Rummery, 1977).

Kerygmatic Renewal adopted psychology and the social sciences to assist with understanding students’ personal and social development (McInerney & McInerney, 2006). The work of psychologists such as Jean Piaget (1896–1980) was considered. Piaget introduced cognitive development based on chronological age. The work of Les Vygotsky (1896–1934) was also considered. That work dealt with the cultural–historical aspects of cognitive development. Lawrence Kolberg’s (1927–1987) work on moral development was applied to theoretical studies of RE.

The emphasis of the kerygmatic approach to teaching RE was met with approval by Australian bishops to the point that several new texts between 1962 and 1964 were produced for use across Australian Catholic schools (Hyde & Rymarz, 2009; Ryan, 2013). They were prepared by teams led by a priest of the Melbourne Catholic Education Office, Fr John Kelly. The texts were based on a German Catechism developed in 1949. The noticeable feature of the texts was their dependence on the Bible. Some Australian references were provided. One significant primary text, a series of books for students aged five to ten was called *My Way to God*. This four-part series was developed with an emphasis on proclaiming the Good News to students. In contrast, one set of books developed for students in Catholic secondary schools retained the question and answer format from Traditional Catechesis. These books are known as the Red and Green Catechisms (Ryan, 2013, pp. 67–68). Religious educators working in Catholic schools in WA at the time used the texts produced by the Melbourne Catholic Education Office. Ryan (2013) suggests the texts are an example of the first recognised RE curriculum used across Australia.

**3.4.4.3 The Life-centred and Experiential Approaches.** By the early 1970s a new set of methods for teaching RE emerged in Australia called the life-centred approaches. These approaches built upon Kerygmatic Renewal by further using psychology and the social sciences (O'Donoghue & Byrne, 2014). During RE classes, students were invited to express their personal views and feelings and look for signs of God's activity in their lives and the world around them. However, even with those developments, an appropriation of the Traditional Catechesis approach was still evident (Ryan, 2013). Significant life-centred approaches that influenced the teaching of RE include the Shared Praxis, Liberation and Critical Models (Goldburg, 2008; Lovat, 2002).

The 1970s was a time after the Second Vatican Council when changes to theory and practice in terms of theological and catechetical movements were seriously considered. The Church community attempted to break from the traditional catechetical approach of teaching RE and engaged with progressive educational ideas from scholars inside and outside the Church community. During this time, significant Church documents were produced as sources for the teaching of RE. For example, the *General Catechetical Directory* (Congregation for the Clergy, 1971) aimed to synthesise a review of the character and role of the Church. The influence of that review provided a document with a rationale and guidelines for new catechetical approaches that focused on the nature and role of Catechesis, in particular, RE (Ryan, 2013 p. 91). In this case, RE was considered to be catechetical in nature. The new educational ideology caused disputes among the Catholic community because they exposed deficiencies in the Kerygmatic Renewal approach of teaching RE and saw a move away from the past involvement of whole faith communities (Goldburg, 2008).

The disputes arose from different interpretations of the Church documentation about Catholic education (Buchanan, 2005). For example, interpretations of *Dei Verbum* (Vatican Council II, 1965b) focused on Revelation and how Revelation is a present and ongoing reality in the lives of Christians. The interpretations influenced moves towards teaching RE using more life-centred approaches that considered the students' personal experiences and situations. Students entered into critical analysis of the Christian tradition (Hyde & Rymarz, 2009). The aim was to give students religious meaning to their lives (Lovat, 2002).

The life-centred and experiential approaches to the teaching of RE focused on anthropological studies of the Catholic religion. Protestants and Catholics religious educators worked closely together (Lovat, 2002). At the time, Smart (1971), a Scottish Protestant scholar, contributed to the teaching of RE in Catholic secondary schools. His work is known to have advanced secular religious studies in Britain particularly, whereby the content in the

RE curriculum of Catholic schools is overseen by diocesan bishops but managed by the government through the national education system (Rummery, 1977).

One life-centred approach to RE that became popular in Australia during the 1980s and possibly beyond was Groome's (1980) Shared Christian Praxis model. Groome developed a model consisting of four stages: shared experience; reflection-deepened; faith expressed; and insights reinforced. His work is based on the work of Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire (Ryan, 2013). This was one of a number of educational approaches used by theorists at the time with insights based on critical theory (Hyde & Rymarz, 2009, p. 9). Earlier life-centred models attempted to pass on the traditional faith whereas the Shared Christian Praxis model attempted to evoke social awareness in students so as to become active agents of the Church and respond to the demands of the Christian tradition.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s the Shared Christian Praxis model was adapted and introduced across dioceses in Australia in the form of RE Guidelines (Ryan, 2013). For example, the Archdioceses of Melbourne, Sydney and Perth produced their own RE Guidelines. The development of the RE Guidelines was part of the Church's policy developments aimed at reforming the teaching of RE (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988; Congregation for the Clergy, 1997). Catholic ideology focused on bringing together the faith, the history and the culture of its people in light of the Gospel message. This ideology continues to be a feature of current scholarly works (Rymarz, 2014).

In 1981, the Perth Archdiocese developed its first set of RE guidelines called *The Truth Will Set You Free* (Director of Religious Education, Archdiocese of Perth, 1983). These RE Guidelines were "reviewed and superseded" with the current "working drafts" of the Perth Archdiocesan Religious Education Course (PAREC), which were first released for implementation as Units of Work in 2003 (Hackett, 2006, p. 18). An updated version of the Units is used by religious educators today in Catholic education in WA. The Units contain the mandated content that religious educators involved in this study are prescribed to use in their teaching of RE and in preparing students for the BRLA (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, 2013b; Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013).

**3.4.4.4 Educational Approaches.** Prior to and in particular since the 1970s the teaching of RE began to further align with academically recognised models of education. The educational approaches have focused on the acquisition of knowledge, skills and values of the Catholic Faith Tradition (O'Donoghue & Byrne, 2014). Hyde and Rymarz (2009) argue that

scholarship in RE since the 1970s has attempted to make RE more educationally relevant.

They write:

Part of this movement was to use some of the concepts and language used in other disciplines and apply them to Religious Education. This movement was supported by Church documents which asked for the same rigour to be applied to RE as was evident in other subjects. To facilitate this development Catholic Education Offices all over the country began to develop their own curriculum along the parameters set out in the Guidelines. The Guidelines gave Religious Education a structure and direction but left it up to teachers and schools to shape the curriculum to suit their particular needs. Guideline documents used language that was common in educational circles such as core objective, learning outcomes and educational goals and applied these to Religious Education .... Teachers planned lessons to meet specific goals and also developed assessments which were an important part of education in other areas .... Part of the movement to make Religious Education more educationally relevant was to develop key resources for students and teachers in the area. (pp. 9–10)

Further to their claim, Rymarz and Hyde (2013) suggest that RE taught using the educational approaches specifically focuses on the principles of scientific inquiry more than any other approaches used in the past.

The work of international researchers such as Moran, Groome, Goldman, Grimmer and Smart and Australian scholars such as Rummery, Crawford, Rossiter and Malone drew attention to the necessity to bring developments in education and related disciplines of psychology and sociology to RE (Fleming, 2002). The researchers, in particular Rummery (1975), are recognised for paving the way for the development of a language in RE that has brought about a balance between the terms “religious” and “education” (Ryan, 2013). The researchers have strongly argued for RE activities that take place in the formal RE classrooms to be grounded in educational principles. The educational approaches to teaching RE attempt to enhance the religious literacy of students (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006; Rossiter, 2010; Ryan, 2013, p. 137).

Today various models of teaching RE with a focus on education are adopted by Catholic dioceses across Australia, including WA. Locally, the review of the original RE curriculum and resources for the curriculum are developed in WA by the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia (CEOWA) to align the developments and implementation of RE with State and Federal education frameworks (Hackett et al., 2017). The CEOWA focuses on academic and systematic approaches to teaching and assessing student learning in RE

(Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, 2013b). The approaches provide Catholic schools with key content, understandings and learning points for all school-aged students in Pre-Primary to Year 12.

In 2006, further alignment was made visible with the introduction of the *Religious Education: Learning Area Statement and Progress Maps* (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2006b). This is a resource produced for teachers within the context of standard-based educational reform. The resource integrates the content in the RE Units of Work with the teaching, monitoring and assessment standards in RE as prescribed under the five broad outcomes that students are expected to achieve by the end of Year Ten.

Other Australian examples of educational models used in Catholic schools for teaching RE are found in the Archdiocese of Melbourne (Catholic Education Office of Melbourne, 2011) and Sydney (Catholic Education Office of Sydney, 2011b). The models focus on increasing religious understanding (Ryan, 2007). *To Know Worship and Love* is the text book series that is used to support the academic model in Melbourne and Sydney (Buchanan, 2009).

Within the context of educational approaches to the teaching of RE, Catholic education systems in Australia, including that in WA, recognise RE as an authentic learning area that offers “an academic, disciplined study” (National Catholic Education Commission, 2017b, p. 10; Ryan, 2007, p. 147). The aim of such approaches is to allow students to gain Christian knowledge and skills about the Catholic religion (McGunnigle & Hackett, 2015; National Catholic Education Commission, 2017a, p. 7) and, at the same time, develop an understanding of the culture and faith of the Catholic Tradition (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 50, 1982, para. 57, 1988, para. 69). The assessment of students’ knowledge and skills about the Catholic religion is a feature of educational approaches to teaching RE.

**3.4.5 Assessment practices.** Given that RE is recognised as being taught with the same systematic demands as other learning areas (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 62; Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 50, 1982, para. 57, 1988, paras. 69, 70; Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, para. 73) assessment practices in RE are conceivable. Within this context the use of LSAs such as the BRLA in RE is also plausible. In practice, however, the place of formal assessment in RE other than the use of LSAs such as the BRLA has been more a theoretical concept loosely applied to RE classes in Catholic schools with the rigour intended by Church documents (White & Borg,

2002). Much of the scholarship surrounding assessment in RE from a Catholic perspective is about anonymous self-assessments and evaluations (MacDonald, 1994). The intention for rigorous assessment practices are considered (Healy & Bush, 2010), but the reality may continue to be that assessment practices in RE are not as rigorous as in other learning areas (White, 2004). This issue is considered by research literature as beyond the RE classroom and general to education (Gardner, 2012; Harlen, 2007). Evidence suggests that the whole teaching profession is in need of specific training in assessment principles and practices generally (Hill & Barber, 2014).

Two possible reasons for the lack of attention to formal assessment practices in RE may stem from the historical approaches to the teaching of RE. Firstly, the resentment to the idea of returning to a time when the traditional catechetical approach to teaching RE applied rote learning techniques based on the question and answer teaching of RE. Secondly, the ongoing debate about the nature and role of Catechesis and RE. The latter debate presents value laden assumptions and ideologies that are difficult to measure using scientific inquiry (Grimmitt, 2008).

The work of MacDonald (1994) about assessment in RE has been pivotal to the study of the learning area in Catholic schools. MacDonald explains that improvement of student learning is the central concern of the religious educator's work. In order to understand assessment, there is a need for religious educators to acknowledge the following components. Firstly, to consider the nature and purpose of RE within Catholic schools. According to MacDonald, both are significantly connected. Secondly, to consider the nature of faith. For MacDonald, the idea of faith comes in three forms: faith as gift; faith as free response; and faith as communal. MacDonald argues religious educators should only be concerned with a student's ability to demonstrate his or her knowledge and skills relating to the content of faith set in the RE curriculum. Within the curriculum is content that is of an affective and cognitive nature. Assessment in RE should include learning of content that is both affective and cognitive but should not extend to an evaluation of the students' faith response. Of interest to this study, MacDonald's views present a fine line between the content learnt affectively and students' faith responses. Also, for MacDonald, measurement or formal examination and testing such as the BRLA has no place in RE. MacDonald states:

The question of what to assess in Religious Education is perhaps the most difficult and controversial one concerned with the processes of assessment.... As outlined above, my definition of assessment in Religious Education deliberately avoids any reference to measurement ... in Religious Education there would be little justification



for formal assessment procedures such as tests or examinations. Summative or terminal assessment, in the form of a final end of year examination, where there is no opportunity to use the examination paper and the students' performance as a learning opportunity, would have limited educational value. (1995, p. 12)

MacDonald's work advanced the need for school-based assessment across the RE curriculum like other learning areas during the 1990s. However, more recent developments in the use of assessments in RE provide guidance for a more rigorous process. Hyde and Rymarz (2009), for example, advocate for systematic and formalised procedures. They state:

One can make a strong case for assessment in RE and at the same time maintain that there are some areas of RE that should not be assessed. These largely pertain to the affective or spiritual domains. This is not to say that these domains are not important or that they emphatically cannot be assessed .... Rather it means that assessment should be primarily directed to the cognitive dimension of the discipline. (p. 105)

Hyde and Rymarz (2009) provide religious educators with examples of a range of assessment types, from presentations to tests, to work diaries, summaries, structured plays, posters, assignments, projects, writing letters, dialogues, quizzes, tests and exams. The extent to which the religious educators in this study applied such educational assessment practices in RE is evident in the findings.

**3.4.6 Context summary.** The literature reviewed about RE provides a global definition as well as a specific Australian Catholic perspective aligned to the experiences of religious educators in this study. Historically, the teaching of RE in Australia has followed educational trends but has kept to the missionary task of spreading and developing the Catholic Faith Tradition (Ryan, 2013). RE is a complex area, marked by perceived differences among religious educators about titles and teaching approaches (O'Donoghue & Byrne, 2014). These differences have caused debates inside and outside the Catholic religion (Scott, 2016; Shanahan, 2016). Tensions between the religious and educational focus of RE continue to fuel the debates. For example, some religious educators associate RE as Catechesis and a faith-based activity. In contrast, other religious educators focus on the educational dimension of RE. Church documents and contemporary scholarship advocate a balanced focus between approaches (Rossiter, 2010; Rymarz, 2012). Such a balance requires collective understandings about RE within the context of Catholic schools and whole Catholic education systems. A more educational alignment of RE with other learning areas

has meant that assessment and measurement principles are considered in RE more than in the past (Hyde & Rymarz, 2009; White & Borg, 2002). These developments have seen the use of formal assessments such as the BRLA. The extent to which religious educators interpret their understandings of RE and apply these understandings to their teaching and assessment practices in RE is the reality in Catholic schools. This reality is significant to this study and aspects of this reality are made known through the findings of the study.

### **3.5 Context Two: The Use of Large-scale, Standardised Assessments**

This section of the chapter deals specifically with LSAs that are compatible with the BRLA. Assessments similar to the BRLA are used locally, nationally and internationally in educational systems including Catholic education systems in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom. The literature reviewed within this context identifies those assessments and specifically addresses the language of educational assessment and the place of those LSAs within that language. The purpose and role, and the properties and processes of LSAs are discussed. However, the literature does not include discussions regarding student performance data from LSAs as these discussions are beyond the scope of this thesis. The educational assessment literature that is presented is grounded in an evidence-based curriculum reform agenda that considers the use of LSAs as measures of accountability for improving student learning (Masters, 2013). Stakeholders such as system leaders, school leaders, teachers, parents, students and the wider community are responsible for the learning that takes place in schools (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

**3.5.1 Assessment defined.** Assessment comes from the Latin word, *assidere* (Stevenson & Waite, 2011, p. 78) meaning “to sit beside” to evaluate worth (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013, p. 18). The word crept into the field of educational testing mainly through psychology (Athanasou & Lamprianou, 2005). In recent years the term assessment has taken over from the term testing mainly because of its broader inclusion of a variety of tasks and to avoid many of the negative and anxious connotations associated with intelligence type testing in psychology.

Gardner (1999) explains that the study of human knowledge within the field of cognitive psychology has helped shape assessments used in education. For example, cognitive theories have identified knowledge as mental representations where ideas are linked in hierarchies; sets of propositions that are connected in networks; and schemata or structures that help people actively engage in comprehension and guide the execution of processing.

Whatever the theory, scholars now agree that human knowledge is about a complex storage, retrieval and interpretation of facts and ideas by the human brain (Reynolds et al., 2009).

In education, the act of assessment is part of an evaluation process that involves judging and estimating the nature and attributes of a person or object (Wu, Tam, & Jen, 2016). For example, Athanasou and Lamprianou (2005) define assessment as the “process or processes of collecting and combining information from tasks (e.g. tests on performance or learning) with a view to making a judgement about a person or making a comparison against an established criterion” (p. 3). For these scholars, assessment involves the process of identifying, gathering and interpreting information about students’ learning.

Reynolds et al. (2009, p. 3) suggest that the term “assessment” needs to be considered alongside the term “measurement”, and that often these terms are commonly used interchangeably. For these scholars, there is a clear distinction between the terms that educators should acknowledge. Assessment refers to the systematic collection of information or data used to make judgements and inferences whereas measurement refers to the rules used in the design of tools or instruments and methods for scoring or techniques for assessing. Student learning is assessed using various measurement tools (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013). Examples of measurement tools used in education include classroom tests, assignments, projects and standardised assessments. Other measurement tools with built-in rubrics that are used to assess student learning include observations, surveys and oral presentations. Both the learning of students and the tools used to measure their learning should be assessed (Andrich, 1988).

Masters (2010) argues that assessment should be explicit and implicit in the teaching and learning process. The expectation is that through effective assessment practices, aligned with other components of the curriculum (Athanasou & Lamprianou, 2005; Kelly, 2005), teachers are provided with information that enhance instruction and promote learning (Timperley, 2013; Volante, 2010). Effective assessment practices ensure that students develop deep understandings of disciplines; the ability to analyse and synthesise; and make inferences that reflect critical, problem solving skills (Segers, Dochy, & Cascallar, 2003). Furthermore, effective assessment practices that evaluate assessing and measuring processes collect valid and reliable data (Earl & Timperley, 2009).

Effective assessment practices are based on three aspects (Blumberg, 2014, p. 44). First and foremost, assessment should convey a commitment to helping students to acquire knowledge, skills and values. Secondly, assessments should act as learning events. Thirdly, assessment should enable students to recognise and monitor their own progress. If these three

aspects are kept in mind when designing and constructing learning opportunities, assessment may improve the quality and impact of those opportunities, enabling students to become independent, confident and motivated to learn. The extent to which religious educators in this study considered these aspects within their assessment practices in RE was explored and is evident in the findings presented in Chapters Five through to Ten.

To ensure the ideals of assessment practices are achieved, national governments overseeing education jurisdictions in countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Ireland, Scotland and Japan are focused on the development of professional standards in assessment practice (Wyatt-Smith, Klenowski, & Colbert, 2014). The development of professional capabilities of teachers (Gardner, Harlen, Hayward, Stobart, & Montgomery, 2010) as well as school and system leaders (Dinham, 2016; Fullan, 2016) in the area of educational assessment is a priority for these countries. The desired outcome for teachers and leaders is to collect valid and reliable data so as to better measure and assess student learning and bring about growth as sustained improvement of the learning (Hill & Barber, 2014; Wu, 2016). One of the major changes in assessment practices since the 1990s to ensure desired outcomes are achieved is the introduction of LSAs (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011). These assessments have been a system-wide response to an apparent drop in student standards in education (Fullan, 2016; Gardner, 2012; Ryan & Weinstein, 2009).

In the absence of data about standards in student performance in RE, the BRLA as a LSA was developed and implemented for measuring student learning in RE at a time when the focus on improving standards in education arose (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2006a). Like education systems around the world, the Catholic education system in WA is committed to improving effective assessment practices in all learning areas they offer (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2013a), in particular, RE (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, 2013b). The CEOWA developed the BRLA to assist religious educators at the classroom, school and system levels to diagnose student learning in RE and consider future planning in RE (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2006a, 2013).

**3.5.2 Large-scale, standardised assessments defined.** The history of assessment helps to understand how and why formalised or large-scale assessments are perceived by people today (Gardner, 2012). Testing practices of this kind can be traced back over 4,000 years ago to Sumerian civilisations. In 2200 BC the Mandarins in China set up a civil service

testing program via oral examinations. This practice was used until the late 1800s to evaluate achievement. In Britain, much of the early and formal educational assessments were based on rote memorisation as set up by Joseph Lancaster (1778–1838). Written tests dating back to around the 1860s identify formal testing practices.

The introduction and widespread use of formal testing such as LSAs can be traced back to the early 1900s within the field of psychology, when scholars such as Alfred Binet and his colleagues started working on intelligence testing (Athanasou & Lamprianou, 2005; Gardner, 1999; Reynolds et al., 2009). The intelligence tests that were produced and administered were biased heavily on linguistics and logical mathematics. People who faced difficulties in either or both of these areas tended to fail the instruments. The study of psychometrics arose from the testing of intelligence and was concerned with the theory of the evaluation of psychological measurement, including the measurement of knowledge abilities, attitudes, personality traits and educational measurement (Cotton, 1995).

Wang et al. (2006) provide a comprehensive definition for LSAs and the surrounding landscape:

Standardised assessment extends beyond norm-referenced tests to include standards-based tests typically used for high-stakes purposes. This means that such assessment (a) is externally imposed by the State and [National] governments; (b) assesses state-prescribed content standards; (c) follows a uniform procedure in administering, scoring, and interpreting the test; and (d) the results are often used to determine rewards and sanctions for students, teachers, schools, or districts. Note that under this definition, standardised assessment is not necessarily limited to multiple-choice questions, as some standardised testing advocates have assumed. Authentic performance assessments can and should be standardised to minimise abuses and inequities and to give us a common language for describing different children in different classrooms ... although such work has been shown to be more challenging and less successful than multiple-choice tests .... (pp. 308–309)

The use of the term “large-scale” refers to students across entire educational systems, locations or States participating in a common assessment program (Athanasou & Lamprianou, 2005; Reynolds et al., 2009). The term “standardised” refers to an approach used by educators to measure the performance of students using consistent administrative procedures, assessment items and strategies for scoring items (Andrich, 1988, Popham, 2005). The use of the term “standards” considers how well students perform relative to prescribed sets of content rather than relative to a norm group comprising students of the

same age and ability (Wang et al. 2006). In Australia, the content from core subjects such as English, Mathematics and Science are generally assessed using LSAs (Matters, 2006).

The advent of large classes and organised education has meant that dramatic changes to assessment have occurred (Linn, 2000). LSAs are thought to have emerged from industrialisation and universal schooling at the turn of the twentieth century and as time went on evolved with the rise of the middle class and capitalism. In education today, assessments have become more formal, more quantitative in nature and have involved greater standardisation (Gardner, 2012). Administrators of LSAs appear to be seeking ways of identifying and describing the cognitive development of students' understanding at a macro level.

Gardner (2012) believes that various countries began using LSAs from the 1990s. Over time LSAs have been developed externally to schools and classrooms by educational system administrators as part of a series of educational reforms (Harrington, 2013). These reforms include strategies focused on the development of national curricula and standards for teaching and leading student learning in schools. Evidence gathered about teaching and learning from LSAs has paved the way for "evidence-based" reforms (Forster, 2009; Fullan et al., 2006; Hattie, 2009). These reforms have focused on the use of data to enhance instructional and assessment practices.

**3.5.3 Evidence-based curriculum reforms.** The term "evidence-based" is at times synonymous with "assessment-driven" reform, "standards-based" assessment, "assessment-centered accountability", and "high-stakes consequences" (Wang et al., 2006). Terms such as "accountability", "standards" and "alignment" are emphasised (Hill & Barber, 2014). The reforms promote the collection of student data using a range of measurement tools including LSAs (James & Pedder, 2006). The purpose for such reforms is to inform and to raise standards in student learning, teaching and assessment practices, and to maximise ongoing improvements of those standards (Shaddock, 2014). Classroom teachers, school and system leaders are deemed responsible and held accountable for student learning (Linn, 2003). Collaboration between educators is endorsed to optimise efficacy. As part of the evidence-based reforms, classroom teachers and school and system leaders are encouraged to look beyond the superficial view of assessment based on a distinction between the purpose and role of LSAs and classroom assessment (Guskey, 2007).

A perception by educators in recent times is that the focus on externally produced assessments such as LSAs (considered "summative" in nature) has been greater than the

focus on classroom assessments (considered “formative” in nature) (Harlen, 2007). Stiggins (2008) suggest that a refocus is in order. The refocus targets classroom assessment practices to better provide quality information on student learning.

Masters (2013), who is an advocate of evidence-based reforms in education, in particular, in Australian education, recommends an alignment between classroom and system wide assessment practices. As part of the alignment he discourages the use of words such as “formative” and “summative” and other limiting phrases so that a mutual appreciation for teacher-designed assessments and LSAs is established. Within this context, the intended role of LSAs is to generate data that can inform and assist teachers and school and system leaders with student learning. Information from classroom assessments together with information from LSAs may lead to broader and comprehensive assessment practices. It is expected that such practices also lead to sustained improvements in student learning (Forster, 2009; Hill & Barber, 2014).

Decker and Bolt (2008) also suggest educators refocus their thinking around assessment practices and in particular, the use of LSAs. They believe that the role of LSAs (as one form of assessment), should be aligned to curriculum standards in a way that reflects the range of content and level of knowledge students are exposed to and can master as skills. If alignment is achieved (Herman & Webb, 2007) standards will be met. Decker and Bolt (2008) state that the aim for implementing LSAs as accountability measures is fourfold. Firstly, to produce gains in student learning and achievement. Secondly, to increase teacher and student motivation. Thirdly, to improve curriculum and instruction. Fourthly, to provide for the recognition of equity among historically at-risk groups of students.

Research literature suggests that when external measures such as LSAs are used to assess student learning, there can be more of a focus by teachers, school leaders and administrators on collecting and analysing quality data about students’ learning (Forster, 2009; Wildy, 2004; Wu, Tam, & Jen, 2016). The data generated from LSAs informs decisions about assessment policy and practice (Craig & Craig, 2008; Reynolds et al., 2009). For example, educators who use longitudinal data from LSAs identify strengths and weaknesses of student learning and increase opportunities to improve and modify instruction throughout the school year and across Year levels (Webb, 2007).

Such evidence-based reforms that include the use of LSAs, can encourage teachers, school leaders and system authorities to work collaboratively within schools, across school settings and with educational systems to improve professional learning programs (Rowe, 2005). The educators work together to interpret data from classroom assessments and LSAs

(Earl & Timperley, 2009; Timperley, 2009, 2010, 2013). This use of data assists educators to consider a variety of pedagogical strategies (Fullan et al., 2006; Hattie, 2009) and use multiple assessment methods including LSAs (Athanasou & Lamprianou, 2005; Stiggins, 2008; Volante, 2010) to help them make fair and consistent judgements about students' learning (Forster, 2009; Timperley, 2005). The professional learning programs developed from the evidence-based reforms aim to instruct teachers how to better evaluate their teaching and assessment practices, unite them in their review processes and become "classroom managers of the system" (Wilson & Draney, 2004, p. 139).

Generally, school and system leaders are recognised as the keepers and interpreters of student assessment data; including data collected from the administration of LSAs. Advocates of evidence-based reforms argue there is opportunity for cohesion from different professionals to work together, in bridging the gap between classroom and system wide assessment practices (Forster, 2009). The aim is to bridge the gap between data collected from classroom measures and data collected from system accountability measures such as LSAs (Forster & Masters, 2004; Heritage & Yeagley, 2005), and the effective use of data from those measures to improve student learning (Heritage & Chen, 2005; Pettit, 2009; Thompson & Mockler, 2016; Timperley, 2013).

The aim of bridging the gap between classroom and system accountability measures is to promote sustained improvements in student learning. The focus is capacity building for whole school and educational systems (Fullan, 2016). These reforms aim to bring about an "educational revolution" or "renaissance" directed at assessment practices in schools (Hill & Barber, 2014, p. 3). In the midst of the arguments for and against evidence-based reforms that use LSAs, Fullan (2016) states:

I want to provide an advanced organizer. Governments can push *accountability*, provide *incentives* (pressure and supports), and/or foster *capacity building*. We will see that if they do only the first and second, they can get, at best, some short-term results. Many governments have put all their eggs in the accountability basket; a few have been good at integrating pressure and support; and even fewer have seriously affected capacity, although several are now working on it. (p. 210)

Fullan identifies some countries as currently focusing more on "capacity building" rather than the use and misuse of data from LSAs, which was considered the issue about educational accountability in the past and led to the increased use of LSAs today. Wang et al. (2006) assert:



Standardised assessment has so far failed to deliver the promise of effective school reform because we do not now establish a tight connection between the cognitive learning theory, the curriculum, the classroom activities, and the assessment items. Authentic assessment that bridges this link between classroom learning and standardised assessment is held by many as the key to assessment-driven reforms. (p. 309)

Further to the assertion, Wang et al. (2006) suggest:

No standardized assessment—or any assessment, for that matter—is perfect. It is in this imperfection that controversies lie. Without attempting to win the battle for one side or the other, we call for all constituencies—government officials, school administrators, community leaders, teachers, parents, students, and researchers—to come together and engage in meaningful dialogue and genuine collaboration. (p. 314)

Wang et al. (2006) also recommend that classroom teachers and school and system leaders to better understand and accept the philosophical underpinnings of LSAs otherwise evidence-based reforms will not work.

The arguments posed by evidence-based advocates have implications for assessment policies and practices in the Catholic education system in WA. The perceptions of religious educators about the BRLA as a LSA, provide understandings about the extent to which evidence-based reforms are considered in RE in Catholic schools in WA.

**3.5.4 Examples of use.** Local, national and international examples of the use of LSAs are presented. These examples are similar in structure and process to the BRLA. Given that full details of the BRLA are discussed in Chapter Two, this section identifies LSAs similar to the BRLA used in education systems across Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom. In contrast to the BRLA, the identified examples of LSAs used in Western education systems are run by government authorities (Gardner, 2012) and perceived as “high stakes” initiatives (Wang et al., 2006). These initiatives are considered accountability measures used to assess the quality of teaching, leadership and school effectiveness (Harrington, 2013). Proponents of accountability measures believe that teachers, leaders and schools need to be audited for performance and that progress regarding measurable outcomes must be monitored and reported (Wang et al., 2006, p. 315). In this study the implications from these perceived high stakes initiatives are explored through the personal and collective experiences of religious educators.

**3.5.4.1 Local examples.** At the time of the study, students and teachers in schools in WA had experience of the LSA program called WAMSE (Department of Education, 2011). The assessment program was developed by the education authority in WA as part of an evaluation and accountability policy enforced by the state government. However, in 2013 WAMSE was discontinued due to the implementation of the national assessment program called NAPLAN (Department of Education, 2010).

WAMSE comprised a series of standardised assessments used to measure students' knowledge and skills in Science and the humanities subject Society and Environment. The assessments were administered each year in August to students in Years Five, Seven and Nine in government and non-government schools in WA, such as Catholic schools. Until 2013, the administration of the BRLA coincided with the administration of WAMSE (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2006a).

Prior to 2008, state-wide, standardised assessments were used to measure student learning in literacy and numeracy. Known as the Western Australian Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (WALNA), the assessments involved students in Years Three, Five, Seven and Nine (Department of Education, 2010). The BRLA was initially developed from the assessment design and principles used by WALNA and WAMSE (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2006a). In recent years, the developments of the BRLA have mirrored some of the design features and principles from national testing (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013).

**3.5.4.2 National example.** NAPLAN is an Australia wide, standardised assessment program (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008a). The assessment program began in 2008 and was developed by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), a national education body. The State, Territory and Federal governments have, through their education jurisdictions and systems, mandated the implementation of NAPLAN. Each year in May, students in Years Three, Five, Seven and Nine are administered literacy and numeracy assessments as part of NAPLAN. Selected student groups also participate in sample assessments for Science literacy, Civic and Citizenship, and Information Communications Technology (ICT) literacy. Sample assessments began in 2003.

The use of LSAs across Australia stem from initiatives that began with the *Adelaide Declaration of Educational Goals for Schooling in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 1999). Within these initiatives, the

Federal government as well as the State and Territory governments endorsed a set of national benchmarks for aspects of literacy and numeracy for Years Three, Five, Seven and Nine (Cumming & Maxwell, 2004; Lingard, Thompson, & Sellar, 2016). Following on from the earlier initiatives was the *Melbourne Declaration of Educational Goals for Young Australians* (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008a). This declaration further led to the administration of nation-wide assessments.

According to the ACARA website, the aim of NAPLAN is:

The measure through which governments, education authorities, schools, teachers and parents can determine whether or not young Australians have the literacy and numeracy skills that provide the critical foundation for other learning and for their productive and rewarding participation in the community. (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2013, para. 2).

In 2010, the My School website was launched by the Federal government to display the NAPLAN results achieved by schools. The website is a means for stakeholders such as education authorities, school leaders, teachers and parents to visibly identify school results as well as to make comparisons with those results and the results from similar schools (Gorur, 2016). According to Rudd and Gillard (2008) and ACARA (2010), the purpose of the website is to improve the equity and excellence of educational outcomes in Australian schools.

The initiative grew out of Australia's first National Plan for education, titled *Literacy for All: The Challenge for Australian Schools* (Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1998). In April 2009, the Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) announced a decision to develop a system for comparing the performance of schools using NAPLAN results and other sources of data. The Federal government reported high levels of parental support for this initiative, proposing that it provides transparency and accountability of student learning.

Disputes about the implementation of the My School website are ongoing (Gorur, 2016; Thompson & Cook, 2014). The disputes suggest that the website promotes unintended consequences for the use of LSAs because schools in Australia are compared and unjustly identified. No such comparisons of school results are available for similar stakeholders of the BRLA.

**3.5.4.3 International examples.** Four examples of the use of LSAs that are common to most educators (Fullan, 2016) are presented: the Organisation for Economic Co-operation

and Development (OECD); the International Association for Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA); the United Kingdom; and the United States.

The OECD is an international organisation whose mission it is to promote policies that improve the economic and social wellbeing of people around the world (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011). Educational policies implemented by the OECD support this mission. One such policy includes the use of a LSA program called the Programme for International Students Assessment (PISA). This program consists of a series of standardised tests that are administered to students every three years. In 2015, “twenty-eight million, 15-year-old students in schools across 72 countries and economies” participated in a “two-hour test” (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2017, para. 2). Every three years the results of the assessments are released as data for educational systems to review education standards in their country and compare these standards with other countries. At the time of the study, and currently, the PISA program is applicable to the education context in WA. Comparisons between student performance in learning areas such as Mathematics in Australia are made with student performance in other countries. These comparisons often lead to new educational policies.

Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) is a standardised assessment program developed by the IEA in the United States within the International Study Centre located at the Boston College’s Lynch School of Education. There is also a specific reading assessment program called Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (International Association for Evaluation of Educational Achievement, 2017). Like PISA, these assessment programs are conducted regularly using students in various countries around the world in the fourth grade (8–10 years of age) and the eighth grade (13–15 years of age). The assessment programs provide international comparative data about student achievement in Mathematics, Science and Reading from different countries. Using the data generated from the assessment programs, participating countries are given opportunities to make decisions about student learning in Mathematics and Reading.

International comparative data provided by both the OECD and IEA about student achievement in various countries around the world is subject to further discourse. Arguments for and against the public release and use of such data have emerged, heightening global competition and making an impact on teacher perception of the use of LSAs (Gardner, 2012). The extent to which the religious educators in this study take heed of these debates and influence their perceptions of the BRLA are of interest to the study.

The current use of LSAs in the United Kingdom is an initial response to the Educational Reform Act (ERA) introduced in 1988. Margaret Thatcher, then Prime Minister, legislated wide-ranging changes in education across the United Kingdom. One educational change was the introduction of a national curriculum with an associated national assessment program (Daugherty & Ecclestone, 2006). The program administers standardised assessments across the core subjects of the national curriculum to students aged seven, eleven, fourteen and sixteen. Incentives and penalties for schools and individual teachers are reported that argue for and against the use of LSAs in the United Kingdom (Fullan, 2016).

The use of LSAs in the United States is an initial response to legislation known as the Elementary and Secondary, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act passed in 2001 as Public Law No. 107-110 (United States Education Department, 2002). Since 2006, State education agencies and local school districts in the United States have implemented policies regarding standardised assessments to generate periodic, local and national data about the performance of elementary and secondary school students (Gill, Lerner, & Meosky, 2016; Reynolds et al., 2009). The students that participate are in Year levels ranging from Three to Five, Six to Nine and Ten to Twelve (United States Education Department, 2002). The goal has been to ensure that all students achieve success in education (Wang et al., 2006). Arguments for and against the use of LSAs in the United States are based on this goal. According to Fullan (2016, p. 214) the use of data from the nationwide assessment programs has been associated with “punitive accountability”. The original Act required all 50 states in the United States to comply with the legislation by the end of 2006 and produce district or school report cards. Abrams, Pedulla, and Madaus (2003) identify 19 states as having attached high-stakes sanctions and rewards to their assessment results, including accreditation and financial incentives.

As educators of RE, the teachers and school leaders involved in this study are possibly aware of the developments and debates about LSAs in the United Kingdom and the United States. The extent to which the religious educators were influenced by the developments and debates about LSAs in other countries is of interest to this study. This is because the findings in this study identify the religious educators’ perceptions of LSAs and how these perceptions may have shaped their perceptions of the BRLA.

**3.5.4.4 Examples of use in Religious Education.** The use of LSAs in RE is evident in Catholic education systems in Australia and the United States. Three examples of use in Australian dioceses are identified. The BRLA and other LSAs used in RE across Australia

emerged from initiatives based in the United States. The National Catholic Education Association (NCEA) in the United States has been developing LSAs in RE since the late 1970s (National Catholic Education Association, 2001).

The LSAs developed by the NCEA are designed to measure students' knowledge of the RE content taught in Catholic schools and parishes across the United States. The NCEA developed these RE assessments to consist of multiple choice items focused on faith knowledge (cognitive domain) as well as beliefs, behaviours, attitudes and practices (affective domain). Different forms of the standardised assessments are designed for students in different Year levels. All forms of the standardised assessments are administered either as paper-based or computer-based tests (National Catholic Education Association, 2018).

The first LSAs administered in Australia to students in Catholic schools for the purpose of measuring student learning in RE involved Year Six students across the Archdiocese of Sydney in New South Wales in 1998 (Catholic Education Office of Sydney, 1998). The assessments were introduced to measure students' knowledge and faith of the RE curriculum implemented across the Archdiocese. Originally, there were 50 multiple choice items and 20 short answer items in the Year Six test. In some cases, a faith response was asked of the students. Changes have been made to the structure of the RE assessment since it was first introduced because of difficulties that arose in marking these faith responses (Catholic Education Office of Sydney, 2008). In recent years, the RE assessments consist of 50 multiple choice items administered online to students in Years Six and Eight. Student, school and system reports are generated from student performance (Catholic Education Office of Sydney, 2011a).

The Parramatta and Wollongong dioceses in New South Wales developed similar assessments. Their LSAs used in RE have been administered online and in paper form to students in Years Four, Six and Eight (Catholic Education Office of the Diocese of Parramatta, 2011; Catholic Education Office of the Diocese of Wollongong, 2011). The assessments have consisted of multiple choice items. These RE assessments aim to measure students' knowledge of the RE curricula offered in each diocese. Catholic schools in the Parramatta Diocese have also completed a faith-based assessment. The results of this assessment are combined with the results of the online assessment. Since 2012, the online service providers of the LSAs used in RE in Parramatta, also facilitates the online administration of the BRLA (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2016a).

The LSAs operating within Catholic education systems outside WA are similar to the BRLA in terms of their purpose but differ in design and structure of test items. The reason for

these differences is that although each assessment administered in the various Catholic dioceses aims to measure student content knowledge in RE based on the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the educational model used to teach the RE content may differ from one diocese to the next (Hackett, 2006; O'Donoghue & Byrne, 2014; Ryan, 2013). As previously identified in Chapter Two, the BRLA is designed in structure and process consistent with educational assessment principles developed and used by State, Territory and Federal government run education jurisdictions and systems (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013; Hackett et al., 2017).

The LSAs developed for RE in Australian Catholic education systems and the United States have structures that assess students' knowledge and religious or faith responses of the Catholic Faith Tradition (e.g. Catholic Education Office of Sydney, 2008). In contrast to these LSAs, the BRLA is more in keeping with the LSAs developed in general education in the United Kingdom, which concentrate only on assessing students' knowledge and understandings of content taught. Hence, the focus of the test items in the BRLA is to measure students' knowledge and understanding of the content in the RE curriculum that is derived from the Catholic Faith Tradition.

**3.5.5 Perceptions of use.** The increased use of LSAs across learning areas, within the context of evidence-based reforms in education, has either reinforced or undermined the goals of transformation or curriculum renewal that is intended by system administrators as measures of accountability in education (Gardner, 2012; Hattie, Brown, & Keegan, 2003). Fullan (2016) describes LSAs as “wrong drivers” of accountability that place pressure on teachers and schools (p. 209). Since the initial yet separate educational policies in the United Kingdom and the United States were established, which included the use of LSAs, new policies have been developed that continue to use LSAs. The new policies aim to improve LSA regimes and further develop and support evidence-based reforms that consider whole system and local school curriculum accountability (Hill & Barber, 2014).

There is an assumption by system and jurisdiction authorities that LSAs are designed objectively, without bias and accurately assess student academic knowledge (Popham, 2001; Wu, 2016). However, due to punitive measures on classroom teachers as a result of the perceived use and misuse of student performance data from LSAs, teachers may not have the same understanding of the intended goals of transformation or curriculum renewal (Kohn, 2000; Fullan, 2016). In contrast to teacher perceptions of the use of LSAs, politicians, business leaders and parents support their use because they perceive LSAs to provide

valuable data (Lingard, Thompson, & Sellar, 2016; Phelps, 2005). School leaders also appear more receptive to the use of LSAs than teachers (Pettit, 2009; Thompson & Mockler, 2016). Earl and Timperley (2009) argue that there are unintended consequences of LSAs in an era of increased accountability in education where LSAs are mandated by governments. Such unintended consequences, for example, where school results are tied to funding, can have “far-reaching” implications for future decisions (p. 5). Given the unintended consequences of LSAs, Earl and Timperley (2009) suggest a need to investigate the student performance data that is generated from LSAs. Teachers are directly responsible for student learning and preparing students for LSAs. As such, teacher perceptions of LSAs may influence the student performance data and, in turn, reduce the data’s reliability.

**3.5.5.1 Arguments in favour of use.** The advocates of LSAs support evidence-based reforms. They identify the use of LSAs as a justified measure of accountability (Lobascher, 2011; Phelps, 2005) that assists in the development of effective teacher instruction, pedagogy and assessment practices (Popham, 2009). Furthermore, they believe that the transparency of student performance data is necessary for appropriate education policy development (Decker & Bolt, 2008; Timperley, 2013).

The arguments by advocates of LSAs deem the role of educational accountability through the use of LSAs as necessary. For example, Popham (2001) argues that LSAs are necessary because they help determine whether “educators are performing satisfactorily” (p. 34). Teacher input into student learning is measured by students’ achievement scores and these scores are justifiably made visible for all to see, including parents and policy makers. Similarly, Lobascher (2011) states, “If students and teachers are held to account, they will each work harder to achieve better results ... schools, teachers and students will strive to do their best to receive the rewards and to avoid punishment” (p. 1). Burgess et al. (2011) suggest that in Britain the use of LSAs as accountability measures to report student learning actually assists student performance. The removal of measures such as LSAs that are developed externally to classrooms and the reporting of student learning from these measures completely may actually hamper student performance.

Australian studies indicate that school principals like to use data from LSAs to track student performance (Thompson & Mockler, 2016). For principals, teacher accountability is one way of gauging teaching performance. Within the Catholic school context in Australia and abroad, principals are becoming more data literate and confident in their analysis of student performance data (Holter, Frabutt and Nuzzi, 2014). However, Australian school



principals and other school leaders seem to require further assistance to interpret and use data from LSAs (Pettit, 2009, 2010). Yates (2008) reports that teachers and school leaders in education neither trust nor value the large-scale statistics that aim to provide objective evidence on which to base practice. The international studies suggest school leaders be given more appropriate tools to systematically use data to make important decisions about student learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010).

The proposal is that more work is required in the area of data analysis to strengthen intended evidence-based reforms (Timperley, 2013; Wu, 2016). Teachers and school leaders who make judgements about student learning that are based on identifying, gathering and interpreting a wide range of student data (Axworthy, 2005; Heritage & Chen, 2005) appear to improve student performance (Earl, 2005; Hattie, 2009). These teachers and school leaders become better informed about the structure of effective assessment processes (Volante & Beckett, 2011) and are supported in their future planning of teaching and assessment practices (Heritage & Yeagley, 2005).

Those that argue in support for the use of LSAs focus on improving student learning as well as assessment design and assessment practices (Hill & Barber, 2014; Masters, 2013). The extent to which religious educators support the use of the BRLA as a LSA (in an effort, to improve student learning as intended by the WA Bishops and the CEOWA) is significant in this study. Furthermore, the perceptions that teachers and school leaders of RE have about the BRLA is relevant to the national and international research about the identified differences between teacher and school leader perceptions of the use of LSAs in education and builds upon that research.

**3.5.5.2 Arguments against the use.** Contemporary research points to a range of unintended consequences of the use of LSAs (Cizek, 200; Lingard, Thompson, & Sellar, 2016) that are influencing student learning and teacher expectations on learning (Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013). The rationale for arguments against the use of LSAs are based on two opposing expressions. Firstly, the overemphasis on what system administrators regulate in terms of the administration of LSAs (Brown, 2004; Shepard, 2004); and secondly, how predominantly data generated about student learning from the assessments is used by the various stakeholders (Brown & Harris, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2010).

LSAs are perceived as “high stakes” (Thompson & Cook, 2014) accountability measures (Apple, 2005; Biesta, 2010) that are driving an emergent audit culture and causing serious consequences (Ball, 2003), such as pressure on students and teachers. It is argued that

the audit culture stems from educational accountability that emerged from globalised educational policy (Lingard, 2010). Gill et al. (2016) suggest LSAs are recognised as aggressive, market-based ways to create accountability. According to Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith (2012), accountability is considered a modern “buzzword” used in education to fuel debates.

Governments and education systems are increasingly collecting, analysing and distributing data about student learning (Shaddock, 2014). Opponents of LSAs argue that governments appear to focus on identifying, contextualising and theorising the rise of global and complementary national modes of test-based, top-down accountability in school systems (Lingard, Martino, & Rezai-Rashti, 2013). Teachers, school leaders and scholars who oppose the use of LSAs perceive LSAs as limiting intellectual freedom, student diversity, local autonomy and teacher empowerment (Wang et al., 2006). The impact of the audit culture is currently addressing school leadership (Australian Council for Educational Leaders, 2009; Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011) after an initial focus on teacher efficacy to improve standards in student learning (Hattie et al., 2003). Literature is now available about teacher efficacy based on student results from LSAs (e.g. Hattie & Anderman, 2013; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005) and about school leadership (e.g. Blackmore, 2011; Pont, Nusche, & Hopkins, 2008; Thompson & Mockler 2016).

Kohn (2000), who in his 1993 work concluded that extrinsic sources of motivation in schools such as stickers and stars undermine student learning, speaks of the undermining potential of LSAs. Kohn’s argument is based on the context of the United States. Kohn refers to the use of the assessments as punitive consequences that on “Teaching and learning alike .... come to be seen as less appealing when someone has a gun to your head” (p. 21). Similarly, Ryan and Weinstein (2009) refer to LSAs as simplistic accountability strategies used to improve schools as a “a carrot and stick” approach. Lingard, Creagh, and Vass (2012) identify LSAs as neo-liberal education regimes where “data and numbers are central to this new mode of governance” articulated within educational policy (p. 316). The media and politicians of countries are often blamed for the perceived use of LSAs as accountability driven initiatives (Thompson & Mockler 2016).

Opponents of the use of LSAs identify students and teachers as dissatisfied and stressed by LSAs and the use of student results from LSAs (Abrams et al., 2003). A major force in shaping perceptions about student performance and the quality of individual schools is the manner in which students’ results from LSAs are compared to State and National proficiency levels or benchmarks (Reynolds et al., 2009). The use of league tables,

comparisons of students' performance and ranking of schools (Rowe, 2000) is considered distressing for teachers, particularly when students are not achieving well (Mulford & Silins, 2011). Stress on teachers and students is also a factor when schools are punished for underperforming in LSAs (Caldwell, 2010; Gill et al., 2016). The student performance from LSAs is considered not to address equality, vindicating socio-economic differences and accentuating mental capacity (Klenowski, 2016; Kohn, 2000). Shepard (2004) argues that fear and anxiety felt by teachers and students leads to a decrease in morale (Abrams et al., 2003), which, in turn, leads to negative and unproductive classroom environments (Lingard, 2010; Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013). Decreased morale can sometimes lead to teachers cheating (Thompson & Cook, 2014).

Teachers also perceive the use of LSAs as creating a "teaching to the test" mentality (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Shepard, 2004) that narrows the curriculum (Au, 2007; Thompson, 2012) by reducing teaching time and limiting classroom instruction and student learning (Resnick, Rothman, Slattery, & Vranek, 2003; Roach, Niebling, & Kurz, 2008). They identify LSAs as "snapshots" of learning, with limited scope due to the inclusion of multiple choice test items that are believed not to adequately measure student learning (Darling-Hammond, 2010). In a local Western Australian study of teachers who administer NAPLAN, 67% argued that the literacy and numeracy assessments were not having a positive impact on student learning. NAPLAN was perceived as disconnected from the curriculum implementation, instruction and the life-contexts of the learners (Thompson, 2012, p. 69).

According to Australian researchers, NAPLAN is perceived as an issue for teachers. Doecke, Kostogriz, and Illesca (2010) suggest teachers regard NAPLAN as an additional task, which has an impact on school-based curriculum, pedagogical practices and student-teacher relationships. Polesel, Dulfer, and Turnbull (2012) claim that teachers perceive NAPLAN as "a school ranking or a policing tool" with "lower than expected results" that affect student enrolment and retention. The Australian studies suggest the publication of results on the My School website affects how teachers and schools are perceived by parents, which in turn causes stress for teachers (Gannon, 2013; Hardy & Boyle, 2011, Mockler, 2013). For example, the use of the term "high-stakes" was attached to NAPLAN after the introduction of the My School website (Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2012). Researchers believe that it is important to consider the margin of error surrounding test scores when scores are used for such comparative purposes (Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2012). The extent to which the religious educators perceive the BRLA in light of their experiences of NAPLAN is significant to this study and has the potential to further build upon the Australian studies

about NAPLAN. Furthermore, the extent to which the religious educators identify with one or both sides of the debates regarding the use of LSAs is also significant to this study. This is because the findings suggest that the religious educators' perceptions about LSAs may have influenced their perceptions about the BRLA.

**3.5.6 Context summary.** Like RE, the area of assessment is complex, involving multiple disciplines with their own specific language and approaches. Assessments were introduced to education through the field of psychology. Governments around the world began using LSAs as measurement tools for collecting data about student learning in response to perceived lower than expected achievement standards in schools. Today the purpose for using LSAs in education is in response to evidence-based curriculum reforms addressing the need to raise standards in education (Gardner et al., 2010). A common agreement about the use of LSAs for this purpose is not evident. A possible forerunner for focused and improved intervention on student learning using LSAs is better understanding of stakeholder perceptions of LSAs (Brown & Harris, 2009) and training in data collection and analysis (Timperley, 2009). The next section reviews literature about religious educators. The religious educators in this study instruct students in RE, in particular, students in Years Three, Five and Nine, and are involved in preparing those students for the administration of the BRLA. These religious educators are the conduit between the implementation of the Catholic RE curriculum in WA and the effective use of LSAs as part of that implementation.

### **3.6 Context Three: The Religious Educator**

This context reviews Catholic scholarship regarding the importance of the role and the professional training of religious educators working in Catholic education. Given that the local context of the role and professional training of religious educators was discussed in Chapter Two, this section discusses a broader Catholic perspective also relevant to the religious educators involved in this study.

Teacher efficacy is considered in education to be an influential factor in contributing to evidence-based reforms (Hattie & Anderman, 2013). Considerations about teacher efficacy in RE is no different (Gellel & Buchanan, 2015; Hackett, 2010; Rymarz & Hyde, 2013). The Catholic Church, universally and locally, perceives the role of the teacher and school leader as fundamentally important in determining whether or not a Catholic school achieves its aims (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, paras. 91, 96, 94, 95; Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 40, 1982, para. 65, 1988, para. 96; Vatican

Council II, 1965d, para. 25). Teachers and school leaders are regarded as professionals who act as communicators of the Catholic faith culture (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982).

**3.6.1 Role.** Religious educators working in WA or elsewhere in Catholic education belong to a team of educators who contribute to the religious life of their schools (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 6; Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, paras. 51–65). The religious educators contribute by firstly, supporting parents in their role as primary educators (John Paul II, 1988; Vatican Council II, 1965c, para. 52). Secondly, the religious educators have a significant role or vocation as lay faithful men and women, not consecrated religious or clergy (Vatican II, 1965a) to responsibly and successfully learn and understand their own roles of implementing the RE curriculum. Thirdly, religious educators are required to give clear leadership and guidance to their communities regarding RE (Catholic Education Commission, 2009, paras. 94, 95; Sayce & Lavery, 2010).

Teachers and school leaders of RE fulfil their vocations in two ways. Firstly, they are called, as are all Catholic educators, to give witness to the Gospel message of Jesus (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982, para. 59; Paul VI, 1975, para. 41). This is the first act of evangelisation to be Christ-like in the presence of others (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 43, 1982, paras. 32, 33, 1988, para. 110; Vatican II, 1965a). They do so through their “instruction and enthusiasm for living the Christian message” (Hackett, 2006, p. 41). Secondly, by “imparting the teaching of Jesus” (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982, para. 59, 1988, para. 66; John Paul II, 1979, para. 6). As they instruct students about Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, and manage to carry out this instruction effectively, they contribute to the development of students’ knowledge and understanding of the Catholic Faith Tradition (Congregation of Catholic Education, 1988, para. 26).

In order for religious educators to individually and collectively share in their school community’s responsibility to promote the religious dimension of Catholic education, adequate educational training (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, paras. 25–32) and formation (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, paras. 78, 79) of these professionals, particularly in the area of RE, is required (Buchanan & Rymarz, 2008; Hackett, 2010; John Paul II, 2001). Vatican documents (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988) describe the need for professional training:

Everything possible must be done to ensure that Catholic schools have adequately trained religion teachers; it is a vital necessity and a legitimate expectation. In Catholic schools today, these teachers tend more and more to be lay people, and they should have the opportunity to receiving the specific experiential knowledge of the mystery of Christ and of the Church that priests and Religious automatically acquire in the course of their formation. We need to look to the future and promote the establishment of formation centres for these teachers; ecclesiastical universities and faculties should do what they can to develop appropriate programmes so that teachers of tomorrow will be able to carry out their task with the competency and the efficacy that is expected. (para. 97)

Nuzzi (2015) references the recommendations of the Church to adequately train religious educators, suggesting specific attention be made to spiritual formation and educational requirements:

To prepare teachers well for this type of ministry, which goes beyond the classroom teaching to call forth discipleship and witness, the professional preparation for teachers and leaders for Catholic schools has expanded in recent years to include explicit spiritual formation and Religious Education in addition to the more standard and general requirements of classroom pedagogy or educational administration. (p. 249)

In addressing the significant role that religious educators have in Catholic schools, Nuzzi (2015) identifies the professional training that will support teachers as well as school leaders in their important roles. Capacity building beyond the classroom RE lesson is considered important in developing leadership in RE and within the Catholic community (Rossiter, 2010; Rymarz, 2012).

**3.6.2 Professional training.** Catholic literature regarding the professional training of religious educators is focused on professional formation comprising spiritual and religious formation in the Catholic faith as well as knowledge of this Faith Tradition (D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2011, Hackett, 2006, 2008, 2010; Ryan, 2013; Rymarz, 2012). The spiritual and religious formation involves personal and collective relationship building with God and community. The emphasis is on reflective prayer and broader, liturgical celebration. Formation in terms of knowledge of the Catholic Faith Tradition involves Catholic theology and educational theory. Training is focused on advancing common literacy (Prothero, 2007). The training should involve expanding a religious educators’ “ability to understand and use

religious terms such as symbols, images, beliefs, practices, scriptures, heroes, themes, and stories that are employed in ... public life” (Prothero, 2007, p. 13). Religious educators are expected to know and develop students’ content literacy in RE (Rymarz and Hyde, 2013). By doing so, religious educators better align RE with contemporary educational theory. The introduction of the BRLA is an example of an initiative aimed at improving RE literacy within the context of educational assessment theory (Reynolds et al., 2009).

D’Orsa and D’Orsa (2011, p. 123) argue the necessity in today’s globalised, pluralistic and secularised world for aligning the work of religious educators and more broadly Catholic education as a whole with work from the scientific community. They believe this type of alignment is a search for truth that generates knowledge for students that is seen as more plausible, reasonable and reliable. However, they stress that caution is required because there is more to consider in RE and more broadly in Catholic education than scientific inquiry. Religious educators have a duty within the Catholic school setting to know and defend the Catholic Faith Tradition in a way that uses a balance of scientific and religious inquiry. Integration of science and religious thought will engage the student in ways perhaps not previously considered.

Recent documents from the Vatican such as *Educating Today and Tomorrow: A Renewing Passion* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2014) build on previous documents such as *Gravissimum Educationis* (Vatican Council II, 1965d) regarding the role of Catholic institutes in offering professional training to Catholic educators in educational theory and religious formation. For example, the recent Congregation for Catholic Education (CCE) document advocates “The promotion of research as a rigorous commitment towards truth, being aware that human knowledge has its limits, but also with a great openness of mind and heart” (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2014, para. 1). The document discusses the value of teaching students how to learn content that is relevant to the student:

In a number of countries, Catholic religion courses have been threatened and risk disappearing from the syllabus. Since religion courses fall under the responsibility of bishops, it is extremely important to always remember that this teaching cannot be neglected, although it should constantly be renewed. Religion courses require an in-depth knowledge of young people’s real needs, because this will provide the foundation on which the proclamation can be built, although the difference between “knowing” and “believing” must be respected. (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2014, para. 1)

Professional competency is discussed as necessary for developing the students' educational potential. By adequately preparing teachers and school leaders to attend to the educational needs of their students, those students should be sufficiently prepared for the challenges of the workforce.

Rossiter (2010) and other researchers have also proposed professional training and leadership within Catholic education that is beyond the RE classroom, exposing all teachers, school leaders and their students to the experience of "religiosity or religious spirituality" (p. 7). This ideology is about revisiting the mission of the Catholic schools (Rymarz, 2012). The outcome of such a revisit is for a focus on the religious formation of all Catholic educators, as well as students and their parents. This type of formation attempts to build knowledge of the Catholic Faith Tradition, which in turn leads to better engagement (McKinney, 2013; Rymarz, 2014). Successful implementation involves the entire Church community. As D'Orsa and D'Orsa (2011) explain:

For many Catholic educators, today there is a perceived gap between the way mission is expressed with the school and what they regard as the challenges of mission revealed in their encounter with students and their parents. An essential task in effective school leadership is to help teachers make sense of this experience in such a way that the school community can move towards a coherent understanding of its own mission. This understanding needs to guide not only decision making, but also the entire life of the school, therefore is the concern for all. (p. 134)

The purpose intended is a fully integrated curriculum that is person-centred and builds capacity. The building of a capacity of knowledge and engagement that develops the Catholic school culture beyond the RE classroom is no different to what is being advocated in education more broadly today regarding whole system reforms (Fullan, 2016).

The aforementioned complexity of the study of RE brings about a complexity also in the role of religious educators and the execution of their role (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982, para. 24; Sullivan, 2016). Research suggests that religious educators have mixed perceptions about the meaning and purpose of RE (Buchanan, 2005; Hackett, 2006, 2008). These findings have implications for the role of religious educators in the implementation of effective teaching and assessment practices in RE. These implications are consistent with findings from educational research in other learning areas, recognising the implications teachers' beliefs, expectations and practices have on student learning (Fullan et al., 2006; Hattie, 2009; Hill, Stremmel, & Fu, 2005).



Research about RE focused on whole school and system-wide improvements of student learning that are consistent with evidence-based, curriculum reforms (Healey & Bush, 2010) suggests that some teachers have deeply ingrained beliefs and misconceptions about RE (Malone, 2002). RE teachers, particularly in Catholic primary schools, appear to be utilising different educational philosophies and employing a limited range of pedagogical practices when teaching RE, as compared to the ideologies they express and the approaches to teaching they use in other learning areas (White, 2004).

Catholic researchers argue that religious educators' perceptions of and practices in RE are due to a lack of professional training (Healey & Bush, 2010; Hill, 2004; Meehan, 2007). Religious educators require more professional development in theological understanding (Hackett, 2010; Rymarz, 2007), RE pedagogy (Barry, Elliott, & Rush, 2003; Hackett, 2010; Malone, 2002) and assessment practices (White, 2004; White and Borg, 2002). Hackett (2009, p. 3) argues teacher training coupled with teaching experience improves the chances of RE teachers delivering the RE curriculum as intended by system administrators.

Hackett's (2006, 2008, 2010) studies specifically target the formation of the RE teacher in WA, and the pursuit of improved content knowledge. Hackett believes teacher training about the knowledge of the Catholic Faith Tradition and the formation of the faith from the Tradition is a "crucial component of the quality of Religious Education" (2010, p. 3). He identifies not only the value of content and pedagogical knowledge of the teacher and the integration of that knowledge, but also the lived Catholic experience or the "experiential content knowledge" of the teacher as significant to teaching RE. There is an expectation that religious educators have an understanding of the RE curriculum, and the vocabulary commonly used in the curriculum. As part of this expectation, religious educators should know how to appropriately employ methods for teaching the content of the curriculum according to the students' needs. The challenge for the religious educator is to harness their "self-knowledge": knowledge of students and the learning area. This expectation extends to the religious educator being aware of the knowledge of the broader integrated Catholic curriculum (D'Orsa & D'Orsa, 2011, 2012, 2013).

In Catholic schools in WA, the efficacy of religious educators is reliant on these educators knowing, understanding and teaching the content in the RE curriculum and leading the curriculum (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, 2013b). The teaching and assessing of student knowledge and understanding of the RE content is expected to have the same academic rigour as other learning areas. For the religious educators involved in this study, they prepared students for the administration of the BRLA (Catholic Education

Office of Western Australia, 2013). Initial undergraduate and ongoing professional training is provided for these religious educators for them to effectively execute their role. The extent to which the religious educators applied and demonstrated their training as part of their teaching and assessment practices in RE is of great interest to this study. This is because the findings from this study suggest that the religious educators' personal and professional understandings of the nature and role of RE, as they carried out their roles, influenced how they approached the teaching of RE. In turn, these approaches may have shaped their perceptions of the BRLA. These findings are a source of data that have the potential to inform recommendations for future professional training in RE.

**3.6.3 Context summary.** The literature reviewed in this section identified the role of teachers and school leaders in Catholic schools in their implementation of the RE curriculum. Church documents (e.g. Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988) provide signposting for the type of role that is expected by the Catholic Church community and required to be demonstrated within Catholic education. Contemporary research and literature support efforts to assist religious educators in effectively carrying out their role (e.g. Buchanan & Rymarz, 2008). Much of the literature is based on teacher efficacy and more broadly on whole school and system approaches for capacity building that is consistent with educational theories presented in Context Two and applied to RE in Context One. The research on teachers and school leaders of RE suggests that there appears to be a disparity between the teaching and assessment practices that are mandated and expected by Catholic education system leaders and supported by professional courses and ongoing development in RE (Hackett, 2010). The findings from this study build on the identified research literature regarding the nature and purpose of RE and the expected role of religious educators who work in Catholic schools that implement mandated RE curricula.

### **3.7 Chapter Summary**

The literature reviewed in this chapter was limited to a Catholic educational perspective that is relevant to the experiences of religious educators involved in the study. The chapter begins with the conceptual framework that outlines the major parameters of the study. The experiences of the religious educators are based on three contexts as the parameters of the study. Firstly, the context of teaching the RE curriculum and assessing student knowledge of the content of that curriculum. Secondly, understanding and using LSAs within the educational context. Thirdly, the professional training and role of religious

educators working in Catholic schools. As teachers and school leaders involved in preparing students for the administration of the BRLA, the religious educators are required to have knowledge of the content in the RE curriculum and effectively teach students about that content as well as effectively assess their students' learning. Applying academic rigour to teaching and assessment practices in RE (as in all learning areas) is part of that role. Successfully engaging students that now attend Catholic schools with the content of the RE curriculum is also important in that role.

The review of literature suggests religious educators have a significant role to play in Catholic education. The literature also points to an alignment of ideologies in RE and the broader educational scholarship. The ideologies are focused on teachers and school leaders applying academic rigour to the teaching and assessment of all learning areas including RE. The purpose is to improve student learning. To achieve this purpose, whole school and whole system capacity building is implied. For improvements in student learning to occur in RE and to be sustained, a culture of collaborative leadership for learning advocated through evidence-based curriculum reforms is required. The extent to which religious educators in this study effectively understand the intended purpose of the BRLA, execute the administration of the BRLA and consider adapting and changing teaching and assessment practices to achieve the desired outcomes of the RE curriculum in Catholic education in WA has implications for this study.

The next chapter describes the research design and methods used in this study. Given that the religious educators are the focus of the study and also given the complexity of their role within Catholic education, a multi-dimensional and pragmatic approach to research was adopted. This approach considers the contexts of the study: the RE curriculum; the use of LSAs as part of this curriculum; and the role of religious educators in effectively implementing the curriculum.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter describes the design and the methods utilised in this study to systematically address the research problem. The research problem identifies a specific lack of empirical evidence about how religious educators perceive *The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment* (BRLA). Addressing the research problem has involved an awareness of multiple contexts. For example, firstly, religious educators are teachers and school leaders of Religious Education (RE). In this study, 238 religious educators working in 65 Catholic schools across Western Australia (WA) were involved. Secondly, the nature of RE and the specific role that religious educators are required to play in implementing the RE curriculum in Catholic schools in WA. Thirdly, the nature of large-scale, standardised assessments (LSAs) in education, in particular, the nature of the BRLA as a LSA used as part of the RE curriculum. The religious educators in this study were directly involved with preparing students in Years Three, Five and Nine for the administration of the BRLA. Fourthly, how to best approach the study of human perceptions. Furthermore, how to best interpret the interplay between the religious educators' personal and professional experiences of teaching RE and using a LSA in education, and the influence of these experiences on the formation of their perceptions of the BRLA as a LSA used in RE. Given the complexity of addressing the research problem, a decision was made to adopt a pragmatic approach to research (Creswell, 2009; Crotty, 1998; Morgan, 2007) using mixed methods. The empirical evidence generated from the design and methods used support local, national and international research about the quality of teaching and assessment practices in RE adopted by religious educators working in Catholic schools.

#### **4.2 The Presentation of the Chapter**

Table 4.1 outlines the structure of this chapter. The chapter begins with a theoretical framework that supports the research design and the decisions taken to conduct the study. The theoretical framework highlights the essential elements of the research methodology used to address the research problem. The body of the chapter discusses how the theoretical framework informed decisions that led to using mixed methods research. The chapter

concludes with an explanation of the ethical considerations of the study and details about how the key research findings are presented within the chapters that follow.

Table 4.1

*Overview of Chapter Four: Research Design and Methods*

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4.3	The Research Design
4.3.1	The research questions
4.3.2	The theoretical framework
4.3.3	The pragmatic approach to research
4.3.4	Mixed methods research
4.3.5	The study of perceptions
4.4	The Research Methods
4.4.1	Methods of data collection
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### **4.3 The Research Design**

The research design for this study is informed by the nature of the research problem (Creswell, 2009; Punch, 2009). The general research question (GRQ), three specific research questions (SRQs) and various contributing questions have been developed to address the research problem. A theoretical framework outlining the philosophical perspectives considered to address the research problem (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) was also developed. A pragmatic approach to research (Crotty, 1998; Morgan, 2007) is the philosophical stance taken to investigate the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA and mixed methods research is the associated strategy aligned to the stance (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The pragmatic approach in this study is the epistemological worldview underpinning the theoretical perspectives and methods employed to investigate the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA. The reason for the chosen research design is because the research problem identifies the investigation of the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA as a

complex phenomenon involving multiple disciplines. Also, there are multiple strategies and techniques from various research perspectives that are required to understand and interpret the contexts. The outline about the research design begins with the research questions.

**4.3.1 The research questions.** The research problem focuses on a need to explore the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA based on the influencing realities shaping those perceptions. This focus is therefore not on the BRLA itself but rather the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA as expressed symbols of their "subjective understandings" (Berg, 2004, p. 8; Crotty, 1998). Given the study aimed to address the research problem, an in-depth investigation of the multiple realities grounded in the religious educators' experiences, knowledge and understandings of the BRLA seemed appropriate. The investigation involved understanding how the religious educators formed their perceptions and the processes they used to express their perceptions. Furthermore, how the religious educators as teachers and school leaders of RE perceived the BRLA in relation to student learning, teaching practices, assessment practices and potential leadership in RE is considered important. To address the research problem a GRQ and three SRQs were developed.

**4.3.1.1 The general research question.** The GRQ for the study is: How do religious educators who work in Catholic schools in Western Australia perceive *The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment* as a large-scale, standardised assessment in Religious Education?

This is an open-ended question (O'Leary, 2010) that allows for a broad, exploration of the research problem. The GRQ considers the full extent of the interplay between the religious educators' experiences of the BRLA and the process whereby this LSA influences and is influenced by the local social contexts (Gall et al., 2007; Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2010) to which the religious educators belong.

**4.3.1.2 The specific research questions.** Three SRQs were used in the study. Each SRQ consists of contributing questions. The SRQs explicitly targeted the religious educators' perceptions of various aspects of the BRLA, within the context of the RE curriculum taught in Western Australian Catholic schools. The SRQs generated findings that address the GRQ.

The first SRQ is: How do religious educators perceive the purpose and role of the BRLA as a large-scale, standardised assessment in Religious Education? This question

helped to identify what the BRLA meant to the religious educators in terms of its value and effectiveness as a LSA used to measure student learning in RE.

The second SRQ is: How do religious educators respond to the administration and implementation of the BRLA as a large-scale, standardised assessment in Religious Education? This question helped to explore three aspects. Firstly, how the religious educators organised, prepared and supported themselves, their students and other religious educators to administer the BRLA. Secondly, how they considered follow-up activities to the administration process such as the review of test items and the analysis of student performance data from the BRLA. Thirdly, how they interpreted and acted upon the data within their role and capacity as teachers and school leaders of RE.

The third SRQ is: How do the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA influence their teaching and assessment practices in Religious Education? This question and the subsequent contributing questions helped to identify how the religious educators perceived the BRLA within the broader contexts of RE and the use of a LSA in RE. The contributing questions particularly focused on how the religious educators used the BRLA, including the student performance data, to guide and inform curriculum planning and policy decisions in RE.

An alignment between the research problem and the research questions exists. That is the research questions were developed and guided by the theoretical framework. The framework helped inform how best to observe, identify and interpret the religious educators' real-world experiences, in terms their teaching of RE and their use of the BRLA as a LSA. The questions focused on eliciting the range of emotions, thoughts and convictions, personal values, choices, judgements, opinions and understandings (Blumer, 1969; Charon, 2010) that are considered the events within the religious educators' real-world experiences (Ashworth, 2008, p. 15). These events were investigated using a pragmatic approach to research that employed quantitative and qualitative strategies, techniques and procedures. An elaboration of the theoretical framework, the pragmatic approach to research used in this study and the different components that align to the approach is presented in the next section.

**4.3.2 The theoretical framework.** Figure 4.1 represents the theoretical framework developed for this study. This framework supports the exploration of the research problem and the research questions developed to address the problem. The theoretical framework is a structure aligned to the pragmatic approach to research that connects theory and practice (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998). As a structure, the framework highlights the continuous

relationship that existed throughout the study “between methodology and epistemology and methodology and methods” (Morgan, 2007, p. 68). Three main elements feature within this integrated theoretical framework.

The first element is the pragmatic approach to research that according to Thayer (1982) is founded in the field of social science and used in the seminal works of Pierce, James, Dewey, and Mead. The approach draws upon a Social Constructionism worldview where, as Crotty (1998) argues, realist and relativist perspectives are considered one in their quest to make meaning (p. 63). Crotty points to George Mead who identifies reality and the construction of reality as not confined and where “It is a world of intersubjectivity, interaction, community and communication, in and out of which we come to be persons and to live as persons” (p. 63). The pragmatic approach was considered appropriate for this study because it is not paradigm driven, rather a philosophical stance focused on problem solving (Morgan, 2007). In research, the pragmatic approach welcomes multiple assumptions about knowledge, strategies of inquiry and structural procedures aimed at solving research problems (Creswell, 2009; Greene, Kreider, & Mayer, 2005; Punch, 2009).

The second element of the theoretical framework is mixed methods research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2006). This element considers a convergence of approaches to research (Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2010; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998) used to explore the social behaviour of the religious educators. As explained by Crotty (1998), recognising various approaches and “invoking one or several of them may help us to set forth the process we plan to follow and, even more importantly, to expound the process we have in fact followed” (p. 216). The mixed methods research utilised in this study took advantage of the representative and generalisable approaches used in quantitative research and the in-depth and contextual approaches used in qualitative research (Greene & Caracelli, 2003). Neither the qualitative nor the quantitative approaches used in the study are considered more important than the other (Punch, 2009, p. 4). Furthermore, neither are the paradigms, positions or perspectives of either method of research considered more important than the other. Rather the strategies, techniques and procedures within each research method are considered significant and useful for investigating the religious educators’ perceptions of the BRLA. Quantitative techniques such as descriptive statistics (Babbie, 2008; Gravetter & Wallnau, 2007; Liu, 2014) and Rasch analysis (Andrich, 1988; Wilson, 2005) that draw from a positivistic perspective to research were considered and used in the first phase of the study. Qualitative techniques drawn from Social Constructionism (Creswell, 2009; Crotty, 1998)



and associated Interpretivism (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) were considered in the first and second phases of the study.

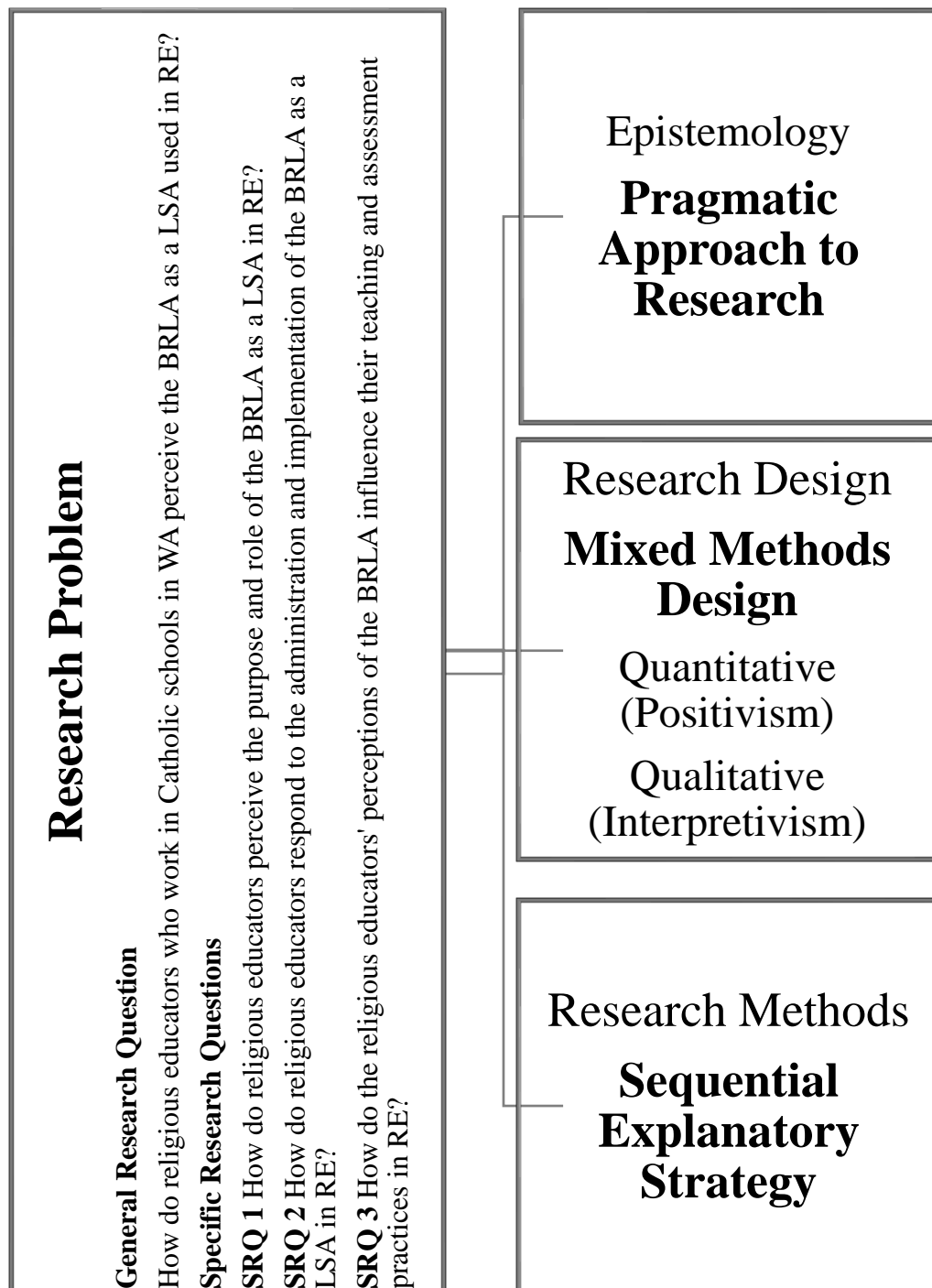


Figure 4.1. The theoretical framework

The third element of the framework is the research methods. Specific to the methods in this study is an adapted version of the sequential explanatory strategy model (Creswell, 2009, p. 211). Consistent with the pragmatic approach to research, the mixed methods model was used to collect, process and analyse quantitative and qualitative survey data (Babbie, 2008) from religious educators in two sequential phases. The purpose for using such a model was to “better advocate for participants” and “better understand” “artefacts” (Charon, 2010, p. 213) such as the BRLA within the context of the religious educators’ experienced realities of teaching RE and using LSAs in RE. Unlike similar models, this adapted model does not give priority to the quantitative data nor the methods used to collect and analyse that data. Instead, an online questionnaire was used in the first phase to collect numeric and written data from the 238 religious educators. The data were quantitative and qualitative in nature. In the second phase, qualitative data were collected using semi-structured, individual and group interviews. A total of 43 of the 238 religious educators were involved. The different data sets from both phases were collated, processed and analysed separately and later combined and integrated. The pragmatic approach used in this study ensured the continuous alignment of these research methods with the research design.

**4.3.3 The pragmatic approach to research.** The pragmatic approach is the underlying worldview adopted to investigate the religious educators’ perceptions of the BRLA. For this study, the pragmatic approach is defined in terms of the researcher’s “worldview” and the “basic set of beliefs or assumptions” that guided the researcher’s inquiry (Creswell, 1998, p. 74) to solve the research problem (Crotty, 1998; Kuhn, 1970). The chosen worldview considers an “optimistic and progressivist” (Crotty, 1998, p. 74) approach for addressing the research problem, allowing for diversity in planning and implementing research (Creswell, 2007, pp. 22-23).

The pragmatic approach derives from the assumption introduced by Charles Sanders Peirce and William James that multiple realities exist and are shaped by physical and social contexts (Thayer, 1982). Miles et al. (2014) state “that social phenomena exist not only in the mind but also in the world and that some reasonably stable relationships can be found among the idiosyncratic messiness of life” (p. 7). This study acknowledges this assumption that “reality is socially constructed” (Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2010, p. 126). The study sought to understand the social reality of the religious educators in terms of their experiences and the meaning they attached to those experiences. Furthermore, the study draws upon the works of pragmatists such as John Dewey who advocated for scientific methods of studying logic and

the acquisition of knowledge; and George Herbert Mead, the forefather of Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969), as the pragmatic strategy for interpreting the constructed, personal and social realities of people (Charon, 2010). For this study, Symbolic Interactionism is the strategy used to investigate and interpret the religious educators' expressions about the BRLA.

Three specific assumptions or beliefs are relevant to this study. First, the belief that not only is reality constructed, reality is also consistently changing, has multiple layers and can be further "constructed by the individuals involved in the research situation" (Creswell, 1998, p. 76). Reality is considered not as one objective truth waiting to be found, rather multiple and different ways individuals perceive objects around them as they interact with the objects and with others also interacting with the objects (Charon, 2010). According to this belief, the realities that the religious educators held about the BRLA are assumed as having been constructed and not discovered. In addition, the assumption is made that the religious educators generated and transmitted knowledge and meaning through their real-world experiences (Charon, 2010). The assumption is that the religious educators' experiences are their multiple realities of the BRLA.

The first belief suggests that reality is neither simply objective truth or simply subjective truth. This belief rejects forced dichotomies in research claiming a study requires to take a subjective or objective perspective. As Morgan (2007) argues such stances are "artificial summaries of the relationship between the researcher and the research process ... inductive results from the qualitative approach serve as inputs to the deductive goals of the quantitative approach and vice versa" (Morgan, 2007, p. 71).

The second belief draws on Crotty's (1998) and Guba and Lincoln's (1998) arguments about the nature of knowledge and truth. Guba and Lincoln (1998) argue for a "relationship between the knower or would be knower and what can be known" (p. 201). This belief attempts to close the gap between competing ontologies, epistemologies, theoretical perspectives and methodologies and methods. As Crotty (1998, p. 3) points out, the different theoretical terms are complementary and mutually dependent and "to talk about the construction of meaning [epistemology]" is, for example, "to talk about construction of meaningful reality [ontology]" (p. 10).

The implication for these beliefs is threefold: firstly, the study adopted both an objectivist and a subjectivist position about the nature of knowledge and how to scientifically discover truth and the meaning of truth (Crotty, 1998, p. 8); secondly, all attempts were made in the investigation of the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA to maintain

objectivity without having to impose a particular set of ethical judgements or cultural values (Morgan, 2007; Thayer, 1982); and thirdly, the study embraced a range of strategies, techniques and procedures applicable to multiple fields and disciplines studying the research problem. The use of different techniques, for example, strengthened the investigation and led to the discovery about the religious educators' perceived realities of the BRLA. The emphasis for the discovery was on achieving shared meaning and joint action (Crotty, 1998; Kuhn, 1970) made possible by mixed methods research.

**4.3.4 Mixed methods research.** A mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Green, Kreider, & Mayer, 2005; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998, 2003) was used in this study to accommodate for the assumed multiple realities held by the religious educators about the BRLA. This type of design is well aligned to the pragmatic approach to research (Creswell, 2009; Punch, 2009). Traced back to the work of Campbell and Fiske (1959), mixed methods research is considered the “third alternative” to social science research (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007). As an alternative to just quantitative or just qualitative research, mixed methods research offered the study an opportunity to combine the use and strengths of the two classic forms of research (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

From a pragmatic perspective, the combination of quantitative and qualitative inquiry rejects dualism and competing ideologies, seeking only to achieve a common ground and compatibility between philosophies and their methods of research (Punch, 2009). When a common ground is achieved, the similarities between the methods, as the basis for the need to combine their use becomes obvious (Bryman, 2004; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Morgan, 2007). Furthermore, if the sharing of qualitative and quantitative methods is carried out in a scientific manner, “communities of practice” are established (Kuhn, 1970, p. 178) and the information gained from both methods is exchanged and, in turn, used to reinforce the research.

The mixed methods design was used in this study for three reasons. Firstly, to overcome the possible “intrinsic bias” from “single-methods, single-observer, and single-theory studies” (Denzin 1989, p. 307). The design allowed for a substantive representation of the religious educators' “interests, voices, and perspectives” (Greene & Caracelli, 1997, p. 14). Secondly, to combine and make full use of “multiple observers, theories, methods and data sources” (Denzin 1989, p. 307). The complementary use of both quantitative and qualitative strategies for data collection and analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) enhanced the integrity of the overall study (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2005) by providing breadth

and depth to the findings (Bryman, 2004). Furthermore, the variations (Creswell, 2009) in the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA are believed to have been captured, effectively analysed and reflected through the findings (Denzin, 1978) based on the use of the mixed methods design. Thirdly, through a process of triangulation applicable to mixed methods research (Silverman, 2013), the combination of methods allowed for the possible "convergence of data collected" (Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2010, p. 3). The assumption is that the credibility of the research findings was enhanced (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003) by qualitative methods that supported and validated the quantitative methods. The goal was always to objectively integrate (Bryman, 2006) the research findings by identifying consistencies and inconsistencies in the methods. An explanation of the complementary use of both methods in this study is provided next.

**4.3.4.1 The quantitative methods.** The study uses mathematical techniques that draw from positivism (Crotty, 1998; Babbie, 2008). These techniques share a common set of principles and logic, developed by the natural sciences and the notion of science. Derived from the natural sciences, they can also address the collection, processing and analysis of numeric data for social science research (Creswell, 2009; Punch, 2009). The techniques belong to inquiry methods tracing back to Auguste Comte (Cohen et al., 2005) who identified society as a phenomenon that can be studied scientifically (Babbie, 2008). Examples of the quantitative techniques used in this study includes descriptive statistics (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2007; Liu, 2014) and Rasch analysis (Andrich, 1988; Wilson, 2005).

The purpose of using such techniques is to identify patterns in social behaviour to ascertain "laws of human behaviour" (Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2010, p. 126). According to Creswell (2009), to understand quantitative research is to begin with an understanding of variables. He states:

A variable refers to a characteristic or attribute of an individual or an organisation that can be measured or observed and that varies among the people or organisation being studied .... A variable typically will vary in two or more categories or on a continuum of scores, and it can be measured or assessed on a scale. (p. 50)

In this study, the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA were initially identified and measured using descriptive statistics. The religious educators' perceptions were recognised as characteristic of the choices they made on Likert scale items in an online questionnaire. Rasch analysis was used in the first pilot study to evaluate and provide quality assurance for the Likert scale items. The data generated from the pilot study became a criterion or part of a

larger construct map for items design (Andrich, 1988). This particular analysis attempts to “describe a way to relate to the scored outcomes for structured items in online questionnaires” in a way that complements the classical test theory used to generate descriptive statistics (Wilson, 2005, p. 85).

The quantitative research methods used in this study draw on two assumptions. Firstly, that quantifiable observations of a phenomenon can be made and measured using statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics were used in this study to summarise, organise and simplify the numeric data (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2007; Liu, 2014) gathered from the religious educators. This analysis allows for the establishment of reliable and valid knowledge about how phenomenon works (Babbie, 2008; Cohen et al., 2005). The analysis is based on a “sophisticated” interpretation that Babbie (2008) asserts is about applying “rational understanding” to “even non-rational human behaviour” (p. 42), and “despite inescapable subjectivity or our experiences ... seeks an agreement on what is ‘really real’ and what is objectively so” (p. 43). The premise is that objective reality exists that is independent of any individual’s subjective experience.

The second assumption is that the quantitative techniques used in this study are based on a probabilistic rather than a deterministic logic (Andrich, 1988; Rasch, 1960). For this reason, Rasch analysis was also used in this study. Rasch analysis is aligned to the probabilistic assumptions of reality as part of the pragmatic approach to research (Punch, 2009). This type of analysis is used in the areas of educational assessment and psychological measurement as a framework described by a mathematical function to attempt to measure human performance, characteristics, behaviours or attributes (Andrich, 1988; Wilson, 2005; Wu, Tam, & Jen, 2016). For the purpose of this study, a one item or parameter Rasch model was used to calculate the total score across all the structured Likert scale items in the online questionnaire. The aim was to objectively identify and measure the religious educators’ perceptions (as attributes) of the BRLA. However, in reality, human behaviour in the form of perceptions is complex to measure with complete certainty (Wilson, 2005).

Rasch modelling is based on a latent trait theory developed by Georg Rasch, a Danish mathematician in which unobservable characteristics or attributes of people can be indirectly measured (Rasch, 1960; Wu, Tam, & Jen, 2016) using, for example, Likert scale items. In this study, the one parameter Rasch model was used to predict the probability of a sub-sample group of 20 religious educators choosing the latent trait (an attribute) and plotting the item difficulty or location of that trait. A test of fit between the data and the model was calculated

to arrive at a total score. The total score of the items, characterises each of the religious educators who completed the questionnaire.

It is intended that the data fit the model rather than the model fit the data as assumed in traditional analysis (Andrich, 1988; Wu, Tam, & Jen, 2016). To this end, the use of Rasch analysis in this study helped to investigate the structure of the religious educators' responses further to statistical descriptions of those responses. The probability of a relationship between the religious educators' observable, chosen categories to each of the Likert scale items and their unobservable characteristics or perceptions relating to those categories was identified. This investigation also helped to determine whether the constructed online questionnaire items were effective in targeting the intended similar but wider audience of the 238 religious educators involved in the study.

**4.3.4.2 The qualitative methods.** This study considers Interpretivism (Crotty, 1998; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) as the perspective to be used to develop and analyse the qualitative components of the study. Interpretivism draws on Max Weber's assumptions that the natural world in which people live and experience reality is all part of one human world, and whereby, natural and social realities can be studied together (Neuman, 2011). Crotty (1998) argues that Weber specified that "any study of society ... has to be substantiated by empirical evidence" (p. 69). Associated with Weber's assumptions is that reality is independent of any consciousness (Creswell, 2009).

From the Interpretivist perspective, the meaning of reality is important and the meaning that people make of their multiple realities derives from social interaction. Social patterns result from the meaning that comes from mutual and social processes of interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Interactions within the natural world involve "social practice" or a socialisation process (Hyde, 2015, p. 295). Furthermore, the assumption is that the cooperation of people over time develops culture and is considered symbolic and influential on how people behave in society (Charon, 2010). Knowledge and meaning is constructed by individuals and groups of individuals within historical and social contexts (Crotty, 1998, p. 42), as well as "historical and cultural settings" (Creswell, 2009, p. 8; Gall et al., 2007). Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that "realities are wholes that cannot be understood in isolation from their contexts" (p. 39).

As argued by Lincoln and Guba (1985), there are other related assumptions within the Interpretivist perspective. Firstly, that "multiple constructed realities" exist and that "inquiry into these realities will inevitably diverge (each inquiry raises more questions than it

answers)” (p. 37). Secondly, that “knower and the known are inseparable” (p. 39). The researcher is considered the primary data gathering instrument to fully understand, respond and describe the complex interactions taking place. Thirdly, “the investigator and the object of investigation are interactively linked so that the ‘findings’ are literally created as the investigation proceeds” (p. 207). These assumptions are closely aligned to the pragmatic approach to research (Crotty, 1998). Implications for this study are evident in the ethical considerations.

The Interpretivist perspective also provides a structure for understanding and explaining the constructed realities (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Crotty, 1998) of the religious educators about the BRLA within different contexts. For example, the CEOWA develops and implements a state-wide standardised assessment called the BRLA (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2006a). As a result of the introduced BRLA, it is assumed that stakeholders such as the CEOWA, school-based religious educators, students and their parents develop narratives about the assessment. In turn, these narratives may have changed the BRLA into a “created artefact” (Charon, 2010, p. 213), taking on a life of its own, perhaps initially intended or unintended by the CEOWA. As an artefact the BRLA may have started to become a feature of the school community’s reality rather than a simple construction based on interactions with people. Through communication about the BRLA between school community members, there is an assumption that language was exchanged, and relationships developed. At this point, the BRLA may have become the artefact for the individuals and the community. Hence, the investigation that led to the religious educators’ perceptions of the BRLA considered each of the religious educators’ historical, social and cultural contexts and how these contexts may have influenced their different conscious understandings and associated meanings about the BRLA.

This study uses Symbolic Interactionism as the Interpretivist lens to investigate the historical and cultural settings that are assumed to have shaped the religious educators’ perceptions of the BRLA. Symbolic Interactionism is used to specifically analyse and interpret the religious educators’ expressions of their perceived realities of the BRLA. As a qualitative research lens for this study, Symbolic Interactionism helped identify and understand the process by which the religious educators’ knowledge and meaning of their reality of the BRLA were interpreted, conveyed and acted upon. The lens was used to investigate the religious educators’ perceptions of the BRLA as they were generated and transmitted within the contexts of their role as teachers and school leaders responsible for implementing the RE curriculum. These religious educators were directly involved with the



BRLA and interacted with others also involved with the assessment, in particular, the students in their care.

Symbolic Interactionism is a sociological paradigm that can be traced back to the pragmatic philosophies of Dewey, Mead and Blumer (Charon, 2010; Crotty, 1998). This study draws on Symbolic Interactionism because as a pragmatic strategy and Interpretivist lens for qualitative research it recognises people as active beings, thinking, creative, self-directing, defining dynamic actors who have abilities to use symbols, to define and to alter the environment resulting in a unique being in nature (Charon, 2010, p. 34). People are believed to express their individual and subjective understanding of reality using a “set of symbols” (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005, p. 20). Cohen et al. (2005) argue that symbolic interactionists do not focus on the individual rather they “direct their attention at the nature of interaction, the dynamic activities taking place between people” (p. 26). Crotty (1998) argues that “Symbolic Interactionism explores the understandings abroad in culture as the meaningful matrix that guides our lives” (p. 71). He quotes the pragmatists and symbolic interactionists Dewey and Mead to say that “in this understanding of things, experience and culture come to be almost interchangeable terms” (p. 74). The pragmatic study of human perceptions is also aligned with the assumptions of Dewey and Mead (Charon, 2010). The next section outlines the context of perceptions in this study from a pragmatic approach to research.

**4.3.5 The study of perceptions.** For the purpose of this study, “perception” refers to a concept within a broad pragmatic and multidisciplinary reference used in sociological social psychology to examine what it means to be human (Charon, 2010). The term “perception” comes from the Latin verb *perceptio* (Stevenson & Waite, 2011), referring to a dual process of acquiring knowledge through sensory stimulation and experience, resulting in information to be managed and interpreted by the human brain (Bandura, 1993; Maund, 2003). The management and interpretation of the information by the brain is the process of perceiving. However, this study recognises the religious educators’ perceptions of the BRLA as more than the interpretation of sensory stimuli. The study acknowledges, within the context of Symbolic Interactionism, Charon’s (2010, p. 121) definition of perception as described by Mead (1936) and Shibutani (1961).

Mead calls “perception” the active ongoing process of selecting objects out of the environment, those objects that can be used to achieve the actor’s goals. Perception thus makes objects into *social objects* in a situation: “Stimuli, therefore do not initiate activity,

they are pivots for redirection” (Shibutani, 1961, p. 68). The individual acts in a world that has meaning for him or her at the moment. Perception and definition is selective and ongoing. To Mead such thinking is the most important part of what people do and the larger part of that thinking is a process of discovering “just what it is that people ought to do attacked, what was to be avoided” (Mead, 1936, p. 403).

The assumption in this study is that the religious educators may not have sensed their environment directly; rather they defined each situation they found themselves in. The environment they found themselves in may have existed but the definition of that environment by each of the religious educators was important for the underlying understanding of their perceptions and for coming to those understandings. Therefore, the role of perception through social life as an instrument of the social construction of reality was also considered (Charon, 2010; Friedman, 2011). The study focused on understanding how the religious educators’ perceptions of the BRLA were formed within their individual minds as they continuously interacted with themselves, others and things around them.

The expression of the religious educators’ perceptions of the BRLA was considered a unique response in the form of thoughts, words and actions based on their level of awareness of a particular reality or set of realities (Charon, 2010). The religious educators’ perceptions of the BRLA were the link between their thoughts and their experiences of teaching RE and using LSAs within their school settings. The study of perceptions in this regard recognises perceptions as a social process that used symbols. Within the context of the Symbolic Interactionist, perception is one way that symbols function: “The symbol translates the world from a physical sensed reality to a reality that can be understood, interpreted, dissected, integrated, and tested. Between reality and what we see and do stands the symbol” (Charon, 2010, p. 59). Symbolic communication as language guides people through what their senses experience. Language is a person’s means of thinking (Hertzler, 1965), and thinking is part of the perceptual process. As people use language, they identify their perspectives as the lens and framework from which they view their perceived reality (Shibutani, 1955). As Charon (2010) explains, “This lens alters every aspect of our being” (p. 64).

Variables that influence perceptual functioning include gender, age, employment role of responsibility and culture. Bandura (1986, 1993, 1997, 1999) believes that the acquisition of knowledge and meaning is regulated and controlled by people’s realities of the world around them in multiple ways. Vygotsky (1978, 1986) argues words and symbols of a language are regarded as the mediated means by which culture is transmitted. Bruner (1996) proposes culture provides the tools to communicate by which people organise and understand

their world. Johns and Saks (2011) explore organisational behaviour and the influence that organisations have on the formation of perceptions. Gutiérrez and Rogoff (2003) argue the need for holistic views of people's perceptions in terms of experience that give consideration to cultural and historical contexts. This study of the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA considered such variables as criteria and attempted to identify key differences between the perceptions of individual and groups of religious educators. The study focused on exploring how the religious educators' perceptions may have influenced their teaching and assessment practices in RE. Given that the religious educators worked in Catholic schools, the study was designed to gather data about the level of influence that arose from the religious educators' interactions with their students and other school-based religious educators. Also, the study explores how the religious educators prepared students for the administration of the BRLA and were affected by such preparations.

Four assumptions about perceptions are considered in this study from the perspective of a pragmatic approach to research. Firstly, religious educators, as people, have minds that work by processing, organising, retrieving information and articulating that information via behaviours. In this study, the observed behaviours are identified as the symbolic language used by the religious educators. Secondly, the symbolic language used by the religious educators was interpreted as their perceptions of the BRLA. Thirdly, these perceptions were investigated within the contexts of teaching RE and using LSAs. Fourthly, the religious educators' perceptions were understood to be informed by their real-world realities or individual and collective professional experiences. How the religious educators' experiences related to other human experiences was considered. In light of these assumptions, considerations were raised about how the properties of the religious educators' experiences could best be determined to address the research question. The following section describes the research methods used in response to these considerations to conduct this study about religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA.

#### **4.4 The Research Methods**

Figure 4.2 is an elaboration of the research methods identified in the theoretical framework (Figure 4.1). The figure shows a sequence of events involved in the collection and analysis of data for this study. This sequence of events is an adaptation of the "sequential explanatory strategy" used in mixed methods research (Creswell, 2009, p. 211). The strategy outlines a combination of methods involving "the collection, analysis and integration of quantitative and qualitative data in a ... multiphase study" (Hanson, Creswell, Plano Clark,

Petska, & Creswell, 2005, p. 224). A timeline of the major events of the study is available in Appendix C.

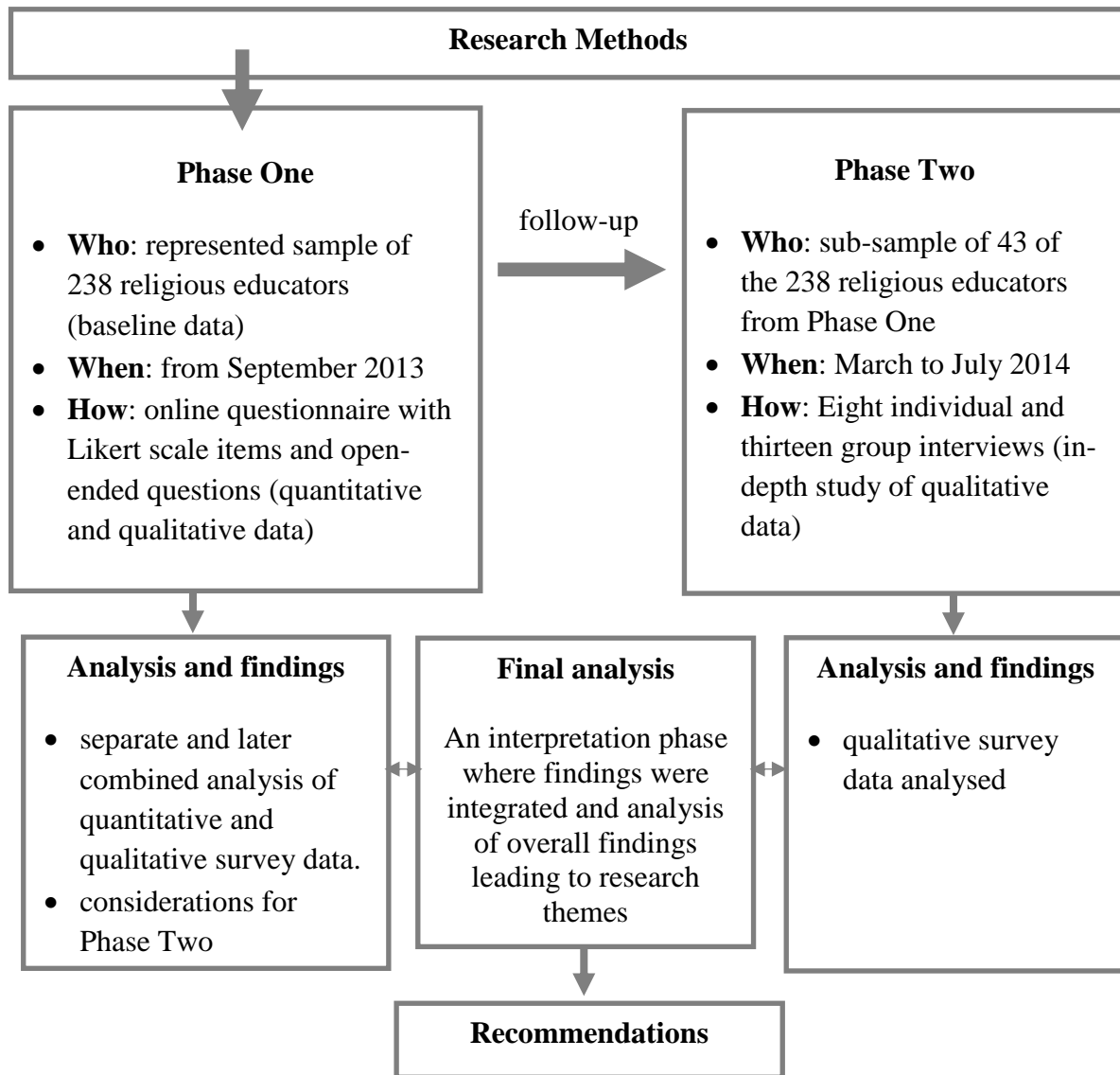


Figure 4.2. The sequential explanatory strategy (adapted from Creswell, 2009, p. 211)

There were two interconnected phases of data collection and analysis. Quantitative and qualitative response data from 238 religious educators were collected in Phase One using an online questionnaire. Numeric data were collected from the religious educators' responses to Likert scale items. Written data were collected from the religious educators' open-ended responses. The analysis of the quantitative data was carried out separately from the analysis of qualitative data. Later, the findings from both data sets were combined, interrogated and

integrated. Considerations for follow-up surveying (Creswell, 2009; Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2010) of the religious educators based on the analysis of findings from Phase One of the study were applied in Phase Two. Qualitative responses were collected from 43 of the 238 religious educators in Phase Two through semi-structured individual and group interviews. The analysis of the qualitative data was conducted separately to the data sets from Phase One and later reviewed, considering the findings from Phase One. The use of different data sets from within each phase and across the phases complemented each other and were interpreted accordingly (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). The combination of findings from both phases of the study led to research themes. These themes emerged from the common response patterns identified in the findings and the inferences made from the findings (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003).

**4.4.1 Methods of data collection.** The data collection period began in August and September 2013 and was completed by July 2014. During this period, the religious educators had a heightened experience of the BRLA because they had been directly involved with the administration of the 2013 BRLA with students in Years Three, Five and/or Nine. Response data were collected from a represented sample size of 238 (39.6%) religious educators working in 65 (44.2%) primary, secondary or composite Catholic schools within metropolitan and regional areas across the four Western Australian Catholic dioceses. This sample comes from an estimated target population of 600 classroom teachers, school leaders and principals working in 147 Catholic schools in WA who participated in the BRLA in 2013 and 2014 (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2014). Throughout the thesis, the uppercase letter *N* represents the total sample size of 238 religious educators. The lowercase letter *n* represents a sub-set of the total sample. According to Cohen et al. (2005) the sample size in this study is substantial enough to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings.

Table 4.2 identifies the location and type of Catholic schools in WA who participated in the BRLA in 2013 and 2014. The religious educators who worked in these schools were responsible for implementing the RE curriculum. They were also directly involved with preparing students in Years Three, Five and Nine for the administration of the BRLA (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013). The following section describes the purpose of the data collection phases and the survey measures used in each phase to collect the response data from the religious educators. The design and development of the surveying items and the trialling procedures employed to evaluate the items is included.

Table 4.2

*The Number of Catholic Schools in WA Represented in the Study*

Schools	Catholic Dioceses in Western Australia				Total (%)
	Bunbury	Broome	Geraldton	Perth	
Primary	5 of 22	1 of 3	3 of 7	36 of 75	45/107 (42.1)
Secondary	2 of 2	0 of 0	2 of 2	12 of 22	16/26 (61.5)
Composite	0 of 3	1 of 1	1 of 1	2 of 9	4/14 (28.6)
Total (%)	7 of 27 (25.9)	2 of 4 (50.0)	6 of 10 (60.0)	50 of 106 (47.2)	65/147 (44.2)

*Note.* Composite schools offer Kindergarten (age 3) to Year 12 (age 18) classes.

**4.4.1.1 Phase One.** In Phase One, quantitative and qualitative response data from the 238 teachers and school leaders of RE were gathered using an online, semi-structured questionnaire. The structure of the questionnaire followed that recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 41) in the use of semi-structured questionnaires. The religious educators were given opportunities in the questionnaire to respond to Likert scale and open-ended items about the BRLA, their use of LSAs and their teaching and assessment of RE. The questionnaire allowed the religious educators to provide quantitative as well as supporting qualitative data. This practice provides opportunities in research to readily collect, collate and analyse dichotomous, non-dichotomous and polygamous data using statistical procedures (Babbie, 2008).

**4.4.1.1.1 The respondents.** Table 4.3 is a summary of the demographic composition of the religious educators involved in Phase One. The table identifies most religious educators as having taught in Catholic schools for more than six years. Most religious educators were employed in schools within the Archdiocese of Perth. Half the number of religious educators were employed in large Catholic schools with student populations of more than 500 students in total.

The 238 religious educators comprised three categories. These are 150 classroom teachers of RE responsible for students in Years Three (n = 55), Five (n = 40) and Nine (n =

55); 57 school leaders responsible for leading RE in Catholic primary (n = 37) and secondary (n = 20) schools; and 31 principals of Catholic primary (n = 26) and secondary (n = 5) schools. The school leaders of RE in Catholic primary schools are called Assistant Principals of Religious Education (APRE), and the school leaders of RE in Catholic secondary schools are called Heads of Department (Religious Education) or Religious Education Coordinators (REC).

Table 4.3  
*Demographic Summary of the Respondents in Phase One*

Demographic Category	Number of Respondents	%
Females	158	66.4
Males	80	33.6
Largest age grouping is between 45 to 54 (male 41%, female 30%)	81	34.0
Largest cohort from the Archdiocese of Perth	188	79.0
Teaching experience was six years or more	202	84.9
Teaching experience in a Catholic school, was six years or more	193	81.1
Educational specialisation in Religious Education	115	48.3
Teaching RE in a Catholic School, was six years or more	181	76.1
Taught RE outside of WA	35	14.7
Common educational qualification –Bachelor of Education	117	49.2
Common educational institute attended by teachers of RE (The University of Notre Dame Australia)	96	40.3
Years of involvement with the BRLA (5 to 8 years)	117	49.2
School size with more than a 500 student, population	123	51.7

*Note.* N = 238 respondents

*4.4.1.1.2 Data gathering instrument: online, semi-structured questionnaire.* The online questionnaire in this study was designed to collect baseline data from the religious

educators about their perceptions of the BRLA. The questionnaire was made available online to the religious educators by Qualtrics: Online Survey Software and Insight Platform (Qualtrics Online Solutions, 2013). The religious educators required approximately 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire within a period of more than one month (August to September 2013).

A total of 90 items were used to collect response data from the religious educators (Appendices I and J). The questionnaire comprised four items informing and requesting religious educators to consent to participate; 16 items requesting demographic information; and five open-ended questions requesting religious educators to comment on statements about the BRLA, the teaching experience of RE and the use of LSAs. There were also 65 structured items, mainly Likert scale items, whereby the religious educators were asked to respond to “stimulus statements (sometimes called a stem) and a set of standard options” (Wilson, 2005, p. 78) about aspects of the BRLA, the use of LSAs and RE. The set of standard options used mainly a five-point scale as well as a seven-point scale for two items. One other structured item required the religious educators to rate the effectiveness of the BRLA on a scale with score points from zero to one hundred. The zero rating on the scale was considered as the least possible score of effectiveness and one hundred as the highest possible score of effectiveness.

The Likert scale items were used to “measure the strength” (Foddy, 1993, p. 153) of the religious educators’ attributes or characteristics that potentially led to their perceptions of the BRLA. The five-point scale used for each Likert scale item generally ranged from ordered categories of strongly disagree (SD = 1), disagree (D = 2), neither agree nor disagree (N = 3), agree (A = 4) to strongly agree (SA = 5). For the two items that used a seven-point scale, the ordered categories were very dissatisfied (1), dissatisfied (2), somewhat dissatisfied (3), neutral (4), somewhat satisfied (5), satisfied (6), and very satisfied (7).

Two features were added to the design of the Likert scale items. Firstly, religious educators were given the opportunity to choose to agree or disagree or to select neutral. The decision to include neutral was made to limit the probability of respondents being forced to choose to agree or disagree to statements, when in reality the respondents may not have settled on a fixed position (O’Leary, 2010). The researcher recognises there is disagreement from researchers about the number of options available on Likert scale items and the use of neutral ratings that exist (Revilla, Saris, & Krosonick, 2014). Secondly, several Likert scale items were repeated using positive and negative phraseology to represent reversed thresholds (Foddy, 1993; Wilson, 2005). This feature was adopted to establish consistency in the



religious educators' responses. Thirdly, regardless of the features and considerations used to measure the religious educators' responses using questionnaire items, the researcher acknowledges that the religious educators may have had "radically different ideas" (Wilson, 2005, p. 79) to how they responded to the items. Also, the religious educators may have interpreted the stem of the stimulus statements differently and perceived the categorised ratings on the Likert scales items differently to what was displayed and intended.

The open-ended questions within the online questionnaire were designed to collect qualitative information to assist the researcher to clarify and build upon the quantitative response data (Cohen et al., 2005; Miles & Huberman 1994; O'Leary, 2010). For three of the open-ended questions, the religious educators were asked to share their experiences of the BRLA (Question 12), teaching RE (Question 33) and using LSAs (Question 37). The final two open-ended questions asked religious educators to comment on what influence they believed the BRLA has had in RE (Question 81), and to comment about any aspect of the BRLA that they felt significant to their needs (Question 83). The combination of Likert scale and open-ended items in the questionnaire gave the religious educators the opportunity to respond to statements and add remarks, qualifications and explanations in support of their ranked responses.

**4.4.1.2 Phase Two.** In the second phase of the study, qualitative response data were collected from 43 religious educators from March to July 2014. The data were generated from 21 semi-structured individual and group interviews. The purpose of Phase Two was to probe significant findings from the first phase by exploring in greater depth the properties and potential influence (Gorgi & Gorgi, 2008) of the BRLA as a LSA used in RE, as perceived by the religious educators. The structure of the interview questions was based on findings that emerged from the analysis of the response data from Phase One.

**4.4.1.2.1 The participants.** The 43 religious educators involved in Phase Two represent a sub-set of the sample size of 238 religious educators involved in Phase One. The 43 religious educators elected to participate in the interview process when asked at the end of the online questionnaire. The 43 religious educators included 21 teachers of RE [Year Three (n = 5), Year Five (n = 5) and Year Nine (n = 11)] and 22 school leaders of RE [APREs (n = 8), RECs (n = 6) and principals of primary schools (n = 8)]. No principal from Catholic secondary schools volunteered. The principals who were interviewed led primary schools in the Archdiocese of Perth. The fact that no principal from a Catholic secondary school

contributed to Phase Two is a recognised and identified as a limitation. This limitation with other identified limitations are addressed in Chapter One.

A broad representation of the different religious educators working in Catholic schools in WA is evident in Phase Two. For example, the teacher and school leader groups were employed in diverse geographic and demographic Catholic schools within the Archdiocese of Perth and within the dioceses of Broome and Geraldton. No religious educators from the Bunbury Diocese are represented. Again, this is an acknowledged limitation that is addressed in Chapter One. Also, in terms of the religious educators' gender the following is known. The 21 teachers of RE comprise:

- five female Year Three teachers;
- three female and two male Year Five teachers; and
- six female and seven male Year Nine teachers.

The 22 school leaders of RE comprise:

- five female and three male school leaders of primary schools;
- four female and two male school leaders of secondary schools; and
- three female and five male principals.

Furthermore, the 43 religious educators were aged between 21 and 70.

*4.4.1.2.2 Data gathering instrument: semi-structured interviews.* The interview process involved the following considerations. Firstly, the number of religious educators involved determined the composition of the interview process. Secondly, at least one hour per interview was allocated and used. Thirdly, religious educators were asked to respond to nine stimulus questions and follow-up contributing questions drawn from the analysis of findings identified in the response data to the online questionnaire (Appendices K and L). The interview questions were designed to give the religious educators an opportunity to express individual meanings of their perceptions (Gall et al., 2007) of the BRLA. The religious educators were encouraged to speak freely, discussing and elaborating on their experiences (Cohen et al., 2005) of the BRLA and related contexts including the teaching of RE and the use of LSAs. Given the nature of the semi-structured interviews, there were also opportunities for the religious educators to explore ideas beyond the stimulus questions. For example, the religious educators were asked impromptu questions such as “What do you mean by that comment?” and “Could you please explain that point further?”. Finally, audio recordings and transcriptions of the interviews were made with the informed consent of

religious educators. The religious educators were instructed (Miles et al., 2014) that it was possible for them to review, comment upon and alter what they said in the interviews.

*4.4.1.2.3 Composition.* The composition of the interviews was dependent upon the number of religious educators who volunteered to take part in the interviews and the role of teaching responsibility of those religious educators. Given the power differential that exists between classroom teachers and principals (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Seidman, 2013), the researcher decided to organise separate and individual interviews with the principals who volunteered to participate in the interview process. This decision was made to allow teachers to express themselves freely without possibly feeling intimidated by principals. Eight individual interviews involving principals were conducted first throughout March 2014.

The group interviews were conducted between April and July 2014 (Appendix M). These interviews were conducted either at school locations or in buildings that were near school locations. Where two or more religious educators from one school agreed to be interviewed, a school group interview was conducted. Group interviews with teachers responsible for students in similar Year levels were also conducted.

In the first round of group interviews, six school group interviews involving several teachers and school leaders of RE were organised. These interviews were followed by three primary school group interviews and three secondary school group interviews. A further three group interviews were arranged involving individual teachers and school leaders from different schools and responsible for different Year levels. Of the group interviews involving teachers of Year Nine students, one was conducted via video conferencing because the teachers worked in regional Catholic schools. Finally, two group interviews were held with school leaders. One involved five APREs from five different Catholic primary schools and the other involved three RECs from three different secondary schools. The full composition of the interview process is available in Appendix L.

*4.4.1.2.4 The interview questions.* The semi-structured, individual and group interviews used a framework (Seidman, 2013) focused on nine stimulus questions. Appendices K and L list the nine stimulus questions and follow-up contributing questions used during the eight individual and thirteen group interviews. Two interviewers used probing questions to encourage participants to elaborate and clarify what they had said (O’Leary, 2010). The participants were asked to respond to questions about their experiences, thoughts, feelings and opinions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Seidman, 2013) of the BRLA

within the broader contexts of RE and the use of LSAs. The religious educators were provided with sufficient time and space to discuss and exchange ideas freely with the interviewers and each other in the group. Through the dialogue, participants recalled their stories; in many cases they used literary forms such as similes, metaphors, analogies and images.

**4.4.2 Methods of data analysis.** Given that numeric, written and transcribed data were collected from the religious educators during the two phases of the study, a mixed methods approach to data analysis was applied at the end of each phase. The response data from Phase One were separately collated and analysed according to the type of data set. Data from Phase One were analysed prior to starting Phase Two, informing the design and composition of that phase. Quantitative techniques such as descriptive processing and analysis were conducted on the numeric data (Babbie, 2008; Cohen et al., 2005; Gravetter & Wallnau, 2007) received from the 238 religious educators in Phase One. The written data from the 238 religious educators in Phase One and the transcribed data from the 43 religious educators in Phase Two were managed and analysed using Miles and Huberman's (1994) systematic methods of qualitative analysis. These processes of data analysis were followed by the cross-referencing of analysed data from both phases (Teddie & Tashakkori, 2009). As part of the cross-referencing investigation, the quantitative and qualitative data were combined and integrated. The aim was to identify similarities and differences in the findings from both data sets. The comparison of data sets led to a discovery of common response patterns or themes.

Table 4.4 is a summary of the procedures for collating and analysing the quantitative and qualitative response data from both phases. A systematic approach was used to investigate each data set and specific aspects of the data sets. A feedback loop from the end of Phase Two back to Phase One identifies the final cross-referencing process.

Table 4.4

*The Procedures for Collating and Analysing Response Data*

<i>Phase</i>	<i>Implementation</i>
→ <b>Phase One</b>	
Sort	1. Sort online questionnaire items and response data from the items according to one or more specific research questions addressed. Use Microsoft Word and Excel.
↓	
Investigate	2. Systematically code and enter numeric data from the structured online questionnaire items into SPSS (e.g. Likert scale items).
↓	
	3. Display descriptive statistics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frequency counts;</li> <li>• Mean;</li> <li>• Standard deviation; and</li> <li>• Testing for statistical probabilities using non-parametric testing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mann-Whitney U Test to measure difference according to gender; and</li> <li>- Kruskal-Wallis Test to measure differences according to age and employment role of responsibility.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
	4. Code and enter numeric data into Rasch program, <i>RUMM2030</i> . Consider: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summary statistics;</li> <li>• Threshold probabilities; and</li> <li>• Item fit and person fit.</li> </ul>
	5. Systematically colour code and categorise response data from the open-ended questions. Conduct frequency counts of the responses.
↓	
	6. Interrogate data for common response patterns.
Cross-reference	7. Cross-reference response data from structured items and open-ended questions. Interrogate data for common response patterns.
↓	
<b>Phase Two</b>	8. Transcribe interview response data within hours of an interview. Use the Dragon NaturallySpeaking voice activated program to assist.
↓	
Sort	9. Systematically sort, colour code and categorise the transcribed response data from the interviews.
↓	
Investigate	10. Cross-reference transcribed response data from each interview. Identify response patterns. Interrogate data for common response patterns.
↓	
Cross-reference	11. Cross-reference written response data from the online questionnaire with the transcribed response data from the interviews.
↓	
	12. Interrogate data to identify research themes.

**4.4.2.1 Analysis of Phase One.** The response data gathered from the first phase underwent several stages of analysis. Microsoft Word and Excel (Microsoft, 2011) programs were used to manage the data. Firstly, the quantitative data were separated from the qualitative response data. The response data to the structured questions, such as the Likert scale items, were grouped according to the similarity of the questions and the SRQs the data addressed. The written data from the open-ended questions went through a similar initial process. Various ordered matrices were created whereby written data were sorted into rows and columns, reflecting items and participants' responses to those items. Later in the analysis process, the qualitative and quantitative data sets and aspects of the data sets were cross-referenced to identify common response patterns from individual and collective participants (Creswell, 2009; O'Leary, 2010).

**4.4.2.1.1 The analysis of quantitative data.** The process of analysis of the numeric data were carried out in three stages. The stages involved preparing the data, entering the data into various software programs and calculating descriptive statistics. The original data from the online questionnaire were provided by Qualtrics in Microsoft Excel spreadsheets. The systematic coding and entering of numeric data into software programs was used to generate and display descriptive statistics (Gall et al., 2007; O'Leary, 2010). Firstly, the data were reconfigured and coded according to the constructed question types. As part of the coding exercise, the five- and seven-point Likert scale items used the ordered categories or score points as part of the analysis rather than words. Thresholds were established using the score points. For example, in the five-point Likert scale, one threshold was established between the categories of "agree" and "strongly agree". Another threshold established "strongly agree" as the highest possible score point on the scale continuum.

Pivot tables in Microsoft Excel were then generated to conduct investigations of test characteristics using descriptive statistics (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2007). The mean was used as a measure of central tendency to identify the central value of observable variables. The standard deviation was used as a measure of variance to calculate the range of observable variables. Other statistics such as frequency distributions and Cronbach's alpha as a measure of reliability were also used. Distractor analysis was used in further investigations involving item characteristics and function (Andrich et al., 2011; Rasch, 1977).

Using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) (Allen & Bennett, 2008) software program, the numeric data were subjected to non-parametric testing. The tests used were the Kruskal-Wallis 1-way ANOVA Test for gender and employment type and the

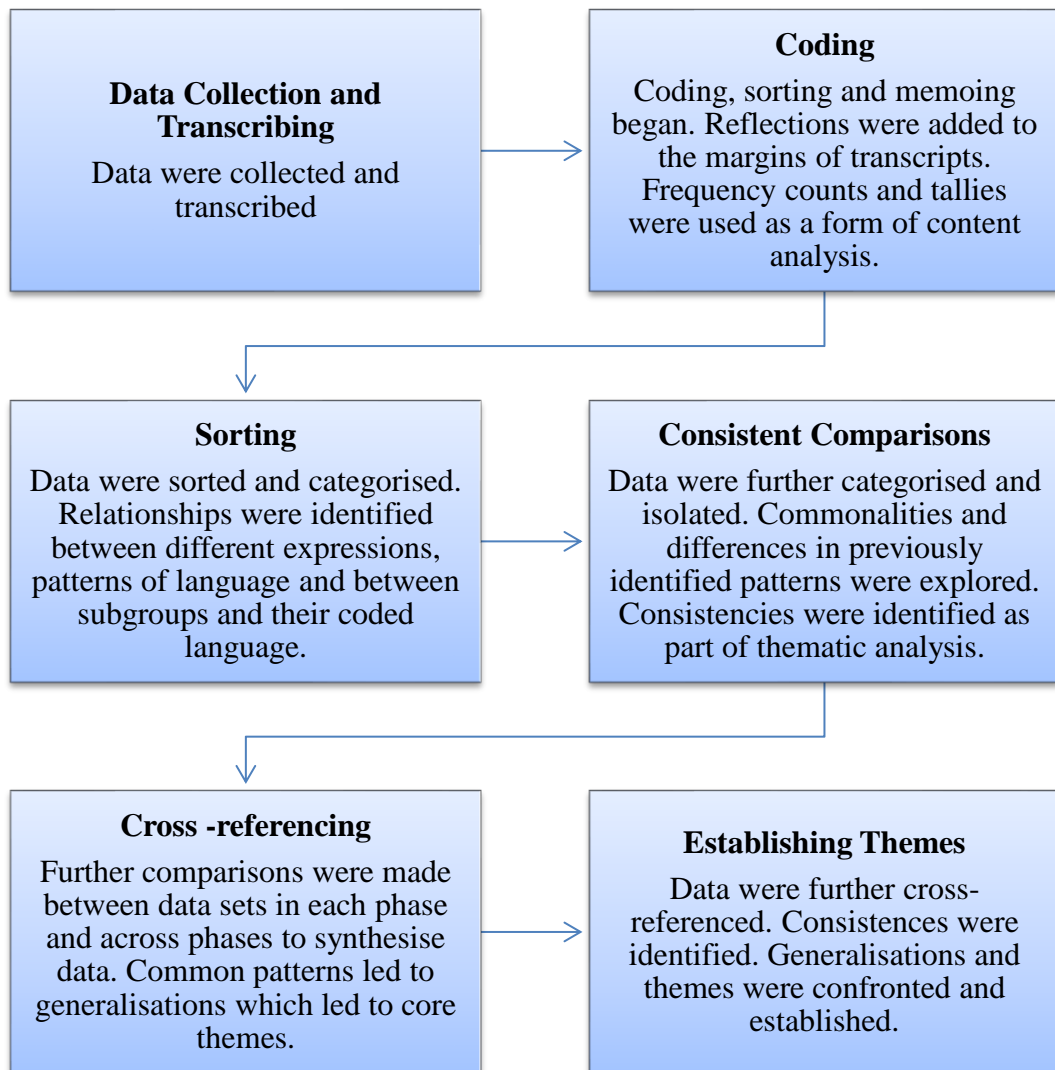
Mann-Whitney U Test for age (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2007; Liu, 2014). When analysis of the response data to the scale items was conducted using non-parametric testing, the rejection of a null hypothesis of less than .05 was identified several times for gender, age and the religious educators' employment role of responsibility. These results indicate differences in how religious educators responded to questions based on those variables. Other demographic variables did not cause the same results. For example, the school location and size in terms of student numbers.

*4.4.2.1.2 The analysis of qualitative data.* The religious educators' written responses to the five open-ended questions underwent two stages of analysis. Firstly, systematic, manual and computer assisted sorting, note-taking, coding and categorising (Creswell, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994) was carried out on the written responses to each question. The religious educators' responses were mapped against the SRQs. Microsoft Word and Excel programs were used to manage the data. Secondly, data were cross-referenced to identify similarities and differences in the religious educators' responses to each of the questions. Data tables were developed from categories created from the sorting and coding of data. These tables assisted in the process of content analysis. Thirdly, the written responses were cross-referenced with responses to corresponding structured items. The cross-referencing of data sets was carried out to establish consistency in the religious educators' responses.

Much of the work carried out by the researcher in the analysis of the qualitative data followed the arguments presented by Miles et al. (2014) of being "shamelessly eclectic" (p. 9) by borrowing techniques from various scholars. For example, the coding activity draws on Glaser and Strauss's (1967, p. 102) description of the qualitative coding approach that involves three dominant stages. The first stage is deductive, where data are converted to frequency counts. The second stage is inductive, where data are coded first to generate an understanding of the data. The third stage involves the combination of both stages. Full details of the qualitative analysis are described within the processes of analysis carried out in Phase Two.

*4.4.2.2 Analysis of Phase Two.* Figure 4.3 outlines the process used in this study to analyse the qualitative data from Phase Two and later compare and merge the processed data from Phase One. The response data in Phase Two underwent several stages of analysis with much of the work drawn from Miles et al. (2014). In the first stage of analysis, two research assistants transcribed the interviews within hours of each process (Siedman, 2013). The

recordings of the interviews were firstly transcribed using Dragon NaturallySpeaking 13 Standard (Nuance Communication Inc., 2013). Several reviews of each transcribed interview were conducted to ensure that words were spelt correctly, and that words and phrases were transcribed correctly from the recordings.



*Figure 4.3.* Analytic methods of qualitative research for this study (adapted from Miles et al., 2014, pp. 69–104)

Secondly, the two interviewers in this study provided written reports detailing their perceptions of each of the interviews in which they were involved. Thirdly, for ethical reasons, final non-identifiable transcriptions and voice recordings of each interview (Miles & Huberman, 1994; O’Leary, 2010) were provided to the researcher by research assistants.



Each of the 43 religious educators were given coded names to protect their identity. It was only at this point that the researcher received information about the religious educators' employment role of responsibility and about the configuration of the interviews. Fourthly, the transcribed data from each interview were sorted, coded and categorised and sorted again. Fifthly, the categorised sets of transcriptions were cross-referenced to establish similarities and differences in the data between the religious educators as a whole and between teachers, school leaders and principals. The sorting activities led to generalisations and the identification of common themes. Transcripts from the interviews provided opportunities for the researcher to explore with greater complexity a richer understanding of how religious educators perceived different aspects of the BRLA. The transcriptions also provided insights into the participants' perceptions of the BRLA and how these perceptions may have influenced their teaching, learning and assessment practices in RE. The stages of analysis following the produced interview transcripts is further explained next.

*4.4.2.2.1 Coding.* During the coding process in this study, interview transcripts and recordings were reviewed several times. Copies of transcripts created and phrases and words within the transcripts were highlighted and colour coded. Data were entered into Microsoft Word and Excel to further assist with the coding process. The process of naming and labelling particular expressions (single words and phrases), categories of expressions and associated properties of those expressions was part of coding (Saldaña, 2013). This process was used in Phase One and Two with the written and transcribed response data provided by the religious educators. Three types of coding occurred. Firstly, open coding (Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 102) was used, where each line, sentence and paragraph was read in search of answering a repeated question, "What is this about?" (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The labels used referred to expressions such as "the BRLA", "religious education", "LSA", "at my school" and so on. These are the nouns and verbs of the conceptual world (Charon, 2010). Tables were drawn to synthesise the phrases. The arrangement, identification and rearrangement of phrases occurred. Secondly, axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used, whereby codes were created to identify relationships in the data sets and across data sets. Thirdly, selective coding was used, whereby categories were formed and selected as core in a string of categories that created a central narrative (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldaña, 2013).

*4.4.2.2 Constant comparisons.* The coded data were categorised into common groupings (Saldaña, 2013) using memoing. The first process of categorisation was carried out repeatedly in order to triangulate the data. System cards and memos were used as a way of recording ideas (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Furthermore, various display formats were created in the coding process to identify the groupings. For example, networks showing series of notes with links between them; multi-forms showing short blocks of text, quotations, phrases, rating, abbreviations, symbolic figures, labelling lines and arrows; and context charts showing mapping in graphic forms (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The display formats helped identify properties within the data. These properties gave rise to concepts about the categories established. For example, Year Three teachers spoke about the difficulty in the language used in the BRLA.

As coded categories emerged, the researcher linked them together into common response patterns. Questions such as “when”, “why” and “under what conditions do these themes occur” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp. 101–116) were raised by the researcher about the processed data. As a follow-up to the process, preliminary tables were drafted and reviewed. These tables underwent reassessment and refinement. The initial process of categorisation enabled data reduction to occur. In turn, the process enabled the researcher to make decisions regarding further analysis that resulted in preliminary and, later, final conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The established categories were compared for meanings and then refined and explored for their relationship. Lastly, the categories were integrated when understandings about the religious educators’ perceptions of the BRLA were identified.

Memos were used throughout the stages of analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Firstly, as recorded reflections about the data. Secondly, as notes about aspects of the developed properties, categories and associated relationships identified through coding and the constant comparison of categories created.

*4.4.2.3 Cross-referencing of data from both phases.* The processed data in each phase and between phases were cross-referenced several times through sorting, coding and categorising techniques. The aim was to gain plausibility in the data by clustering the data and building logical chains of evidence (Bryman, 2004). This chain of evidence reduced the data and led to the research findings that address the three SRQs. Identified at the end of the chain were the research themes. Core themes emerged from the research findings through a process of thematic analysis (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Saldaña, 2013).

During the cross-referencing stage and through a process of triangulation, data were merged and compared (Bryman, 2004; Creswell, 2009). Data sets and aspects of data sets from each phase of the study were cross-referenced to identify common response patterns or recurrent behaviours from individual and collective participants. The analysis involved searching and identifying themes and then interpreting those themes. A refinement of the themes continued with further sorting of relationships and patterns across categories until a saturation point (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 62; Miles et al., 2014, p. 286) occurred where no new knowledge was able to be gained. During this time generalisations and conclusions were drawn and confirmed. The data were reduced to a point where the GRQ was addressed and the stages of analysis were complete.

Throughout the data analysis, the researcher aimed to ensure three key principles of research analysis. The aim was to achieve trustworthiness of the collected data. Firstly, quantitative research methods were used to ensure credibility and transferability of the research findings (Babbie, 2008). Secondly, qualitative research methods were used to ensure generalisability of the research findings (Miles et al., 2014). Thirdly, to ensure dependability of the research findings, a focused investigation based on SRQs was conducted and the limitations from the investigation were acknowledged. These principles helped to successfully address the research problem. The outcome of the study supports the argument for integrating the collection and analysis of data used in mixed methods research (Bryman, 2004; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Discussion about the use of pilot studies is required to further support this claim.

**4.4.3 Pilot studies.** Two pilot studies were conducted. The pilot studies were aligned to the research design represented in the theoretical framework that focuses on the research problem. The purpose of the pilot studies was to assist in the development of effective survey instruments for generating valid and reliable data for the study (Cohen et al., 2005; Wilson, 2005). The pilot studies provided an opportunity to sample and review proposed online questionnaire items and interview questions. The questions for both phases of the study were evaluated and modified before their final release. The pilot studies also helped determine the appropriate time required to complete the online questionnaire, the appropriate time to conduct interviews and the appropriate number of teachers for each group interview.

**4.4.3.1 Timing.** The timing of the pilot studies is as follows. The first pilot study trialled the online questionnaire items from March to July 2013. The second pilot study trialled the interview questions from October to February 2014. Besides attempting to improve the question types, the second pilot study also helped the interviewers discover how best to approach the questions with the religious educators. Both pilot studies preceded the two phases of the study.

**4.4.3.2 Participants.** Twenty religious educators took part in the pilot studies. The group of religious educators were employed as casual relief teachers in Catholic schools. They were involved in the BRLA marking process. These religious educators, having had professional teaching experience in RE, were aware of the BRLA and its use in RE.

**4.4.3.3 Design.** The conceptual and theoretical frameworks of the study informed the sampling methodology of the pilot studies. All statements and questions were based on the review of RE literature, the use of LSAs and the role of the religious educator. Furthermore, literature about the construction of questions for questionnaires and interviews was used (Foddy, 1993). From the pilot studies, the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA were identified through responses to firstly, a set of constructed statements of standard options from which they could choose, and secondly, to open-ended questions.

**4.4.3.4 Rasch Analysis.** Rasch modelling (Andrich, 1988; Rasch, 1960) was used for quality assurance regarding the construction of the Likert scale items used in the online questionnaire. That is, Rasch analysis helped to assess the validity and closeness of fit between the online questions and the participants' responses to those questions (Wu, Tam, & Jen, 2016). The response data from the Likert scale items in the online questionnaire were recoded and entered into the *RUMM2030* software program (Andrich et al., 2011). Partial completion of the online questionnaire was not included in program. The Rasch software was used to estimate the item (difficulty) and person (ability or in this case, choice) parameters on a common scale. *RUMM2030* provided summary statistics with the residual correlations; the display of threshold information with items entered as polygamous with five and seven ordered categorises (e.g. displays of threshold probability curves and person-item threshold distribution); individual item fit and individual person fit (e.g. displays of category probability curves to show item function and compare strength of item function, item characteristic curves); residual correlations; and the Guttman principle components. The

findings from the investigation suggest that the data fitted the model. Table 4.5 is a summary of the test of fit statistics based from *RUMM2030*.

Table 4.5

*Summary of the Test of Fit Statistics from RUMM2030 (n = 232)*

	Pilot Study		Actual Study	
Total item -Chi Square	314.9820		1,400.3005	
Degrees of Freedom	240		180	
Chi Square Probability	0.000822		0.000000	
Person separation index with and without extremes	0.87289		0.89760	
Coefficient Alpha with and without extremes	0.86791		0.90043	
	Item Fit			
	Item Location	Fit Residual	Item Location	Fit Residual
Mean	0.0000	0.6605	0.0000	0.1167
Standard Deviation	1.6980	0.6019	0.7687	2.2874
Skewness	1.2267	1.4120	-0.2623	1.4341
Kurtosis		1.3712	2.6109	1.6677
	Persons Fit			
	Person Location	Fit Residual	Person Location	Fit Residual
Mean	1.5161	0.7291	0.0775	-0.3218
Standard Deviation	0.5100	2.0083	0.4660	2.3658
Skewness	0.6609	0.4815	0.0320	0.0863
Kurtosis	-0.6609	-0.4337	-0.1125	0.0184

The table shows the statistics from the pilot study compared to the statistics from the actual study. The person separation index for the pilot study (the Rasch equivalent to Cronbach's alpha) is 0.86791 compared to 0.90043 for the actual study. These results suggest a high degree of reliability for both studies in terms of individual item fit. That is, the analysis

from the pilot study suggests there was no need to substantively change or remove any of the Likert scale items in preparation for the actual study because the items seem to have appropriately targeted the religious educators involved. Appendix P further highlights the reliability of the questionnaire items in the actual study. For example, the first figure in Appendix P displays the person-item threshold distribution and suggests according to the concentration of persons in the middle of the output graph that the items appropriately targeted the represented sample of religious educators involved in the actual study.

#### **4.5 Ethical Considerations**

Four ethical considerations are addressed in this study. The strategies proposed to address the ethical considerations were approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of The University of Notre Dame Australia on Thursday 10 May 2012 (Appendix D). The first ethical consideration is based on the intellectual property of the study. The second is the permission given to conduct the study. The third addresses a potential conflict of interest that exists between the researcher and the participants. The fourth involves gaining informed consent from participants. These considerations are considered necessary preventative steps to ensure the integrity of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**4.5.1 Intellectual property of the study.** The first ethical consideration deals with the intellectual property of the study. The University of Notre Dame Australia was identified on all documentation sent to stakeholders of the study as the sponsor of the study and the owner of all the data. The documentation described the study as a university program and the researcher as a student of the university.

**4.5.2 Permission to conduct the study.** After HREC approval and in a letter to the Director of Catholic Education of Western Australia (Appendix E), the researcher sought permission to survey religious educators working within the Catholic education system in WA. The Director at the time, Mr Ron Dullard, formally gave written permission for the study on Friday 1 June 2012. Approval for the research was then sought by the school principals who directly employ religious educators. Initially, letters were sent to the Primary and Secondary Principal Associations of Western Australia requesting the support of their members (Appendix F), followed by letters to each Catholic school principal in WA requesting their support to promote the study and their permission to contact their teaching staff (Appendix G). The letters to the Director, school principals and relevant associations

outlined the features of the study and the ethical considerations addressed in the initial proposal for the study.

**4.5.3 Potential conflict of interest.** The second ethical consideration addresses a potential conflict of interest between the researcher and the participants of the study. The researcher is a student at The University of Notre Dame Australia but also an employee of the CEOWA. She is a consultant who supports religious educators in the implementation of the RE curriculum. The researcher has always been directly responsible for the development, implementation and analysis of the BRLA as part of the RE curriculum. As part of her work she is involved with teachers and school leaders of RE. This is a potential conflict of interest. To overcome this potential conflict, research assistants were employed and trained by the researcher to collect and manage all response data from the study. Two research assistants were employed to contact, engage and coordinate the completion of the online questionnaire with principals, school leaders of RE and teachers of RE; to contact consenting participants for the semi-structured individual and group interviews; to conduct all interviews and transcribe data from the interviews; and provide only non-identifiable transcripts and audio recordings of the interviews to the researcher. These measures complied with the requirements of the HREC (Appendix D) and the anonymity of participants was guaranteed in the completion of the online questionnaire and conducted interviews.

Although the researcher was never directly involved with the participants at any stage during the study, the researcher was very familiar with the area and topic of the study. This ensured the credibility of the research design and methods used to address the research problem (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher was responsible, for preparing items for the online questionnaire and follow-up questions for the interviews and for training the research assistants to carry out their work. All participants in the study were issued with a code derived from information of their birthdate. This code protected the anonymity of the participants from the researcher yet assisted the research assistants to identify and merge data from participants who were involved in the first and second phases of the study. In addition to these measures, the researcher signed a confidentiality agreement to ensure that all information from the study was kept private and confidential and not disclosed to any staff member at the CEOWA. Furthermore, the researcher implemented a peer review process to consult with the research assistants and research supervisor on matters related to the study (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2010).

Given the potential conflict of interest in this study, the scope of the study does not reference or discuss student performance data from the BRLA. Such a discussion may have caused an additional conflict of interest because participants may have felt intimidated by the possible association between their involvement preparing students for the administration of the BRLA and the students' results.

**4.5.4 Informed consent.** Another ethical consideration addressed the provisions for informed consent by all participants. The religious educators were invited to voluntarily participate in the study. The teachers and school leaders of RE were sent a letter detailing the aims of the research and the methods in which data were to be gathered, processed and reported (Babbie, 2008; Creswell, 2009; Punch, 2009). This letter was similar to the letter sent to school principals (e.g. Appendix G). Informed consent from the religious educators was sought prior to them starting the online questionnaire and the interviews. The informed consent was made available electronically when RE teachers began the online questionnaire and on paper when the religious educators participated in the interviews (e.g. Appendix H). The religious educators were made aware, through the informed consent, of their option to remove themselves from the study at any time. The invitation to religious educators to participate in the study, in particular, the individual and group interviews, is addressed as a limitation and acknowledged in Chapter One and further acknowledged in the recommendations from the study in Chapter Twelve.

## **4.6 Chapter Summary**

The design plan for the research was presented in this chapter. Firstly, the theoretical framework underpinning the study was outlined. The framework identifies a pragmatic approach to research, which was used to guide the development of the research methodology aimed at addressing the research problem through the GRQ and the three SRQs. The plan describes the methods for investigating the religious educators' perceptions of various aspects of the BRLA. These aspects include the perceived purpose and role of the BRLA, response to the administration and implementation of the BRLA, and the influence that perceptions have on teaching and assessment practices. An adaptation of a sequential explanatory strategy of mixed methods research was utilised to collect and analyse quantitative and qualitative data over two phases.

Multiple processes of collation and analysis of response data in both phases and across the phases led to the research findings and themes. The presentation of the key



findings identified within the next six chapters is according to three considerations. Each of the considerations have associated implications for the structure of the chapters.

Firstly, the key findings are presented according to the phase of the study from which they emerged. Chapters Five, Seven and Nine present the key findings in Phase One. The key findings identified in these chapters are based on the survey data from 238 teachers and school leaders of RE who represent a sample size of a target population of 600 religious educators working in Catholic education in WA. Chapters Six, Eight and Ten present key findings from Phase Two. The key findings identified in these chapters are based on the 43 of the 238 teachers and school leaders of RE who volunteered to participate in the individual and group interviews. These religious educators are a sub-group of the sample size of the targeted population. The key findings to emerge from the groups' individual and collective responses build on the initial key findings in Phase One by adding further supporting evidence that provides depth and clarification to those findings.

Secondly, the key findings are presented according to the three SRQs they address. Chapters Five and Six identify key findings that address SRQ 1 regarding the perceived purpose and role of the BRLA. Chapters Seven and Eight identify key findings that address SRQ 2. This second question relates to responses about the administration and implementation of the BRLA. Chapters Nine and Ten identify key findings that address SRQ 3. This third question targets the possible influence that underpins the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA on their teaching and assessment practices in RE.

Thirdly, the key findings are a result of quantitative and qualitative survey data analysed separately and later combined. The study used the qualitative data and the analysis of that data to support and validate the quantitative data and analysis of that data. Neither type of data is considered more important than the other. Each chapter begins by identifying the key findings. The evidence supporting the key findings is presented according to the combined substantial quantitative and qualitative survey data from the religious educators. This convergence of data is proven to enhance the credibility of the research findings (Creswell et al., 2003). As will be demonstrated in the next six chapters, the goal was always to objectively integrate data (Bryman, 2006) to find consistencies and inconsistencies within the data provided by the religious educators. These efforts of triangulation led to the research themes discussed in Chapter Eleven.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **FINDING ONE**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter reports the first key finding that emerged from Phase One of the study. The finding addresses SRQ 1: How do religious educators perceive the purpose and role of the BRLA as a large-scale, standardised assessment in Religious Education? Response data from 238 religious educators to ten online questionnaire items were collected and analysed. For analysis and reporting, these respondents were categorised into two groups based on their employment role. Group one comprises 55 Year Three teachers, 40 Year Five teachers and 55 Year Nine teachers, all responsible for implementing the RE curriculum. Collectively, this group of 150 classroom teachers is referred to as teachers of RE. Group two comprises 37 APREs, 20 RECs and 31 school principals. Collectively this group of 88 religious educators are referred to as school leaders of RE. The analysis of response data from the religious educators that led to Finding One involved three processes. Firstly, written data from four open-ended items were collated, coded and categorised. Secondly, numeric data from six structured response items were collated and statistically analysed. Thirdly, the processed data were combined, integrated and cross-referenced.

#### **5.2 The Presentation of Finding One**

Table 5.1 outlines the structure of the chapter in terms of the presentation of Finding One. The evidence to support the finding is explained through the use of three sub-findings. The sub-findings emerged from separate and combined investigations. The investigations targeted response data from the religious educators relating to their perceptions of the meaning and value of the BRLA and, in turn, the purpose and role of the BRLA within the RE curriculum. Open-ended questions, a rating scale and Likert scale items mostly applying five ordered categories were used.

Finding One suggests that the religious educators differed in their perceptions of the purpose and role of the BRLA. Groups of religious educators disagreed about the nature and purpose of the BRLA and the role it played as an assessment in RE. The disagreements seem to be based on the religious educators' personal and professional experiences of the BRLA and, more broadly, of teaching RE and using LSAs in education.

Table 5.1

*Overview of Chapter Five: Finding One*

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5.2	Finding One: The religious educators differed in their perceptions of the purpose and role of the BRLA.
5.2.1	Sub-finding 1.1: Groups of religious educators perceived the purpose of the BRLA in different ways.
5.2.2	Sub-finding 1.2: The majority of religious educators believed the BRLA had a role to play in RE but disagreed about the type of role.
5.2.3	Sub-finding 1.3: Groups of religious educators provided contrasting rationales for their perceptions of the purpose and role of the BRLA.
5.3	Chapter Summary

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**5.2.1 Sub-finding 1.1.** Response data to six online questionnaire items were used to investigate the religious educators’ perceptions of the purpose of the BRLA. The investigation considered three aspects. Firstly, how the religious educators perceived their experiences of the BRLA and what those experiences implied. Secondly, how the religious educators perceived the effectiveness of the BRLA as a measure of student learning in RE. Thirdly, how satisfied the religious educators perceived people in their school communities to be about the BRLA. The results from the investigation identify groups of religious educators with similar numbers, who either raised concerns about or expressed support for the BRLA.

**5.2.1.1 Described experiences of the BRLA.** The religious educators were asked to describe their experiences of the BRLA. Table 5.2 lists examples of common descriptions used by respondents about their experiences. These descriptions are categorised according to three response patterns. Two-thirds of the respondents [159 of 238 (66.8%)] described the meaning and purpose of the BRLA as part of their experiences. One-third of the respondents [79 of 238 (33.2%)] chose to focus on operational experiences of administering the BRLA. The response data from these respondents is considered in Chapter Seven as it relates specifically to the administration and implementation of the BRLA (SRQ 2).

Table 5.2

*Described experiences of the BRLA*

**Response Pattern One: Expressions of concern about the BRLA**

One group of 80 of 238 respondents (33.6%) used phrases such as, the BRLA is:

- a distraction from our work and just another thing we have to do.
- is not a test that caters for students' ages, abilities or differentiated learning styles.
- is an English literacy test rather than a measure of religious literacy.
- too difficult and stressful for students and teachers.
- only for the more capable students who are able to memorise and rote learn facts.
- too content driven and an examination of doctrine.
- not supported by students, parents or teaching colleagues unless they are practising Catholics and go to Mass.
- a logistical nightmare and of little relevance to classroom practices and, reporting.

**Response Pattern Two: Expressions of support for the BRLA**

One group of 79 of 238 respondents (33.2%) used phrases such as, the BRLA is:

- fine, good, great, rewarding, positive and a worthwhile undertaking.
- a useful, effective and valuable assessment tool for Catholic schools, that is, interesting and thought provoking and very informative.
- a good initiative for the system.
- an easy process to understand.
- inclusive and complementary to classroom practices in RE.
- not receiving the attention, it deserves.
- better than nothing.

**Response Pattern Three: Expressions regarding operational experiences**

One group of 79 of 238 respondents (33.2%) uses phrases such as:

- I assist students and teachers with the administration of the BRLA.
- I inform the students, teachers and parents about the processes for administering the BRLA.
- I review past test items with students.
- I followed all the instructions.

*Note.* Partial response data to Open-ended Item 12: Describe your experience of the BRLA ( $N = 238$ ).

5.2.1.1.1 *Response Pattern One.* A total of 80 of 238 respondents (33.6%) raised concerns about the use of the BRLA and questioned the purpose of the assessment. The group suggested the BRLA was a “distraction” to the work carried out in RE classes. These respondents were mainly teachers [56 of 80 (70.0%)], compared to school leaders of RE [13 of 80 (16.3%)] and principals [11 of 80 (13.8%)]. These 56 teachers represent 37.3% of the teachers of RE (56 of 150) involved in Phase One of this study and 23.5% of the total number of respondents (56 of 238) in that phase. The Year Three and Year Nine teachers in particular, made comments such as the BRLA is “an extraordinary waste of resources and time” and “what is the point of this?”. Table 5.3 presents the frequency of expressed concerns from the group about the BRLA and from a sub-group who specifically described the BRLA as challenging.

Table 5.3  
*The Frequency of Described Concerns About the BRLA*

Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		Total (%)
Year 3 (n = 55)	Year 5 (n = 40)	Year 9 (n = 55)	APRE (n = 37)	REC (n = 20)	CPP (n = 26)	CSP (n = 5)	
22	15	19	6	7	8	3	80 (33.6)

<sup>a</sup>*Major concern -The BRLA was challenging.*

Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		Total (%)
Year 3 (n = 55)	Year 5 (n = 40)	Year 9 (n = 55)	APRE (n = 37)	REC (n = 20)	CPP (n = 26)	CSP (n = 5)	
13 of 22	8 of 15	6 of 19	6 of 6	4 of 7	3 of 8	1 of 3	41 of 80 (51.3) 41 of 238 (17.2)

*Note.* Partial responses to Open-ended Item 12: Describe your experience of the BRLA (N = 238).

<sup>a</sup>n = 41 religious educators as a sub-group of the 80 religious educators who raised concerns.

APRE represents Assistant Principals as school leaders of RE in Catholic primary schools.

REC represents Religious Education Coordinators as school leaders of RE in Catholic secondary schools.

CPP represents Catholic primary principals and CSP represents Catholic secondary principals.

The respondents identified the purpose of the assessment as a “form of accountability” aimed at finding out how well teachers “cover” the content in the RE

curriculum. For these respondents, the BRLA was an “imposed” form of accountability; a “compulsory” and “negative” “compliance instrument” that, as a LSA, “informs” and “only satisfies” the WA Bishops and system authorities such as the CEOWA. As one principal wrote, “The BRLA is an assessment that had to be issued to the students and we followed through with the directive”.

The respondents also described the BRLA as “just another thing to do” in what they suggested was a “crowded curriculum”. They explained how the purpose of the BRLA was “unclear” and had “never been communicated” by school leaders and system authorities. As one Year Nine teacher stated, “It is difficult to appreciate the purpose of the BRLA because there should be more feedback on the results”. Furthermore, they described the BRLA as a “Holy NAPLAN”. The respondents raised concerns about the BRLA and associated those concerns with NAPLAN (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2014). They provided specific arguments about the challenges that LSAs such as the BRLA and NAPLAN present to students and teachers. As will be identified throughout the six chapters, the groups’ concerns provide a noteworthy context for why they questioned the purpose of the BRLA.

Common concerns about the BRLA were raised by the group of 80 respondents. Firstly, more than half [41 of 80 (51.3%)] described the BRLA as a challenging LSA. These 41 respondents represent 17.2% (41 of 238) of the total number of respondents in Phase One. These respondents questioned the validity of the assessment. They argued the BRLA was irrelevant to the RE curriculum and suggested a “noticeable difference between the language used in the content of the RE curriculum and the BRLA”. For example, as one Year Five teacher wrote:

I found some of the language or vocabulary to be beyond many of the children and the content at times to be very theological. There were some questions which seemed to be designed to trick children. I wonder at the validity of an assessment for young children when our main objective it to help develop them as young Catholics living out Gospel values. I do not believe this is reflected in the assessment.

Similarly, one Year Three teacher wrote:

If the intent of the BRLA is purely to make lower school religion a more academic subject, then it is effective. My question about the purpose of Religious Education as a holistic subject remains.

Year Nine teachers also questioned the validity of the BRLA and argued the assessment was designed only for students who are “better able to perform on pen and paper tests”. They

commented, “The BRLA is a rote learning exercise” for students who have “sound memories”. One secondary school leader of RE responsible for Year Nine students suggested a correlation between student performance in the BRLA as a LSA and students’ literacy skills:

Many classroom teachers do stress about the BRLA. However, some don’t see the relevance of it. Looking at the students’ results, I can see that good literacy skills are needed to answer the questions.

Further to these concerns, 19 respondents (8.0% of 238) argued specifically that the BRLA as a LSA was challenging for students because “assessments such as these” do not consider the “English competency of students”. A total of 18 respondents (7.6% of 238) stated the BRLA was challenging because it “causes stress” for students and teachers. For these respondents, the BRLA as a LSA was “too literacy based” and “not suitable for the ages and learning styles of students”. These respondents appear to have questioned the validity of the BRLA based on their perceptions of student learning in RE.

The 19 respondents also described the purpose of the BRLA as a “measure of students’ English capabilities rather than their religious literacy”. They suggested students “struggle” to read the questions and answer the written sections in the BRLA. They remarked, students only achieve “good results” in LSAs when they demonstrate highly competent comprehension skills. These respondents also indicated the vocabulary in the BRLA was inappropriate for students, particularly for “young” students, students with “poor literacy skills” and “indigenous students”. The accuracy of measuring student knowledge of RE, using the BRLA, was questioned by the group because they perceived students to perform poorly in the BRLA.

The Year Three teachers, within the group described their experience of the BRLA test items as “above the students’ abilities” and the language and question structure to be “too dense for children of this age”. The teachers referred to the BRLA test items as “obstacles” that “inadequately reflect student knowledge of the topics” taught in RE classes. As one of the teachers explained:

I believe that the BRLA does not test students on the work that they are learning in school. It is difficult for students to revise for the test because we spend more time on completing the program and I believe that the BRLA does not take into consideration specific needs and learning abilities. I believe that the BRLA does not properly assess students’ learning and it is viewed as something negative.

Further investigation regarding the respondents' perceptions of the difficulty of the BRLA test items is discussed in Chapter Seven. Within Chapter Seven attention is given to the respondents' reactions to aspects of the implementation and administration of the BRLA that include opinions of the design and structure of test items.

The 18 respondents who specifically referred to the BRLA as a stressful LSA for students and teachers comprised: six Year Three teachers, five Year Five teachers, four Year Nine teachers, two school leaders of RE in Catholic primary schools and one school leader of RE in a Catholic secondary school. Three reasons were provided by the group for why they perceived the BRLA to have caused stress. Firstly, nine respondents [9 of 238 (3.8%)] perceived LSAs such as the BRLA as "emotionally damaging" because students may not have covered all the content in the RE curriculum. For these respondents, students felt inadequately prepared for the BRLA. Secondly, nine other respondents [9 of 238 (3.8%)] perceived students in Years Three, Five and Nine to be "over tested" and exposed heavily to the use of LSAs. Thirdly, seven respondents [7 of 238 (2.9%)] perceived the BRLA as "too content driven" and "damaging to their students' faith".

The religious educators who raised concerns about the BRLA, suggested that students need to be adequately prepared for engaging with LSAs and "sitting this style of test". Year Three teachers, in particular, commented that Year Three students are not familiar with the "formal LSA" experience. As one Year Three teacher explained:

I found the BRLA to be a bit pointless. I think the BRLA puts undue stress on Year Three children. Their program of work focuses on discussions, drawings, roleplay etc. To ask questions in a formalised style like the Bishops' test, confuses them, even if they know the answer. At this age, we still have children that struggle with reading, even though we as teachers can read to them.

A feature of the teacher's argument is about the difficulty of the language used in LSAs test items and a suggestion that the RE learning area is not to be taught and assessed in a formal manner.

The respondents explained that the language used in the BRLA test items presented a challenge for them and caused pressure on them to prepare students. They felt that students needed guidance with the difficult language anticipated in the test items and compelled to "teach to the test, even though it was recommended not to". They wrote statements such as, "the expectations of school leaders and parents place undue pressure upon us as teachers". They also wrote statements such as, "There is way too much emphasis on these types of tests". The BRLA was identified by these respondents as a LSA "outside the realms" of



regular classroom practices and “a distraction to the work of students and teachers”. As a consequence of their perceptions, the respondents indicated that they “treated the BRLA in isolation” because “it had no use or benefit” to RE. In the words of one school leader, “Purpose! The CEOWA needs to be more explicit about why we need the BRLA”. According to the respondents, if a specific purpose for the BRLA did exist, it has not been communicated effectively to them.

As the 80 respondents described their concerns about the BRLA, they also seem to have described their dislike of LSAs. Groups of religious educators wrote statements similar to the following:

- “I don’t think a lot about standardised testing”
- “I am not a fan of these tests”
- “Large-scale, standardised assessments don’t always measure ability in an area”
- “As one form of assessment, LSAs, disadvantage students from low socio-economic background”
- “LSAs focus on rote learning not critical thinking”
- “I find that we spend too much time on standardised testing and less time on teaching content”.

The comments identify the respondents’ general perceptions of LSAs as distinctive and contrary to the classroom environment. As one school leader explained:

I feel strongly that the large-scale tests are detrimental to the learning experiences of many children. The test environment is not one that the children are used to these days and for some children, particularly those who struggle with their literacy, it is a very unpleasant. The results are usually given very late in the year and are often of no benefit to the current teacher.

The statements by two respondents further reflect the perceptions of the group about LSAs. Firstly, one Year Nine teacher wrote, “Other important curriculum subject matter is not attended to properly because we are trying to cram basic knowledge so that it can be tested”. Secondly, one Year Five teacher wrote:

Just another stress for the Year Five students of WA. Standardised tests have no place in education. Along with NAPLAN and WAMSE, the BRLA is just another test, and has no religious benefit to students. I have lost a lot of valuable teaching time due to standardised tests.

For these respondents, the BRLA is “a pointless waste of time and resources” that “serves no purpose or role and the administration of it should be stopped”.

The 80 respondents proposed points of difference between the BRLA and how they perceived the nature of RE and their classroom practices in RE. These differences are noteworthy and will be addressed further in this study. Furthermore, the respondents’ perceptions of LSAs are also addressed within the study because they provide contextual information about the respondents’ perceptions of the BRLA as a LSA used in RE.

*5.2.1.1.2 Response Pattern Two.* A total of 79 of 238 respondents (33.2%) described their experiences of the BRLA as positive and seem to have argued predominately in support of the BRLA. The respondents described the BRLA as an appropriate measure of student learning used in RE. Firstly, 34 of the 79 respondents (14.3% of 238) described the BRLA as a necessary LSA. Secondly, 15 of the 79 respondents (6.3% of 238) described their treatment of RE as an academic learning area and felt that the BRLA was justified in its use as a formal assessment. In contrast to the previous group of 80, an apparent appreciation for the use of LSAs seems evident in these respondents’ statements of support for the BRLA. Table 5.4 presents the frequency of expressions of support for the BRLA. There are noticeable differences between the respondents’ expressions according to their employment role of responsibility.

Table 5.4  
*The Frequency of Described Support for the BRLA*

Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		Total (%)
Year 3 (n = 55)	Year 5 (n = 40)	Year 9 (n = 55)	AP (n = 37)	REC (n = 20)	SPP (n = 26)	SPS (n = 5)	
23	16	15	9	7	8	1	79 (33.2)

*Note.* Partial responses to Open-ended Item 12: Describe your experience of the BRLA (N = 238).

The 34 respondents who described the BRLA as a necessary LSA specifically identified the purpose of the BRLA as a “tool” for gathering information about student learning in RE. They stated that the BRLA has “established a form of accountability in Religious Education” that “ensures the content in the RE curriculum is well taught”. These respondents consistently made comparisons between the BRLA and NAPLAN and the

benefits of using such LSAs. They suggested LSAs such as NAPLAN and the BRLA are “needed in education”. As one teacher wrote:

I found that the BRLA was a little intimidating for Year Three students as first timers but appropriate in that students now have some prior knowledge of the assessment. I think having it after NAPLAN was a great idea as they already had experience in such a formalised test.

The teacher indicated that with more exposure to LSAs, young students become accustomed to the formalities of such assessments.

The 34 respondents also referred to the BRLA as a “low stakes standardised test” that according to them was not as much of a “burden” and a “source of stress” on students and teachers compared to NAPLAN. However, the respondents also cautioned against the misuse of student results from what they termed “these types of assessments”. As one school leader of RE wrote, “Large-scale, standardised assessments in education are necessary but it is important that the results be used wisely”. One principal directly compared the BRLA with NAPLAN and commented specifically on the misuse of students’ results. The principal wrote:

As a large-scale, standardised assessment like NAPLAN, the BRLA has given RE a greater academic focus. NAPLAN used to be the same. I believe there is far too much emphasis now placed on the NAPLAN tests. NAPLAN has gone from being a very useful tool to assess student progress to now where schools are judged according to their NAPLAN results.

The principal acknowledged the academic focus that they perceived the BRLA has brought to the RE learning area.

The group of 15 respondents who justified the use of the BRLA within an academic context, identified the purpose of the assessment in two ways. Firstly, they identified the BRLA as a tool that helps teachers to target the content in the RE curriculum and secondly, as a means for ensuring that RE is recognised and treated in the same way as other learning areas, in terms of teaching and assessment practices. For this group, RE was considered an academic learning area that “can” and “should be formally assessed”. They were concerned that students, parents and colleagues do not seriously treat RE as a learning area. These respondents explained that RE does not receive “the treatment that it should within Catholic education” and “the support from parents” that “they believed”, the “subject requires”.

The expressions of six respondents within the group of 15 reflect the common argument that RE should be treated as an academic learning area. One Year Five teacher

stated, “More time needs to be given to ensure that Religious Education has a prominent role in our Catholic schools and given the equality it deserves”. One Year Three teacher wrote:

We have many standardised tests in English and Mathematics so, it is great to have a formal test in Religion to show parents that Religion is the most important learning area in Catholic schools.

One Year Nine teacher explained that “The value of the BRLA has the hallmarks of a LSA that makes people and, in particular, parents come to understand the importance of Religious Education”. Another Year Nine teacher working in a remote Catholic secondary school explained:

I live and work in an indigenous community which does not value formal RE and therefore do not see the relevance of assessment and reporting in RE. However, in all fairness, the same could be said for many elements of formal schooling. The main priority for many of our families is that their children learn the basics of reading and writing and, for many children, just getting to school and through the day is a challenge. For those families who are a part of the church, whether it be Catholic or other, the BRLA is seen as only a small indicator of achievement.

Another secondary school leader suggested that not only is RE not treated in the same way as other learning areas by students and their families, but also that “RE is not being supported by colleagues” within their own school.

For the 15 respondents, the BRLA, as a LSA, had “elevated the RE learning area to the academic status” they perceived RE should receive. The respondents commented, “RE is the first subject in Catholic schools” and as an initiative, the BRLA had “lifted the profile of RE” and helped people come to recognise RE as a “serious” learning area. As one principal explained:

The BRLA, as a LSA like NAPLAN, gives us some knowledge about how well we’re teaching what the bishops expect children to know. When children have just school as their only or most consistent link to the Catholic Church then it is important for us to give many opportunities for them to express their faith and to use their knowledge.

The BRLA was identified as an opportunity for Catholic schools to build student knowledge and the cultural capacity that the Catholic Faith Tradition appears to require today (D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012, 2013).

The analysis of data from the group of 79 respondents identifies differences in described support for the BRLA according to their employment role of responsibility in RE. For example, 54 teachers (68.4% of 79) who expressed support for the BRLA suggested the

BRLA was “beneficial” and “effective measurement tool”. As one Year Three teacher commented:

I found the BRLA an interesting standardised test as it did assess the students on a wide range of concepts from Jesus to the Bible, which was beneficial. It did showcase the students’ strengths and weaknesses in terms of what they know about our Religion and areas that need to be focused on more in the classroom.

Similarly, one Year Nine teacher explained, “The BRLA is a wonderful test that ensures students are aware of their religion and the importance of knowledge within its field”.

Likewise, another Year Nine teacher’s comment reflects those of the group, “I believe the BRLA has been a positive experience that gives a focus to the teaching of Year Eight and Nine Religious Education programs”. The teachers described the BRLA as a “provider of valuable data for Catholic schools” and “a good initiative in curriculum planning and implementation”.

Sixteen school leaders of RE (20.3% of 79) expressed support for the BRLA. For example, one primary school leader wrote, “The BRLA is a good experience, a good opportunity to make sure that essential learning is covered”. Another primary school leader wrote, “The BRLA provides good data to show what the students are learning in Religious Education”. Secondary school leaders of RE also provided similar comments. One secondary school leader wrote, “I have found the BRLA experience rewarding and is a good indication of students understanding of the RE course”. Another school leader explained, “I think the BRLA makes Religious Education more accountable because it supports the report writing process”. School leaders of RE identified the BRLA as a useful tool that highlights the “strengths and weaknesses in teaching and student understanding of religious concepts”. The school leaders seem to have perceived the purpose of the BRLA as a complementary data source of student learning in RE to in-class assessments.

Nine principals expressed support for the BRLA (11.4% of 79), referring to the assessment as “a tool that had raised the status of RE as a subject with the same rigour as the other eight learning areas” implemented in Catholic schools in WA. The comments of three principals reflect the common argument of support. As one principal stated, “I’m a school leader and am very interested in the data it gives”. Another principal explained:

The BRLA provides the school with well-constructed RE tests which provide examples of RE assessments and the results can be used to gain an insight into the knowledge students have on the topic.

A third principal wrote:

The BRLA provides teachers with a focus in teaching. This does not mean “teaching to the test” rather providing direction with the teacher’s understanding of the requirements of elements of their teaching in RE.

According to the principals and the other school leaders of RE, the data from the BRLA was important and provided a focus for classroom teachers to consider in more depth the content in the RE curriculum.

The group of 79 respondents who described support for the BRLA referred to the assessment as a measure of accountability in RE with “far-reaching benefits”. They seem to have focused on student learning in RE, suggesting the BRLA was a “measurement tool” for diagnosing student learning. The group indicated the BRLA was a “snapshot of student learning” that “effectively assists teachers to cover the content in the RE curriculum”. Further to this claim, the group indicated that teachers, schools and system authorities such as the CEOWA can use the BRLA to “improve the quality of learning in RE”. The next section highlights contrasting perceptions of the effectiveness of the BRLA as a measure of students’ learning in RE.

**5.2.1.2 Perceived effectiveness of the BRLA.** According to the response data to Item 39 and Likert scale Items 60, 61 and 65, the religious educators in this study had differing perceptions of the effectiveness of the BRLA and more specifically, the BRLA test items. The analysis of response data to these online questions considers the previous analysis of response data to Open-ended Item 12 regarding the religious educators’ described experiences of the BRLA.

**5.2.1.2.1 Perceived measure of effectiveness.** A rating scale divided in intervals of ten, beginning with zero and ending in one hundred was used to capture response data for Item 39. On the scale, zero was deemed the lowest possible rating, fifty was the mid-point and one hundred, the highest rating. Equal numbers of respondents rated the BRLA either as an effective or ineffective measure of student learning in RE.

Four sets of statistics regarding the response data to Item 39 are presented in Table 5.5. That is, the frequency of the respondents’ ratings on the scale within intervals of ten; the mean and standard deviation of the respondents’ total ratings; the frequency of the respondents’ ratings according to their employment role of responsibility of RE; and the mean of the respondents’ ratings also according to their employment role. The rationale for displaying the frequency of ratings according to the respondents’ role is based on evidence

from non-parametric testing. Analysis of variance for Item 39 using the Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test identifies a rejection of the null hypothesis of 0.010. This p value is less than 0.05 and suggests the probability of a difference between the response data from teachers and school leaders of RE.

Table 5.5

*The Frequency of the Ratings of Effectiveness*

Frequency of Ratings [(Mean Rating = 48.6) (SD = 24.02) (*p = 0.010)]									
0–10	11–20	21–30	31–40	41–50	51–60	61–70	71–80	81–90	91–100
26 (11.1%)	15 (6.4%)	19 (8.1%)	26 (11.1%)	34 (14.5%)	32 (13.7%)	37 (15.8%)	25 (10.7%)	18 (7.7%)	2 (0.9%)

1. Frequency of ratings according to employment role of responsibility.

Rating	Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		Total	%
	Year 3 (n=55)	Year 5 (n=40)	Year 9 (n=55)	APRE (n=37)	REC (n=20)	CPP (n=26)	CSP (n=5)		
0 to 50	32	20	31	9	12	12	4	120	51.3
51 to 100	23	20	21	27	8	14	1	114	48.7

2. The mean of the ratings for each group of respondents.

	Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)	
	Year 3 (n=55)	Year 5 (n=40)	Year 9 (n=55)	APRE (n=37)	REC (n=20)	CPP (n=26)	CSP (n=5)
Mean	45	53	45	59	44	50	25
SD	3.58	2.08	3.52	2.95	1.49	2.68	0.85

*Note.* Response data to Item 39: How would you rate the effectiveness of the BRLA as a measure of student learning in Religious Education? (n = 234)

\*The p value is the statistical probability of the rejection of a null hypothesis, 0.05 or less, in non-parametric testing using the Kruskal-Wallis Test to measure differences according to employment role of responsibility.

Table 5.5 shows that according to the frequency of the respondents' ratings on the scale and given that 50 is considered the mid-point, 120 of 234 religious educators (51.3%) rated the BRLA between zero and 50 compared to 114 of 234 (48.7%) who chose a rating between 51 and 100. This result shows a statistically significant difference of 2.6% in how the religious educators rated the BRLA above or below 50. Furthermore, the mean of the

respondents' total ratings at 48.6 on the scale and the standard deviation of 24.02 as the distribution of ratings reflect the frequency of ratings above and below 50.

According to the frequency of ratings from the respondents as categorised into employment role of responsibility, more leaders of RE in Catholic primary schools [27 of 37 (73.0%) Assistant Principals] rated the BRLA 51 or more on the scale compared to other groups of religious educators. The Catholic primary school leaders, including principals [41 of 63 (65.1%)] rated the BRLA higher on the scale of effectiveness than their colleagues in Catholic secondary schools [9 of 25 (36.0%)]. More Year Three teachers [32 of 55 (58.1%)] and Year Nine teachers [31 of 55 (56.4%)] chose a rating of 50 and below.

*5.2.1.2.2 Perceived effectiveness of test items.* The analysis of response data to Likert scale Items 60, 61 and 65 identifies groups of respondents with contrasting perceptions about the effectiveness of the BRLA test items. Table 5.6 is a summary of the analysis. One inference from the analysis draws on the number of respondents who chose neither to agree nor disagree to statements in Items 60, 61 and 65. Close to or more than a third of the religious educators chose neither to agree nor disagree about the effectiveness of the BRLA test items. These numbers are mostly greater than the number of respondents who chose to agree or to disagree. From this evidence it appears that significant numbers of religious educators decided to be ambivalent about the BRLA test items.

Three other inferences are drawn from the analysis of response data to Items 60, 61 and 65. Firstly, in response to Item 60, less than a third of the respondents [59 of 232 (25.4%)] agreed that teachers felt the 2013 BRLA test items effectively measured student learning compared to more than a third who disagreed [84 of 232 = 71 disagree + 13 strongly disagree (36.2%)]. Similarly, more than a third of the respondents [88 of 232 (37.9%)] chose neither to agree nor disagree that teachers felt the 2013 BRLA effectively measured student learning in RE. As is discussed further in Chapter Seven, the response data to Item 58 identifies contrary evidence. That is, 129 of 232 respondents [125 agree + 4 strongly agree (55.6%)] agreed the test items in the 2013 BRLA were relevant to the RE curriculum. This evidence applies to more than half the total number of religious educators in the study.



Table 5.6

*Perceptions of the Effectiveness of the BRLA Test Items*

Item Description	Frequency of Responses					Mean (SD)
	SD = 1	D = 2	N = 3	A = 4	SA = 5	
Teachers at my school feel that the test items in the 2013 BRLA effectively measured student learning in RE. [Item 60 (n = 232)]	13 5.6%	72 31.0%	88 37.9%	59 25.4%	0 0.0%	2.83 (0.876)
Over the years, the test items in the BRLA have not effectively measured student learning in RE. [Item 61 (n = 232)]	3 1.3%	48 20.7%	92 39.7%	70 30.2%	19 8.2%	2.90 (0.975)
I believe that the test items in the BRLA effectively measure student learning in RE. [Item 65 (n = 231)]	19 8.2%	66 28.6%	66 28.6%	80 34.6%	0 0.0%	3.23 (0.915)

*Note.* The three items consisted of statements that required religious educators to use one of five ratings. The ratings are: Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1, Disagree (D) = 2, Neither agree nor disagree (N) = 3, Agree (A) = 4, Strongly Agree (SA) = 5. To reflect missing response data, the percentages presented in the table represent the valid percent as calculated in SPSS.

The second inference draws on the analysis of response data to Item 61. That analysis shows that more than a third [89 of 232 = 70 agree + 19 strongly agree (38.4%)] of respondents agreed that over the years, the test items in the BRLA had not effectively measured student learning in RE compared to those who disagreed [51 of 231 = 48 disagree + 3 strongly disagree (22.1%)]. However, there were more respondents [92 of 231 (39.8%)] who chose neither to agree nor disagree that the BRLA test items over time were not effective compared to those who either agreed or disagreed.

The third inference draws from the analysis of response data to Item 65. From that analysis, less than a third of the respondents [80 of 231 (34.6%)] believed the BRLA test items effectively measured student learning in RE compared to more than a third [85 of 231 = 66 disagree + 19 strongly disagree (36.8%)] who disagreed. Although more numbers of religious educators indicated that teachers at their schools felt the BRLA test items were ineffective, just as many religious educators chose to agree the test items were effective or chose neither to agree nor disagree. These statistics suggest that the religious educators were divided in their perceptions of the effectiveness of the BRLA test items.

**5.2.1.3 Perceived satisfaction with the BRLA.** Response data to Likert scale Item 40 were analysed (Table 5.7) to understand how satisfied religious educators thought people in their school communities were about the BRLA. Seven ordered categories were presented to the religious educators. The scores ranged from one (very dissatisfied) to seven (very satisfied). A neutral score of 4 was included.

Table 5.7  
*Perceptions of People's Satisfaction with the BRLA*

Item Description	Frequency of Responses							Mean (SD)
	1=Very Dissatisfied	2=Dissatisfied	3=Somewhat Dissatisfied	4=Neutral	5=Somewhat Satisfied	6=Satisfied	7=Very Satisfied	
How satisfied do you think other teachers you know are with the BRLA? [Item 40a (n = 234)]	15 6.4%	37 15.8%	37 15.8%	70 29.9%	39 16.7%	34 14.5%	2 0.9%	3.82 (1.472)
How satisfied do you think school leaders you know are with the BRLA? [Item 40b (n = 234)]	7 3.0%	24 10.3%	15 6.4%	72 30.8%	48 20.5%	60 25.6%	8 3.4%	4.46 (1.441)
How satisfied do you think parents you know are with the BRLA? [Item 40c (n = 234)]	4 1.7%	15 6.4%	16 6.8%	127 54.3%	41 17.5%	29 12.4%	2 0.9%	4.20 (1.091)
How satisfied do you think students you know are with the BRLA? [Item 40d (n = 234)]	13 5.6%	26 11.1%	29 12.4%	115 49.1%	26 11.1%	24 10.3%	1 0.4%	3.82 (1.265)

*Note.* To reflect missing response data, the percentages presented in the table represent the valid percent as calculated in SPSS.

Three inferences are drawn from the analysis. Firstly, 116 of 234 respondents [48 somewhat satisfied + 60 satisfied + 8 very satisfied (49.6%)] thought school leaders were the most satisfied group in their Catholic school communities with the BRLA. The respondents identified teachers [75 of 234 (32.1%)], parents [72 of 234 (30.8%)] and students [51 of 234

(21.8%)] as less satisfied with the BRLA compared to school leaders. According to the respondents, students were possibly less likely to be satisfied with the BRLA. Secondly, the respondents identified teachers as being more dissatisfied [89 of 234 (38.0%)] with the BRLA than other people in their school communities. Student dissatisfaction was perceived as second to teacher dissatisfaction [68 of 234 (29.1%)]. School leaders were perceived as slightly more dissatisfied with the BRLA [46 of 234 (19.7%)] compared to parents [35 of 234 (15.0%)]. Thirdly, parents were perceived as possibly the least dissatisfied with the BRLA. However, half the number of respondents chose neither to agree or disagree with statements about how satisfied they thought parents [127 of 234 (54.3%)] and students [115 of 234 (49.1%)] were about the BRLA.

The collation and analysis of response data presented thus far has dealt with sub-finding 1.1 that identifies groups of religious educators with contrasting perceptions of the purpose of the BRLA. The religious educators' perceptions appear to be founded on their experiences of the BRLA. Based on different experiences, groups of religious educators either raised concerns about the BRLA or supported the assessment in RE. Furthermore, groups of religious educators either rated the BRLA as an effective or ineffective measure of student learning in RE. The religious educators also differed in their perceptions of the BRLA according to their employment role of responsibility in RE. For example, firstly, the religious educators agreed school leaders were more satisfied with the BRLA than other people in their school communities. Secondly, more school leaders expressed support for the BRLA [16 of 79 (20.3%)] compared to school leaders who raised concerns [13 of 80 (16.3%)]. Thirdly, slightly more teachers raised concerns about the BRLA [56 of 80 (70.0%)] compared to those who expressed support [54 of 79 respondents (68.4%)]. Fourthly, slightly more principals also raised concerns about the BRLA [11 of 80 (13.8%)] compared to those who expressed support [9 of 79 (11.4%)]. The next sub-finding (1.2) shows evidence to suggest that the religious educators were less divided in their perceptions of the role of the BRLA.

**5.3.2 Sub-finding 1.2.** The response data to five items were analysed to arrive at this sub-finding. Two investigations were carried out. Each investigation led to an aspect of the sub-finding. Firstly, response data to Likert scale Item 11 were analysed. For this item, the religious educators were asked to indicate their belief about the role of the BRLA in RE. Secondly, written comments to Open-ended Item 81 were analysed and compared with the response data to Item 11. Item 81 required respondents to explain the influence they believed

the BRLA has had in RE. The analysis seems to suggest that the majority of religious educators believed the BRLA had a role to play in RE but disagreed about the type of role.

**5.2.2.1 Perceived role of the BRLA.** Table 5.8 is a summary of the analysis of response data to Likert scale Item 11. A total of 141 of 238 respondents [119 agree + 22 strongly agree (59.2%)] believed the BRLA has a role to play in the RE curriculum that is implemented in Catholic schools in WA. In contrast, 42 of 238 respondents [34 disagree + 8 strongly disagree (17.6%)] believed the BRLA has no role to play. Less than a quarter of the respondents [55 of 238 (23.1%)] chose neither to agree nor disagree. These results suggest that many religious educators perceived the BRLA as having a role to play in RE.

Table 5.8  
*Perceptions of the Role of the BRLA*

Item Description	Frequency of Responses					Mean (SD)
	SD = 1	D = 2	N = 3	A = 4	SA = 5	
I believe that the BRLA has a role to play in Religious Education in Catholic schools.	8 3.4%	34 14.3%	55 23.1%	119 50.0%	22 9.2%	3.47 (0.962)

(p = 0.022)

*Note.* Likert scale Item 11: I believe that the BRLA has a role to play in Religious Education ( $N = 238$ ). The item used a five-point scale with the following ratings: Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1, Disagree (D) = 2, Neither agree nor disagree (N) = 3, Agree (A) = 4, Strongly Agree (SA) = 5. To reflect missing response data, the percentages presented in the table represent the valid percent as calculated in SPSS.

An analysis of variance for Item 11, using the Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test identifies a rejection of the null hypothesis of 0.022. This p value is less than 0.05 and suggests the probability of a difference in the response data to Item 11 between respondents. To further investigate this probability of difference, a frequency of the data according to the respondents' employment role of responsibility in RE was calculated (Table 5.9). Principals of Catholic primary schools [20 out of 26 (61.5%)] and Year Five teachers [23 out of 40 (57.5%)] perceived more than other sub-groups that the BRLA had a role to play in RE. In contrast, principals of Catholic secondary schools perceived the BRLA had no role.

Table 5.9

*The Frequency of Data for Item 11 According to Role*

	Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		Total
	Yr 3	Yr 5	Yr 9	APRE	REC	CPP	CSP	
Strongly disagree	0	1	2	1	2	2	0	8
Disagree	8	3	10	4	4	2	3	34
Neither agree nor disagree	17	9	15	7	3	2	2	55
Agree	27	23	22	20	11	16	0	119
Strongly agree	3	4	6	5	0	4	0	22
<b>Total*</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>238</b>

*Note.* Likert scale Item 11: I believe that the BRLA has a role to play in Religious Education ( $N = 238$ ).

\*The total refers to the number of religious educators who responded to the questionnaire item.

**5.2.2.2 Perceived type of role.** To further explore the religious educators' perceptions of the role of the BRLA, the response data to Open-ended Item 81 were analysed. For the item, respondents were required to explain the influence they believed the BRLA has had in RE. Three response patterns are identified from the data. Two of the response patterns consist of contrasting rationales provided by the respondents about the type of role the BRLA has played in RE. The third response pattern identifies 34 of 238 respondents (14.3%) who were not sure what role the BRLA played in RE. Of this group, 28 are teachers of RE [11 Year Three, seven Year Five and ten Year Nine teachers] and six school leaders of RE in Catholic primary schools. The analysis suggests groups of religious educators disagreed about the type of role the BRLA plays in RE.

**5.2.2.2.1 A distinct role.** Response pattern one identifies 99 of 238 respondents (41.6%) who explained the BRLA had a distinct role (Table 5.10). Of the group, more than half are school leaders of RE in Catholic primary schools [22 of 37 (59.5%)]. For these respondents, the BRLA had one of three distinct roles that they suggested improved student learning, teaching in RE and generally built cultural capacity in RE.

Table 5.10

*The Frequency of Data Regarding the Distinct Role of the BRLA*

	Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		Total (%)
	Yr 3 (n=55)	Yr 5 (n=40)	Yr 9 (n=55)	APRE (n=37)	REC (n=20)	CPP (n=26)	CSP (n=5)	
Ensured coverage of RE content	12	13	11	15	7	4	0	62
Raised the profile of RE	1	1	5	6	4	10	0	27
Total*	17	15	17	22	13	15	0	99 (41.6)

*Note.* Partial responses to Open-ended Item 81: What influence do you believe The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment has had in Religious Education? ( $N = 238$ )

\*The total refers to the number of religious educators who perceived the BRLA has having a distinct role.

Table 5.11 lists examples of common expressions provided by the group. A total of 62 of the 99 respondents (26.1% of 238), explained the BRLA had ensured coverage of the content in the RE curriculum. A total of 27 of the 99 respondents (11.3% of 238) explained the BRLA had raised the profile of RE. The latter sub-group explained how the academic nature of the BRLA had elevated RE to a more academic status. They believed that the new status was consistent with the expected status of other learning areas implemented in Catholic schools in WA.

5.2.2.2.2 *A limited role.* Response pattern two identifies 105 of 238 respondents (44.1%) who explained the BRLA had a limited role to play in RE. This group offered five explanations for their perceptions. The most common of these explanations is from 44 of the 105 respondents who stated, "the BRLA is irrelevant to the RE curriculum". Table 5.12 lists the explanations and their frequency according to the respondents' role of employment in RE.

Table 5.11

*Expressions of the Distinct Role of the BRLA*

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The BRLA: (role relevant to student learning)

- measures student knowledge in RE;
- is a snapshot of students' learning;
- provides available data about student learning in RE and helps teachers identify strengths, weaknesses and misconceptions in RE; and
- exposes students to large-scale testing.

The BRLA: (role relevant to teaching)

- measures the quality of teaching in RE in schools and across the CEOWA system;
- ensures RE content is being taught;
- ensures the essential content is being covered in RE;
- making teachers (“us”) accountable for what is being taught; and
- assists future planning in RE.

The BRLA: (role relevant to the building of teaching capacity at the whole system level)

- identifies RE as a learning area;
  - elevates the status of RE as a learning area;
  - assists the CEOWA to review and improve the RE curriculum;
  - effectively models assessment practice; and
  - helps develop in students and teachers an awareness of Catholic literacy and the Catholic Faith Tradition.
- 

The group of 44 respondents (18.5% of 238) who believed the BRLA was irrelevant to the RE curriculum provided two reasons for their beliefs. They either explained that preparations for the administration of the BRLA involved “extra work outside regular classroom practices” in RE or stated that the results from the BRLA were received “far too late, after the event”. The group referred to the “huge amount of content” they were expected to “cover” with students prior to the administration of the BRLA. As one teacher wrote, “I find that unless the tested RE Units of Work have been covered, the children are at a loss to answer many of the questions”. As another teacher explained, “Once the BRLA is over, we resume regular RE lessons”. For these respondents, there was a “time lapse” between students completing the BRLA and teachers receiving the results”. One Year Nine teacher explained:

The BRLA is a test that happens in Year Nine. The teachers can be encouraged to prepare the students for the test, but the amount of material covered does not impress

staff or students. The teachers get the results but by the time they are received, there is usually little value in going over the test with the students. The test would better be marked in the school for the school to use the results but that defeats the purposes for which standardised tests are usually administered.

According to the religious educators, teachers are encouraged to prepare students for the BRLA by reviewing past BRLA papers, but the time spent preparing, takes away from time “better spent” engaging students in “meaningful RE learning experiences”.

Table 5.12

*The Frequency of Expressions Regarding the Limited Role of the BRLA*

	Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		Total (%)
	Yr 3 (n=55)	Yr 5 (n=40)	Yr 9 (n=55)	APRE (n=37)	REC (n=20)	CPP (n=26)	CSP (n=5)	
The BRLA is irrelevant to the RE curriculum.	7	7	14	2	5	4	5	44
Teachers “teach to the test” because the BRLA is too content driven.	5	4	3	1	1	0	0	14
The BRLA is damaging to students’ faith.	1	2	8	0	0	1	0	12
RE Units have not updated.	4	2	2	2	0	0	0	10
The BRLA causes stress.	2	1	0	0	1	3	0	7
The BRLA is too literacy based.	4	1	0	3	0	1	0	9
RE is not supported by parents, students and other teachers.	1	2	2	2	0	2	0	9
Total*	24	19	29	10	7	11	5	105 (44.1)

*Note.* Partial responses to Open-ended Item 81: What influence do you believe The Bishops’ Religious Literacy Assessment has had in Religious Education? (N = 238)

\*The total refers to the number of religious educators who perceived the BRLA has having a limited role.



A second explanation provided by 14 respondents (5.9% of 238) is that the BRLA was perceived as “too content driven”. According to this group, teachers were forced to “teach to the test”. Similarly, nine respondents (3.8% of 238) suggested the BRLA was “too literacy based”. One principal gave this explanation:

The BRLA does provide some information on the knowledge component of our faith but it is not closely linked to the curriculum. It is yet another assessment where teachers teach to the test and try to anticipate the random selections that will be made, particularly in areas like the knowledge of Bible stories.

The principal seems to have perceived the BRLA as a LSA that is not linked to the curriculum and that there was far too wide a range of content to be covered in LSAs for students to perform well. The 14 respondents used words to express their enjoyment of teaching RE as an academic learning area but also argued against the formalities of teaching and assessing RE. As one teacher stated, “The BRLA pushes teachers to teach content and not understandings about how students can use RE to relate to their own lives”.

A third explanation provided by 12 respondents (5.0% of 238) is that RE as a learning area should “focus on faith” and not content. They suggested that the BRLA focused solely on content and had no place in RE. As one Year Five teacher explained, “I don’t believe testing in this area is necessary”. Furthermore, seven of these respondents suggested the BRLA caused stress to students; the type of pressure that is “not necessary in RE”. They recommended students would benefit more from opportunities to develop a personal relationship with God in RE classes “rather than learn about the Bible and church structure”.

The explanation provided by the group of 12 is consistent with the explanation offered by seven other respondents in their answers to Open-ended Item 12. These religious educators indicated that the BRLA is “emotionally damaging to students’ faith”. Of the 12 respondents, eight Year Nine teachers argued more than other sub-groups that “the BRLA did not provide students with opportunities to follow God’s teachings”. As one teacher wrote, “At times the preparation for the BRLA prevents broader exploration of faith issues in class”.

Five other comments from teachers and school leaders of RE about the damaging aspect of the BRLA on students’ faith are provided. One teacher wrote:

It takes a philosophical and theological learning environment and attempts to measure doctrine and Catechism teaching that may not always be relevant or helpful to developing a student’s spiritual or even faith life.

One teacher compared the BRLA to the RE curriculum:

Teaching Year Nine students, we have to follow the *Come Follow Me* books, which are more about the emotional and spiritual growth of the student. Whereas the BRLA focuses on what students know about church history and actually going to Mass.

Year Three and Year Five teachers compared the BRLA to the RE curriculum and suggested that the BRLA had a different focus to the curriculum. As one Year Three teacher wrote:

The BRLA makes a subject area that usually creates happiness and discussions about our religion into something that becomes stressful as the children and staff feel the pressure placed on them from standardised testing.

Also, one Year Five teacher wrote:

This is my first year of being part of the BRLA, but I believe measurement of Christian literacy is not something that assists in spreading the Gospel Values and Christian lifestyle. Students in today's technological multimedia society need to be related to on their level, so that they can connect with their developing spirituality.

The perceptions of these teachers about the conflict they perceived between the BRLA and the RE curriculum is echoed in similar arguments presented by school leaders of RE, including principals. One school leader wrote:

I think the BRLA is a waste of time especially at primary level. I am a teacher at a Catholic school and have a very strong faith. I send my children to Catholic schools. However, I really hate when my children's experience during Religious Education is given a grade. I feel since formal assessment in this area it has turned many older children off learning about God.

The school leader indicated the BRLA is formal and has driven or "turned" students against the RE learning area. Similarly, one principal wrote, "The BRLA does not relate to what the students are specifically learning, so very 'left field' and therefore difficult for them to take seriously". According to the respondents, "The BRLA is contrary and counter cultural to RE, the teachings of faith, and the teaching of spirituality and life skills".

The group of 12 respondents argued against the possible role of the BRLA as well as the use of LSAs in RE. The comments of one school leader of RE reflects the apparent bias against LSAs:

Large-scale, standardised assessments like the BRLA are limited in capturing what really matters about a person. The assessment is not in keeping with the Christian outlook on the value of the whole person and the complexity and dignity of each individual.

The school leader explained that LSAs such as the BRLA are irrelevant to the teaching of RE because the “whole person” is not considered when using LSAs.

A fourth explanation provided by nine respondents (3.8% of 238) is that the BRLA is not supported by staff, students and their parents. The respondents perceived, “neither staff nor students take the BRLA seriously”. Their comments are similar to those of 15 other respondents (6.3% of 238) who in response to Open-ended Item 12 described how RE is not supported by staff, students or parents. One principal explained:

It is what it is. The BRLA deals with what RE content needs to be taught but doesn't allow for the fact that many children have little or no experience outside of the school.

The majority of parents do not rate RE as important in the academic sense.

The respondents suggested the BRLA takes a “back seat to NAPLAN” because “parents do not hold the importance of the BRLA as to tests like NAPLAN”. One teacher provides further clarity, “The BRLA underestimates the value of religion in the home”.

The religious educators in the groups who perceived the BRLA as having a limited role, explained how teachers who “didn't teach Religious Education” and teachers and students who “did not go to Mass” were “just simply not interested” in RE or the BRLA. As one Year Five Teacher recommended, “You need to survey teachers in regard to questions and time spent on Religion. I don't believe schools place importance on Religious Education anymore”. According to these groups, “the questions in the BRLA were directed at those students who only attend Mass regularly and have a strong Catholic background”.

Consequently, the perception appears that many students and their parents did not take the BRLA as a “form of assessment”. As one Year Nine teacher explained:

When curriculum matches student assessment, large-scale assessments are very useful. I do not believe this is the case with the BRLA. This assessment does not take into consideration student background, and an assessment in RE is something that should take this into consideration.

Furthermore, one school leader provides clarification:

I find the general level of indifference towards religion displayed by our students very worrying. Many of our students have little spiritual and more so religious awareness or language.

The perceived disengagement of the BRLA by students, in particular, suggests teachers and school leaders of RE were challenged by student disengagement in RE. As one Year Five teacher stated:

I understand the value of RE and support the curriculum strongly but, at the same time, am quite realistic of the Catholicity of the students and thus struggle to understand this test.

Similarly, one Year Nine teacher recommended, “There is a need to make RE more appealing” to students in terms of applying creative and experiential pedagogy. These religious educators questioned the purpose and role of the BRLA.

In addition to the arguments presented by the religious educators about the limited role of the BRLA in the RE curriculum, a fifth argument from another group of ten (4.2% of 238) relates to the perception that the BRLA had not brought about a change to the RE curriculum. The ten religious educators suggested that, “no change had occurred in RE since the introduction of the BRLA”. The group described how they had taught from the “same Units of Work” since the introduction of the BRLA. They explained how they believed that assessment practices were as much about identifying student learning as they were about reviewing pedagogy and content. As one school leader wrote, “At the school level, the BRLA has had a big influence but at the CEOWA level we have seen minimal change because the RE Units of Work are still in draft form”. Other teachers in the group explained, “Little information about the review of the RE curriculum is provided to us” and “The biggest change in RE has been the move of students in Year Seven into Catholic secondary schools and the Sacrament of Confirmation being moved to Year Six”. These explanations are further contextualised in the rationales presented by the respondents. The respondents’ contrasting rationales are discussed in the next sub-finding.

**5.2.3 Sub-finding 1.3.** The cross-referencing of response data previously analysed to address SRQ 1 led to the discovery that groups of religious educators provided contrasting rationales for their perceptions of the purpose and role of the BRLA. The processed data from Items 12 and 81 were cross-referenced with data from Open-ended Items 33 and 37. Response data to Open-ended Item 33 relates to the religious educators’ described experiences of teaching RE. Response data to Open-ended Item 37 is about the religious educators’ described experiences of using LSAs. Inferences are drawn from the cross-analysis that identify three distinct rationales provided by the religious educators in this study about the perceived purpose and role of the BRLA.

**5.2.3.1 Rationale one.** Firstly, when response data to Open-ended Items 12 and 81 were cross-referenced, the group of 99 of 238 respondents (41.6%) who suggested the BRLA

had a distinct role to play in RE were, in part, also the 79 of 238 respondents (33.2%) who described support for the BRLA. As a whole, these religious educators appear to have perceived the purpose of the BRLA as an appropriate “measure of accountability” that assisted teachers, whole schools and the CEOWA to improve student learning. They believed student learning has improved in RE since the arrival of the BRLA; citing changes to curriculum policies and teaching and assessment practices in RE. These respondents referred to the BRLA as a form of accountability that has held teachers, school and system leaders responsible for ensuring that the content in the RE curriculum is taught and the academic profile of the RE learning area is maintained.

Secondly, but in contrast to the above evidence, the 105 of 238 respondents (44.1%) who suggested the BRLA had a limited role to play in RE were, in part, also the 80 of 238 respondents (33.6%) who raised concerns about the BRLA and questioned its purpose. These religious educators perceived the BRLA as limited in its role, because they appear to have believed that the assessment was an imposed accountability measure. The reasons they provided for the limitations to the BRLA were based on common arguments such as the BRLA is irrelevant to the RE curriculum because it is “too content driven”, “too literacy based” and “emotionally” and “spiritually” damaging to students. The religious educators referred to the pressures associated with LSAs, and the challenges of teaching RE to students and their parents who were disengaged with the RE learning area.

Given the similarities in the response data to Open-ended Items 12 and 81, the response data to these items were also cross-referenced with Likert scale Items 33 and 37. Table 5.13 identifies the 105 respondents who in response to Open-ended Item 81 suggested the BRLA has a limited role to play in RE and compares the frequency of that written data with the frequency of written data to Open-ended Item 33 (experiences of teaching RE) and Open-ended Item 37 (experiences of using LSAs). From the cross-referencing exercise two other rationales are identified that explain how religious educators perceived the role of the BRLA.

**5.2.3.2 Rationale two.** The second rationale identifies a statistically significant number of religious educators who appear to have questioned the use of LSAs. For example, a total of 67 of the 105 respondents (63.8%) who believed the BRLA had a limited role to play in RE also argued against the use of LSAs. A total of 52 of the 67 respondents who argued against the use of LSAs were teachers of RE (77.6%). Relevant supporting evidence from those who answered Item 37, identifies 115 of 238 respondents (48.3%) raising

concerns about LSAs. Furthermore, 52 of the 238 religious educators in this study (21.8%) described LSAs as stressful to students and teachers. Of the 52 religious educators, 41 were teachers of RE [41 of 238 (17.2%)].

Table 5.13

*Cross-referenced Expressions Challenging the Role of the BRLA*

	Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		Total (%)
	Yr 3 (n=55)	Yr 5 (n=40)	Yr 9 (n=55)	APRE (n=37)	REC (n=20)	CPP (n=26)	CSP (n=5)	
The BRLA has a limited role to play in RE	24	19	29	10	7	11	5	105 (44.1)

Note. Partial responses to Open-ended Item 81: What influence do you believe the BRLA has had in RE? (N = 238)

1. Sub-set of the 105 respondents who argued against the use of LSAs

	Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		Total (%)
	Yr 3 (n=55)	Yr 5 (n=40)	Yr 9 (n=55)	APRE (n=37)	REC (n=20)	CPP (n=26)	CSP (n=5)	
*Arguments against the use of LSAs	18	13	21	5	4	2	4	67 (28.2)

Note. Partial responses to Open-ended Item 37: Describe your experience of LSAs other than the BRLA (N = 238).

\*Of the 105 respondents 67 (63.8%) argued against the use of LSAs and 24 of 105 (22.9%) argued in support of LSAs, 14 (13.3%) described how they administer LSAs.

2. Sub-set of the 105 respondents who described their experiences of teaching RE

	Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		Total (%)
	Yr 3 (n=55)	Yr 5 (n=40)	Yr 9 (n=55)	APRE (n=37)	REC (n=20)	CPP (n=26)	CSP (n=5)	
*Teaching RE is challenging	8	5	16	1	3	0	3	36 (15.1)
*Descriptions of positive experiences of teaching RE	16	12	7	5	2	5	3	50 (21.0)

Note. Partial responses to Open-ended Item 33: Describe your experience of teaching Religious Education (N = 238).

\*Of the 105 respondents, 50 described positive experiences of teaching RE and 36 described the experience of teaching RE challenging. 19 of 105 respondents (18.1%) described how they taught RE and are not included in the sub-set.

**5.2.3.3 Rationale three.** A total of 50 of the 105 religious educators (47.6%) who perceived the BRLA to have had a limited role in RE also expressed positive experiences of teaching RE. In contrast, a total of 36 of the 105 respondents (34.3%) experienced challenges associated with teaching RE. The largest number of respondents [16 of 36 (44.4%)] who suggested they experienced challenges teaching RE were Year Nine teachers. These teachers identified student engagement as their greatest challenge. Similarly, when the response data to Open-ended Item 33 were further analysed, 67 of the 238 religious educators in the study (28.2%) who described their experiences of teaching RE suggested teaching RE was challenging. Their greatest challenge was also student and parent disengagement in the RE learning area. The third rationale presents evidence suggesting that based on experience, religious educators may require particular support teaching RE to students.

The cross-referenced data from the various online questionnaire items suggest that groups of religious educators who perceived the BRLA as having little purpose and a limited role in RE also appeared to express concerns about teaching RE and questioned the use of LSAs in education. These groups of religious educators seem to have perceived the BRLA as an imposition. As one religious educator stated, “The BRLA is done within the schools as it is something imposed. I question the purpose, value and reason behind the role of the BRLA”. In contrast, groups of religious educators who perceived the BRLA as having a distinct purpose and role in RE also acknowledged whole school improvement approaches to student learning and the benefits of using LSAs to generate data about student’s learning. These groups appear to have perceived the BRLA as an “appropriate” and “necessary” measure of student learning that had raised the profile of the RE learning area and improved both the teaching of RE and students’ learning of the content in the RE curriculum.

### **5.3 Chapter Summary**

Finding One was discussed in this chapter. A complete summary of the main features of the finding is provided in Figure 5.1. The key finding addresses SRQ 1 by identifying groups of religious educators who perceived the purpose and role of the BRLA in contrasting ways. Generally, religious educators agreed that the BRLA had a role to play in RE but disagreed about the BRLA’s purpose and type of role. Groups of teachers and school leaders of RE identified competing rationales for their perceptions. These rationales seem to be based on their personal and professional experiences of teaching RE and using LSAs. In turn, these experiences seem to have led to contrasting perceptions as to the effectiveness of the BRLA as a whole, as well as the specific test items and beliefs about people’s satisfaction with the

BRLA. The level of engagement by teachers, students and parents with the BRLA and RE in general was a growing concern for some. Differing views about the role of accountability in RE and assessment practices is also evident in the finding. The next chapter presents the key finding in the second phase of the study that also addresses SRQ 1 regarding the perceived purpose and role of the BRLA. The key finding in Chapter Six builds upon Finding One by providing supporting arguments for and against the purpose and role of the BRLA in RE.



## Specific Research Question One

How do religious educators perceive the purpose and role of the BRLA as a LSA?

### Contributing Questions

Describe your experience of the BRLA (Item 12).

Rate the effectiveness of the BRLA as a measure of student learning in RE (Item 39).

Teachers at my school feel that the test items in the 2013 BRLA effectively measured student learning in RE (Item 60).

I believe that the test items in the BRLA effectively measure student learning in RE (Item 61).

Over the years, the test items in the BRLA have not effectively measured student learning in RE (Item 65).

How satisfied do you believe people at your school are about the BRLA? (Item 40).

Do you perceive the BRLA to play a role in RE? (Item 11).

Describe the influence the BRLA has had in RE (Item 81).

Describe your experiences of teaching RE (Item 33).

Describe your experiences of using LSAs (Item 37).

## Finding One from Phase One

**Finding One:** The religious educators differed in their perceptions of the purpose and role of the BRLA.

**Sub-finding 1.1:** Groups of religious educators perceived the purpose of the BRLA in different ways.

A total of 159 of 238 (66.8%) religious educators expressed their perceptions of the purpose of the BRLA as part of their described experiences of the assessment. They either raised concerns about the BRLA [80 of 238 (33.6%)] or expressed support for BRLA [79 of 238 (33.2%)].

The religious educators had differing perceptions about the effectiveness of the BRLA as a measure of student learning in RE.

120 of 234 (51.3%) rated the BRLA as ineffective compared to 114 of 234 (48.7%) who rated the BRLA as an effective measure.

The religious educators were divided in their perceptions of the effectiveness of the BRLA test items.

116 of 234 (49.6%) perceived school leaders were more satisfied with the BRLA compared to teachers [75 of 234 (32.1%)], parents [72 of 234 (30.8%)] and students [51 of 234 (21.8%)].

**Sub-finding 1.2:** The majority of religious educators believed [141 of 238 (59.2%)] the BRLA had a role to play in RE but disagreed about the type of role.

99 of 238 (41.6%) perceived the BRLA as having a distinct role whereas 105 of 238 (44.1%) perceived the BRLA as having a limited role in RE.

**Sub-finding 1.3:** Groups of religious educators provided contrasting rationales for their perceptions of the purpose and role of the BRLA. These rationales seem to have been based on their personal and professional experiences of teaching RE and using LSAs.

Figure 5.1. Summary of Finding One

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **FINDING TWO**

#### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents Finding Two, a key finding from Phase Two of the study. The finding affirms and builds upon Finding One by also addressing SRQ 1: How do religious educators perceive the purpose and role of the BRLA as a large-scale, standardised assessment in Religious Education? Finding Two provides further insights about the interpretations and rationales that appear to have formed the religious educators' perceptions of the meaning of the BRLA and, in turn, the purpose and role of the assessment within the context of the RE curriculum implemented in Catholic schools in WA.

Forty-three of the 238 religious educators in the study: 21 teachers of RE [Year Three (n = 5), Year Five (n = 5) and Year Nine (n = 11)] and 22 school leaders of RE [APREs (n = 8), RECs (n = 6) and principals of primary schools (n = 8)] participated in Phase Two. These religious educators were involved in one of eight individual, or thirteen group interviews. The religious educators' responses to the following interview questions with associated contributing questions led to Finding Two:

1. Explain what the BRLA means and represents for you.
2. What do you understand to be the intended purpose and role of the BRLA?

As participants in Phase Two, the 43 religious educators represent a skewed sub-sample of the 238 religious educators involved in the study. This is because no Catholic secondary school principal volunteered to participate in Phase Two. Also, these religious educators mostly belonged to groups in Phase One who expressed support for the use of the BRLA. These limitations are addressed in Chapter One.

#### **6.2 The Presentation of Finding Two**

The structure of the chapter will follow the order of the two sub-findings listed in Table 6.1. The sub-findings are elaborations of Finding Two and suggest that the majority of the 43 religious educators in Phase Two perceived the BRLA as having a distinctive purpose and role. The religious educators outlined the benefits of using LSAs and, as such, expressed an appreciation for exercising educational accountability in RE. The focus of their discussions was on student learning. Finding Two also encapsulates the contrasting interpretations of the purpose and role of the BRLA by minority groups.

Table 6.1

*Overview of Chapter Six: Finding Two*

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6.2	Finding Two: The religious educators provided mostly positive interpretations of the purpose and role of the BRLA.
6.2.1	Sub-finding 2.1: The religious educators perceived the BRLA as having a distinct purpose.
6.2.2	Sub-finding 2.2: The religious educators perceived the BRLA as having a role to play in Religious Education.
6.3	Chapter Summary

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**6.2.1 Sub-finding 2.1.** The religious educators in Phase Two perceived the BRLA as having a distinct purpose. Their perceptions seem to reflect their support of the BRLA and its relevance to the RE curriculum. The level of support for the BRLA was consistent with their level of support for NAPLAN (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2014).

**6.2.1.1 Compared benefits.** A total of 40 of the 43 religious educators (93.0%) drew many parallels between the BRLA and NAPLAN and made constant comparisons between the benefits of using the BRLA and NAPLAN. Table 6.2 presents the frequency of comparisons made between the BRLA and NAPLAN. The table is categorised according to the religious educators' employment role of responsibility. The teachers and school leaders of RE who compared the BRLA to NAPLAN explained how they were familiar with NAPLAN because they were involved with preparing students for the assessment program. They explained how the BRLA was a LSA like NAPLAN that was produced "externally to the classroom" by system administrators. In the case of the BRLA, the WA Bishops and CEOWA were identified as the system administrators.

The religious educators described the BRLA as a "pen and paper" LSA and compared it to NAPLAN in terms of process, design and structure. They used phrases such as "The BRLA is like NAPLAN", "The BRLA is a type of NAPLAN", a "snapshot of" and "benchmark for student learning just like NAPLAN". As one school leader of RE stated, "I liken the BRLA a bit to NAPLAN but it's not NAPLAN. You know, that's how the test is formatted". According to these religious educators the instructions for administering the

BRLA and NAPLAN to students were “similar” and the processes were “familiar”. Given the expressed similarity between the BRLA and NAPLAN, these participants also suggested they treated the BRLA with the same respect as NAPLAN. As one teacher of RE said, “I take the assessment as seriously as NAPLAN”.

Table 6.2

*The Frequency of Expressions Comparing the BRLA to NAPLAN*

Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 21)			School Leaders of RE (n = 14)		Principals (n = 8)		Total (%)
Year 3 (n = 5)	Year 5 (n = 5)	Year 9 (n = 11)	APRE (n = 8)	REC (n = 6)	CPP (n = 8)	CSP NA	
5	5	9	8	6	7	0	40 (93.0)

*Note.* Partial response data to Interview Question 1: Explain what the BRLA means and represents for you? (n = 43)

APRE represents Assistant Principals as school leaders of RE in Catholic primary schools.

REC represents Religious Education Coordinators as school leaders of RE in Catholic secondary schools. CPP represents Catholic primary principals and CSP represents Catholic secondary principals.

Three teachers of RE [3 of 43 (7.0%)] compared the BRLA to NAPLAN and WAMSE (Department of Education, 2011). These teachers explained how they were responsible, for preparing students in Years Three, Five and Nine for all three assessments. At the time of the study (2013), WAMSE was a state-wide standardised assessment program that measured student learning in Science and Society and Environment. With the introduction of NAPLAN in 2008, the WAMSE assessments were phased out and discontinued after 2013 (School Curriculum and Standards Authority, 2016a).

The expressed similarities between the BRLA and NAPLAN extended to conversations about the perceived high degree of competency students were required to have in literacy in order to complete “these types of assessments”. As one school leader of RE explained, “There is a strong correlation between the results from the BRLA and NAPLAN English literacy levels”.

Seven participants [7 of 43 (16.3%)] suggested that although the BRLA was like NAPLAN, it was also quite different in many ways. As one teacher suggested, “The BRLA is like NAPLAN but not NAPLAN, a valid test but not like NAPLAN”. The reason given was

based on what the teacher referred to as the “less unintended consequences” of the BRLA compared to NAPLAN.

Three explanations were provided by the seven participants about what they meant by the unintended consequences of NAPLAN. Firstly, they explained the BRLA did not use league tables to “judge the performance” of one school against another. As one principal clarified, the BRLA is what NAPLAN used to be like before the results became the “focus for public school rankings”. Secondly, the BRLA was considered “less intense” compared to NAPLAN and did not present the associated pressures from system administrators, school leaders, parents and the media. For one principal, the BRLA did not cause the school to “beat themselves up” when the results came back:

The BRLA is something that is going on quietly under the surface and the people are not stressed about it. Which is good. Once, you got a truer reading of the NAPLAN, before everybody started practising and cramming. Today children get stressed and parents put pressure on their children. Schools feel it’s going to make them look bad if they don’t get good results. NAPLAN seems to have got out of whack and I think that the BRLA being at a lower level is probably a truer reading of the results than, if it also was being hyped up.

The participants expressed appreciation for the perceived “lower intensity” of pressure felt by teachers and students about the BRLA.

Thirdly, the religious educators argued the BRLA was not perceived as important as NAPLAN because they believed RE was not treated in the same way as other learning areas. They made comments such as, “the BRLA is another NAPLAN but not taken seriously”. The religious educators explained how they believed that parents demonstrated little support for RE compared to other learning areas and little support for the BRLA compared to NAPLAN.

The religious educators seemed to be fully aware of the processes involved with NAPLAN but less aware of the processes involved with the BRLA. As one principal explained:

The BRLA is very similar to NAPLAN but you wouldn’t know it? With NAPLAN they do “little tests” on target schools to trial certain questions. Now, I am not certain that the test items in the BRLA have ever been trialled over a large number of schools to test their validity.

The principal wanted clarification about the use of pilot studies in the BRLA. Similarly, five teachers of RE questioned the release of student performance data from the BRLA. Two of the teachers were from Catholic secondary schools in regional WA. They said that they were

unaware of the students’ performance data from the BRLA and made comments such as, “I’ve never seen the student performance data nor analysed the data with my students”, yet they explained how they were always exposed to the NAPLAN results. An inference from these discussions is a perceived lack of communication about the BRLA from system and or school leaders.

**6.2.1.2 Expressions of support.** A total of 36 of the 43 religious educators (83.7%) expressed support for the BRLA as a LSA “like NAPLAN”. As the religious educators made comparisons between the BRLA and NAPLAN, they also expressed their support of both the BRLA and NAPLAN as LSAs used to measure student learning. They explained how the BRLA represented a valid LSA used in RE. The statement of one teacher reflects the supportive use of language by the group:

To me it looks like the BRLA is a NAPLAN for RE. I guess, I mean, from, our perspective I think it’s a great thing to have a standardised test for religious content, that for us is meant to be covered.

Similarly, one principal described the BRLA as a LSA like NAPLAN that had “merit”. The principal said that the BRLA was “just like NAPLAN” in terms of providing schools with “valuable” information about student learning in RE.

Table 6.3 shows the frequency of expressed support for the BRLA by the group according to their employment role of responsibility in RE. The religious educators used a variety of expressions of support; the most commonly used expressions are listed in Table 6.4. The language used by the religious educators seems to suggest they valued the BRLA and were appreciative of its use in RE.

Table 6.3  
*The Frequency of Expressed Support for the BRLA as a LSA*

Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 21)			School Leaders of RE (n = 14)		Principals (n = 8)		Total (%)
Year 3 (n = 5)	Year 5 (n = 5)	Year 9 (n = 11)	AP (n = 8)	REC (n = 6)	SPP (n = 8)	SPS NA	
2	4	9	8	6	7	0	36 (83.7)

*Note.* Partial response data to Interview Question 1: Explain what the BRLA means and represents for you? (n = 43)

Table 6.4

*Expressions of Support for the BRLA*

- 
- I actually like the BRLA.
  - It is great as an assessment.
  - It is fantastic.
  - I'm glad it is in the system.
  - It is a positive move and influence in Religious Education.
  - It is straight forward; black and white.
  - A good and valuable measurement tool.
  - It has merit as an assessment.
  - Deals with a wide coverage of RE content.
  - It isn't a problem for us.
  - It is improving each year.
- 

**6.2.1.3 Perceived measure of accountability.** A total of 31 of the 43 religious educators (72.1%) indicated that the purpose of the BRLA was to measure student learning in RE across the Catholic education system in WA. They considered NAPLAN as a measure of accountability for student learning in literacy and numeracy and suggested that the BRLA established a similar form of accountability for student learning in RE.

The BRLA was recognised by the group as a measure that gathered and reported evidence of student learning in RE. The religious educators explained how the BRLA was an appropriate and beneficial measure of accountability. As one school leader of RE in the group explained:

Accountability is what is needed in RE. It helps students learn about their faith. We need to change the way we teach Religious Education. We need to improve student learning in RE. Teachers cannot test faith but at least teachers, in Catholic schools can impart the knowledge of our faith tradition. Content is important to learn. Students need content of the faith tradition in order to make better connections in the world.

The school leader emphasised the need for greater accountability measures in RE and further explained how the BRLA has contributed to this outcome. Three other religious educators presented similar arguments. One teacher of RE who supported the need for measures of accountability in RE posed the question, "Why we are teaching RE?". One school leader of RE stated:

I think when people know that there is a standardised test across the board they feel that it is a little bit more serious. They need to keep up to certain standards. I think teachers and students feel this way about the BRLA.

One principal explained:

I see the BRLA having a similar purpose as NAPLAN and that is to gauge the success of the teaching of RE in Catholic schools. You can get comparative data from it and so get an idea of how the students are going in relation to the RE content.

These religious educators identified accountability in RE as necessary for raising the standards in teaching, learning and assessment.

Of the 31 religious educators, 14 (32.6% of 43) used language to suggest that there were “positive outcomes” from the use of the BRLA as a measure of accountability in RE.

Table 6.5 lists the common expressions of language used by the group.

Table 6.5

*Expressions of the BRLA as a Measure of Accountability*

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The Bishops’ Religious Literacy Assessment

- puts RE “up there” like NAPLAN.
  - is academic in nature.
  - is rigorous as an assessment.
  - is in the system and I am glad it is.
  - gives rigour to the learning area of Religious Education.
  - “keeps us on our toes”.
  - is a good tool that affirms our teaching.
  - is a role model of good assessment practice.
  - is a diagnostic measurement tool.
  - has been a positive influence.
  - has “put RE on the table”.
  - is a “form of advertising” to show what we value and give back to our students.
  - has given us a “sniff” towards a more academic or more rigorous direction.
  - has “heightened our awareness” of our Religious Education curriculum.
- 

Although the 31 religious educators referred to the BRLA as a measure of accountability, their use of the phrase varied, suggesting that perhaps they interpreted the role of accountability differently from each other. For example, 24 religious educators explained that the BRLA informs a broad audience consisting of teachers and school leaders within the



Catholic education system about student learning in RE. An inclusive and broad responsibility for student learning appears evident. In contrast, 12 religious educators explained that the BRLA informs a smaller and limited audience consisting of school and system leaders. This interpretation seems exclusive of classroom teachers and their responsibility for student learning in RE.

*6.2.1.3.1 Inclusive responsibility.* A total of 24 of 43 (55.8%) religious educators suggested that the BRLA informed a broad audience about student learning in RE. These religious educators perceived the purpose of the BRLA was to inform classroom teachers, leaders in schools, the CEOWA and the WA Bishops about student learning in RE. The implications for the group's understanding of the role of accountability appears to embrace a whole system approach to addressing student learning in RE. This group argued that the BRLA had improved student learning by assisting teachers to focus on the "essential" content in the RE curriculum. They insisted that there was content in the RE curriculum that both teachers and students "needed to know" and the purpose of the BRLA was assisting schools to focus on giving students the knowledge and understanding of the Catholic Faith Tradition. As one teacher stated, "The BRLA helps us measure how Catholic we are!"

*6.2.1.3.2 Exclusive responsibility.* A total of 12 of 43 (27.9%) religious educators explained how the BRLA informed school leaders about student learning in RE. This group perceived that the purpose of the BRLA was specifically to inform school and system leaders about student learning in RE. The 12 religious educators suggested there was value in school and system leaders gaining information about student learning in RE but not necessarily classroom teachers. As one teacher of RE explained:

At least the Bishops know the basics are being taught. The Bishops want to know or want some reassurance that RE content and knowledge is being taught. You can't test faith but at least you can impart the knowledge of our religion that students need to know. The BRLA is a reminder to us all that these are the basics we need to cover. The religious educators identified the purpose of the BRLA as a measure of how effective teachers were at teaching the knowledge and understandings of the Catholic Faith Tradition. They seem to have interpreted the role of accountability as a means for monitoring "teacher effectiveness" of student learning.

School leaders of RE and principals, in particular, expressed how they valued the data generated from the BRLA about student learning in RE. They explained how the BRLA

provided them with information that reflected the knowledge their teachers had about the RE curriculum. As one principal stated, “The BRLA confirms that we are on the right track and helps focus the Year Three and Five teachers”.

For the 12 religious educators, the BRLA provided the WA Bishops and other system leaders in the CEOWA with a “bird’s eye view”, “eye on the schools” and “tabs on schools” so as to “stay in touch” with teacher effectiveness and student learning in RE. As one school leader explained, “Historically, Archbishop Hickey was instrumental in introducing the BRLA at a time when LSAs were gaining traction throughout educational systems”. This school leader suggested that the introduction of the BRLA was an attempt by the WA Bishops to monitor RE activity in schools at a time when other LSAs were also being introduced nationally through the NAPLAN program. According to the school leader, the aim of NAPLAN was to monitor teacher effectiveness in literacy and numeracy and similarly, the aim of the BRLA was to monitor teacher effectiveness in RE.

The 12 religious educators presented arguments suggesting the BRLA was “exclusive to classroom practices” and an opportunity “mainly” for system authorities and school leaders to engage in assessing student learning at the broader levels outside RE classrooms. As one teacher explained:

The BRLA is for principals, Assistant Principals and deputies and for the CEOWA administrators, to check on the progress of RE in their schools. I suppose to give value to RE as being as important as, if not more important than the other subjects. We have a standardised test for other subjects, why not RE?

Similarly, one primary school leader explained:

I think the Bishops just want to see how we are actually going with Religion, and Gospel values and the responses in Mass, and how well, students know about the traditions of the Catholic Church. I suppose just for them really to gather information. Because you know, we’ve got all our Units of Work. Are we teaching them properly? Are the students actually understanding what was taught?

One principal further elaborated about the perceived value of the WA Bishops gaining information about student learning in RE:

I think the Bishops probably wanted to know how much students know in RE. Really you can gloss over things and think children remember facts, but they don’t. And then especially, I think, Catholics generally didn’t study Scripture much in the old days and we couldn’t draw on our facts. You know, you meet up with people from other Christian churches and they are able to quote the Bible. So, I suppose the BRLA is

helping us to become a bit more articulate about our faith and to make an effort to remember facts and people and events, parts of the Gospel and Church history and so on.

The group indicated that the BRLA was for the “system to gauge student learning in RE” so as to improve the “status quo” at the CEOWA system and school levels. They perceived the purpose of the BRLA as being a measure of accountability in the interest of educational leaders but also seem to have agreed it was necessary for leaders to receive “feedback” about how “teachers teach” and “student learn” the content in the RE curriculum. As one school leader of RE explained, “The purpose of the BRLA is to see where schools are at in terms of student learning and to be better able to resource and support them rather than schools worrying about those issues”.

This group of 12 religious educators suggested that the information gathered from the BRLA enabled system administrators to not only monitor teacher efficacy but also to review professional training in RE and update the RE curriculum. As one teacher explained, “The BRLA provides an opportunity for the CEOWA to offer guidance and professional development in Religious Education.” Similarly, another teacher explained, “The BRLA allows the RE Team in the Catholic Education Office to ‘find holes’ in the curriculum content that show which concepts are not being covered and to determine why”. These religious educators considered the BRLA to be a measure that provided the CEOWA a better understanding of what was being taught from the RE curriculum and what was required for reviewing the future RE curricula resource materials.

**6.2.1.4 Expressions of concern.** Seven of the 43 religious educators (16.3%) in Phase Two identified the BRLA as an unnecessary measure of student learning used in RE. This group believed the BRLA had a limited purpose. They identified the BRLA as a measure of accountability but disapproved of it as a measure to be used in RE. They used language suggesting measures of accountability such as LSAs are “unnecessary”, “counter-productive in education”, “a costly waste of time and money”, “damaging to students’ morals and faith” and “taking away from valuable classroom teaching experiences”.

The seven religious educators argued the BRLA was designed “just as a ploy by the Bishops” to monitor, “check-up on” school performance in RE and “simply rank students and schools according to the levels of student attainment in RE”. As one teacher explained:

They [the WA Bishops] want to make us [teachers in Catholic schools] more accountable. This is why it is called, *The Bishops’ Religious Literacy Assessment*. It is

the first thing for me, that, it's called the Bishops' Literacy test .... I think really, it's a test of how much students know. So, it tends to reflect back on the school, the students and obviously, the teachers.

Similarly, one secondary school leader explained:

The BRLA is far removed from the classroom. We do not teach to it or even talk about it. This test is for the Bishops to find out how teachers are teaching and how students are learning in RE.

According to these religious educators, it was “only” the job of classroom teachers to “ensure that the scores in the BRLA were maintained in the average to above average ranking”. They perceived school and system leaders were only interested in the students' scores and if the scores were below expected achievement in RE, they believed teachers were “questioned”, “scrutinised” and “reprimanded”. Furthermore, the group suggested that the BRLA was a tool that “system authorities” used to better resource schools if the level of student learning became inappropriate.

Like the group of 12, the seven religious educators identified the BRLA as outside the scope of classroom work and “just another LSA” similar to NAPLAN. They argued that the BRLA was a measure of accountability to “satisfy” the WA Bishops, but saw the information from the BRLA as irrelevant to them and their classroom practices in RE. They indicated, that “like NAPLAN”, the BRLA did not really concern them. However, unlike the group of twelve, the seven religious educators said they were “expected to be involved in” the BRLA without any “real purpose” for them or their students.

The seven religious educators considered LSAs as “questionable” measures of student learning that were imposed by politicians and authorities of education systems. As one principal suggested, the WA Bishops should concentrate their efforts on training priests for contemporary circumstances rather than the development of a LSA in RE:

I think the Bishops should be concentrating more on looking at why our schools are full, but our churches are empty. I feel that if they looked more at teaching their priests how to engage with young families we would be better off. I know that it is really hard to do. I absolutely agree that it is the Bishops' right to set the BRLA and I know they have had assistance from the RE Team in the Catholic Education Office.

These participants also recommended clearer communication, guidance and direction from the CEOWA about the purpose of the BRLA as a LSA. As one school leader explained:

Is it worth reviewing on an annual basis so that it is clear. Are schools really clear on what the Bishops and the CEOWA are, actually designing? When was the last time

they called everyone together to let us know what to do with the BRLA or is it just this great knowledge that we have always used. I think there is a challenge here for our Bishops and the CEOWA. I don't think there is common knowledge of the BRLA across WA.

The explanations from the seven participants suggest that unless the purpose of the BRLA was better articulated to them, the BRLA will continue to be identified as outside the scope of classroom practices in RE, and as an “unjustifiable” measure of the professional quality of religious educators. This evidence provides one possible reason why religious educators in Phase One of the study [116 of 234 (49.6%)] perceived school leaders as more satisfied with the BRLA compared to classroom teachers [75 of 234 (32.1%)].

**6.2.2 Sub-finding 2.2.** The majority of religious educators [36 of 43 (83.7%)] involved in Phase Two perceived the BRLA as having a role to play in RE. They provided two distinct roles. The first role considers the academic profile of RE [15 of 43 (34.9%)]. The second role [11 of 43 (25.6%)] ensures coverage of the content taught in the RE curriculum. The comment of one principal reflects the collective perceptions of the group about the perceived importance of the BRLA's role in RE. The principal said, “Religious Education as a learning area is now mirroring the humanities subjects if it is taught right”. Table 6.6 lists common expressions in the form of metaphors and similes used by the rest of the group to describe the distinct role they perceived the BRLA had in RE. The metaphors and similes are emphasised in bold within the table.

Table 6.6

*Perceived Role of the BRLA in Religious Education*

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Fifteen religious educators [15 of 43 (34.9%)] suggested the BRLA had enhanced the profile of Religious Education and promoted an academic focus.

The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment

- gives “**rigour**” to the learning area of Religious Education.
- gives RE “**status**”.
- “**lifts the profile**” of Religious Education.
- gives “**credibility to RE**” as an academic learning area.
- “**keeps the profile alive**” for Religious Education.
- has “**put RE on the table**”.
- “puts RE up there” like NAPLAN.
- is a “**form of advertising**” to show what we value and give back to our students.
- has given us a “**sniff**” towards a more academic or more rigorous direction.
- has “**heightened our awareness**” of our R curriculum.
- [provides] ... student performance data results and the assessment itself has helped me to go more vigorously over the RE content and not just to “**gloss over it**”.
- has ensured that we do not “**fluff around anymore**”.
- has ensured “**more of an urgency**” to cover the content. Before the BRLA we in the primary school probably spent too much time on activities like making posters or “**doing the filler stuff**”.

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Eleven religious educators [11 of 43 (25.6%)] suggested the BRLA had ensured the teaching of content in the RE curriculum.

The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment

- has given us more of a sense of “**direction**” in the teaching of RE.
- in my opinion does not have any disadvantages. “**It keeps us on our toes**”. It tells us what is important in the content, the essential content and models assessment practice.
- is not the “**be all and end all**” I understand its place and I see it as a tool that validates my teaching.
- “**affirms what we do**”.
- is “**pressured work**” but a “good thing” as it is an opportunity to go back through some things to find out and remind students what they have done in terms of the basics and what they should know.
- is “**here to stay**”. Testing and assessment is not going away. The BRLA has given us an opportunity to “**grapple with**” the language behind our faith.
- helps us concentrate on “**covering the mandated RE content**”.

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**6.2.2.1 Enhanced academic profile.** Fifteen religious educators [15 of 43 (34.9%)] suggested the BRLA has enhanced the academic profile of RE. These religious educators indicated that the role of the BRLA had “given RE a place on the table”, with other learning priorities, such as literacy and numeracy. They argued the BRLA had improved the profile of

RE and given it the status of other academic learning areas. The group used phrases such as, the BRLA has “enhanced”, “lifted” and “kept the profile of Religious Education as an academic learning area alive”. One principal identified the role of the BRLA as, “giving teaching in RE the same rigour and ‘kudos’ as other learning areas”. The principal also said:

The BRLA “keeps us on our toes”. Honestly, I can’t see there’s any disadvantage to it. I think there’s only advantages in being reflective and in wanting to do RE better. I think in an era of testing, does legitimatise RE as a subject rather than just something that we do casually or not take seriously in Catholic schools. I think now with Religion and Life, the BRLA has a place. I take the BRLA very seriously. You can actually see its place, from a community point of view, of our need to be informed Catholics rather than uninformed Catholics; if you know what I mean.

The principal suggested there was an expectation by the WA Bishops that “RE be considered and treated as the first learning area”.

The group of 15 referred to RE as the “first learning area” and suggested that “students needed to know” the specific vocabulary used as part of the Catholic Faith Tradition and that students needed to be taught about “their religion”. They indicated that the “transmission of knowledge” in RE was important. For these participants, the BRLA meets the expectations of the WA Bishops. Teachers teach, and students learn about the religious content of the Catholic faith. In so doing, the participants felt that students were capable then of applying their knowledge to a wider context.

Ten religious educators [10 of 43 (23.3%)] within the group of 15 indicated that the BRLA had encouraged a whole system approach to RE. They said the BRLA had provided evidence of student learning, complementary to evidence gained by classroom assessments in RE. These religious educators used language suggesting they valued the collection of student learning data from a range of assessments, developed by classroom teachers and externally produced by system administrators. They belonged to the same group who demonstrated an inclusive responsibility for student learning.

These religious educators explained that the BRLA had provided opportunities for teachers and school leaders and for the CEOWA to focus and respond as a whole system to student learning in RE. They said, “The BRLA is about system level thinking”. Three of the ten religious educators described the necessity for whole system thinking in RE. As one teacher explained:

I think, the BRLA reaffirms that we are doing the right thing; doing the best for our students and that as students at our school, they can be competitive against all other students in other schools.

Similarly, a secondary school leader explained:

Often when I look at the results I will see where our school is, how well we are doing and what our average is ... just to know that we're doing the right thing in comparison to the bigger picture ... well that's what I think.

Another school leader explained the need for teachers and school leaders to work together to understand student learning in RE:

It's about establishing, "systemness"; how the whole system is going, rather than just individual schools and individual children. So, it's a "good health check" for the system, a bit of accountability. Is what we're doing in Catholic schools working?

[How is it] working in Religious Education? If not, why not and how we can fix it?

These participants perceived the underlying role of the BRLA was to track student learning in RE so as to ensure continued and sustained progress of that learning. The explanation by one Year Nine teacher reflects the comments presented by the overall group of ten:

The BRLA gauges across the State, the strengths and weaknesses of children's knowledge and I suppose it then helps to draw the bow to how teachers should focus on aspects of the RE curriculum. For us, the BRLA results show that our students are weak in the section on Church. So, to improve the situation for our school we are providing more experiences to our children to know more about the structures of Church life.

The group explained how educators who work collaboratively can better identify strengths, weaknesses and misconceptions in student learning. For these religious educators, the BRLA was a measure of accountability used in RE to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

**6.2.2.2 Content coverage.** Eleven religious educators [11 of 43 (25.6%)] suggested the BRLA had ensured that teachers taught students the content in the RE curriculum. They explained how the BRLA had achieved this outcome. Firstly, the group seem to have believed that the BRLA had restored balance to the teaching of RE, which included the teaching of the essential content in the RE curriculum. As one teacher explained, "The RE content is a valuable tool that helps us find out about our religion and the other religions of the world". Secondly, the BRLA had improved the quality of assessment practices in RE because the teaching focus was on the content in the RE curriculum.



The 11 religious educators perceived the role of the BRLA as a measure “guiding teachers through the RE content”. The explanations provided by five of them reflect how the group perceived the role that the BRLA played within the RE curriculum. One teacher stated, “The BRLA makes my teaching more explicit in terms of content, knowledge and understanding”. Another teacher explained:

The purpose of the BRLA is to determine if we are “all” doing the right thing in RE. The CEOWA also looks at the results to see if, for example, we actually are covering what we’re saying we’re covering.

One school leader of RE explained:

When there is a standardised test like the BRLA, the RE learning area is treated more seriously and it confirms what is being taught in RE across the system. There is an opportunity for applying continuity to teaching the RE content.

Similarly, another school leader suggested, “The more we engage with the BRLA, the more we get to know the content in the RE curriculum”. As one principal stated, “Things are out of our control like literacy levels and Church attendance, but we have to try to improve things and the BRLA has helped us to do so”. The 11 religious educators indicated that change was necessary in RE. They felt there was a need for changes to how RE was being taught, and how the quality of student learning in RE was dependent upon being the central focus for all teachers and school leaders.

Of the group of 11, four religious educators [4 of 43 (9.3%)] as teachers of RE, responsible for students in Year Three and Year Five suggested the BRLA had restored balance and order to the teaching of RE and had “finally” closed the “gap” in their understanding about the content in the RE curriculum. They suggest that for “far too long” they had focused on “experiential” and “faith” based activities in RE rather than trying to cover the content in the RE curriculum. They argued that as a result of their experiences, they did not believe that the expected outcomes of the “mandated” RE curriculum were being addressed.

One teacher explained, “We used to fluff around before the BRLA. Now we have to focus because the BRLA has made teachers teach the content knowledge in Religious Education”. Similarly, another teacher suggested:

The BRLA gives a focus to the teachers, as well as the students, about as to what kind of things they should be making sure they have covered. I think there were all those years as we said before, where it was. You would ask children questions and be staggered at how they can’t answer the questions, really basic things.

These teachers of RE felt that the RE curriculum resource material such as the “Units of Work” in Catholic primary schools were “full of ‘wonder’ questions”, “airy-fairy” concepts about human emotions and did not “contain many facts”. They recommended the RE curriculum be updated to address and align with the academic rigour they perceived was adopted by the BRLA. One of the Year Five teachers was also a school leader. As a school leader of RE they stated, “our focus on feelings is a thing of the past in RE and we need to focus now on facts”. The school leader elaborated by explaining:

A little bit too much was thrown out the window. Until now, RE was all about exploring one’s feelings; “touchy feely” emotions driven, teaching styles were being used. Now I think we are getting more balance coming in through the use of the BRLA. There is more focus on knowledge, knowledge about the history of the Church, knowledge about events, knowledge about Scripture and parts of the Mass and all that sort of language. The BRLA gives us more of a framework. It gives you purpose to teach RE.

For these religious educators, the BRLA had ensured that students learnt the language of the Catholic faith that encompassed the historical and scriptural structures of the Church.

Of the eleven, six religious educators [6 of 43 (14.0%)] indicated the BRLA has improved assessment practices in RE. They described the BRLA as having motivated “effective assessment practices” in RE. They explained how the BRLA provided exemplars of academically focused assessment techniques in RE that were similar to other learning areas. As one teacher of RE said, “We used to make up our own assessments but now we have a set structure from the BRLA for more formal assessment types that the whole school follows”. Similarly, another teacher explained:

The BRLA has an important role. It is a good thing. The BRLA has helped us understand that the rigour of assessment practice in RE should be the same as other learning areas and we should be trying to improve the situation at our school. If you compare the BRLA to NAPLAN some of the questions make you say, “Oh wow, I didn’t even think of that type of questioning to assess that particular area”. With the Bishops’ test, the questions make me think why I didn’t cover the content as well as I should have. So, teachers learn about assessment at the same time as they are preparing students and reviewing results. It’s just like we do for NAPLAN.

These religious educators seem to have appreciated the review and improvement of assessment practices in RE as important for progress in student learning in RE.

Besides driving assessment practice, the group of six also indicated the BRLA was a source of student performance data in RE that was tracked and aligned with student performance data from classroom assessments in RE. As one secondary school leader of RE stated, “The results from the BRLA keep me on track and directed me more to core teaching in RE”. These religious educators seem to have perceived that the BRLA data were helping them understand how to better improve student learning in RE. As one principal suggested, “Unlike for NAPLAN, the results from the BRLA are different to the results in classroom assessments. Perhaps we need to attend to the teaching of content in RE”. The principal perceived the role of the BRLA as a means for aligning assessment practices in RE to other learning areas and ensuring that better alignment of assessment, pedagogy and content in RE is considered into the future.

Sub-finding 2.2 supports the evidence in Phase One. Firstly, the finding supports the 141 of the total number of 238 religious educators in the study (59.2%) who perceived the BRLA as having a role to play in RE. Secondly, the finding supports the 62 of 99 religious educators (26.1% of 238) who described the role of the BRLA as having ensured coverage of the content in the RE curriculum. Thirdly, the finding supports the 27 of 99 religious educators (11.3% of 238) who described how the BRLA has raised the profile of the RE curriculum. These perceived intended aspects of the BRLA seem to also reflect the local Religious Education Policy, version 2-B5 (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2013b) regarding the expected treatment of RE as an academic learning area.

**6.2.2.3 Perceived limitations.** The group of seven (16.3% of 43) who questioned the purpose of the BRLA and said that the assessment was an unnecessary measure of accountability in RE also appear to have perceived the BRLA as having a limited role to play in RE. The group used metaphors and analogies to express their perceptions of the meaning and value of the BRLA. Table 6.7 lists the common expressions used by the group. The metaphors and analogies are highlighted within the table.

This group described in detail how they disapproved of the BRLA by raising concerns and issues about the academic focus of RE and suggested the BRLA had not improved the faith of students. The group made comments such as, “I am not convinced the BRLA is a good thing” and “It is not important to use, we don’t put much credence on it”. The reasons provided by the group identifying why they disapproved of the BRLA are categorised in two ways.

Table 6.7

*Perceived Limitations of the Role of the BRLA*

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Category One: The BRLA is irrelevant and inappropriate in RE.

- The BRLA is only for the Bishops. However, the BRLA probably doesn't do what the Bishops want because "**students don't care, and parents too don't treat it like NAPLAN**".
- It is not valued by parents because they "**do not appear to be interested**".
- The BRLA is "**used by the CEOWA**" and does not really concern us.
- The BRLA is not valued by "other teachers who are not involved". "Other teachers are not interested".
- The test does not make you a "**better Catholic**".
- It is "only for kids that are interested in RE".
- What is the point of the test when the staff are not Catholic in secondary schools?
- Student performance is a result of "**poor church attendance**".
- The BRLA is "more knowledge based rather than how we teach".
- The BRLA does not allow for teachers "to make judgements about students' faith".
- The test items are "not about students' lives".
- The BRLA is "not doing enough to engage the students with their faith".
- Learning in RE needs to be assessed using more than just pen and paper tests. Faith cannot be judged by a test.
- It is stressful because there is "**too much content**" to cover.
- The BRLA leaves us "**all in the dark**" about how to interpret the results and "**where to go to next**".

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Category Two: Large-scale, standardised assessments are inappropriate and unnecessary.

- It's not just the BRLA, I'm against all these, standardised type of tests.
- As other tests like this, the BRLA is "**an interruption**" to everyday teaching.
- It is just "another thing we have to do" and so "I glance over the results and get on with my job".
- Standardised testing like the BRLA do not tell the "**full story**".
- Our students "**either sink or swim**" during the BRLA. That is normal for these types of tests.
- The BRLA is "**a brick wall, for students**" who have poor literacy.
- The BRLA is highly valued as an English test.
- Students at my school with poor English skills are not catered for and are damaged by these tests.
- Schools with students who have poor literacy levels are dealing with a "**double edged sword**". How do we help students break open standardised assessment items without compromising the integrity of the results?
- The BRLA as a large-scale, standardised assessment is designed for "**the bright kids**" with "**good memories**" and those who can "**rote learn**".

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Category one identifies how the religious educators perceived the BRLA as irrelevant and inappropriate in RE. The religious educators explained how the BRLA was irrelevant to their classroom practices in RE and, also to the RE curriculum because the assessment was designed for use by system leaders. They said that teachers, students and their parents were

not interested in the assessment nor in RE generally. Only students who attended Church were considered interested in the BRLA because they performed well.

Category two identifies how the religious educators perceived the BRLA as a LSA to be irrelevant and inappropriate in RE. They indicated that the use of LSAs were inappropriate in education and unnecessary for classroom use. They also believed LSAs had a limited capacity to measure the knowledge and understanding of students, especially those students with poor literacy skills. The religious educators considered LSAs as only for students who were proficient in reading and writing. Their comments provided clarity about why they disapproved of the BRLA as a LSA and for why they considered the purpose and role of the BRLA to be limited.

For the group of seven, there was “no point to the test”. As one principal who appears to have disapproved of the BRLA explained, “The BRLA is a misguided attempt to pretend that it is an effective test like NAPLAN. And I’m not ‘anti-standardised testing’, just anti-something that tries to be like one”. The principal further indicated the BRLA represents, “a lack of clarity in terms of what the WA Bishops and the CEOWA want to achieve in RE”.

The arguments presented by the group of seven align with the evidence in Phase One that identifies larger groups of religious educators who appear to have raised concerns about the BRLA and LSAs generally. For example, 80 of 238 religious educators (33.6%) raised concerns about the use of the BRLA and 41 of the 80 (17.2% of 238) described the BRLA as challenging based on issues associated with students’ literacy. Similarly, 105 of 238 religious educators (44.1%) suggested the BRLA has a limited role to play in RE and 44 of the 105 (18.5% of 238) described the BRLA as irrelevant to the RE curriculum. They suggested that the BRLA was irrelevant because the vocabulary of the test items was difficulty for students and teachers and that the students’ faith was being confronted.

### **6.3 Chapter Summary**

Finding Two from Phase Two was presented in this chapter. A summary of the finding and associated sub-findings based on the analysis of response data from 43 religious educators is provided in Figure 6.1. Finding Two provides clarity and depth to Finding One regarding the religious educators’ contrasting perceptions of the purpose and role of the BRLA. As a sub-sample of the 238 religious educators in the study, these 43 religious educators generally perceived the BRLA as a positive initiative with a distinct purpose and role in RE. The religious educators made constant comparisons between the BRLA and NAPLAN and appear to have demonstrated support for LSAs. The majority of the religious

educators highlighted what they perceived as the two distinct roles that the BRLA had played as a LSA in RE. That is, to enhance the academic profile of RE and ensure the teaching of content from the RE curriculum. The finding suggests that groups of religious educators perceived the BRLA as having encouraged a whole system focus on student learning in RE, restored balance to a learning area that may have in the past been treated more as a faith-based activity rather than an educational activity, and promoted improved assessment practices in RE.

However, Finding Two also identifies the perceptions of minority groups who disapproved of the BRLA and felt that the assessment had a limited purpose and role in RE. The minority groups provided a number of reasons for their perceptions that align with the reasons provided by groups of religious educators in Phase One. They raised concerns about the BRLA and considered the BRLA and LSAs generally as irrelevant to classroom curriculum practices. The religious educators' perceptions seem to reflect their teaching experiences in RE and experiences of using LSAs. How they interpreted the role of accountability based on their experiences is also evident.

The religious educators' perceptions of the purpose and role of the BRLA will be further discussed in Chapters Nine and Ten to highlight the influence that their perceptions had on their teaching and assessment practices. In the next chapter the religious educators' response to the administration and implementation of the BRLA is discussed.

## Specific Research Question One

How do religious educators perceive the purpose and role of the BRLA as a LSA?

### Contributing Questions

Explain what the BRLA means and represents to you.

What do you understand to be the intended purpose and role of the BRLA?

## Finding Two from Phase Two

**Finding Two:** The religious educators provided mostly positive interpretations of the purpose and role of the BRLA.

**Sub-finding 2.1:** The religious educators perceived the BRLA as having a distinct purpose.

40 of 43 (93.0%) compared the BRLA to NAPLAN.

36 of 43 (83.7%) expressed support for the BRLA as a LSA.

31 of 43 (72.1%) identified the BRLA as a measure of accountability used in RE.

24 of 43 (55.8%) suggested the BRLA informs a broad audience about student learning in RE.

12 of 43 (27.9%) suggested the BRLA informs educational leaders about student learning in RE.

Seven religious educators [7 of 43 (16.3%)] identified the BRLA as an unnecessary measure of accountability used in RE.

**Sub-finding 2.2:** The religious educators perceived the BRLA as having a role to play in RE.

36 of 43 (83.7%) identified two distinct roles the BRLA plays in RE.

15 of 43 (34.9%) suggested the BRLA had enhanced the academic profile of RE. Ten [10 of 43 (23.3%)] suggested the BRLA had encouraged a whole system approach to RE.

11 of 43 (25.6%) suggested the BRLA had ensured teachers taught students the content in the RE curriculum. 4 of 43 (9.3%) suggested the BRLA has restored balance to the teaching of RE. 6 of 43 (14.0%) suggested the BRLA had improved assessment practices in RE.

7 religious educators [7 of 43 (16.3%)] indicated the BRLA had a limited role to play in RE.

Figure 6.1. Summary of Finding Two

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **FINDINGS THREE AND FOUR**

#### **7.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents two key findings that emerged from the first phase of the study and address SRQ 2: How do religious educators respond to the administration and implementation of the BRLA as a large-scale, standardised assessment in Religious Education? The findings relate to data provided by the 238 religious educators in response to twenty-three online questionnaire items. The teachers and school leaders of RE mostly agreed about the process for administering BRLA, but groups of them responded in contrasting ways to the implementation of the assessment. These findings build upon the previous two findings and further suggest the influence of contextual factors relating to the religious educators' personal and professional experiences of teaching RE and using LSAs in education.

#### **7.2 The Presentation of Findings Three and Four**

The presentation of the two key findings in this chapter follow the order of the findings and associated sub-findings listed in Table 7.1. The findings are labelled Three and Four. Finding Three emerged from response data relating to five aspects about the structures and process involved in the administration of the BRLA. Information about each aspect is discussed as a sub-finding. The sub-findings identify the religious educators' experiences and responses to administering the BRLA to students. Finding Four consists of two sub-findings based on two procedural aspects of the implementation of the BRLA. These sub-findings consider the religious educators' perceptions of the organisation involved in preparing students for the BRLA; the time and pressure associated with the assessment; and the design, construction and relevance of the BRLA test items to the RE curriculum.



Table 7.1

*Overview of Chapter Seven: Findings Three and Four*

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7.3	Finding Three: The religious educators perceived the administration of the BRLA as a straightforward and familiar process and indicated that school-based educators provided the most appropriate support to students.
7.3.1	Sub-finding 3.1: Most of the religious educators perceived the BRLA as easy to administer to students.
7.3.2	Sub-finding 3.2: Most of the religious educators perceived the instructions for administering the BRLA as appropriate and easy to follow.
7.3.3	Sub-finding 3.3: More than half the number of religious educators agreed students completed the BRLA within the allocated time.
7.3.4	Sub-finding 3.4: Groups of religious educators described contrasting experiences of administering the BRLA to students.
7.3.5	Sub-finding 3.5: The religious educators had mixed perceptions about the level of support offered to teachers and students in preparation for the administration of the BRLA.
7.4	Finding Four: The religious educators responded to the implementation of the BRLA in contrasting ways.
7.4.1	Sub-finding 4.1: The religious educators disagreed about the amount of time and pressure associated with the BRLA.
7.4.2	Sub-finding 4.2: The religious educators disagreed about aspects of the BRLA test items.
7.5	Chapter Summary

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### **7.3 Finding Three**

The collation and analysis of data from the religious educators to ten Likert scale and two open-ended items led to Finding Three. Various tables summarise the data. The items used to capture the data identify the religious educators' perceptions of their experiences of administering the BRLA to students; the instructions for administration; support documents provided by system administrators; student completion times; and the level of support offered to the religious educators and students leading up to and during the administration process. According to non-parametric testing, the religious educators' gender, age and employment role of responsibility in RE appear as probable factors influencing how they responded to the online questionnaire items.

Table 7.2

*Perceptions of Aspects of the Administration of the BRLA*

Item Description	Frequency of Responses					Mean (SD)
	SD = 1	D = 2	N = 3	A = 4	SA = 5	
I find the BRLA easy to administer to students. [Item 52 (n = 233)]	1 0.4%	15 6.4%	24 10.3%	166 71.2%	27 11.6%	3.87 (0.708) p = 0.029 age p = 0.007 role
The instructions for administering the BRLA are difficult to follow. [Item 53 (n = 233)]	29 12.4%	158 67.8%	26 11.2%	18 7.7%	2 0.9%	2.17 (0.773)
The CEOWA provides appropriate support documents to teachers in preparation for the administration of the BRLA. [Item 43 (n = 233)]	7 3.0%	47 20.2%	33 14.2%	115 49.4%	31 13.3%	3.51 (1.047) p = 0.015 gender p = 0.026 age p = 0.006 role
My students completed the BRLA within the allocated time. [Item 55 (n = 232)]	9 3.9%	47 20.3%	25 10.8%	123 53.0%	28 12.1%	3.49 (1.065) p = 0.022 gender p = 0.000 role

*Note.* The four items consisted of statements that required religious educators to use one of five ratings. The ratings are: Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1, Disagree (D) = 2, Neither agree nor disagree (N) = 3, Agree (A) = 4, Strongly Agree (SA) = 5. To reflect missing response data, the percentages presented in the table represent the valid percent as calculated in SPSS.

The p value is the statistical probability of the rejection of a null hypothesis, 0.05 or less, in the non-parametric testing using the Mann-Whitney U Test to measure difference according to gender and the Kruskal-Wallis Test to measure differences according to age and employment role of responsibility.

**7.3.1 Sub-finding 3.1.** In response to Likert scale Item 52, most of the religious educators [193 of 233 = 166 agree + 27 strongly agree (82.8%)] agreed the BRLA was easy to administer to students (Table 7.2). Furthermore, the Kruskal-Wallis Test identifies a 0.029 probability of difference in the response data to Likert scale Item 52 according to the religious educators' age and a 0.007 probability of difference according to the religious educators' employment role of responsibility in RE (Table 7.3). The results from the non-parametric tests suggest that religious educators aged between 24 to 30 years [46 of 52 (88.5%)] agreed more than other age groups that the BRLA was easy to administer to

students and that Year Five teachers [37 of 40 (92.5%)] agreed more than other sub-groups of religious educators that the BRLA was easy to administer.

Table 7.3

*The Frequency of Data for Item 52 According to Age and Role*

	Age						Total
	<24 (n=16)	24–30 (n=52)	31–40 (n=51)	41–50 (n=80)	51–60 (n=37)	>61 (n=2)	
Strongly Disagree	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Disagree	0	3	5	1	5	1	15
Neither agree nor disagree	1	2	8	9	4	0	24
Agree	10	40	33	56	26	1	166
Strongly Agree	4	6	4	11	2	0	27
Total*	15	51	50	78	37	2	233

	Employment Role of Responsibility in RE							Total
	Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		
	Year 3 (n = 55)	Year 5 (n = 40)	Year 9 (n = 55)	APRE (n = 37)	REC (n = 20)	CPP (n = 26)	CSP (n = 5)	
Strongly Disagree	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Disagree	6	0	1	2	2	4	0	15
Neither agree nor disagree	5	2	8	3	0	4	2	24
Agree	39	27	38	25	17	17	3	166
Strongly Agree	5	10	5	6	0	1	0	27
Total*	55	39	52	36	20	26	5	233

*Note.* Response data to Likert scale Item 52: I find the BRLA easy to administer to students ( $n = 233$ ). APRE represents Assistant Principals as school leaders of RE in Catholic primary schools. REC represents Religious Education Coordinators as school leaders of RE in Catholic secondary schools. CPP represents Catholic primary principals and CSP represents Catholic secondary principals.

\*The total refers to the number of religious educators who responded to the questionnaire item.

**7.3.2 Sub-finding 3.2.** Most of the religious educators perceived the instructions for administering the BRLA as appropriate and easy to follow (Table 7.2). This sub-finding is based on the analysis of response data to two Likert scale items (Items 53 and 43). Firstly, in response to the statement “The instructions for administering the BRLA are difficult to follow”, 187 of 233 religious educators disagreed [158 disagree + 29 strongly disagree (80.3%)]. Secondly, 146 of 233 religious educators [115 agree + 31 strongly agree (62.7%)] agreed the system administrators at the CEOWA provide appropriate support documents to teachers in preparation for the administration of the BRLA. These support documents relate to the instructions for administration.

Non-parametric testing identifies statistically significant differences in the response data according to the religious educators’ gender, age and employment role of responsibility in RE (Table 7.4). In terms of gender, the Mann-Whitney U Test identifies a 0.015 probability of difference. The frequency of response data according to gender suggests males [56 of 80 (70.0%)] agreed more than females [90 of 158 (57.0%)] that CEOWA provided appropriate support documents. The Kruskal-Wallis Test identifies a 0.026 probability of differences in response data according to age. The frequency of that data suggests religious educators aged between 51 and 60 agreed [30 of 37 (81.1%)] more than any other age groups agreed that the CEOWA support documents for the administration of the BRLA were appropriate. The Kruskal-Wallis Test also identifies a 0.006 probability of difference according to the religious educators’ employment role. The frequency of response data according to role suggests principals agreed [20 of 26 (76.9%) primary principals and 4 of 5 (80.0%) secondary principals] more than any other sub-group that the CEOWA support documents for administering the BRLA were appropriate.

Table 7.4  
*The Frequency of Data for Item 43 According to Gender, Age and Role*

	Gender		Total
	Females (n = 158)	Males (n = 80)	
Strongly Disagree	5	2	7
Disagree	39	8	47
Neither agree nor disagree	22	11	33
Agree	72	43	115
Strongly Agree	18	13	31
Total*	156	77	233

Table 7.4 continued

	Age						Total
	<24 (n = 16)	24–30 (n = 52)	31–40 (n = 51)	41–50 (n = 80)	51–60 (n = 37)	>61 (n = 2)	
Strongly Disagree		1	2	4	0	0	7
Disagree	4	19	9	12	3	0	47
Neither agree nor disagree	2	5	7	13	4	2	33
Agree	8	24	22	37	24	0	115
Strongly Agree	1	2	10	12	6	0	31
Total*	15	51	50	78	37	2	233

	Employment Role of Responsibility in RE							Total
	Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		
	Year 3 (n = 55)	Year 5 (n = 40)	Year 9 (n = 55)	AP (n = 37)	REC (n = 20)	SPP (n = 26)	SPS (n = 5)	
Strongly Disagree	5	1	0	0	1	0	0	7
Disagree	14	9	11	6	5	2	0	47
Neither agree nor disagree	8	6	11	3	0	4	1	33
Agree	26	18	28	16	7	16	4	115
Strongly Agree	2	5	2	11	7	4	0	31
Total*	55	39	52	36	20	26	5	233

*Note.* Response data to Likert scale Item 43: The CEOWA provides appropriate support documents to teachers in preparation for the administration of the BRLA ( $n = 233$ ).

\*The total refers to the number of religious educators who responded to the questionnaire item.

**7.3.3 Sub-finding 3.3.** The religious educators agreed students completed the BRLA within the allocated time (Table 7.2). In response to the statement (Item 55), “My students completed the BRLA within the allocated time”, 151 of 232 religious educators [123 agree + 28 strongly agree (65.1%)] agreed. The Mann-Whitney U Test identifies a 0.022 probability of difference in the response data according to gender. The frequency of the data according to gender suggests that more male religious educators agreed [55 of 80 (68.8%)] than females

that students completed the BRLA within the allocated time. Also, the Kruskal-Wallis Test identifies a 0.000 probability of difference in the response data according to the religious educators' employment role of responsibility in RE. The frequency of the data according to role suggests secondary School Leaders of RE (RECs) agreed [18 of 20 (90.0%)] more than any other sub-group that students completed the BRLA within the allocated time. Table 7.5 shows the frequency of response data according to the religious educators' gender and role.

Table 7.5  
*The Frequency of Data for Item 55 According to Gender and Role*

	Gender		Total
	Females (n = 158)	Males (n = 80)	
Strongly Disagree	9	0	9
Disagree	37	10	47
Neither agree nor disagree	14	11	25
Agree	80	43	123
Strongly Agree	16	12	28
Total	156	76	232

	Employment Role of Responsibility in RE							Total
	Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		
	Year 3 (n = 55)	Year 5 (n = 40)	Year 9 (n = 55)	APRE (n = 37)	REC (n = 20)	CPP (n = 26)	CSP (n = 5)	
Strongly Disagree	8	1	0	0	0	0	0	9
Disagree	23	7	1	8	2	6	0	47
Neither agree nor disagree	4	2	10	4	0	5	0	25
Agree	19	25	26	22	11	15	5	123
Strongly Agree	1	4	15	1	7	0	0	28
Total*	55	39	52	35	20	26	5	232

*Note.* Response data to Likert scale Item 55: My students completed the BRLA within the allocated time ( $n = 232$ ).

\*The total refers to the number of religious educators who responded to the questionnaire item.

**7.3.4 Sub-finding 3.4.** Groups of religious educators described contrasting experiences of administering the BRLA to students. In response to Open-ended Item 12, 58 of 238 religious educators (24.4%) described administering the BRLA. Thirty-seven of the 58 religious educators (15.5% of 238) described the administration of the BRLA as challenging. In contrast, 21 of the 58 religious educators (8.8% of 238) described the administration of the BRLA as simple and familiar.

**7.3.4.1 Challenging experiences.** The 37 religious educators described their experiences of administering the BRLA as challenging. They used language to indicate that the preparation and organisation involved in the administration process were “overwhelming”. For one secondary school leader of RE the administration of the BRLA was a “logistical nightmare”. For another school leader, the administration was described as follows:

It is very time consuming to set everything up for the BRLA and getting it sent off properly. It is also an inconvenience to other subject areas as to the administration of the test and catching up with absent students takes time. I am, however, appreciative of test covers being pre-populated with information in advance.

This group appears to have considered the BRLA to be “time consuming”, and also a burden for Years Three, Five and Nine students. They perceived LSAs such as the BRLA “greatly impacts on students and teachers in those Year levels”. This group suggested that the administration of the BRLA was another task outside classroom practices that requires their “extra attention”. Teachers of RE within the group recommended the administration of the BRLA be changed to different year levels because students in Years Three, Five and Nine were also over-exposed to State and National LSAs such as WAMSE, the BRLA and NAPLAN.

**7.3.4.2 Simple and familiar experiences.** The 21 religious educators who described the ease and familiarity of administering the BRLA also described the instructions for administering the BRLA as simple to follow and the support documents provided by the CEOWA as appropriate. Seventeen of the religious educators were teachers of RE. As one of the teachers stated, “The whole administration process was simple to understand”. Similarly, another teacher said, “The BRLA was easy to administer because the instructions were clear and precise for the teachers and the students”.

School Leaders of RE expressed similar descriptions to teachers about the instructions for administering the BRLA to students. One school leader commented, “Over the years, the BRLA has become easier to administer”. Another school leader explained:

From an administrators’ point of view, the BRLA has been positive. The paperwork, organisation and instructions have been very clear and easy to follow. The RE Team at the CEO have always been responsive and helpful with any queries that I have had. From a teaching point of view, the BRLA has been easy to administer, instructions have been clear and the fact that staff have been able to keep and re-use previous test booklets for new classes each year, the familiarity of how the test is structured, has indeed assisted the children who are taking the test.

The school leaders indicated that the administration of the BRLA was a positive experience for them, one that was simple, familiar and well resourced.

The 21 religious educators also described the administration of the BRLA as “no different” to administering the NAPLAN and WAMSE assessments. The religious educators wrote that the administration of the BRLA was similar to the administration of NAPLAN, in terms of structures and process. As one of the teachers explained:

I found that the BRLA was a little intimidating for first timers but appropriate in that they now have some prior knowledge of the assessment. I think having it after NAPLAN was a great idea as they already had experience in such a formalised test.

Other teachers commented that the “BRLA reminds students of NAPLAN” and students in Years Three, Five and Nine are familiar with “sitting this style of testing as we have the NAPLAN testing in these year levels”. According to the group, the BRLA was a “God test” like NAPLAN but “not as tedious” to administer. The religious educators suggested that students and teachers knew what to expect in the administration of the BRLA and were “less stressed” by the “formal testing experience” compared to NAPLAN. This evidence aligns with Finding Two that identifies groups of religious educators who drew parallels between the BRLA and NAPLAN.

The analysis of numeric and written response data suggests that although most of the religious educators perceived the BRLA as easy to administer to students, some religious educators had challenging experiences. The arguments presented, are consistent with arguments identified in Findings One and Two that appear to have informed perceptions about the purpose and role of the BRLA.



**7.3.5 Sub-finding 3.5.** This sub-finding is based on the analysis of response data from six Likert scale and three open-ended items (Table 7.6). The analysis suggests that religious educators had mixed perceptions about the level of support offered to teachers and students in preparation for the administration of the BRLA.

Table 7.6  
*Perceptions of the Support Provided to Students and Teachers*

Item Description	Frequency of Responses					Mean (SD)
	SD = 1	D = 2	N = 3	A = 4	SA = 5	
The CEOWA provides appropriate support to teachers. [Item 44]	17 7.3%	67 28.8%	62 26.6%	69 29.6%	18 7.7%	3.02 (1.091) p = 0.043 role
People at my school provide appropriate support to students in preparation for the BRLA. [Item 45a: Me]	4 1.7%	14 6.0%	37 15.9%	140 60.1%	38 16.3%	3.84 (0.835)
People at my school provide appropriate support to students in preparation for the BRLA. [Item 45b: Teachers]	6 2.6%	28 12.0%	67 28.8%	112 48.1%	20 8.6%	3.48 (0.905) p = 0.018 gender p = 0.003 role
People at my school provide appropriate support to students in preparation for the BRLA. [Item 45c: Leaders]	8 3.4%	31 13.3%	56 24.0%	116 49.8%	22 9.4%	3.48 (0.956) p = 0.013 gender p = 0.000 role
People at my school provide appropriate support to students in preparation for the BRLA. [Item 45d: Parents]	14 6.0%	49 21.0%	119 51.1%	43 18.5%	8 3.4%	2.92 (0.877)
People at my school provide appropriate support to students in preparation for the BRLA. [Item 45e: Students]	14 6.0%	39 16.7%	117 50.2%	55 23.6%	8 3.4%	3.02 (0.886)

*Note.* The items consisted of statements that required religious educators to use one of five ratings ( $n = 233$ ). The ratings are: Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1, Disagree (D) = 2, Neither agree nor disagree (N) = 3, Agree (A) = 4, Strongly Agree (SA) = 5. To reflect missing response data, the percentages presented in the table represent the valid percent as calculated in SPSS.

The p value is the statistical probability of the rejection of a null hypothesis, 0.05 or less, in the non-parametric testing using the Mann-Whitney U Test to measure difference according to gender and the Kruskal-Wallis Test to measure differences according to age and employment role of responsibility.

Table 7.6 is a summary of data to Likert scale Items 44 and 45. Likert scale Item 45 consists of five sub-questions. The Likert scale items required a response to statements about the perceived level of supported offered to teachers and students from the CEOWA, themselves, other teachers, school leaders, parents and students. The analysis of written responses to Open-ended Items 33 and 81 provide clarity about the religious educators' perceptions of the level of support given to teachers and students prior to and during the administration of the BRLA. This is because for Item 33, the religious educators were asked to describe their experiences of teaching RE. For Item 81, they were asked to explain the influence they believed the BRLA had in RE. Within the religious educators' written responses to the items they provided further information about their experiences of administering the BRLA to students.

**7.3.5.1 Perceived support from system administrators.** In response to Likert scale Item 44, similar numbers of religious educators agreed [87 (69 agree + 18 strongly agree) of 233 (37.3%)] compared to those who disagreed [84 (67 disagree + 17 strongly disagree) of 233 (36.1%)] that the CEOWA provided appropriate support to teachers in preparation for the administration of the BRLA. A total of 62 religious educators (26.6% of 233) chose neither to agree nor disagree. Furthermore, the Kruskal-Wallis Test identifies a 0.043 probability of difference in the response data to Likert scale Item 44 according to the religious educators' employment role of responsibility in RE. However, the frequency of that data does not suggest clear differences exist between teachers and school leaders of RE about their perceptions of the level of support provided by the CEOWA to teachers. The analysis of response data to Item 44 suggests that religious educators appear to have disagreed about the level of support provided by the CEOWA.

According to written response data (Open-ended Item 33), 32 of 238 religious educators (13.4%) described how more support is required by the CEOWA for the administration of the BRLA. They provided comments recommending the RE curriculum be updated to support them in administering the BRLA to students. These religious educators are identified in Table 7.7 as teachers and school leaders of RE.

In support of the recommendation, ten other religious educators (4.2% of 238) specifically described (Open-ended Item 81) how the BRLA has had little influence in RE because the RE curriculum has not been updated since the introduction of the assessment. This group identified a lack of attention by the CEOWA to update the RE curriculum. The

religious educators seem to have assumed that the introduction of the BRLA in 2006 would have brought about a review of the curriculum.

Table 7.7

*The Frequency of Data Regarding a Lack of Curriculum Updates in RE*

Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		Total (%)
Year 3 (n = 55)	Year 5 (n = 40)	Year 9 (n = 55)	AP (n = 37)	REC (n = 20)	SPP (n = 26)	SPS (n = 5)	
10	13	4	4	0	0	1	32 (13.4)

*Note.* Partial responses to Item 33: Describe your experiences of teaching Religious Education (N = 238).

The arguments presented by the religious educators who suggested the CEOWA did not provide appropriate support to teachers in preparation for the administration of the BRLA are reflected in the following three comments. As one primary teacher of RE wrote, “The RE resources we are supplied with continue to have draft written over them”. As another primary teacher explained, “The RE Units of Work” have “too many wonder questions” and not enough content that can be used to prepare students for the BRLA. Thirdly, as a Year Nine teacher stated:

I am happy to have a test such as BRLA, BUT the CEO needs to address the fact that Years Eight and Nine books are resources rather than text; they include more detail than can be reasonably covered; and that the BRLA can unfairly pick miniscule details from these resources.

The religious educators suggested teachers require a curriculum that explicitly identifies RE content “so that students can be better prepared for the administration of the BRLA”. They argued for more “student and teacher friendly” RE teaching resource material where the content is clearly defined, and teachers know what content is expected to be assessed. Furthermore, the religious educators recommended that any new curriculum developments in RE should address the needs of a contemporary Catholic school community where students and parents who may not be practising Catholics or belong to the Catholic religion are “well catered for”.

**7.3.5.2 Perceived support from school-based educators.** The analysis of response data to Likert scale Item 45 led to evidence suggesting that religious educators believed they, other teachers and leaders at their Catholic schools provided appropriate support to students in preparation for the administration of the BRLA. The cross-referencing of written response data to Open-ended Item 12 that led to Finding One provides similar evidence.

Likert scale Item 45 consisted of three sub-questions, labelled 45a, 45b and 45c. As shown in Table 7.6, the analysis of response data to Likert scale Item 45a, identifies 178 of 233 religious educators [139 agree + 39 strongly agree (76.4%)] who agreed they provided appropriate support to students. In response to Item 45b, 132 of 233 religious educators [112 agree + 20 strongly agree (56.6%)] agreed teachers, other than themselves provided support to students. The Mann-Whitney U Test identifies a 0.018 probability of difference in that response data according to the religious educators' gender. As shown in Table 7.8, the frequency of the data according to gender suggests more male religious educators [52 of 80 (65.0%)] compared to females [80 of 158 (50.6%)] agreed teachers at their schools provided support to students. Furthermore, the Kruskal-Wallis Test identifies a 0.003 probability of difference in that same response data to Item 45b, according to the religious educators' employment role of responsibility in RE. The frequency of the data (Table 7.8) suggests that more school leaders of RE agreed than teachers of RE that teachers generally provided appropriate support to students in preparation for the administration of the BRLA. For example, four out of five secondary principals (80.0%) and 14 out of 20 RECs (70.0%) agreed teachers provide appropriated support. Similarly, 28 of 37 Assistant Principals (75.7%) and 18 out of 26 primary principals (69.2%) agreed teachers provided appropriate support. In comparison, under a third of Year Three teachers [18 of 55 (32.7%)], almost half the number of Year Five teachers [18 of 40 (45.0%)] and over half the number of Year Nine teachers [32 of 55 (58.2%)] agreed that teachers in general provided appropriate support to students.

In response to Likert scale Item 45c, 138 of 233 religious educators [116 agree + 22 strongly agree (59.2%)] agreed school leaders provided appropriate support to students. The Mann-Whitney U Test identifies a 0.013 probability of difference in the response data according to the religious educators' gender. As shown in Table 7.9, the frequency of that data suggests that again more male religious educators [54 of 80 (67.5%)] compared to females [84 of 158 (53.2%)] agreed school leaders provided appropriate support. The Kruskal-Wallis Test identifies a 0.000 probability of difference in the response data according to the religious educators' employment role of responsibility in RE. The frequency

of that data according to role (Table 7.9) suggests more leaders of RE in Catholic primary schools agreed compared to other sub-groups that school leaders provided appropriate support to students. For example, 31 of 37 Assistant Principals of RE (83.8%) and 21 of 26 primary principals (80.7%) agreed appropriate support to students is provided by school leaders. This evidence suggests that school leaders may have felt the need to defend their level of support in preparation for the administration of LSAs.

Table 7.8  
*The Frequency of Data Regarding Support from Teachers*

	Gender		Total
	Females (n=158)	Males (n=80)	
Strongly Disagree	5	1	6
Disagree	22	6	28
Neither agree nor disagree	49	18	67
Agree	68	44	112
Strongly Agree	12	8	20
Total*	156	77	233

	Employment Role of Responsibility in RE						Total	
	Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		
	Year 3 (n = 55)	Year 5 (n = 40)	Year 9 (n = 55)	APRE (n = 37)	REC (n = 20)	CPP (n = 26)		CSP (n = 5)
Strongly Disagree	3	0	2	0	1	0	0	6
Disagree	11	3	5	4	3	2	0	28
Neither agree nor disagree	23	18	13	4	2	6	1	67
Agree	15	14	28	24	11	16	4	112
Strongly Agree	3	4	4	4	3	2	0	20
Total*	55	39	52	36	20	26	5	233

*Note.* Response data to Likert scale Item 45b: Teachers at my school provide appropriate support to students in preparation for the BRLA ( $n = 233$ ).

\*The total refers to the number of religious educators who responded to the questionnaire item.

Table 7.9

*The Frequency of Data Regarding Support from School Leaders*

	Gender		Total
	Females (n = 158)	Males (n = 80)	
Strongly Disagree	6	2	8
Disagree	26	5	31
Neither agree nor disagree	40	16	56
Agree	71	45	116
Strongly Agree	13	9	22
Total*	156	77	233

	Employment Role of Responsibility in RE							Total
	Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		
	Year 3 (n = 55)	Year 5 (n = 40)	Year 9 (n = 55)	APRE (n = 37)	REC (n = 20)	CPP (n = 26)	CSP (n = 5)	
Strongly Disagree	4	1	2	0	1	0	0	8
Disagree	13	2	10	3	3	0	0	31
Neither agree nor disagree	16	14	14	2	3	5	2	56
Agree	21	17	23	27	9	16	3	116
Strongly Agree	1	5	3	4	4	5	0	22
Total*	55	39	52	36	20	26	5	233

*Note.* Response data to Likert scale Item 45c: School Leaders at my school provide appropriate support to students in preparation for the BRLA ( $n = 233$ ).

\*The total refers to the number of religious educators who responded to the questionnaire item.

Further to the evidence identifying teachers and school leaders supported students in preparation for the BRLA, the analysis of written response data (Open-ended Item 12) found 79 religious educators who described how they systematically prepared for the administration of the BRLA. Table 7.10 represents the frequency of that data according to the religious educators' employment role of responsibility in RE. As part of their descriptions, the religious educators explained how they particularly supported students in preparation for the

BRLA. The religious educators wrote comments such as “I have prepared students for the administration of the BRLA” and “I assist teachers and students with the administration of the BRLA”. The comment from one school leader of RE reflects the common expressions from the group:

My experience has been from an administrative point of view. I do the paper work, inform parents, inform teachers, prepare samples for students and teachers, organise the logistics of rooms, room changes, supervisors, timetabling, equipment. I have always had the support of staff, parents and students. They are quite compliant with the test [BRLA]. However, my perception is that they don’t give it much importance.

The school leader described not only the level of preparation and support they provided but also indicated that, although others in the school community were known to adhere to preparation requirements, they may not have fully perceived the BRLA as important. The analysis of data to Likert scale Items 45d and 45e substantiate the school leader’s claim by showing that fewer numbers of religious educators perceived teachers, students and parents as providing the same support to students that school leaders and teachers directly involved with the BRLA provide.

Table 7.10

*The Frequency of Statements About the Administration of the BRLA*

Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		Total (%)
Year 3 (n = 55)	Year 5 (n = 40)	Year 9 (n = 55)	APRE (n = 37)	REC (n = 20)	CPP (n = 26)	CSP (n = 5)	
10	9	21	23	5	10	1	79 (33.2)

*Note.* Partial responses to Item 12: Describe your experience of the BRLA (N = 238).

**7.3.5.3 Perceived support from students and parents.** As mentioned, the analysis of response data in Table 7.6 suggests the religious educators may have perceived students and parents as less supportive during the administration phase of the BRLA compared to teachers and school leaders. Furthermore, the table also identifies statistically significant numbers of religious educators who appear ambivalent about the level of support provided by students and parents. For example, 119 of 231 religious educators (51.5%) chose neither to agree nor disagree that parents support students in preparation for the administration of the BRLA and

117 of 231 religious educators (50.6%) chose neither to agree nor disagree that students support each other. These results possibly indicate uncertainty from the religious educators or perhaps their desire not to be critical of students and parents by withholding judgement about the level of support students and parents provide those students who are involved with the BRLA.

The cross-referencing of written response data from Open-ended Items 12, 33 and 81 with the numeric data from Likert scale, Items 45d and 45e presents one possible rationale for the religious educators' ambivalence. Those religious educators who neither agreed nor disagreed about the level of support provided by students and parents for students preparing for the BRLA described how students and parents were disengaged with the BRLA and generally with RE as a learning area. This evidence aligns with evidence in Finding One and Two where religious educators also spoke about the dissatisfaction of students and parents regarding the BRLA and RE in general.

The analysis of data to Open-ended Item 12 found 15 of 238 religious educators (6.3%) who described their experiences of the BRLA as questionable because they believed students and parents did not take RE seriously as a learning area. Of the group of 15, six were Year Nine teachers. As one of the teachers wrote:

Each year I believe the test is becoming more difficult, yet our school population is becoming more and more unchurched. It is difficult for children to truly consolidate their learning when it is not a priority in many families. The church language while explained in teacher background and in some Units of Work is not recognised by the children and occasionally by the teachers.

The comment of one school leader of RE affirms the arguments presented by the Year Nine teachers. The school leader stated, "Hard work! .... It is very challenging to engage students in learning in RE. Often there is a negative or 'slack; it doesn't matter' attitude to the subject".

Similarly, in response to Open-ended Item 33, where religious educators were asked to describe their experiences of teaching RE, a group of 36 (15.1% of 238) described the challenges they faced teaching RE. Almost half the number of religious educators in the group (16 of the 36) were Year Nine teachers. As one of Year Nine teachers wrote:

There are very few Catholics at the school I teach, so it is quite difficult and sad that parents don't support or show interest in this learning area. Removal of this time and paper wasting imposition is needed because it makes it more difficult for teachers to maintain credibility in what is already a counter-cultural subject.



Further to the comments above, in response to Open-ended Item 81, nine (3.8% of 238) religious educators argued there seems to be a lack of support shown by students and their parents towards the BRLA because of its link to the RE curriculum. The group indicated that the BRLA did not have the power to influence policies or practices in RE because of the lack of support that they believed exists for the learning area. The comment by one Year Five teacher reflects the comments of others in the group:

Sadly, not all teachers have given it [Religious Education] the same importance as the other learning areas, so by the time I have the students, some don't approach the work with the same enthusiasm. Lack of parent support also makes it difficult for the children to apply what is learnt in class.

According to the three minority groups, students and their parents (as well as teachers who were not involved in teaching RE) were disengaged with RE as a learning area. They perceived RE not to be valued nor supported by students and parents. The religious educators suggested disengagement with RE as a learning area was due to a decline in the number of students from Catholic families and the increase of non-practising Catholics in the student and teacher populations.

The sub-findings that led to Finding Three indicate that religious educators in Phase One responded positively to the administration of the BRLA and believed they appropriately supported students in preparation for the assessment. However, the religious educators also presented arguments suggesting that they experienced challenges preparing students for the administration of the BRLA. The next section in this chapter discusses Finding Four and refers to how the religious educators responded to various aspects of the implementation of the BRLA prior to and proceeding the administration process. The religious educators' responses further highlight the personal and professional experience they had with the BRLA as a LSA and with RE as the learning area to which the assessment belongs.

#### **7.4 Finding Four**

Finding Four suggests that the religious educators responded to the implementation of the BRLA in contrasting ways. The collation and analysis of response data that led to the finding is based on the religious educators' response to three aspects of the implementation of the BRLA. The first aspect considers the perceived time and pressure associated with the BRLA. The second aspect considers the perceived construction of test items and student experience of the items. The third aspect considers how the religious educators perceived

students to perform in the BRLA compared to in-class assessments in RE and other LSAs such as NAPLAN and WAMSE.

**7.4.1 Sub-finding 4.1.** The religious educators disagreed about the time and pressure associated with the BRLA. The analysis of data to four Likert scale items and five open-ended items led to this sub-finding. Table 7.11 is a summary of the data in response to the Likert scale items. Table 7.14 identifies the frequency of written comments in response to open-ended items that support the numeric data. The written comments suggest that groups of religious educators felt pressure associated with using the BRLA and other LSAs such as NAPLAN.

Table 7.11

*Perceptions of the Time and Pressure Associated with the BRLA*

Item Description	Frequency of Responses					Mean (SD)
	SD = 1	D = 2	N = 3	A = 4	SA = 5	
The organisation involved prior to administering the BRLA is minimal. [Item 51 (n = 233)]	6 2.6%	37 15.9%	41 17.6%	141 60.5%	8 3.4%	3.46 (0.890) p = 0.000 role
Teachers at my school feel that it is necessary to spend time preparing students for the BRLA. [Item 48 (n = 233)]	11 4.7%	38 16.3%	46 19.7%	115 49.4%	23 9.9%	3.43 (1.028)
Students require a great deal of time to prepare for the BRLA. [Item 47 (n = 233)]	10 4.3%	69 29.6%	63 27.0%	78 33.5%	13 5.6%	3.06 (1.013) p = 0.003 gender
I feel that there is a great deal of pressure placed on teachers to prepare students for the BRLA. [Item 49 (n = 233)]	14 6.0%	69 29.6%	59 25.3%	74 31.8%	17 7.3%	3.05 (1.072)

*Note.* The four items consisted of statements that required religious educators to use one of five ratings. The ratings are: Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1, Disagree (D) = 2, Neither agree nor disagree (N) = 3, Agree (A) = 4, Strongly Agree (SA) = 5. To reflect missing response data, the percentages presented in the table represent the valid percent as calculated in SPSS.

**7.4.1.1 Perceptions of organisational requirements.** More than half the number of religious educators agreed preparations for the BRLA required minimal organisation. In response to Likert scale Item 51, 149 of 233 religious educators [141 agree + 8 strongly agree (63.9%)] agreed minimal organisation is required by teachers to prepare students for the BRLA. The Kruskal-Wallis Test identifies a 0.000 probability of difference in the data according to the religious educators' employment role of responsibility in RE. The frequency of that data as shown in Table 7.12 suggests Year Three teachers [47 of 55 (85.5%)] agreed more than other sub-groups that minimal organisation was required. The majority of primary school leaders of RE [30 of 37 (81.1%)] and secondary principals [4 of 5 (80.0%)] also agreed minimal organisation was required.

Table 7.12

*The Frequency of Data for Item 51 According to Role*

	Employment Role of Responsibility in RE							Total
	Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		
	Year 3 (n = 55)	Year 5 (n = 40)	Year 9 (n = 55)	APRE (n = 37)	REC (n = 20)	CPP (n = 26)	CSP (n = 5)	
Strongly Disagree	0	3	3	0	0	0	0	6
Disagree	2	1	13	4	7	9	1	37
Neither agree nor disagree	6	10	14	2	2	7	0	41
Agree	45	21	21	30	11	10	3	141
Strongly Agree	2	4	1	0	0	0	1	8
Total*	55	39	52	36	20	26	5	233

*Note.* Response data to Likert scale Item 51: School Leaders at my school provide appropriate support to students in preparation for the BRLA ( $n = 233$ ).

\*The total refers to the number of religious educators who responded to the questionnaire item.

**7.4.1.2 Perceptions of preparation time.** More than half the number of religious educators agreed it necessary to spend time preparing students for the BRLA. In response to Likert scale Item 48, 138 of 233 religious educators [115 agree + 23 strongly agree (59.2%)] agreed teachers at their school felt that it was necessary to spend time preparing students for

the BRLA. However, the amount of time considered necessary by groups of religious educators seem to vary. For example, in response to Likert scale Item 47 the religious educators disagreed about the amount of time required to prepare students for the BRLA. More than a third [91 (78 agree + 13 strongly agree) of 233 (39.1%)] agreed students required a great deal of time. In contrast, almost a third of the number of religious educators [79 (69 disagree + 10 strongly disagree) of 233 (33.9%)] disagreed and slightly less than a third [63 of 233 (27.0%)] chose neither to agree nor disagree.

The Mann-Whitney U Test identifies a 0.003 probability of difference in the response data to Likert scale Item 47 according to the religious educators' gender. With reference to Table 7.13, the frequency of data according to gender suggests almost twice as many male religious educators [35 of 80 (43.8%)] compared to females [44 of 158 (27.8%)] disagreed that a great deal of time was required to prepare students for the BRLA. This result again suggests that male religious educators seem to have had more positive experiences of the administration and implementation of the BRLA compared to female religious educators.

Table 7.13

*The Frequency of Data for Item 47 According to Gender*

	Gender		Total
	Females (n = 158)	Males (n = 80)	
Strongly Disagree	6	4	10
Disagree	38	31	69
Neither agree nor disagree	42	21	63
Agree	59	19	78
Strongly Agree	11	2	13
Total*	156	77	233

\*The total refers to the number of religious educators who responded to the questionnaire item.

**7.4.1.3 Perceptions of pressure on teachers.** The religious educators disagreed about the amount of pressure on teachers associated with preparing students for the BRLA. In response to Likert scale Item 49, 91 of 233 [74 agree + 17 strongly agree (39.1%)] agreed a great deal of pressure was placed on teachers to prepare students for the BRLA. Similar numbers of religious educators disagreed [83 (69 disagree + 14 strongly disagree) of 233 (35.6%)] or chose neither to agree nor disagree [59 of 233 (25.3%)]. Table 7.14 shows the

frequency of written comments by teachers and school leaders of RE that refer to their statements about the perceived pressure associated with the BRLA and with other LSAs such as NAPLAN.

Table 7.14

*The Frequency of Statements About the Stress Associated with the BRLA*

	Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		Total (%)
	Yr 3 (n=55)	Yr 5 (n=40)	Yr 9 (n=55)	APRE (n=37)	REC (n=20)	CPP (n=26)	CSP (n=5)	
The BRLA causes stress and added pressure because it reminds students of NAPLAN and there is too much testing in these year levels [Open-ended Item 12]	6	5	4	2	1	0	0	18 (7.6)
Teachers are constrained by time because the BRLA is too early in Term 3 and not all the content in the RE curriculum is taught. [Open-ended Item 12]	0	5	4	2	1	0	0	12 (5.0)
Large-scale, standardised assessments are a source of stress and anxiety on students and teachers. [Open-ended Item 37]	19	14	8	7	1	2	0	51 (21.4)

*Note.* Partial responses to Item 12: Describe your experience of The Bishops’ Religious Literacy Assessment. (N = 238) Partial responses to Item 37: Describe your experience of large-scale, standardised assessments (N = 238).

As first identified in Finding One through the response data to Open-ended Item 12, 18 of 238 religious educators (7.6%) described the BRLA as stressful. They stated the BRLA caused stress by “adding pressure on students and teachers” and consumed “valuable in-class time to adequately prepare students for the BRLA”. Of the group, 15 were teachers of RE. Similarly, but in greater numbers, in response to Open-ended Item 37 where religious

educators were asked to describe their experiences of LSAs, 51 of 238 religious educators (21.4%) who were predominately teachers of RE, stated that LSAs were a source of stress and anxiety on students and teachers. The teachers described how the BRLA reminds students of NAPLAN and the perceived stress associated with NAPLAN. This group of religious educators also indicated that students in Years Three, Five and Nine were overexposed to LSAs. The concern of not having taught all content prior to the administration of the BRLA was stated by 12 of the group of 51 (5.0% of 238).

These groups of religious educators described how “the BRLA reminded students of NAPLAN” and that “there was too much of this type of testing in Years Three, Five and Nine”. As one school leader of RE stated, “The BRLA is A LOT of work, it disrupts classes and stress students out”. Similarly, one Year Five teacher explained:

As there are many standardised tests administered to Year Five which are out of the control of the CEOWA, I found the timing of the assessment in the week before WAMSE to be stressful and tiring for the children. I wonder whether the assessment could be later in Term Three just to give the children a bit of a breather?

The religious educators considered the BRLA, NAPLAN and WAMSE testing all in the same year levels as stressful for students and their teachers.

Twelve religious educators indicated in response to Open-ended Item 12 that the timing of the BRLA was too early in the year and did not allow teachers the time to ensure that the essential RE content had been taught. The religious educators felt they were “under pressure” shortly after the July school holidays [usually in the first few weeks of Term Three] to administer the BRLA. They suggested they adequately prepared students for the BRLA but were at times frustrated “seeing students flounder with questions”. They also believed the students would have easily been able to answer such questions if more time was given to teachers to cover the content in the RE curriculum prior to administration. The explanation provided by one Year Nine teacher reflects the common perceptions by the group of 12:

In my initial years, there was a lot of preparation involved, and helping students understand the BRLA and giving them the opportunity to practise going through past year papers. Over the years, the BRLA has taken place in early Term Three. The start of Term Three is usually a stressful time as there often were limited time for students to be well-prepared. As a result, I have created an information booklet based on the major themes of the BRLA and given to students in advance for their preparation.

The teacher described how attempts were made to help students deal with the pressure associated with the BRLA.

Besides feeling that they did not have the time to adequately prepare students for the BRLA, the religious educators believed the stress associated with the BRLA was also due to time wasted on the BRLA rather than on the “broader exploration of faith issues in class”. The group of 12 religious educators perceived the BRLA outside the scope of RE classroom practices. They explained that their focus in RE classes was more about ensuring students develop their faith and less about students demonstrating their knowledge of the faith. This evidence appears in Findings One and Two and will be explored further in the following chapters.

It appears that groups of religious educators seem to have treated RE as a catechetical rather than an educational activity. It also seems that the 51 religious educators who described LSAs generally as stressful activities, provide a context for their response to the implementation of the BRLA. Three contextual understandings are identified. Firstly, 41 of the 51 religious educators were teachers of RE and half that number were Year Three teachers [21 of 41 (51.2%)]. Secondly, the teachers argued that LSAs “created a lot of stress for children”, “add unnecessary pressure on teachers” and “students need to be adequately prepared to sit these types of assessments”. Thirdly, the religious educators provided explanations for why they perceived LSA to be stressful. They described the format of LSA as different to classroom assessments; the perceived “content driven” curriculum in Catholic schools that they were expected to teach; and how parent anxiety about LSAs contributes to student and teacher anxiety.

The teachers of RE described the “format” of LSAs as stressful and suggested that Year Three students in particular were formally exposed to standardised assessments at an inappropriately early age. As one Year Three teacher explained:

These assessments are too stressful for children, even though I endeavour to take the pressure off, it’s very difficult considering the scripts and environment we have to adhere to, to ensure they are standardised throughout all schools.

As another teacher explained:

They [LSAs] create a lot of stress for the children. As teachers, we waste a lot of time preparing them for these tests. Time that could be spent teaching content from the curriculum. Over the years I have found that a lot of children perform worse than expected (as they don’t know how to complete these tests in a test situation) this then causes more stress for the parents and teachers.

The teachers described LSAs as “taking up valuable teaching time” from what they believed was a very “content driven” RE curriculum.

Teachers of RE suggested they “wasted a lot of time preparing students” for LSAs and that their time could have been “better spent teaching the content from the curriculum”. They suggested the teaching of test techniques and strategies to prepare students for LSAs was “too time consuming”. They argued that LSAs were different to regular classroom work and required “a great deal of their time and energy” to ensure that students knew the essential content that may possibly appear in the assessments. As one Year Five teacher explained:

These assessments, particularly NAPLAN, cause great stress for many students. I was at pains to assist my students to be relaxed and comfortable and to put the assessment in perspective.

A school leader of RE made a similar comment to the teachers:

Standardised assessments such as NAPLAN put undue stress on students which is unfair for them and can cause much anxiety. Many teachers cancel their regular teaching programme to prepare which pushes core learning back and means playing catch-up for the rest of the term.

These religious educators said that parents also generally tended to become “nervous for their children” when participating in LSAs and that the parents’ anxiety about the assessment added to student and teacher stress.

Explanations by three other religious educators within the group of 51 reflect the perceptions of the group about the use of LSAs and the associated stress relating to the assessments. As one principal wrote:

I actually find it [NAPLAN] a complete waste of time. Parents are putting far too much pressure on their children and in turn children are put under unnecessary pressure. Too many schools teach to/for the NAPLAN test. How accurate are the results???

Similarly, one school leader explained:

I have experienced administering both NAPLAN and WAMSE testing. They are all quite easy to administer. However, students do become quite stressed over these tests. It’s good they are all very similar, in regards, to administering the tests from a teachers’ point of view and for students the layout of tests is similar.

As one teacher explained, suggestions were provided by the religious educators to assist parents to keep their children “stress free”. The teacher wrote:

Children need to be taught how to sit these tests and to work under time pressure. This can be very stressful for some children and I have seen a child have a panic attack from all the pressure. Young children do find it challenging to sit and focus for that



amount of time, and many of them worry about the clock and about just rushing through the test. As a school, we do get some useful information as to areas that we need to work on.

The religious educators' perceptions of LSAs were discussed in Chapter Five (Finding One) because their comments provide a context for the religious educators' perceptions of the purpose of the BRLA. The evidence that led to Sub-finding 4.1 suggests that how the religious educators perceived the purpose and role of the BRLA as a LSA may have influenced how they responded to the implementation of the assessment.

**7.4.2 Sub-finding 4.2.** Despite religious educators disagreeing about the amount of time and pressure associated with the BRLA, they did agree it was useful to review test items in the BRLA but disagreed about aspects of the BRLA test items. For example, they disagreed specifically about the construction of the test items.

**7.4.2.1 Perceptions of reviewing test items.** More than half the number of religious educators agreed it was useful reviewing test items with students. In response to Likert scale Item 66, as shown in Table 7.15, 140 of 231 religious educators [126 agree + 14 strongly agree (60.6%)] agreed it was useful to review test items in the BRLA with students. The review process was considered as time teachers spent with students answering past test items. Within the written data in response to Open-ended Item 12, ten (4.2% of 238) religious educators acknowledged the need for reviewing test items with students in preparation for the BRLA. Of the ten religious educators, seven Year Nine teachers wrote comments such as "Before the test [BRLA] we ensure that the children are aware of the content not yet covered in the year. We practise completing past test questions".

The Kruskal-Wallis Test identifies a 0.003 probability of difference in the response data to Likert scale Item 66 according to the religious educators' employment role of responsibility in RE. The frequency of that data according to role (Table 7.16), suggests that school leaders of RE and, in particular, primary principals [21 of 26 (80.8%)] and primary Assistant Principals of RE [27 of 37 (73.0%)] agreed more than other sub-groups that it was useful to review test items with students. Similar numbers of Year Nine teachers agreed or chose neither to agree nor disagree it was useful reviewing test items with student.

Table 7.15

*Perceptions of Reviewing BRLA test items*

Item Description	Frequency of Responses					Mean (SD)
	SD = 1	D = 2	N = 3	A = 4	SA = 5	
I find it useful to review the BRLA test items with my students. [Item 66 (n = 231)]	9 (4%)	28 (12%)	54 (23%)	126 (55%)	14 (6%)	3.46 (0.926)
						p = 0.003 role

*Note.* The item required religious educators to use one of five ratings. The ratings are: Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1, Disagree (D) = 2, Neither agree nor disagree (N) = 3, Agree (A) = 4, Strongly Agree (SA) = 5. To reflect missing response data, the percentages presented in the table represent the valid percent as calculated in SPSS.

Table 7.16

*The Frequency of Data for Item 66 According to Role*

	Employment Role of Responsibility							Total
	Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		
	Year 3 (n = 55)	Year 5 (n = 40)	Year 9 (n = 55)	APRE (n = 37)	REC (n = 20)	CPP (n = 26)	CSP (n = 5)	
Strongly Disagree	0	1	4	0	2	2	0	9
Disagree	13	3	7	0	3	0	2	28
Neither agree nor disagree	9	11	19	8	3	3	1	54
Agree	30	22	19	24	12	17	2	126
Strongly Agree	3	2	2	3	0	4	0	14
Total*	55	39	51	35	20	26	5	231

*Note.* Response data to Likert scale Item 66: I find it useful to review the BRLA test items with my students (n = 231).

\*The total refers to the number of religious educators who responded to the questionnaire item.

**7.4.2.2 Perceptions of the construction of the test items.** The religious educators disagreed that the BRLA test items were poorly constructed and that students found it

difficult to answer most items. Table 7.17 identifies that half the number of religious educators disagreed [122 (114 disagree + 8 strongly disagree) of 231 (52.8%)] that the BRLA test items were poorly constructed. Under half the number of the religious educators [103 (100 disagreed + 3 strongly disagreed) of 231 (44.6%)] disagreed that students found it difficult to answer most of the test items in the BRLA compared to 28.6% who agreed [66 (51 agreed + 15 strongly agreed) of 231] and 26.8% who chose neither to agree nor disagree (62 of 231).

Table 7.17  
*Perceptions of the BRLA Test Items*

Item Description	Frequency of Responses					Mean (SD)
	SD = 1	D = 2	N = 3	A = 4	SA = 5	
The test items in the BRLA are generally poorly constructed. [Item 63 (n = 231)]	8 3.5%	114 49.4%	74 32.0%	26 11.3%	9 3.9%	2.62 (0.875)
My students find it difficult to answer most of the test items. [Item 64 (n = 231)]	3 1.3%	100 43.3%	62 26.8%	51 22.1%	15 6.5%	2.89 (0.979)

*Note.* The two items consisted of statements that required religious educators to use one of five ratings. The ratings are: Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1, Disagree (D) = 2, Neither agree nor disagree (N) = 3, Agree (A) = 4, Strongly Agree (SA) = 5. To reflect missing response data, the percentages presented in the table represent the valid percent as calculated in SPSS.

**7.4.2.3 Perceived difficulty with the test items.** More religious educators agreed than disagreed that the BRLA test items contained difficult vocabulary (Table 7.18). In response to Likert scale Item 56, 164 of 232 religious educators [109 agree + 55 strongly agree (70.7%)] agreed that students experienced, difficulty with the vocabulary used in the BRLA test items. The Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test identifies a 0.039 probability of difference in that response data according to the religious educators' employment role of responsibility in RE. The frequency of the data to Likert scale Item 56 as shown in Table 7.19 suggests Year Three [44 of 55 (80.0%)] and Year Five [32 of 40 (80.0%)] teachers, as well as secondary principals [4 of 5 (80.0%)] agreed more than other sub-groups that students experienced, difficulty with the vocabulary used in the BRLA test items. As a group, less

Year Nine teachers [22 of 55 (40.0%)] agreed students experienced difficulty with the test items.

Table 7.18

*Perceptions of the Difficulty of the BRLA Test Items*

Item Description	Frequency of Responses					Mean (SD)
	SD = 1	D = 2	N = 3	A = 4	SA = 5	
My students experience difficulty with the vocabulary used in the BRLA. [Item 56 (n = 232)]	2 0.9%	33 14.2%	33 14.2%	109 47.0%	55 23.7%	3.78 (0.992) p = 0.039 role

*Note.* The item required religious educators to use one of five ratings. The ratings are: Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1, Disagree (D) = 2, Neither agree nor disagree (N) = 3, Agree (A) = 4, Strongly Agree (SA) = 5. To reflect missing response data, the percentages presented in the table represent the valid percent as calculated in SPSS.

Table 7.19

*The Frequency of Data for Item 56 According to Role*

	Employment Role of Responsibility in RE							Total
	Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		
	Year 3 (n = 55)	Year 5 (n = 40)	Year 9 (n = 55)	APRE (n = 37)	REC (n = 20)	CPP (n = 26)	CSP (n = 5)	
Strongly Disagree	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	2
Disagree	5	3	15	2	2	5	1	33
Neither agree nor disagree	6	4	14	4	2	3	0	33
Agree	24	22	18	17	12	12	4	109
Strongly Agree	20	10	4	12	3	6	0	55
Total*	55	39	52	35	20	26	5	232

*Note.* Response data to Likert scale Item 56: My students experience difficulty with the vocabulary used in the BRLA (n = 232).

\*The total refers to the number of religious educators who responded to the questionnaire item.

The religious educators provided written comments in reply to three open-ended questions, indicating the vocabulary in the BRLA test items was difficult for students. For example, in response to Open-ended Item 83, a total of 81 of 238 (34.0%) religious educators suggested the vocabulary used in the BRLA was difficult for students. They provided the feedback about the test items as part of their final comments about the BRLA. Table 7.20 presents the frequency of those comments. A total of 65 of the 81 (80.2%) religious educators were in Catholic primary schools, with almost half Year Three teachers [29 of 65 (44.6%)]. The teachers wrote comments suggesting student with “high literacy levels” performed better in the BRLA compared to students with “poor literacy skills”. As one teacher explained, “Students may know the answers; however, as they are required to adequately read and write, some students tend to underperform”. Similarly, another teacher wrote, “The BRLA can be a useful tool to measure understanding of concepts. However, students with poor literacy skills struggle to do the test”.

Table 7.20

*The Frequency of Comments about the Difficulty of the Test Items*

Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		Total (%)
Year 3 (n = 55)	Year 5 (n = 40)	Year 9 (n = 55)	APRE (n = 37)	REC (n = 20)	CPP (n = 26)	CSP (n = 5)	
29	21	4	15	3	9	0	81 (34.0)

*Note.* Partial responses to Item 83: Please comment on any aspect of the BRLA you believe needs attention ( $N = 238$ ).

The religious educators proposed two arguments about the perceived difficulty of the BRLA test items. Firstly, they argued that students with poor literacy skills were disadvantaged by LSAs such as “NAPLAN, WAMSE and the BRLA”. They argued the students’ inability to read and write effectively hinders student performance on assessments. The religious educators felt that LSAs made students “feel inadequate”. In turn, they perceived LSAs as “inaccurate measures of students’ true capabilities”. Secondly, the religious educators argued that the vocabulary in the BRLA was “content specific” and “too theological” for students. They argued they did not believe that teachers focused on the

vocabulary used in the RE curriculum. Furthermore, they suggested the vocabulary in the BRLA test items was unrelated to the RE curriculum. As one Year Three teacher explained:

I believe the language used in some parts of the BRLA is too complicated which impedes the children's understanding. I think if the language was reworded to a more basic form some children that may have known the answer would be more successful. For instance, in this year's test the word "covenant" was used. If that word was changed to "promise", some children may have had a better understanding. The teachers' own faith knowledge is vastly different as well, which will also result in differing levels of education that the students receive. This is the case with any subject area that is taught. I think able students achieve better scores in the BRLA and if the children come from a strong faith background, they may do better than those who do not. I think the results from the BRLA follow a typical "bell curve".

The religious educators recommended the vocabulary in the BRLA test items be "simplified" and replaced with "common, everyday language". They indicated that such a strategy would assist students with their "poor literacy skills" and those who lack the content knowledge that is expected to be known and understood in RE. Table 7.21 lists common expressions used by the group of 81 religious educators about the perceived difficulty of the test items.

Table 7.21

*Statements About the Difficulty of the BRLA Test Items*

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The BRLA test items:

- are above the students' chronological understanding;
  - need to be more user friendly;
  - should be written less in a formalised style;
  - are far too complex, sophisticated and formal;
  - are very theological;
  - should use common everyday language; and,
  - are very difficult for students in Years Three and Five.
- 

Similarly, and as previously identified in Chapter Five, 41 of 238 religious educators (17.2%) in response to Open-ended Item 12 also described the vocabulary used in the BRLA test items as challenging for teachers and students. Their descriptions referred to the perceived purpose of the BRLA. As part of their descriptions they argued the test items were "too literacy based and not suitable for the age or learning styles of students". The religious

educators seem to have believed that the BRLA had not influenced their practices in RE because the vocabulary in the BRLA test items was too difficult and irrelevant to the RE curriculum. Further discussions about the perceived difficulty and relevance of the BRLA test items is presented in the next section and the following chapters.

**7.4.2.4 Perceived relevance of the test items.** The religious educators disagreed about the relevance of the BRLA test items to the RE curriculum (Table 7.22). In response to Likert scale Item 58, 129 of 232 [125 agree + 4 strongly agree (55.6%)] agreed the test items in the 2013 BRLA were relevant to the RE curriculum. In contrast and in response to Likert scale Item 59, a total of 67 of 232, or less than a third of the religious educators [60 agreed + 7 strongly agreed (28.9%)] agreed that over time the BRLA test items were relevant to the RE curriculum. More religious educators agreed than disagreed that the 2013 BRLA test items were relevant to the RE curriculum but fewer numbers agreed past test items were relevant.

Table 7.22

*Perceptions of the Relevance of the BRLA Test Items*

Item Description	Frequency of Responses					Mean (SD)
	SD = 1	D = 2	N = 3	A = 4	SA = 5	
The test items in the 2013 BRLA were relevant to the Religious Education curriculum. [Item 58 (n = 232)]	10 4.3%	38 16.4%	55 23.7%	125 53.9%	4 1.7%	3.32 (0.918)
Over the years, the test items in the BRLA have been irrelevant to the Religious Education curriculum. [Item 59 (n = 232)]	7 3.0%	78 33.6%	80 34.5%	60 25.9%	7 3.0%	2.93 (0.914)

*Note.* The two items required religious educators to use one of five ratings. The ratings are: Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1, Disagree (D) = 2, Neither agree nor disagree (N) = 3, Agree (A) = 4, Strongly Agree (SA) = 5. To reflect missing response data, the percentages presented in the table represent the valid percent as calculated in SPSS.

In comments in response to Open-ended Items 12 and 37, groups of religious educators explained how LSA test items were generally irrelevant to their respective curricula. In response to Item 12, where the religious educators were asked to describe their experiences of the BRLA, 27 (11.3% of 238) religious educators stated that the BRLA was

irrelevant to the RE curriculum because the test items were dissimilar to test items designed by classroom teachers. Similarly, in response to Item 37, where religious educators were asked to describe their experiences of LSAs, 21 (8.8% of 238) religious educators, of which 13 were teachers of RE, suggested that LSAs such as NAPLAN were often not relevant to the respective “syllabus” because the vocabulary used in the test items was difficult for students to read and comprehend. Furthermore, they described how the structure of the test items in LSAs were foreign to students. A total of 28 of 238 (11.8%) religious educators also explained that given the irrelevance of the test items in NAPLAN, teachers “teach to the test”.

The religious educators who described the BRLA and the NAPLAN test items as different to what students experience in assessments designed by classroom teachers made comments such as “Large-scale, standardised assessments don’t always measure a student’s capability in a learning area. They focus on rote learning and not critical thinking”. As one school leader of RE wrote:

NAPLAN does not give an exact description of where a child is “at”. The test does not apply to what they are currently learning in class more so, what they “should” know at their age. I have several students with disabilities that can only fill out the front page with their name. This does not cater for them or any other student with a learning disability/difficulty.

These religious educators suggested they “felt strongly that LSAs were detrimental to the learning experiences of many children”. As assessment types, LSAs were considered “very unpleasant” for students and “sometimes emotionally damaging experiences” particularly for those students that “struggle with their literacy”. They labelled LSAs as “distractions” to regular classroom practices because the wording and structure of the test items was perceived as not understood by students. This evidence is consistent with and complements the previously discussed sub-findings that identify groups of religious educators who perceive LSAs as challenging. One perceived challenge is associated with an apparent difference between student performance in classroom assessments compared to assessments developed by educational system authorities.

**7.4.2.5 Perceptions of student performance.** More religious educators agreed than disagreed that students performed better in RE assessments designed by classroom teachers compared to the BRLA as a LSA. Two Likert scale items were used to investigate the



religious educators' perceptions of student performance in the BRLA. Table 7.23 is a summary of the analyses of that investigation.

Table 7.23

*Perceptions of Student Performance in the BRLA*

Item Description	Frequency of Responses					Mean (SD)
	SD = 1	D = 2	N = 3	A = 4	SA = 5	
My students perform well in RE assessments. Classroom Assessments [Item 74a (n = 231)]	1 0.4%	4 1.7%	48 20.8%	167 72.3%	11 4.8%	3.79 (0.567)
My students perform well in RE assessments. BRLA [Item 74b (n = 231)]	9 3.9%	67 29.0%	92 39.8%	61 26.4%	2 0.9%	2.91 (0.860)
I believe that students who perform poorly in the BRLA also perform poorly in classroom assessments in RE. [Item 75a (n = 231)]	8 3.5%	92 39.8%	37 16.0%	85 36.8%	9 3.9%	2.99 (1.032)
I believe that students who perform poorly in the BRLA also perform poorly in NAPLAN. [Item 75b (n = 231)]	1 0.4%	44 19.0%	56 24.2%	103 44.6%	27 11.7%	3.48 (0.946)
I believe that students who perform poorly in the BRLA also perform poorly in WAMSE. [Item 75c (n = 231)]	1 0.4%	43 18.6%	70 30.3%	93 40.3%	24 10.4%	3.42 (0.923)

*Note.* The two items consisted of statements that required religious educators to use one of five ratings. The ratings are: Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1, Disagree (D) = 2, Neither agree nor disagree (N) = 3, Agree (A) = 4, Strongly Agree (SA) = 5. To reflect missing response data, the percentages presented in the table represent the valid percent as calculated in SPSS.

Three inferences are drawn from the table. Firstly, 178 of 231 religious educators [167 agree + 11 strongly agree (77.1%)] agreed their students performed well in RE assessments designed by classroom teachers (Likert scale Item 74a). In contrast, 63 of 231 religious educators [61 agree + 2 strongly agree (27.3%)] agreed their students performed well in the BRLA (Likert scale Item 74b). Furthermore, in response to Likert scale Item 74b, 76 religious educators [67 disagree + 9 strongly disagree (32.9%)] disagreed their students

performed well in the BRLA and 92 religious educators (39.8%) chose neither to agree nor disagree. Secondly, 95 of 231 religious educators [86 agree + 9 strongly agree (41.1%)] agreed students who performed poorly in the BRLA also performed poorly in RE assessments designed by classroom teachers (Likert scale Item 75a). However, similar numbers of religious educators, 100 of 231 [92 disagree + 8 strongly disagree (43.3%)] disagreed students who performed poorly in the BRLA also performed poorly in RE assessments designed by classroom teachers. Thirdly, 130 of 231 religious educators [103 agree + 27 strongly agree (56.3%)] agreed students who performed poorly in the BRLA also performed poorly in NAPLAN. In comparison, fewer religious educators [117 of 231 (93 agree + 24 strongly agree = 50.6%)] agreed students who performed poorly in the BRLA also performed poorly in WAMSE assessments.

According to the analysis of data from Likert scale Items 74 and 75, the religious educators perceived student performance in the BRLA and other LSAs as different to student performance in assessments designed by classroom teachers. From this evidence, together with the other evidence that led to Finding Four, it appears likely that groups of religious educators had contrasting responses to the implementation of the BRLA because they were influenced by their perceptions of the purpose and role of the BRLA as a LSA. The religious educators' perceptions appear to have been shaped by their experiences of using LSAs.

## **7.5 Chapter Summary**

Findings Three and Four were presented in this chapter. The findings are summarised separately in Figures 7.1 and 7.2. Overall, factors such as age, gender, and in particular, the religious educators' employment role of responsibility in RE, seems to have influenced how teachers and school leaders of RE responded to the administration and implementation of the BRLA.

Finding Three identifies the majority of religious educators as having responded to the administration of the BRLA in a consistent and positive manner. The religious educators perceived the administration of the BRLA as an easy process whereby the instructions were simple to follow and familiar. This is because the religious educators said they were involved with administering three types of LSAs: the BRLA, WAMSE and NAPLAN. As teachers and school leaders of RE, the religious educators felt they provided the most appropriate support to students in preparation for the administration of the BRLA compared to other teachers, students and parents. In terms of the level of support offered by students and parents, the religious educators appear ambivalent. One possible rationale for the religious educators'

ambivalence came from minority groups who described students and parents as disengaged with the BRLA and generally with RE.

In contrast to Finding Three, Finding Four reveals groups of religious educators with contrasting responses to the implementation of the BRLA. Although many of the religious educators felt it necessary to review BRLA test items with students, they disagreed about the amount of time and pressure associated with preparing students for the BRLA and other LSAs. Also, although many of the religious educators generally seem to have agreed that the BRLA test items were not poorly constructed, classroom teachers of RE, argued specifically that the BRLA test items contained difficult vocabulary and were irrelevant to the content they taught from the RE curriculum. Furthermore, groups of religious educators suggested that student performance in RE assessments developed by classroom teachers was much higher than in the BRLA, WAMSE and NAPLAN. These findings suggest a possible discrepancy between the religious educators' perceptions of the implementation of the BRLA and their perceptions of teaching and assessment practices in RE.

The next chapter presents a key finding from Phase Two that also addresses SRQ 2. The finding describes how groups of religious educators involved in the interviews responded to the administration and implementation of the BRLA.

## Specific Research Question Two

How do religious educators respond to the administration and implementation of the BRLA?

### Contributing Questions

I find the BRLA easy to administer to students (Item 52).

The instructions for administration are difficult to follow (Item 53).

The CEOWA provides appropriate support documents to teachers in preparation for the administration of the BRLA (Item 43).

My students completed the BRLA within the allocated time (Item 55).

Describe your experiences of the BRLA (Item 12).

The CEOWA provides appropriate support to teachers (Item 44).

Describe your experiences of teaching RE (Item 33).

People at my school provide appropriate support to students in preparation for the BRLA (Item 45).

What influence do you believe the BRLA has had in RE? (Item 81).

## Finding Three from Phase One

**Finding Three:** The religious educators perceived the administration of the BRLA as a straightforward and familiar process and indicated that school-based educators provided the most appropriate support to students.

**Sub-finding 3.1:** Most of the religious educators perceived the BRLA as easy to administer to students [193 of 233 (82.8%)]. Religious educators aged between 24 to 30 years [46 of 52 (88.5%)] agreed more than other age groups. Year Five teachers agreed [37 of 40 (92.5%)] more than any other sub-groups.

**Sub-finding 3.2:** Most of the religious educators perceived the instructions for administering the BRLA as appropriate and easy to follow [187 of 233 (80.3%)]. More than half the number [146 of 233 (62.7%)] agreed the CEOWA provided appropriate support documents. Males agreed [56 of 80 (70.0%)] more than females.

**Sub-finding 3.3:** The religious educators [151 of 232 (65.1%)] agreed students completed the BRLA within the allocated time. Males agreed [55 of 80 (68.8%)] more than females. Secondary School Leaders of RE (RECs) agreed [18 of 20 (90.0%)] more than other sub-groups.

**Sub-finding 3.4:** Groups of religious educators [58 of 238 (24.4%)] described contrasting experiences of administering the BRLA to students. Thirty-seven [37 of 238 (15.5%)] described their experience as challenging. Twenty-one [21 of 238 (8.8%)], described their experience as familiar to NAPLAN.

**Sub-finding 3.5:** The religious educators had mixed perceptions about the level of support offered to teachers and students in preparation for the administration of the BRLA.

Figure 7.1. Summary of Finding Three

## Specific Research Question Two

How do religious educators respond to the administration and implementation of the BRLA?

### Contributing Questions

The organisation involved prior to administering the BRLA is minimal (Item 51).

Teachers at my school feel that it is necessary to spend time preparing students for the BRLA (Item 48).

Students require a great deal of time to prepare for the BRLA (Item 47).

I feel that there is a great deal of pressure placed on teachers to prepare students for the BRLA (Item 49).

Describe your experiences of the BRLA (Item 12).

Describe your experiences of large-scale, standardised assessments (Item 37).

I find it useful to review the BRLA test items with my students (Item 66).

My students experience difficulty with the vocabulary used in the BRLA (Item 56).

The test items in the BRLA are generally poorly constructed (Item 63).

My students find it difficult to answer most of the test items (Item 64).

The test items in the 2013 BRLA were relevant to the RE curriculum (Item 58).

Over the years, the test items in the BRLA have been irrelevant to the RE curriculum (Item 59).

My students perform well in RE assessments (Item 74).

I believe that students who perform poorly in the BRLA also perform poorly in other assessments in RE (Item 75).

Describe your experiences of teaching RE (Item 33).

What influence do you believe the BRLA has had in RE? (Item 81).

## Finding Four from Phase One

**Finding Four:** The religious educators responded to the implementation of the BRLA in contrasting ways.

**Sub-finding 4.1:** The religious educators disagreed about the amount of time and pressure associated with the BRLA.

More than half the number [149 of 233 (63.9%)] agreed preparations for the BRLA required minimal organisation. Year Three Teachers of RE [47 of 55 (85.5%)] agreed more than other sub-groups.

More than half the number [138 of 233 (59.2%)] agreed it was important to spend time preparing students for the BRLA. The religious educators disagreed about the amount of time and pressure on teachers associated with preparing students for the assessment.

**Sub-finding 4.2:** The religious educators disagreed about aspects of the BRLA test items.

More than half the number [140 of 231 (60.6%)] agreed it was useful to review test items with students.

Half the number [123 of 231 (53.2%)] disagreed items were poorly constructed.

Less than half the number [103 of 231 (44.6%)] disagreed students found it difficult to answer most items.

More religious educators [164 of 232 (70.7%)] agreed than disagreed the test items contained difficult vocabulary.

More than half the number agreed [129 of 232 (55.6%)] the 2013 BRLA test items were relevant to the RE curriculum. Fewer numbers agreed [68 of 232 (29.3%)] past test items were relevant.

More religious educators agreed than disagreed that students performed better in RE assessments designed by classroom teachers [178 of 231 (77.1%)] compared to the BRLA [63 of 231 (27.3%)].

Less than half the number [95 of 231 (41.1%)] agreed students who performed poorly in the BRLA also performed poorly in RE assessments designed by classroom teachers.

More than half the number [130 of 231 (56.3%)] agreed students who performed poorly in the BRLA also performed poorly in NAPLAN.

Figure 7.2. Summary of Finding Four

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### **FINDING FIVE**

#### **8.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents Finding Five that addresses SRQ 2: How do religious educators respond to the administration and implementation of BRLA as a large-scale, standardised assessment in Religious Education? Finding Five emerged from the collation and analysis of data from the 43 of the 238 teachers and school leaders of RE in Phase One who volunteered to participate in individual or group interviews in Phase Two. These religious educators provided responses to the following two interview questions with associated contributing questions:

- What is involved in administering the BRLA?
- How have you used the BRLA in RE?

In response to the questions, the religious educators affirm and build upon Findings Three and Four that also address SRQ 2.

#### **8.2 The Presentation of Finding Five**

Two aspects of Finding Five are presented under the heading of a sub-finding (Table 8.1). The first sub-finding discusses the religious educators' responses to the instructions and procedures for administering the BRLA. The second sub-finding identifies the concerns raised by the religious educators about the implementation of the assessment.

Finding Five suggests that the 43 religious educators who participated in Phase Two responded to the administration and implementation of the BRLA in much the same way as the 238 religious educators in Phase One. As mentioned in Chapter Six, these religious educators represent a skewed sub-sample of the 238 religious educators in the study because they mostly supported the use of the BRLA. However, they also reiterated the general concerns raised by groups of religious educators in Phase One. These concerns regard preparing students for the administration of the assessment and the perceived difficulty with the vocabulary used in the BRLA test items. In addition, the argument about LSAs causing stress for students and teachers, especially students in Years Three, Five and Nine who were perceived as overexposed to these types of assessments was raised again.

Table 8.1

*Overview of Chapter Eight: Finding Five*

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8.2	Finding Five: The religious educators described mixed experiences of administering and implementing the BRLA.
8.2.1	Sub-finding 5.1: Most of the religious educators described the administration of the BRLA as an uncomplicated process.
8.2.2	Sub-finding 5.2: Minority groups of religious educators raised concerns about the implementation of the BRLA.
8.3	Chapter Summary

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**8.2.1 Sub-finding 5.1.** Most of the religious educators [36 of 43 (83.7%)] indicated that the administration of the BRLA was an uncomplicated process. The religious educators provided two reasons for their response. They described the documented instructions for preparing students and for administering the BRLA as clear and concise. Furthermore, they explained how they were experienced in administering LSAs such as NAPLAN and suggested that the administration of the BRLA was similar to NAPLAN. Both reasons are represented in Table 8.2. Within the table, the focus of the religious educators' common expressions about the administration of the BRLA is emphasised in bold.

**8.2.1.1 Perceptions of the instructions.** The religious educators agreed that the BRLA was easy to administer to students because system administrators at the CEOWA provided well documented instructions. They explained how the instructions were simple to read and follow. The instructions were considered similar to those used for NAPLAN. Teachers and school leaders of RE, including principals used similar phrases to describe the instructions as clear and concise.

Teachers of RE who were directly involved with the administration of the BRLA commented that the instructions were “straight forward”. The teachers used phrases such as “The BRLA is the easiest test to administer”. They indicated they took the administration of the BRLA as seriously as they did the administration of NAPLAN to ensure that test conditions were “achieved”. As one Year Nine teacher explained:

We have all the Year Nine classes together and they sit it [the BRLA] on a given day. There are no problems with administering the BRLA. We are used to doing this in secondary schools. It just happens, and the kids are used to it.

The teacher perceived the instructions for administering the BRLA as no different to other formal testing instructions.

Table 8.2

*Expressions About the Instructions for Administering the BRLA*

The instructions were clear and concise.	The “instructions are simple”.
	The instructions for administration are “ <b>straight forward and easy to use</b> ”.
	The BRLA “is the easiest test to administer”.
	It is “on the calendar”.
	The administration of the BRLA “ <b>is treated seriously</b> ”.
	It is “another day at school”.
	We have “our heads around it now”.
	The BRLA is “ <b>black and white</b> ”, we know what to expect.
	We have been well trained to administer the BRLA.
	The other teachers have “ <b>no problem</b> ” with it.
	I do not “over push it”.
	You need to “prepare students for the format of it”.
The procedures were similar to NAPLAN.	The style of the BRLA as a large-scale, standardised assessment is administered is “ <b>like NAPLAN</b> ”.
	The BRLA “fits in like NAPLAN”.
	The BRLA administration “echoes the administration of NAPLAN”.
	“We have got our heads around it now” ... it is like the NAPLAN.
	I just “ <b>roll with the administration</b> ” and now that NAPLAN is earlier the timing of the BRLA is okay.
Similar to NAPLAN and “teachers are used to this type of roll out”.	

School Leaders of RE, including principals, agreed with teachers about the BRLA being the “easiest” assessment to administer and that Catholic schools had a responsibility to ensure the administration of the BRLA was run in the same way as NAPLAN. They



commented about their involvement in organising the logistics for administration. The school leaders used phrases such as:

- “The instructions are clear”;
- “We are primarily responsible for the administration of the BRLA”;
- “The teachers at my school know about the BRLA and how to go about administering it”;
- “Instant help is provided by the CEOWA whenever you email a query about the administration of the BRLA”; and,
- “Students don’t stress about the BRLA”.

Although the principals explained that they were indirectly involved with the administration of the BRLA, their chosen delegates fed back to them that the administration of the BRLA was a “succinct and simple” process. As one principal explained:

I delegate that [the administration of the BRLA] to my two Assistant Principals. The only point where I am involved is at the time of testing. I engage the teachers and ask how the testing went for the students, teachers and leaders.

As another principal also explained, “I ask teachers and students at the time of testing and within the post-testing period about their experiences of the administration of the BRLA, in order to obtain feedback”. According to the school leaders in Phase Two, the administration of the BRLA was a positive experience.

**8.2.1.2 Perceptions of the process of administration.** The religious educators suggested the process involved in administering the BRLA was straight forward and similar to the administration of other LSAs familiar to them. They said it was easy to administer the BRLA because they were “used to administering NAPLAN assessments”. They identified the BRLA as having the “same format and style of administration to NAPLAN”. As one teacher stated, “The BRLA is run similar to NAPLAN”. As one school leader described, “We are given instructions that we find easy to follow”. However, one teacher working in a regional Catholic secondary school added that although the instructions were “fine”, there were “a lot of instructions to follow” when administering LSAs. For the teacher the administration of the BRLA was perceived as “time consuming” and for them, no different to the administration of other LSAs.

The religious educators acknowledged their involvement with the national LSA, NAPLAN, as well as other LSAs produced locally and internationally. They spoke about

LSAs such as WAMSE (Department of Education, 2011) and the WACE exams (School Curriculum and Standards Authority, 2016b) developed by local education authorities. They also spoke about PISA, developed by the OECD. The religious educators identified the administration of the BRLA as similar to the administration of these LSAs. As one principal said, “In comparison, students and teachers found the BRLA to be straight forward, simple, requiring pretty minimal organisation” and “not as stressful as those other LSAs”.

**8.2.2 Sub-finding 5.2.** Groups of religious educators raised concerns about the implementation of the BRLA. The religious educators described how they prepared students for the administration of the BRLA. As they shared their experiences, the religious educators discussed the procedural activities involved in preparing students and their opinions about the implementation of the BRLA, which included the design, structure and relevance of the BRLA test items to the RE curriculum.

**8.2.2.1 Experiences of preparing students.** A group of ten (23.3% of the 43) religious educators comprising Year Nine teachers and secondary school leaders of RE, shared their experiences of preparing students for the BRLA. This group suggested that spending time preparing students for the administration of “these LSAs was necessary”. In a similar way, they indicated that adequate time needed to be set aside for preparing students for the administration of the BRLA. The group highlighted the need to review past BRLA papers with students in preparation for the administration of the BRLA. They argued that students require prior training in the BRLA to be “somewhat successful”. They explained that students become “slightly nervous” at the thought of LSAs and teachers needed to “prepare students for the types of questions they will encounter”. As one teacher of RE explained:

I access the old papers and that’s in fact what I do because otherwise a lot of these kids would be nowhere. Unless you revise content about Church, Jesus, Bible and Sacraments and Prayer with students, there’s no way they’re going to ever vaguely recollect this information and be able to answer something as specific as this. You need to be very focused with them. I give students past papers to give them an understanding of what to expect in the BRLA .... They get a bit nervous before the test and say, “Oh, we don’t know anything”, so then I go to tell them, “Listen, you don’t have to study for this test. It’s like all your previous knowledge”.

The teacher described how students needed to become familiar with formal assessments such as the BRLA, in terms of design and procedures, because these preparations made an impact on student performance in the BRLA.

Besides reviewing past test papers with students, three religious educators employed in Catholic secondary schools requested additional support material from the CEOWA as part of their preparations for the BRLA. Two of the teachers were from regional schools. They suggested they were unaware of support material offered from the CEOWA in preparing students for the BRLA and recommended, “Support material in addition to the availability of past papers would be useful to teachers”. The religious educators also suggested an updated RE curriculum that explicitly identifies the essential content expected to be examined in the BRLA was required. The comments from these teachers suggests a lack of communication by school leaders about the BRLA. Further evidence of a perceived lack of communication about the BRLA is identified later in the chapter as a raised concern about the assessment.

The ten religious educators used the phrase “teaching to the test” to describe how they prepared students for the BRLA. They suggested there was a need to teach to the test in terms of giving students the opportunity to become aware of the style and format of LSAs. These assessments were considered by the group as “outside the scope” of classroom practices in RE.

The religious educators’ interpretations of “teaching to the test” was spoken about in a way that appears contrary to intensely coaching students. The groups’ comments clarify what they meant. For example, two secondary teachers and one school leader of RE, defined what they meant by preparing students and “teaching to the test”. The school leader stated, “We certainly don’t teach to it [BRLA] and don’t talk about it at all”. In reply, one of the teachers explained:

No, no. We don’t need to do any prior preparation for the BRLA. We treat it as a “snapshot”. I think maybe once when it first started, because it was new for everyone, we prepared students for it. But then, now, we just say, okay, right. You know where you’re meant to be on that day and that’s it.

Similar comments by teachers of RE reflect the perceptions of the group about “teaching to the test”. As one teacher said:

We don’t teach to the test but there is some preparation that is needed before the test. I do go through some of the things that are in the test every year like prayer. I go through the Our Father, and some revision of the parables. But I don’t do anything

extra than that, I just continue with the RE program as usual and hope that it's enough.

Another teacher explained:

I do not do any preparation for the BRLA in terms of changing the content I teach in class. I do however, show the students some of the past assessment booklets and we go through them. This exercise shows students the format for the BRLA and kind of questions to expect. After seeing the past papers, I don't think any of the students do any extra study for it.

A third teacher commented on the issue of over-preparing students for the LSA:

We take it [the BRLA] very seriously. We grapple with our kids' lack of knowledge in RE, but we don't teach to the test. I have to say I've noticed lately a lot more discussion around teaching to the test. I don't know what [other schools do], but I know staff from one place say openly, "We've prepared for the BRLA because it is like a NAPLAN 'prep' [preparation]". I just buy out of that. I thought, why would we? We actually just want a clean set of data.

One primary school leader recommended that teachers should restrain from "overly preparing students for LSAs such as the BRLA". The school leader of RE said:

We tend not to overly prepare in our school for NAPLAN. We have just taken the tack that we shouldn't feel pressured into it. We take the same view about the RE Bishops' test. I don't over push it [the preparation]. I don't over push the Year Three [class] preparing for it. I definitely don't teach to the test. I focus on teaching rather focusing on the test.

The religious educators assumed that too much preparation for the BRLA meant that time was removed from regular daily teaching in RE and teachers began engaging in inappropriate actions. These actions were described as leading to invalid data about student learning in RE. For the religious educators at one school, as long as teachers and students were familiar with the style and structure of the BRLA, no further preparation was required for students in the lead up to the administration of the BRLA.

Strategies were offered by religious educators regarding how to prepare students for the BRLA. These were strategies they used to assist students to prepare for the administration of LSAs. As one teacher explained:

Right, well further back here there's another question that lists four prayers to Our Lady and over here are all the Mysteries of the Rosary. So, you just don't look at it [a test item] and think I just don't know anything about it, you remember what you have

read through and you go back. A lot of the answers are there. You just have to think creatively. For example, the four options in each of the multiple choice questions may all be right but not in the context of the stem. And some of the options might give you clues about how to answer some of the short and extended questions in the test you will do later. So always stay focused and think carefully.

The teacher provided an account of how they instructed students to retrieve knowledge and understandings from sources within previously administered test papers. The suggested strategy considered the need for students to complete the BRLA by applying problem solving skills.

**8.2.2.2 Concerns about the BRLA.** The religious educators raised four main concerns about the implementation of the BRLA. They suggested the vocabulary used in the BRLA test items was difficult for students; there was a lack of communication from school leaders about the BRLA; some students and teachers felt challenged and stressed about the BRLA; and that students in Years Three, Five and Nine were overexposed to LSAs. An elaboration of each issue raised by the religious educators is presented. Each of the elaborations align with evidence that led to previous findings. For example, Table 8.3 lists common expressions by teachers and school leaders regarding their concerns about the BRLA and its particular impact on student performance.

Table 8.3

*Statements of Concern about the BRLA*

- 
- Standardised testing like the BRLA does not tell the “**full story**”.
  - These types of “**pen and paper**” tests tend to “**disadvantage students with poor literacy levels**”.
  - Schools with students who have poor literacy levels are dealing with a “**double edged sword**”. How do we help students break open standardised assessment items without compromising the integrity of the results?
  - The BRLA is designed for “**the bright kids with good memories**”.
  - Our students “**either sink or swim**” during the assessment. That is normal for these types of tests.
  - The BRLA is “**a brick wall for students**” who have poor literacy and live in low socio-economic suburbs.
-

8.2.2.2.1 *The vocabulary used in the test items.* Twenty religious educators (46.5% of 43) remarked that the vocabulary used in the BRLA test items was difficult for students and teachers. They provided examples of the vocabulary being “too literacy based”, “content specific” and “not relevant to the content in the RE curriculum” as they understood it to be.

The teachers and school leaders of RE alike commented how students found the vocabulary used in the test items as difficult. For example, the teachers argued that like NAPLAN, the BRLA was a “literacy test” in which students who experienced difficulties in English were “disadvantaged by the use of such large-scale, standardised assessments”. School leaders described the BRLA as “a pen and paper exercise for students with good memories and good skills in literacy”. These religious educators suggested that a student’s socio-economic background was also a factor that they believed affects how well a student performed in LSAs. They explained that students enrolled in Catholic schools in what they termed “higher socio-economic areas” had an advantage over students enrolled in schools in “lower socio-economic areas”. They felt there was a direct correlation between where and how people live and student performance. One teacher added, “Little can be done for either group of students”.

School leaders of RE raised two particular concerns about the vocabulary used in the BRLA test items. Firstly, they argued the language in the BRLA is difficult for poor performing students and has the capacity to undermine student self-confidence. As one school leader in what they described as a low socio-economic location suggested, “I have Year Twelve students who cannot read. These tests [LSAs] are not for them [any students regardless of Year level]”. Secondly, the school leaders explained how LSAs such as the BRLA were limited in “capturing true student performance”. One school leader stated, “The BRLA will not give the Bishops all that they should know about student learning in RE”.

Principals as school leaders of RE indicated that students with poor literacy skills were disadvantaged by the BRLA as a LSA. As one principal said, “The BRLA tends to assess literacy rather than RE knowledge”. Similarly, another principal explained:

I really view the BRLA as more of a literacy assessment. If you have the ability to perform well on NAPLAN, then more than likely you will perform well on the BRLA. The students need to remember knowledge. I do think that some children who perhaps know more are hampered by the literacy constraints of the test. Perhaps if instead of a written test some of those children who perhaps don’t do so well but do have a knowledge that they are strong in their faith. If we were to have an interview

with them, their understanding of the content would shine through, whereas they don't get the opportunity in that particular format.

The principals suggested the BRLA was “problematic for students in RE”. They explained the BRLA was for students who were “expected to be proficient in reading” and “expected to know specific vocabulary” in order, to be successful. One principal said the title of the BRLA was proof that the assessment was designed to assess literacy. Another principal explained:

As an English test, the BRLA will support the NAPLAN. I know that's not your question or the expected answer but it's probably the truth. The BRLA is highly valued as an English test.

In response to what appears as an issue raised publicly among religious educators, one principal provided a solution:

I've often thought about this. *The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment* is not quite the accurate title for it because it's not testing what we think literacy is, as being able to read and write, it's not testing that, it's really testing knowledge but it's assuming the students can read and write so it's got nothing to do with their actual, their actual literacy in the English language. It's knowledge that is being tested so it might be more accurate to call it the Catholic Knowledge Test.

The solution to the issue was to rename the BRLA so as to avoid confusion. The religious educators comments about “literacy” suggest that they perceived the term as the level of proficiency in English that students needed to have rather than the content knowledge students were expected to know for their Year level (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013).

The 20 religious educators who remarked that the vocabulary used in the BRLA test items was difficult for students also explained that the vocabulary in the RE curriculum was difficult and not relevant to the needs of students “today”. As one Year Nine teacher said:

Well as a practising Catholic even I wouldn't be able to answer some of the questions; I wouldn't know the answers. I just find it [the BRLA] ... way beyond the Year Nine level. I would say my knowledge of Catholicism is quite high but still with some of those questions I wouldn't know the answer. I mean, I grew up with having to learn by rote, the content in the Catechism, you know? I'm quite amazed, that it is expected that kids should know the specific answers to the questions in the BRLA.

The explanation by the teacher infers that the BRLA test items drew on specialised subject matter. Although the teacher believed the students had a sound knowledge of the RE content in the curriculum, they also believed the test items were written in a way that neither students

nor teachers could answer. The teacher further explained that the content in the Catechism, from which the RE curriculum is derived, required updating. Consequently, the questions in the BRLA were considered relevant to how RE may have been taught in the past yet irrelevant to how teachers may have tried to engage students in contemporary RE classes.

In contrast to the above arguments by teachers and school leaders, two principals suggested that despite the students' poor literacy skills, they encouraged students to attempt the questions. As one principal stated, "My students do experience difficulties with the language in the BRLA test items, but they are 'little battlers' and are showing improvements in student performance each year". The other principal proposed:

I have two views about the BRLA. One view is that as in any other subject you need a rigorous assessment schedule to note the learning that has occurred. The other side of me says do we need something as rigorous as the BRLA especially for our clientele who when they arrive might not even speak English. So, we have a dilemma. How can we put it across to the kids where the understanding is there without watering down the content?

Both principals recommended the need for a valid system-wide RE assessment in spite of the associated issues with students' literacy and for better support to assist students who experience difficulties with literacy.

Seven religious educators (16.3% of 43) further commented that the vocabulary in the BRLA test items was difficult for teachers. Two primary teachers, three school leaders of RE and four primary principals argued that teachers generally were not able to answer the BRLA test items. This group described the vocabulary in the BRLA as "content specific" and suggested that teachers who were not specialists in the field of Religious Education were not familiar with the content presented in the BRLA nor the RE curriculum in general. Table 8.4 is a summary of comments made by teachers and school leaders of RE about the perceived challenge that the vocabulary in the BRLA test items posed for teachers.

According to the seven religious educators, the vocabulary in the BRLA test items was difficult for students because students had "never come cross this content specific vocabulary that exists in RE". The religious educators suggested that the BRLA had exposed the need for additional teacher training in RE. They recommended improvements to teacher training in teaching and assessment practices in RE. One school leader stated, "Teachers would not have a clue how to answer these questions". When asked to clarify the comment, the school leader expressed their amazement when staff gathered to review the Year Three BRLA test items as part of a whole school marking activity. The school leaders said, "The



teachers demonstrated an inability to answer the BRLA questions themselves through the discussions they shared with each other about the test items”.

Table 8.4

*Statements About the Difficulty of the BRLA Test Items for Teachers*

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From Teachers of Religious Education

- I don't know how to answer some of the BRLA questions.

From School Leaders of Religious Education

- Depth and breadth of knowledge is not there because the understanding and expertise of staff is lacking.
- Teachers are uninformed and lack faith formation.
- Teachers might not be interested in the learning area.
- Teachers would not have a clue how to answer these questions.

From School Principals

- The younger teachers do not go to church and do not have the training to be able to answer some of the questions in the BRLA. I can't even answer all the questions.
- 

8.2.2.2.2 *Lack of communication.* Seven teachers of RE (16.3% of 43) suggested there was a lack of communication about the BRLA from school leaders. As mentioned previously, two of the teachers were from regional and secondary Catholic schools. All seven teachers described how they were not provided with information about the BRLA beyond the administration phase. The teachers commented they had “never seen the students’ results” from the BRLA and furthermore, referred to the BRLA as being “separate” and “isolated to everyday teaching in RE”. The teachers said:

- “We are just given the instructions and asked to administer it [the BRLA]”;
- “I was handed the administration guide for the BRLA and told to do it”;
- “We are only told a week beforehand that it is coming”;
- “Here it [the BRLA] is. Just do it!”; and,
- “Teachers not directly involved with the BRLA don't have a problem with the assessment as long as it doesn't disrupt their timetables”.

The group recommended that all teachers directly and indirectly involved in the BRLA be provided with statements of purpose, additional support in preparation for the BRLA and guidelines for the interpretation of student performance data.

8.3.2.2.3 *Stress associated with the BRLA.* Seven religious educators (16.3% of 43) suggested the BRLA was stressful for students and teachers. As one Year Nine teacher explained, the BRLA was a stressful experience where “students and teachers felt pressured by the BRLA” because “the BRLA produces results that school leaders and system authorities look at and make judgements about student learning in RE”. One Year Three teacher explained that their experience of the BRLA was stressful because for them Year Three was about testing students and preparing students for their first celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The teacher said:

The mental stress on these students and teachers is too much. Like anything our teachers will all love it [rest time] at the end of the year because there is so much on in these years.

However, although the group referred to the BRLA as stressful on students and teachers they also explained that parents were “less invested” in the BRLA. Hence, they described how the stress they associated with the BRLA was not as intense as the stress they associated with NAPLAN. According to the religious educators, parents were informed about the BRLA via school newsletters, but parents did not make enquiries about the BRLA nor pressure teachers to prepare their children for the assessment. One Year Nine teacher explained, “It is pointless engaging parents with the BRLA because parents don’t care about Religious Education anyway”. The Year Nine teachers’ comments further reflect the comments of other religious educators identified in the previous findings that suggest students and parents were disengaged with the BRLA and generally with RE.

8.2.2.2.4 *Overexposure to large-scale, standardised assessments.* Six religious educators (14.0% of 43) suggested students in Years Three, Five and Nine were overexposed to LSAs. Equal numbers of teachers and school leaders of RE were in the group. These religious educators felt added pressure as educators responsible for students in Years Three, Five and Nine and on their daily workload to administer the BRLA, NAPLAN and WAMSE. As one school principal explained:

I am frustrated often with the timing of the BRLA. It’s around the same time when WAMSE is done, so I think it is a lot of pressure on the teachers of that Year level.

There is a lot of testing at that time.

Three religious educators commented about the “relief” they felt when WAMSE assessments were discontinued in 2012. As one teacher stated, “Thank goodness WAMSE is no longer with us.” One school leader described:

Well now that WAMSE is gone at least my room is not crowded with boxes [laugh]. I was getting about five boxes in my office at one time. I had to squeeze into my office! Reception would say, “Oh Mr [X] another box” and I would reply, “I don’t want it”. No, I think on the whole, administration is fine of the BRLA is fine. I don’t think there’s an issue there at all. It’s just the timing.

When asked to clarify comments about being relieved WAMSE assessments were no longer being administered in WA, one principal explained:

Now that WAMSE is gone and NAPLAN is in May there is more time to concentrate on the BRLA in August. If Year Three students had to sit the BRLA at the start of the year, that would be dreadful. Yes, for heaven’s sake late Term Three or even early Term Four, I think is a good time. As long as you have the fourth term when you get back the results that ties in with the reporting in fourth term.

For this group and for other larger groups of religious educators identified in Phase One, the implementation of the BRLA as a LSA presented certain challenges for students, teachers and school leaders. These groups appear to have perceived the BRLA as a burden on their “already busy workload”.

### **8.3 Chapter Summary**

Finding Five was discussed in this chapter and Figure 8.1 summarises the main features of the finding. These features suggest that most of the religious educators perceived the administration of the BRLA as an uncomplicated process. Their perceptions were consistent regardless of their gender, age or employment role of teaching responsibility. They suggested the BRLA was easy to administer to students, the instructions for administration were clear and straightforward to follow and the procedures for administration were similar to NAPLAN. However, as a group they also raised concerns about aspects of the implementation of the BRLA, of which their greatest challenge for students as well as teachers was the perceived difficulty of the vocabulary used in the BRLA test items. Factors such as student proficiency in literacy skills, socio-economic circumstances and teacher training in RE were identified as contributing to the challenge. The religious educators also raised concerns, such as the perceived stress associated with preparations for the BRLA, the lack of communication by school leaders about the BRLA, and how over-exposed students in Years Three, Five and Nine were to LSAs. Their concerns align with the concerns raised by larger numbers of religious educators involved in Phase One.

The next chapter discusses how the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA appear to have influenced teaching and assessment practices in RE to some degree. The discussion presents evidence to further support Findings One to Five that find the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA as possibly shaped by contextual factors. These factors are the religious educators' personal and professional experiences of teaching RE and using LSAs in other learning areas.

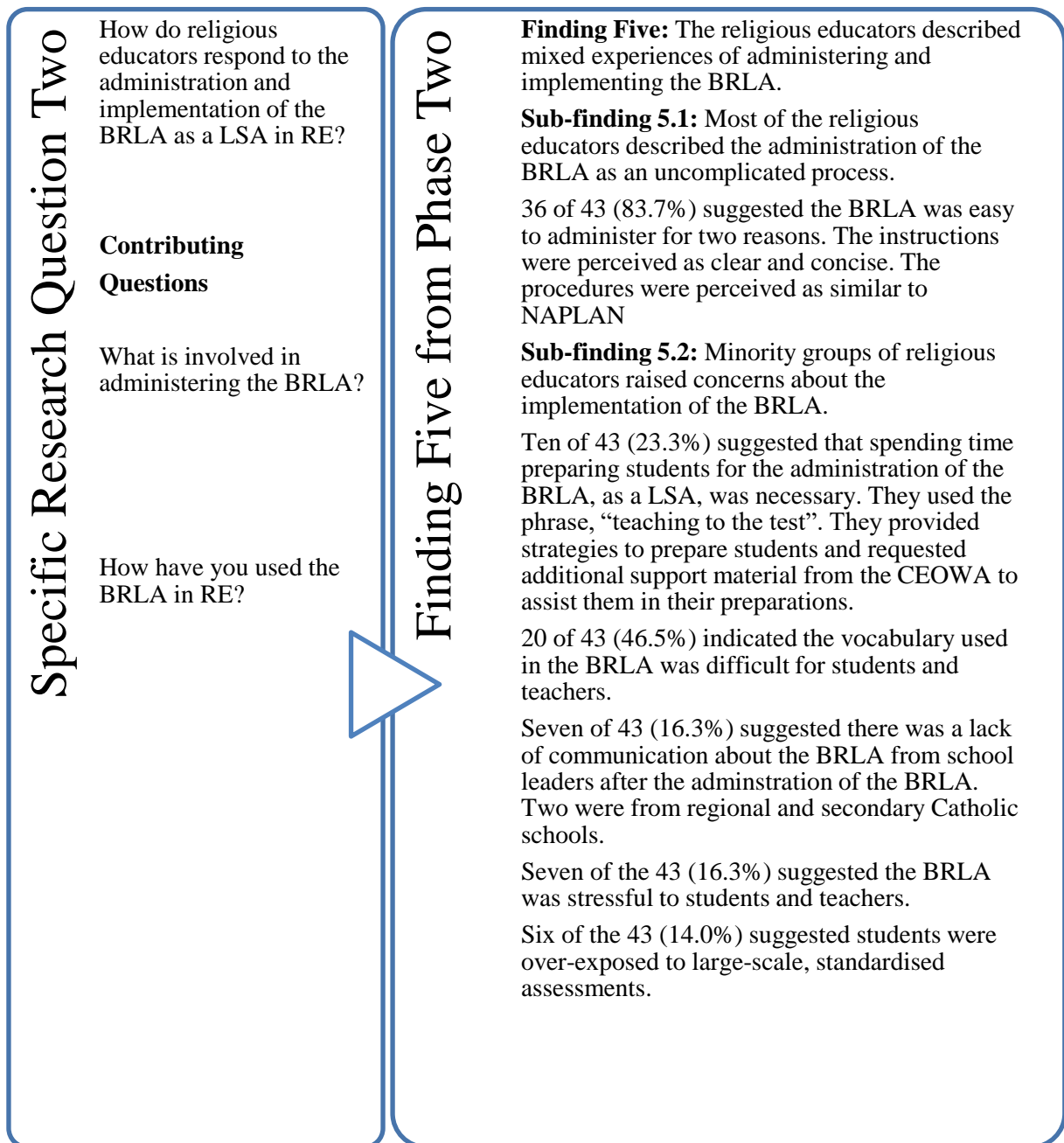


Figure 8.1. Summary of Finding Five

## CHAPTER NINE

### FINDING SIX

#### 9.1 Introduction

This chapter presents Finding Six. The finding emerged from Phase One and addresses the SRQ 3: How do the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA influence their teaching and assessment practices in Religious Education? The collation, analysis and cross-analysis of data from 238 religious educators in response to fourteen items in an online questionnaire led to the finding. Finding Six builds upon the previous five key findings by identifying the influence that the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA had on their teaching and assessment practices in RE. The degree of influence seems entrenched and motivated by religious educators' personal and professional experiences of having taught RE and use of LSAs in education.

#### 9.2 The Presentation of Finding Six

Table 9.1 presents the order of the associated sub-findings that led to Finding Six and the order of the discussions in this chapter. Finding Six developed through a process of cross-analysis of data and reveals a dynamic interplay between how the religious educators perceived the purpose and role of the BRLA as a LSA used in RE and how they responded to their teaching and assessment practices in RE.

Three major investigations led to Finding Six. Each of the investigations focused on the level of influence that the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA seem to have had on the religious educators' implementation of the RE curriculum. The investigations began with response data to Likert scale Item 41 because that data considers the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA's influence on student learning in RE. The data were cross-referenced with previously analysed data to other items from the online questionnaire. Later, response data to Item 39 was also cross-referenced with written data in response to Open-ended Items 12, 37 and 81. Given, the cross-referencing of data was conducted earlier to address SRQs 1 and 2, the data from these items were cross-referenced to build upon and further clarify if possible connections existed between how the religious educators perceived the effectiveness of the BRLA as a measure of student learning and the religious educators' experiences of the BRLA, teaching RE and using LSAs. Profiles of groups of religious educators emerged from the investigations. Each group presented contrasting rationales for

the changes they made or did not make to their teaching and assessment practices in RE as a result of their contrasting perceptions of the BRLA.

Table 9.1

*Overview of Chapter Nine: Finding Six*

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9.2	Finding Six: The religious educators' contrasting perceptions of the BRLA seem to have contributed in some ways to changes in how they implemented the RE curriculum.
9.2.1	Sub-finding 6.1: The religious educators disagreed about whether the use of the BRLA had led to improvements in student learning in RE.
9.2.2	Sub-finding 6.2: Leaders of RE in Catholic primary schools agreed more than other sub-groups of religious educators that the BRLA had helped them focus on improving student learning in RE.
9.2.3	Sub-finding 6.3: The religious educators disagreed about the use of the BRLA reports to inform teaching and assessment practices in RE.
9.2.4	Sub-finding 6.4: Half the number of religious educators neither agreed nor disagreed about student and parent use of the BRLA reports.
9.2.5	Sub-finding 6.5: The religious educators disagreed about the use of the school feedback about the BRLA by system administrators at the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia.
9.2.6	Sub-finding 6.6: The religious educators presented different rationales for the influence they perceived the BRLA had on their teaching and assessment practices in RE.
9.3	Chapter Summary

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**9.2.1 Sub-finding 6.1.** The analysis of data in response to Item 41 identifies groups of religious educators who agreed [80 of 234 (34.2%)] and disagreed [86 of 234 (36.8%)] the BRLA had led to improvements in student learning in RE. The data also identifies statistically significant numbers of religious educators (29.1%) who were ambivalent and chose neither to agree nor disagree about the improvements to student learning in RE that the BRLA may have led. Table 9.2 displays the frequency of that data. This sub-finding suggests the religious educators disagreed about whether the use of the BRLA had led to improvements in student learning in RE, with only a third of the number implying they did use the BRLA for that purpose.

Table 9.2

*Perceptions of the Influence of the BRLA*

Item Description	Frequency of Responses					Mean (SD)
	SD = 1	D = 2	N = 3	A = 4	SA = 5	
I believe that the BRLA has led to improvements in student learning in RE. [Item 41 (n = 234)]	23 9.8%	63 26.9%	68 29.1%	73 31.2%	7 3.0%	2.91 (1.044)

*Note.* The item consisted of a statement that required religious educators to use one of five ratings (n = 233). The ratings are: Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1, Disagree (D) = 2, Neither agree nor disagree (N) = 3, Agree (A) = 4, Strongly Agree (SA) = 5. To reflect missing response data, the percentages presented in the table represent the valid percent as calculated in SPSS.

**9.2.2 Sub-finding 6.2.** The analysis of response data to Likert scale Items 79a, 79b and 79c suggests that many religious educators agreed that the use of the BRLA had helped them and, in particular, leaders in Catholic primary schools to focus on improving student learning in RE. Table 9.3 presents the frequency of that data.

Firstly, Table 9.3 shows that over half the number of religious educators [127 of 231 (55.0%)] agreed the BRLA had helped them focus on student learning in RE. In comparison, only a third agreed the use of the BRLA had led to improvements in student learning (Table 9.2). These results together with the results in Sub-finding 6.1 suggest that possibly the BRLA was being considered rather than used by more religious educators to focus their attention on improving student learning in RE.

Secondly, Table 9.3 shows slightly fewer but still half the number of religious educators [118 of 231 (51.1%)] who agreed school leaders used the BRLA to help them focus on student learning in RE. An analysis of variance provides supporting evidence to suggest that Catholic primary schools leaders of RE more than any other sub-group of religious educators in the study implied they used the BRLA to help them focus on student learning in RE. For example, the Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test finds a 0.009 probability of difference in response to Item 79a according to the religious educators' employment role of responsibility in RE. The frequency of that data (Table 9.4) suggests principals [18 of 26 (69.2%)] and other leaders of RE [25 of 37 (67.6%)] in Catholic primary schools agreed more than other sub-groups of religious educators that the BRLA had helped them focus on improving student learning in RE. In contrast, Year Nine teachers chose more than other sub-

groups neither to agree nor disagree that the BRLA had helped them focus on student learning in RE.

Table 9.3  
*Perceptions of the Use of the BRLA*

Item Description	Frequency of Responses					Mean (SD)
	SD = 1	D = 2	N = 3	A = 4	SA = 5	
The use of the BRLA has helped people in my school to focus on improving student learning in RE. Me [Item 79a (n = 231)]	13 5.6%	39 16.9%	52 22.5%	110 47.6%	17 7.4%	3.35 (1.031) p = 0.009 role
The use of the BRLA has helped people in my school to focus on improving student learning in RE. Other Teachers [Item 79b (n = 231)]	16 6.9%	41 17.7%	78 33.8%	91 39.4%	5 2.2%	3.12 (0.961) p = 0.009 role
The use of the BRLA has helped people in my school to focus on improving student learning in RE. School Leaders [Item 79c (n = 231)]	10 4.3%	27 11.7%	76 32.9%	101 43.7%	17 7.4%	3.39 (0.939) p = 0.000 role

*Note.* The items consisted of statements that required religious educators to use one of five ratings. The ratings are: Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1, Disagree (D) = 2, Neither agree nor disagree (N) = 3, Agree (A) = 4, Strongly Agree (SA) = 5. To reflect missing response data, the percentages presented in the table represent the valid percent as calculated in SPSS.

The p value is the statistical probability of the rejection of a null hypothesis, 0.05 or less, in the non-parametric testing using the Kruskal-Wallis Test to measure differences according to the religious educators' employment role of responsibility.

In response to Item 79b, less than half the number of religious educators [96 of 231 (41.6%)] agreed that other teachers used the BRLA to help them focus on student learning in RE. The Kruskal-Wallis Test also finds in that data, a 0.009 probability of difference according to the religious educators' employment role of responsibility in RE. Again, the frequency of the data suggests that principals [16 of 26 (61.5%)] and other leaders of RE [22 of 37 (59.5%)] working in Catholic primary schools agreed more than other sub-groups that the BRLA had helped them focus on improving student learning in RE (Table 9.5). In comparison, more of the Year Nine teachers chose neither to agree nor disagree.



Table 9.4

*The Frequency of Data for Item 79a According to Role*

	Employment Role of Responsibility in RE							Total
	Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		
	Year 3 (n = 55)	Year 5 (n = 40)	Year 9 (n = 55)	APRE (n = 37)	REC (n = 20)	CPP (n = 26)	CSP (n = 5)	
Strongly Disagree	5	0	3	1	2	1	1	13
Disagree	8	5	13	5	4	3	1	39
Neither agree nor disagree	13	11	17	4	2	4	1	52
Agree	29	19	16	19	11	14	2	110
Strongly Agree	0	4	2	6	1	4	0	17
Total*	55	39	51	35	20	26	5	231

*Note.* Item 79a: The use of the BRLA has helped me focus on improving student learning in RE ( $n = 231$ ).

APRE represents Assistant Principals as school leaders of RE in Catholic primary schools.

REC represents Religious Education Coordinators as school leaders of RE in Catholic secondary schools. CPP represents Catholic primary principals and CSP represents Catholic secondary principals.

\*The total refers to the number of religious educators who responded to the questionnaire item.

Furthermore, in response to Item 79c, where over half the number of religious educators [118 of 231 (51.1%)] agreed that school leaders were helped by the BRLA to focus on student learning in RE, the Kruskal-Wallis Test finds in that data a 0.000 probability of difference according to the religious educators' employment role. The frequency of the data suggests for the third time that principals of Catholic primary schools [17 of 26 (65.4%)] and, in particular, Assistant Principals of RE [26 of 37 (70.3%)] agreed more than other sub-groups that the BRLA had helped them focus on improving student learning in RE (Table 9.6). Again, half the number of Year Nine teachers [28 of 55 (50.9%)] chose neither to agree nor disagree. In comparison to school leaders of RE, the analysis of variance suggests that Year Nine teachers were ambivalent and possibly divided about the BRLA and its influence on them and others to improve student learning in RE.

Table 9.5

*The Frequency of Data for Item 79b According to Role*

	Employment Role of Responsibility in RE							Total
	Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		
	Year 3 (n = 55)	Year 5 (n = 40)	Year 9 (n = 55)	APRE (n = 37)	REC (n = 20)	CPP (n = 26)	CSP (n = 5)	
Strongly Disagree	4	4	3	1	2	1	1	16
Disagree	9	4	13	4	7	3	1	41
Neither agree nor disagree	20	16	23	8	4	6	1	78
Agree	22	14	11	20	7	15	2	91
Strongly Agree	0	1	1	2	0	1	0	5
Total*	55	39	51	35	20	26	5	231

*Note.* Item 79b: The use of the BRLA has helped other teachers focus on improving student learning in RE. ( $n = 231$ )

\*The total refers to the number of religious educators who responded to the questionnaire item.

Table 9.6

*The Frequency of Data for Item 79c According to Role*

	Employment Role of Responsibility in RE							Total
	Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		
	Year 3 (n = 55)	Year 5 (n = 40)	Year 9 (n = 55)	APRE (n = 37)	REC (n = 20)	CPP (n = 26)	CSP (n = 5)	
Strongly Disagree	1	2	2	1	2	1	1	10
Disagree	5	3	8	2	6	2	1	27
Neither agree nor disagree	23	11	28	6	1	6	1	76
Agree	25	18	12	20	11	13	2	101
Strongly Agree	1	5	1	6	0	4	0	17
Total*	55	39	51	35	20	26	5	231

*Note.* Response data to Item 79c: The use of the BRLA has helped school leaders focus on improving student learning in Religious Education ( $n = 231$ ).

\*The total refers to the number of religious educators who responded to the questionnaire item.

**9.2.3 Sub-finding 6.3.** Data in response to Likert scale Items 68, 70, 71 and 72 were also collated and analysed to determine how the religious educators perceived the use of the BRLA reports (Table 9.7). From the analysis of that data it appears that the BRLA reports provided by the CEOWA were used by half the number of religious educators. A total of 116 of 231 religious educators (50.2%) agreed they used the BRLA reports to identify strengths and weaknesses in student learning in RE (Item 70a). However, less than half the number [105 of 231 (45.5%)] felt confident in using the reports (Item 68). Fewer numbers [93 of 231 (40.3%)] chose neither to agree nor disagree that other classroom teachers used the reports (Item 70b). In terms of other people's use of the BRLA reports, more religious educators [102 of 231 (44.2%)] agreed school leaders used the BRLA reports (Item 70c) compared to teachers [61 of 231 (26.4%)] not involved with the BRLA (Item 70b).

The Kruskal-Wallis Test identifies a probability of difference in the response data to Items 68, Item 70a and 70c. In each case the probability of difference is according to the religious educators' employment role of responsibility in RE. The frequency of those data sets (Tables 9.8, 9.9, 9.10 and 9.11) suggest school leaders and, in particular, leaders of RE working in Catholic primary schools were more confident using the BRLA reports and did so in ways that considered future decision making and planning in RE. For example, in Table 9.8, 25 of 37 primary school leaders (67.6%) and 18 of 26 primary principals (69.2%) indicated they confidently used the BRLA reports. More Year Three teachers [20 of 55 (36.4%)] and Year Nine teachers [21 of 55 (38.2%)] than other sub-groups of religious educators chose neither to agree nor disagree. Similar trends in the data in response to Items 70a, 70c and 72 are also evident.

Almost half the number of religious educators [112 of 231 (48.5%)] disagreed teachers at their school work collaboratively to analyse student performance of the BRLA using the school reports (Item 71). Similarly, 104 of 231 religious educators (45.0%) disagreed they use the student performance data from the BRLA reports to plan lessons in RE (Item 72). The Kruskal-Wallis Test identifies a 0.019 probability of difference in that data, and the frequency of the data according to employment role of responsibility in RE indicating Year Nine teachers [20 of 55 (36.4%)] disagreed more than other sub-groups of religious educators that they used the student performance data from the BRLA reports to plan lessons in RE (Table 9.11). More principals of Catholic primary schools chose neither to agree nor disagree. In this case, the principals' response suggests they may have been uncertain of how their teachers used the BRLA reports.

Table 9.7

*Perceptions of the Use of the BRLA Reports*

Item Description	Frequency of Responses					Mean (SD)
	SD = 1	D = 2	N = 3	A = 4	SA = 5	
I feel confident in using the BRLA school reports. [Item 68 (n = 231)]	12 5.2%	48 20.8%	66 28.6%	96 41.6%	9 3.9%	3.19 (0.985) p = 0.002 role
People at my school use the BRLA school and student reports to identify strengths and weaknesses. Me [Item 70a (n = 231)]	17 7.4%	45 19.5%	53 22.9%	108 46.8%	8 3.5%	3.20 (1.036) p = 0.000 role
People at my school use the BRLA school and student reports to identify strengths and weaknesses. Other Teachers [Item 70b (n = 231)]	19 8.2%	58 25.1%	93 40.3%	59 25.5%	2 0.9%	2.86 (0.924)
People at my school use the BRLA school and student reports to identify strengths and weaknesses. School Leaders [Item 70c (n = 231)]	14 5.9%	36 15.1%	79 33.2%	93 39.1%	9 3.8%	3.21 (0.960) p = 0.029 role
Teachers at my school work collaboratively to analyse the student results in the BRLA school reports. [Item 71 (n = 231)]	27 11.7%	85 36.8%	46 19.9%	71 30.7%	2 0.9%	2.72 (1.051)
I use the student data from the BRLA school reports to plan lessons in RE. [Item 72 (n = 231)]	30 13.0%	74 32.0%	62 26.8%	63 27.3%	2 0.9%	2.71 (1.033) p = 0.019 role

*Note.* The items consisted of statements that required religious educators to use one of five ratings. The ratings are: Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1, Disagree (D) = 2, Neither agree nor disagree (N) = 3, Agree (A) = 4, Strongly Agree (SA) = 5. To reflect missing response data, the percentages presented in the table represent the valid percent as calculated in SPSS.

The p value is the statistical probability of the rejection of a null hypothesis, 0.05 or less, in the non-parametric testing using the Kruskal-Wallis Test to measure differences according to the religious educators' employment role of responsibility.

Table 9.8

*The Frequency of Data for Item 68 According to Role*

	Employment Role of Responsibility in RE							Total
	Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		
	Year 3 (n = 55)	Year 5 (n = 40)	Year 9 (n = 55)	APRE (n = 37)	REC (n = 20)	CPP (n = 26)	CSP (n = 5)	
Strongly Disagree	4	1	5	1	1	0	0	12
Disagree	14	8	9	4	6	4	3	48
Neither agree nor disagree	20	14	21	5	2	4	0	66
Agree	17	16	13	24	9	15	2	96
Strongly Agree	0	0	3	1	2	3	0	9
Total*	55	39	51	35	20	26	5	231

*Note.* Likert scale Item 68: I feel confident in using the BRLA school reports ( $n = 231$ ).

\*The total refers to the number of religious educators who responded to the questionnaire item.

Table 9.9

*The Frequency of Data for Item 70a According to Role*

	Employment Role of Responsibility in RE							Total
	Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		
	Year 3 (n = 55)	Year 5 (n = 40)	Year 9 (n = 55)	APRE (n = 37)	REC (n = 20)	CPP (n = 26)	CSP (n = 5)	
Strongly Disagree	4	2	8	1	1	1	0	17
Disagree	12	5	13	5	6	2	2	45
Neither agree nor disagree	14	8	18	7	0	4	2	53
Agree	25	22	11	20	11	18	1	108
Strongly Agree	0	2	1	2	2	1	0	8
Total*	55	39	51	35	20	26	5	231

*Note.* Likert scale Item 70a: I use the BRLA reports to identify strengths and weaknesses in student learning in RE ( $n = 231$ ).

\*The total refers to the number of religious educators who responded to the questionnaire item.

Table 9.10

*The Frequency of Data for Item 70c According to Role*

	Employment Role of Responsibility in RE							Total
	Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		
	Year 3 (n = 55)	Year 5 (n = 40)	Year 9 (n = 55)	APRE (n = 37)	REC (n = 20)	CPP (n = 26)	CSP (n = 5)	
	Strongly Disagree	0	3	6	1	3	1	
Disagree	8	3	8	5	6	4	2	36
Neither agree nor disagree	26	15	22	8	3	3	2	79
Agree	21	15	14	20	6	16	1	93
Strongly Agree	0	3	1	1	2	2	0	9
Total*	55	39	51	35	20	26	5	231

*Note.* Likert scale Item 70c: School leaders use the BRLA reports to identify strengths and weaknesses in student learning in RE ( $n = 231$ ).

\*The total refers to the number of religious educators who responded to the questionnaire item.

Table 9.11

*The Frequency of Data for Item 72 According to Role*

	Employment Role of Responsibility in RE							Total
	Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		
	Year 3 (n = 55)	Year 5 (n = 40)	Year 9 (n = 55)	APRE (n = 37)	REC (n = 20)	CPP (n = 26)	CSP (n = 5)	
	Strongly Disagree	7	3	14	2	1	2	
Disagree	16	10	20	11	9	7	1	74
Neither agree nor disagree	12	13	8	9	6	11	3	62
Agree	20	12	8	13	4	6	0	63
Strongly Agree	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	2
Total*	55	39	51	35	20	26	5	231

*Note.* Response data to Likert scale Item 72: I use the student data from the BRLA school reports to plan lessons in RE ( $n = 231$ ).

\*The total refers to the number of religious educators who responded to the questionnaire item.

Three inferences are drawn from the analysis of response data shown in Tables 9.7, 9.8, 9.9, 9.10 and 9.11 about the perceived use of the BRLA reports. Firstly, half the number of religious educators appear to have used the BRLA school and student reports. Secondly, Catholic primary school leaders appear to have confidently used the BRLA reports to improve student learning in RE more than other sub-groups of religious educators. This inference supports Sub-findings 6.2 that identifies, more Catholic primary school leaders of RE than any other sub-group as having perceived the BRLA as a tool for helping them focus on improving student learning in RE. Thirdly, even though more teachers of RE, in particular, Year Three and Year Nine teachers, indicated they were neither confident using the BRLA reports nor chose to agree nor disagree about their use of the reports, greater numbers of teachers as a whole indicated they used the BRLA reports to identify strengths and weaknesses in student learning in RE. For example, 17 of 55 Year Three teachers felt confident using the BRLA reports (Item 68), compared to 25 who agreed they used the BRLA reports to identify strengths and weaknesses in student learning in RE (Item 70a).

**9.2.4 Sub-finding 6.4.** The response data from four Likert scale items (Table 9.12) identifies a statistically significant number of religious educators who appear ambivalent about how students and parents used the BRLA reports, and considered the usefulness of the BRLA to focus attention on improving student learning in RE. According to the data, 113 of 231 religious educators (48.9%) neither agreed nor disagreed parents referred to their children's BRLA reports (Item 70d). Also, 116 of 231 religious educators (50.2%) neither agreed nor disagreed students referred to the BRLA reports to track their achievement (Item 70e). Similarly, in response to Items 79d and 79e, more than half the number of religious educators chose neither to agree nor disagree that the BRLA had helped parents [137 of 231 (59.3%)] and students [136 of 231 (58.9%)] focus on improving learning in RE. The religious educators' consistent and seemingly uncertain response about student and parent use of the BRLA reports is consistent with data that led to Findings One (Chapter Five) and Three (Chapter Seven). Further investigation is presented in Finding Seven (Chapter Ten) and suggests that the religious educators' response may have influenced how they considered possible changes to their teaching and assessment practices in RE.

Table 9.12

*Perceptions of the Use of the BRLA Reports by Students and Parents*

Item Description	Frequency of Responses					Mean (SD)
	SD = 1	D = 2	N = 3	A = 4	SA = 5	
People at my school use the BRLA school and student reports to identify strengths and weaknesses in student learning in RE. Parents [Item 70d (n = 231)]	27 11.7%	63 27.3%	113 48.9%	27 11.7%	1 0.4%	2.62 (0.856)
People at my school use the BRLA school and student reports to identify strengths and weaknesses in student learning in RE. Students [Item 70e (n = 231)]	27 11.7%	60 26.0%	116 50.2%	27 11.7%	1 0.4%	2.63 (0.854)
The use of the BRLA has helped people in my school to focus on improving student learning in Religious Education. Parents [Item 79d (n = 231)]	15 6.5%	52 22.5%	137 59.3%	26 11.3%	1 0.4%	2.77 (0.750)
The use of the BRLA has helped people in my school to focus on improving student learning in Religious Education. Students [Item 79e (n = 231)]	15 6.5%	51 22.1%	136 58.9%	28 12.1%	1 0.4%	2.78 (0.757)

*Note.* The items consisted of statements that required religious educators to use one of five ratings. The ratings are: Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1, Disagree (D) = 2, Neither agree nor disagree (N) = 3, Agree (A) = 4, Strongly Agree (SA) = 5. To reflect missing response data, the percentages presented in the table represent the valid percent as calculated in SPSS.

**9.2.5 Sub-finding 6.5.** The school feedback about the BRLA (Table 9.13) was perceived by some religious educators as irrelevant to the system administrators of the BRLA at the CEOWA. Even though more religious educators agreed than disagreed that feedback about the BRLA was being used by the CEOWA, a statistically significant number chose neither to agree nor disagree. For example, 34.6% of the religious educators neither agreed nor disagreed the school feedback had provided professional learning opportunities in RE (Item 80c).

Based on the analysis of data presented in Table 9.13, less than half the number of religious educators [112 of 231 (48.5%)] agreed system administrators used feedback from



the BRLA to help improve the structure of the BRLA (Item 80a). Secondly, less than half the number of religious educators [98 of 231 (42.4%)] agreed the CEOWA used feedback from schools about the BRLA to help develop better assessment practices in RE (Item 80b). This number of religious educators who agreed system administrators used feedback to develop better assessment practices is greater than the number who disagreed or chose neither to agree nor disagree. Thirdly, over a third of the number of religious educators [91 of 231 (39.4%)] agreed the CEOWA used feedback from schools about the BRLA to help provide professional learning in RE (Item 80c). The religious educators' mixed perceptions regarding the use of school feedback may have further influenced how they considered changes to teaching and assessment practices in RE.

Table 9.13

*Perceptions of the Use of School Feedback About the BRLA*

Item Description	Frequency of Responses					Mean (SD)
	SD = 1	D = 2	N = 3	A = 4	SA = 5	
I believe that the CEOWA uses feedback from schools about the BRLA to help improve the structure of the BRLA. [Item 80a (n = 231)]	9 3.9%	36 15.6%	74 32.0%	102 44.2%	10 4.3%	3.29 (0.918)
I believe that the CEOWA uses feedback from schools about the BRLA to help develop better assessment practices in RE. [Item 80b (n = 231)]	13 5.6%	43 18.6%	77 33.3%	86 37.2%	12 5.2%	3.18 (0.982)
I believe that the CEOWA uses feedback from schools about the BRLA to help provide professional learning in RE. [Item 80c (n = 231)]	14 6.1%	46 19.9%	80 34.6%	80 34.6%	11 4.8%	3.12 (0.984)

Note. The items consisted of statements that required religious educators to use one of five ratings. The ratings are: Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1, Disagree (D) = 2, Neither agree nor disagree (N) = 3, Agree (A) = 4, Strongly Agree (SA) = 5. To reflect missing response data, the percentages presented in the table represent the valid percent as calculated in SPSS.

**9.2.6 Sub-finding 6.6.** This sub-finding is based on three investigations involving a cross-referencing of the overall response data from the online questionnaire. The cross-

referenced data identified three distinct groups of religious educators. Two of the groups presented contrasting rationales for the influence they perceived the BRLA had on their teaching and assessment practices in RE. The contrasting rationales helped to build the profiles of each group. These profiles highlight the contrasting perceptions that the religious educators had about the BRLA and suggest that contextual factors seem to have influenced their perceptions and, in turn, how they perceived the BRLA had influenced their teaching and assessment practices in RE. These contextual factors were identified throughout the study’s key findings as the religious educators’ personal and collective experiences and beliefs about the use of LSAs, and specifically about, how RE should be taught and assessed.

**9.2.6.1 Investigation one.** Response data to Item 39 were cross-referenced with written data in response to Items 12, 37 and 81. For Item 39 the religious educators were asked to rate the effectiveness of the BRLA as a measure of student learning in RE on a scale from zero to 100, with 50 as the mid-point. For Items 12, 37 and 81, the religious educators were asked to describe their experiences of the BRLA, indicate whether they used LSAs, and explain whether the BRLA had led to improvements in student learning in RE. Table 9.14 summarises the cross-referenced data.

Table 9.14

*Investigation One: Cross-referenced Response Data*

Item 39	Item 12	Item 37	Item 81
Rating is 50 or less (n = 120)	Expressions of concern for the BRLA	Expressions of concern for LSA	Expressions suggesting the BRLA has not influenced RE
[120 of 234 (51.3%)]	[106 of 120 (88.3%)]	[103 of 120 (85.8%)]	[97 of 120 (80.8%)]
Rating is 51 or greater (n = 114)	Expressions of support for the BRLA	Expressions of support for LSA	Expressions suggesting the BRLA has influenced RE
[114 of 234 (48.7%)]	[101 of 114 (88.6%)]	[90 of 114 (78.9%)]	[83 of 114 (72.8%)]

*Note.* Item 39: Rate the effectiveness of the BRLA as a measure of student learning ( $n = 234$ ).  
 Open-ended Item 12: Describe your experience of The Bishops’ Religious Literacy Assessment.  
 Open-ended Item 37: Describe your experience of using large-scale, standardised assessments. Open-ended Item 81: What influence do you believe The Bishops’ Religious Literacy Assessment has had in RE?

Firstly, over half of the number of religious educators [120 of 234 (51.3%)] rated the BRLA between zero and 50. As a group, these religious educators raised concerns about the BRLA (88.3%) and LSAs (85.8%) and perceived the BRLA not to have influenced RE (80.8%). Secondly, 48.7% of the religious educators rated the BRLA between 51 and 100. Of these religious educators, 88.5% used expressions of support for the BRLA. Slightly less of the group (78.9%) used expressions of support for LSAs and even fewer (72.8%) used expressions suggesting the BRLA has influenced RE.

**9.2.6.2 Investigation two.** Given that the first investigation identifies groups of religious educators who perceived the use of LSAs differently, the response data to Item 39 was cross-referenced with data to Likert scale Items 35 and 36 (Table 9.15). These data were specific to the perceived use of LSAs. Full details of the analysis of response data to the two Likert scale items is presented in Appendix O. For Item 35, the religious educators were asked to indicate whether they perceived LSAs as useful in measuring student learning. For Item 36, the religious educators were asked to show if they liked to use LSAs to gather information about student learning.

Table 9.15

*Investigation Two: Cross-referenced Response Data*

Item 39	Item 35	Item 36
Rating is 50 or less (n = 120)  [120 of 234 (51.3%)]	56 of 120 (46.7%) disagreed [41] and strongly disagreed [15]  [*30 religious educators]	56 of 120 (46.7%) disagreed [38] and strongly disagreed [18]  [*29 religious educators]
Rating is 51 or greater (n = 114)  [114 of 234 (48.7%)]	90 of 114 (78.9%) agreed [79] and strongly agreed [11]  [*15 religious educators]	88 of 114 (77.2%) agreed [78] and strongly agreed [10]  [*13 religious educators]

*Note.* Item 39: Rate the effectiveness of the BRLA as a measure of student learning ( $n = 234$ ). Open-ended Item 35: I find large-scale, standardised assessment to be useful in measuring student learning. Open-ended Item 36: I like to use large-scale, standardised assessments to gather information about student learning.

\*This number represents the religious educators who chose neither to agree nor disagree with statements in Likert scale items.

Firstly, less than half the number of religious educators who rated the effectiveness of the BRLA 50 or less as a measure of student learning in RE also disagreed (46.7%) that LSAs were useful to gather information about student learning and measure that learning. Secondly, of the group of religious educators who rated the effectiveness of the BRLA 51 or greater on the scale, most agreed they found LSAs to be useful (78.9%) and liked to use LSAs to gather information about student learning (77.2%). Statistically significant to these results is that a quarter of the number of religious educators in both groups appear ambivalent about the usefulness of LSAs.

**9.2.6.3 Investigation three.** As previously discussed and summarised in Table 9.2, the analysis of response data to Likert scale Item 41 identifies religious educators who argued for and against changes to their teaching and assessment practices in RE as a result of using the BRLA. That is, 86 of 234 religious educators (36.8%) disagreed that the use of the BRLA had led to improvements in student learning in RE; 80 of 234 religious educators (34.2%) agreed; and 68 of 234 religious educators (29.1%) chose neither to agree nor disagree. When the response data to Item 41 were cross-referenced with other data sets, further profiling of these groups of religious educators emerged. The profiles are based on contrasting rationales about the perceived influence the BRLA has had on teaching and assessment practices in RE.

The data sets that were cross-referred with Item 41 included previously presented written responses that described the religious educators' experiences of the BRLA (Open-ended Items 12 and 81), teaching RE (Open-ended Item 33) and using LSAs (Open-ended Item 37). Also, numeric data in response to several items were cross-referenced. These data sets provide additional information about the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA (e.g. Items 11 and 39, Likert scale Items 70a, 72 and 79a), their general use of LSAs (e.g. Likert scale Items 35, 36a) and their treatment of RE as an academic learning area (e.g. Likert scale Items 77 and 78). Appendix O presents the full analysis of Likert scale items focused on the religious educators' perceptions of the use of LSAs and the treatment of RE.

**9.2.6.3.1 Perceived lack of influence.** Of the 234 religious educators who responded to Item 41, 36.8% (86 of 234) disagreed the BRLA had influenced how they taught and assessed student learning in RE. These religious educators suggested that the BRLA had not led to improvements in student learning. The written comments from this group (Table 9.16) identify them as disagreeing about aspects of the BRLA and the use of LSAs yet describing positive experiences of teaching RE.

As a group, the 86 religious educators mostly agreed they treated RE as an academic learning area and agreed student learning in RE should be assessed. In terms of the group's perceptions of LSAs, more than half the number described negative experiences of using LSAs and disagreed LSAs were useful measures of student learning. These religious educators mostly rated the BRLA as an ineffective measure of student learning in RE. Less than half the number in the group disagreed the use of the BRLA had helped them focus on improving student learning in RE and believed the BRLA had no role to play in RE. Almost three-quarters of the group disagreed they used the student performance data from the BRLA reports to plan lessons in RE. This evidence suggests that religious educators in this group were not convinced that the BRLA, as a LSA, was an appropriate measure of student learning to be used in RE. Further to this evidence, 55.8% of the group (48 of 86), described negative experiences of the BRLA in their response to Open-ended Item 12.

Table 9.16

*Religious Educators Who Perceived the BRLA to have Limited Influence*

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Perceptions of Religious Education

- 32 of 86 (37.2%) shared their challenging experiences of teaching RE [Open-ended Item 33].
- 8 of 86 (9.3%) disagreed RE should be treated as an academic learning area [Likert scale Item 77].
- 14 of 86 (16.3%) disagreed student learning in RE should be assessed [Likert scale Item 78].

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Perceptions of large-scale, standardised assessments

- 46 of 86 (53.5%) disagreed LSAs are useful in measuring student learning [Likert scale Item 35].
- 46 of 86 (53.5%) disagreed they used LSAs to gather information about student learning [Likert scale Item 36a].
- 60 of 86 (69.8%) described negative experiences of LSAs [Open-ended Item 37].

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Perceptions of the BRLA as a large-scale, standardised assessment used in RE

- 36 of 86 (41.9%) believed the BRLA as no role to play in RE [Likert scale Item 11].
  - 65 of 86 (75.6%) rated the BRLA 50 or less on the scale of effectiveness [Item 39].
  - 40 of 86 (46.5%) disagreed the use of the BRLA has helped them focus on improving student learning in RE [Likert scale Item 79a].
  - 36 of 86 (41.9%) disagreed they use the BRLA to identify strengths and weaknesses in student learning in RE [Likert scale Item 70a].
  - 58 of 86 (67.4%) disagreed they use the student performance data from the BRLA reports to plan lessons in RE [Likert scale Item 72].
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In the groups' written response to Open-ended Item 81, 75.6% (65 of 86) explained how they believed the BRLA had not influenced RE. The reasons provided by these religious educators relate to perceived concerns and opposition to the structure and relevance of the BRLA. This group remarked that the BRLA was a stressful LSA and irrelevant to the RE curriculum because of its "literacy focus" and "content specific" nature.

As previously discussed in Findings One (Chapter Five) and Four (Chapter Seven), for 44 religious educators in the group of 86, the BRLA was considered irrelevant to the RE curriculum because it was "out of touch" with and "isolated" from the curriculum. The religious educators explained that the BRLA test items did not assess content from the RE curriculum and remarked that as "far as they were concerned", the students' BRLA results were "an inaccurate measure of their learning in RE". The rationale of one Year Nine teacher suggests the BRLA did not assess student learning as well as assessments designed by classroom teachers:

The tests are largely irrelevant to me. I teach in a school that generally performs at the average or above for most of the large-scale testing because of our students' "cultural capital". Some lack a background of attending a Catholic school for years but most have picked up enough along the way to answer the questions. I just give them a practice on the format. I think my assessments give me a clearer idea of how they are working in class because they are responding to something that I know has been taught directly to them.

Further to the comment, phrases such as "cramming for the test" were used. As one teacher stated, "Only around test time do teachers focus on the RE content". The religious educators suggested that after the assessment was administered, teachers "continued to do their own thing".

The comments and phrases by the 44 religious educators suggest that the BRLA test items may have been perceived as irrelevant to the RE curriculum for two reasons. Firstly, the content in the RE curriculum may have been perceived as too extensive to cover prior to the administration of the BRLA. Teachers may have felt overwhelmed by not knowing which test items would appear in the assessment and which content would be targeted by the test items. Secondly, teachers may not have focused on the content in the RE curriculum and felt the need to attend to the content prior to the administration of the BRLA.

Several other reasons were presented by religious educators within the group of 86 for why they perceived the BRLA as irrelevant to the RE curriculum. The reasons they provided, seem to justify why they believed the BRLA had not influenced their teaching and

assessment practices in RE. For example, five religious educators described how the BRLA was irrelevant to the teaching of RE because they believed that students did not attend Mass. As one teacher of RE explained:

I don't really believe that the BRLA has much influence at all. Closer to the testing a number of teachers simply supply the students with local information etc. so they can achieve satisfactory results. These pieces of information are generally of no use as the students do not attend Mass or other Catholic celebrations.

The religious educators described how parents did not value RE. As one school leader wrote, "I don't believe the BRLA is taken too seriously by students and parents even though the formality of its preparation and administration is formalised". Similarly, two other religious educators wrote, "Parents do not hold the importance of the BRLA as to tests like NAPLAN", and:

Personally, I believe a lot of RE learning needs to be supported in the home as literacy and numeracy are. Through my observations, parents know a lot less about religion than their own children due to what is learnt in our schools.

One Year Nine teacher questioned the use of the BRLA in light of the students' commitment to their faith.

When curriculum matches student assessment, large-scale assessments are very useful. I do not believe this is the case with the BRLA. Also, it does not take into consideration student background, and an assessment in RE is something that should take this into consideration.

The comment from the Year Nine teacher also reflects rationales provided by other religious educators that expose differing perceptions of the nature and role of RE.

A second reason provided by 20 religious educators as to why they believed the BRLA was irrelevant to the RE curriculum is that the assessment was "just another stressful assessment imposed on the students in Years Three, Five and Nine". According to these religious educators the BRLA focused heavily on content. As one primary school leader of RE wrote:

I feel in Years Three and Five there has been more of a focus on teaching the C area of the RE curriculum although I don't feel this has had a flow on effect to other Year levels.

The school leader referred to the "C area" in the RE curriculum as the content specific learning points about the role of the Church. This leader questioned such a focus in the content.

A third reason presented by 15 religious educators suggests that the BRLA was perceived as irrelevant to the RE curriculum because in their opinion, the academic nature of the BRLA was changing RE from being a “happy subject” into a formalised, content driven subject. As one Year Three teacher explained:

It makes a subject area that usually creates happiness and discussions about our religion into something that becomes stressful as the children and staff feels the pressure placed on them from a standardised test such as the BRLA.

Similarly, a Year Five teacher wrote:

Teachers have become more focused on the outcomes assessed in the BRLA rather than those in the RE Units of Work. Around the assessment time, RE becomes a focus on doing well in the test rather than developing a deep understanding of the Catholic faith.

These religious educators considered the BRLA as an academic exercise contrary to how they taught and assessed in RE classrooms and made comments such as the following to further expose their views:

The BRLA has done very little. I teach the RE curriculum according to the needs of the children in my class, not according to what they need to know to get a good score in the BRLA.

This evidence suggests that within the group of 86 religious educators there were those who perceived the BRLA as either “too literacy based” or “too content driven”. Furthermore, the Units of Work that made up the RE curriculum were described as “different” and “not as complicated” in comparison to the test items used in the BRLA.

Further to the evidence, thirteen of the 15 religious educators who described the BRLA as an academic exercise also described the BRLA as a LSA that was “damaging the students’ faith”. As one Year Five teacher explained:

LSAs and, in particular the BRLA, are limited in capturing what really matters about a person not in keeping with the Christian outlook on the value of the whole person and the complexity and dignity of each individual.

Similarly, as four teachers further described, the BRLA had not had an impact on their teaching practices in RE because as an assessment the BRLA was perceived as about content and the RE curriculum was about spirituality. The teachers made comments such as “Students are receptive to the notion of spirituality and faith but resistant to the specific teachings of the ‘institutional church’”. One secondary school leader wrote:



In terms of implementation and scoring, the BRLA is a worthwhile experience. I would have to question if it has had an effect on pedagogy and the teaching of RE in Catholic schools. Does the BRLA make RE “better”? I do not believe it does.

The rationales provided by religious educators in the group of 86 highlight the inaction taken by the group in terms of assessment practices in RE.

According to eight religious educators, student learning should not be assessed and specifically not formally assessed in RE using the BRLA. Of the eight, one Year Three teacher who did not agree with the treatment of RE as an academic learning area and believed that formal assessment had no place in RE, wrote:

This is my first year of being part of the BRLA, but I believe measurement of Christian literacy is not something that assists in spreading the Gospel Values and Christian lifestyle. Students in today’s technological multimedia society need to be related to on their level, so that they can connect with their developing spirituality.

Similarly, three school leaders of RE explained that the BRLA was an assessment in RE where assessment is unwarranted. One of the school leaders wrote:

I think the BRLA is a waste of time especially at primary level. I am a teacher at a Catholic school and have a very strong faith. I send my children to Catholic schools. However, I really hate when my children’s experience during Religious Education is given a grade. I feel since formal assessment in this area it has turned many older children off learning about God.

A second primary school leader remarked:

I don’t believe testing in this area is necessary and children would benefit more from being given the opportunity to develop a personal relationship with God in RE classes through learning about the Bible and church structure.

A third, secondary school leader suggested:

Many of our students have little spiritual and more so religious awareness or language. In view of this the content laden curriculum I find a struggle to teach .... I would prefer to have more scope to be able to work with students to explore these things in a more creative, and experiential way. Maybe just a different blend of what we are doing, but at a gentler pace.

The full comments from this school leader are presented in Chapter Five. The repeated inclusion of the comments aims to demonstrate how perceptions seem to have influenced practice.

A fourth reason was presented by three Year Nine teachers of RE to explain why they believed the BRLA was irrelevant to assessment practices in RE. They showed how information about the BRLA was not provided to them from school leaders, including “information about the students’ results”. The Year Nine teachers wrote that school leaders withheld information and only used information from the BRLA to their advantage. One Year Nine teacher explained:

If any, the influence of the BRLA is from teachers and Heads of Departments who have used it as a lever to ensure that Religious Education is taught and assessed in a more structured and academic way within their own school contexts.

The comment from the Year Nine teacher is echoed in the comments of other religious educators in the group of 86 who indicated that school leaders were the “keepers” of student results from the BRLA and did not conduct “any follow-up review of the results with staff”. Similarly, another Year Nine teacher explained:

I feel the BRLA is not commonly known amongst the staff. They are aware of it when the test is being done and the school is asked to cooperate by being mindful of students during the test time. Being unaware of the report on the BRLA, I have thus not used it to assist with what is needed to be taught.

A third Year Nine teacher commented:

At the school, BRLA is just another external assessment that in certain Years students undertake and it has no influence on their grade in Religious Education. Would it have a greater impact if the BRLA result was part of their grade in RE?

The latter Year Nine teacher suggested that only students in Years Three, Five and Nine took part in an assessment that other students and their teachers were not involved with, therefore unaware of and not privy to the results.

A fifth reason was presented by ten religious educators who described how the BRLA was irrelevant to teaching and assessment practices in RE because the RE curriculum had not been reviewed and updated since the BRLA was introduced. This evidence aligns with evidence that led to sub-finding 6.5 where the religious educators had mixed perceptions about how the CEOWA used feedback from schools about the BRLA. According to one Year Five teacher, “The biggest change in RE has not been the RE Units rather the move of students in Year Seven into secondary Catholic schools and the Sacrament of Confirmation being moved to Year Six”. Similarly, one teacher of RE stated, “We have been teaching from the same Units of Work for a while now”. One primary school leader wrote, “At the school

level, the BRLA has had a big influence but at the CEOWA level we have seen minimal change”. One Year Nine teacher explained:

I don’t believe the BRLA has any influence on the way that I teach or the programmes that are supplied to us to teach in our classes. The evidence that I would support this with is that many of the RE resources we are supplied with continue to have draft written over them and the student resource book. Whilst the presentation has been updated to make the books more appealing, do not link with the teacher resource books in regard to page references etc. .... The teacher resource books unfortunately have not had the same updating applied to them.

Other religious educators questioned the term “draft” on the Units and recommended future changes to the structure of student and teacher resources.

The various rationales made known by the 86 religious educators as to why they perceived the BRLA as being irrelevant to the RE curriculum are summarised in the comment from one school leader:

Limited! Hardly ever has the testing been mentioned at network meetings in 21 years. I am unaware of any changes to the accreditation workshops to value add to the teaching of Religious Education. Results of the testing are far too late in the year to maximise assistance or reprogram. The testing is done during clashes with the Catholic Performing Arts Festival whereby many students are involved, which takes them away from lessons, revision activities and the actual testing day. Ideal for future planning (if time permits this to be done in consultation with staff). Not having a strong nucleus of staff who have taught in a number of Year groups adds to the superfluous nature of any benefits that the test results might have on teaching students. Insufficient time provided in the way of enhancing students’ faith journey in these years when content is being tested. General consensus is that students need to perform well to give a “grand” impression of the state of Religious Education in any given school (perception of image).

Further to this comment, school leaders of RE made references to the reporting process for the BRLA. One primary school leader described the BRLA as irrelevant to RE because “the reporting of RE results using the BRLA as a LSA had no relevancy in primary education”. Another school leader wrote, “I’m not sure that reporting on RE to parents is seen as being of relevance at a primary level”. These leaders also wrote about the teaching of RE as a spiritual activity rather than an academic one.

Overall, the discussed rationales suggest that the 86 religious educators dismissed the BRLA in terms of its relevance to the RE curriculum because they approached the teaching of RE with a faith-based focus. This focus appears to have shaped the religious educators' teaching and assessment practices in RE. In turn, the educational purpose and role of the BRLA may have been perceived as contrary to their faith-based practices. In this scenario, it appears likely that LSAs such as the BRLA would have been perceived as limited in influencing the teaching and assessment practices of religious educators in RE.

*9.2.6.3.2 Perceived influence.* In contrast to the latter group, 80 of 234 religious educators (34.2%) agreed the BRLA had influenced how they taught and assessed students in RE. This group believed the BRLA had led to improvements in student learning. Table 9.17 is a summary of the profile of the 80 religious educators. These religious educators mostly agreed on a number of aspects about the BRLA, the use of LSAs and the teaching of RE. They believed the BRLA had a role to play in RE and that it was an effective measure of student learning in RE. They agreed RE should be treated as an academic learning area and believed student learning should be assessed in RE. Although they did not necessarily describe positive experiences of using LSAs, they considered LSAs useful in gathering information about student learning. This group indicated that the BRLA as a LSA had helped them focus on student learning in RE and agreed they used the BRLA reports to identify strengths and weaknesses of students' learning. However, as a group, they were less inclined to use the student performance data from the BRLA reports to plan lessons in RE.

Of the 80 religious educators, 76.3% (61 of 80) described positive experiences of the BRLA in response to Open-ended Item 12. In response to Open-ended Item 81, 78.8% (63 of 80) indicated the BRLA had influenced RE. The rationales these religious educators provided for their perceptions suggest the BRLA had heightened the profile of RE as an academic learning area and, as a result, teachers had become more focused on teaching the content of the RE curriculum to students.

Table 9.17

*Religious Educators Who Perceived the BRLA to be Influential*

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Perceptions about Religious Education

- 50 of 80 (62.5%) described positive experiences of teaching RE [Open-ended Item 33].
- 73 of 80 (91.3%) agreed RE should be treated as an academic learning area [Likert scale Item 77].
- 74 of 80 (92.5%) agreed student learning in RE should be assessed [Likert scale Item 78].

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Perceptions about large-scale, standardised assessments

- 63 of 80 (78.8%) agreed LSAs were useful in measuring student learning [Likert scale Item 35].
- 65 of 80 (81.3%) used LSAs to gather information about student learning [Likert scale Item 36a].
- 39 of 80 (48.8%) described positive experiences of LSAs [Open-ended Item 37].

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Perceptions about the BRLA as a large-scale, standardised assessment used in RE

- 72 of 80 (90.0%) believed the BRLA has a role to play in RE [Likert scale Item 11].
  - 70 of 80 (87.5%) rated the BRLA as an effective measure of student learning [Likert scale Item 39].
  - 68 of 80 (85.0%) indicated they used the BRLA to help them focus on student learning in RE [Likert scale Item 79a].
  - 55 of 80 (68.8%) agreed they used the BRLA reports to identify strengths and weaknesses in student learning in RE [Likert scale Item 70a].
  - 41 of 80 (51.3%) indicated they used the student performance data from the BRLA reports to plan lessons in RE [Likert scale Item 72].
- 

Table 9.18 presents common expressions from the group of 80 about the BRLA and the perceived influence the assessment had on their teaching and assessment practices. The following elaborations from two religious educators reflect the nuance of the expressed perceptions from the group. As one principal wrote:

The BRLA has given RE more status and credibility in line with other subjects. It has drawn attention to RE and the importance of making RE programs by teachers more effective. It promotes an awareness and increases the students' factual knowledge about RE.

Similarly, one other school leader of RE wrote:

I believe that the BRLA raises the status of RE as an academic subject. It also emphasises how important the teaching of RE is as an issue in co-responsibility for

teachers and parents in the faith formation of our students. I talk about the test and its importance in the context of Catholic education in general.

These religious educators attributed the changes to their teaching and assessment practices in RE on the BRLA. They described how the BRLA was “a positive influence on student learning in RE” and how students were beginning to “see” RE as a “real subject”.

Table 9.18

*Statements About the Influence of the BRLA*

- 
- I believe the BRLA forms an implicit directive in shaping the content and approaches of Religious Education. [primary teacher of RE]
  - I think the BRLA has increased the awareness of teaching of content in RE, but it has not become the focus of our teaching. [secondary teacher of RE]
  - It has identified key areas of learning that have been consistent in all BRLA tests I have been involved with. The fact the BRLA is broken up into key areas of understanding (e.g. Church, Jesus etc.) has enabled teachers to focus their teaching accordingly where appropriate. [primary school leader of RE]
  - As a whole school community, one can look at the BRLA results to plan better for areas where students haven't shown good results. I have encouraged staff to be more proactive and creative in presenting their RE Units of Work. Leadership have stressed the importance and relevance of teaching RE in a Catholic school. [primary school leader of RE]
  - The BRLA places an emphasis on students attaining knowledge and facts in the Religious Education learning area. The BRLA raises the profile of Religious Education in line with other learning areas assessed in standardised testing such as NAPLAN and WAMSE. [secondary school leader of RE]
  - The BRLA has led to students focusing more on knowledge, which in turn helps build upon faith. [primary principal]
  - The BRLA has had a huge influence! RE lessons are now based around the RE Units of Work and previous assessments. [primary principal]
- 

For these religious educators the BRLA had provided formality to RE. They considered the BRLA as a measure of student learning that had influenced how they implemented the RE curriculum. They also expressed a “passion” and “enjoyment” for teaching RE to students (Table 9.19). They described how the content in the RE curriculum was “relevant”, highlighting that the RE resource material was well-structured and easy to follow. As one Year Nine teacher explained, “I find the RE resource material in the curriculum easy to modify and I am able to adapt lessons based on those resources to meet

the students' individual needs". This group recommended the need for Catholic schools to be vigilant about the "teaching" and "assessment" of RE as a learning area.

As a supported LSA, the BRLA was perceived by most of the group of 80 religious educators as an accountability measure, positioning RE in a "well deserved spotlight". As one Year Five teacher explained, "The BRLA has led to more questioning by students during religion lessons. In particular, students ask questions about areas they were unsure of during the testing". A similar comment was provided by one school leader of RE:

The BRLA has made parents and students more aware of Religious Education as an academic learning area. Those RE teachers who have prepared students for the BRLA are more aware of what content is assessed and can use this information when teaching other grades, and when having conversations with other teachers.

The group suggested that the BRLA had enabled teachers, other than those who taught RE, and students and their parents who perhaps did not support RE, to become aware of the academic potential of the learning area. The religious educators remarked that they recognised the BRLA as a "feature" of classroom practice and "not an extra" that had brought about a "system-wide approach" to improving student learning in RE.

Table 9.19

*Statements About Teaching Religious Education*

- 
- It is my passion to teach RE.
  - I am a practising Catholic and enjoy handing on the faith.
  - It is the main reason I am teaching in a Catholic school.
  - It is my duty to pass on the faith.
  - I love the message of the Gospels. I believe all teachers should give witness to the Gospels.
  - It is a vocation. RE is challenging though rewarding because students and teachers alike find their spirituality.
  - I am not sure but hope that the BRLA leads to better teaching and learning. Religious Education is extremely important to me as a teacher and Catholic person.
- 

The group of 80 also explained how the BRLA had influenced RE at three different levels of teaching and assessment practices (Table 9.20). They explained how the influence of the BRLA was at the classroom, school and system levels. The BRLA was perceived as having allowed students to critically and "really think" and "develop a better understanding of Religious Education"; encouraged teachers "to better attend to the RE curriculum" as

individuals and as colleagues within schools; and ensured efforts by the CEOWA to establish cohesion in RE throughout the system.

Table 9.20

*The Identified Broad-scale Influence of the BRLA*

Classroom	<p>The BRLA has:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• helped teachers focus on the content of the RE curriculum;</li> <li>• ensured that teachers read questions to students so that literacy is not an issue for students who are being assessed;</li> <li>• encouraged teachers to focus on improving student learning in RE in schools; and,</li> <li>• given more time to the teaching of RE.</li> </ul>
School	<p>The BRLA has:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• encouraged the collaboration of teachers to analysis RE results; and,</li> <li>• encouraged school leaders to use the BRLA results to monitor student progress in RE rather than add pressure to classroom teachers.</li> </ul>
Whole System	<p>The BRLA has:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• encouraged everyone involved to become more aware of the importance of RE;</li> <li>• raised the profile of RE and the students' standards in RE;</li> <li>• raised the idea of using online testing and graphic resources to cater for the different learning styles of students and their difficulty with literacy;</li> <li>• assisted test administrators and teachers to review assessment practices and the design of test items;</li> <li>• identified the more explicit purpose for testing;</li> <li>• highlighted the importance of linking test items to the RE curriculum;</li> <li>• encouraged better marking opportunities of the BRLA for all year levels;</li> <li>• encouraged more timely results;</li> <li>• identified overdue changes to the RE curriculum; and,</li> <li>• provided PD [professional development] opportunities for teachers who may require better understanding of the RE curriculum.</li> </ul>

The religious educators provided specific and detailed examples of how they perceived the BRLA had influenced teaching and assessment practices in RE within their classrooms, their schools and the whole system. One teacher of RE explained how the BRLA assists teachers to focus on student learning in RE that involves parental support:

I think the BRLA has made teachers a lot more accountable for what and how they are teaching. I know that in my own practice in preparation of the children I have developed homework sheets for Term 2 with a breakdown of previous test papers. These are sent home and the children are encouraged to ask their parents for help or to research answers themselves in the Bible, online, or to ask their priest at Mass if



they're really stuck. We then review these questions and answers in a mini-lesson at the conclusion of each week.

One principal explained the BRLA had improved teaching practices in RE. He suggested the BRLA had ensured that RE was “no longer recognised as a soft teaching subject”. The principal wrote:

The BRLA has made all staff aware that the teaching of RE needs to be taken seriously as per Maths, English etc. RE is no longer recognised as a soft teaching subject. Teachers need to focus on the B & C components of the programs of work and not just A.

The principal referred to the structure of the RE curriculum whereby (A) represents personal experiences of God and (B) and (C) are key learnings about Jesus and the Christian response to God. Also, the principal explained how the BRLA had focused teachers' attention to key learnings in the RE curriculum. According to the principal, prior to the BRLA teachers focused “heavily” on personal experiences of God and “not enough” on Jesus and the Christian response to God.

Two teachers of RE further described the benefits of the BRLA on assessment practices in RE. One Year Five teacher wrote:

The BRLA has given RE a greater academic focus. The BRLA also provides the school with well-constructed RE tests which provide examples of RE assessments and the results can be used to gain an insight into the knowledge students have on RE topics. NAPLAN used to be the same. I believe there is far too much emphasis now placed on the NAPLAN tests. NAPLAN has gone from being a very useful tool to assess student progress to now where schools are judged according to their NAPLAN results.

One Year Nine teacher added:

The BRLA itself has notoriously asked questions that would be perceived as outside the scope of what would be covered in a Religious Education class. However, in my opinion these questions are valuable in so much as they tell us the nature of what is required for our religious formation that comes from our Tradition and culture that students should be receiving both at school and at home.

The comments from the teachers provide a summary of the common expressions by religious educators within the group of 80 who perceived the BRLA had influenced their teaching and assessment practices in RE.

The group's rationales seem to have been shaped by their exposure to whole school, and possibly whole system approaches in education (e.g. Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). That is, the religious educators described how classroom teachers as well as leaders at their schools used data from the BRLA to learn to track student achievement, become better acquainted with the content specific to the RE learning area, and to better evaluate their own assessment practices in RE. This evidence suggests comparability between the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA and their perceptions RE as an educational activity. Given the likelihood of comparability, the dynamic influence that the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA had on their teaching and assessment practices in RE is plausible.

*9.2.6.3.3 Uncertain influence.* The rationales from a group of 68 religious educators are also identified through investigation three. This group appear ambivalent about the influence of the BRLA. They chose neither to agree nor disagree that the BRLA had led improvements in student learning. Given their ambivalence, it is unclear whether their perceptions of the BRLA had influenced their teaching and assessment practices in RE.

Most of this group agreed that they treated RE as an academic learning area [56 of 68 (82.4%)] and that students should be assessed in RE [51 of 68 (75.0%)]. However, their responses to items regarding the BRLA suggest that as a group they did not agree about aspects of the assessment. For example, more than half the group [46 of 68 (67.6%)] rated the BRLA as an effective measure of student learning. In contrast, over half the group [40 of 68 (58.8%)] believed the BRLA did not have a role to play in RE. Similarly, half the group [35 of 68 (51.5%)] agreed the use of the BRLA had helped them focus on improving student learning in RE and agreed [34 of 68 (50.0%)] that they used the BRLA reports to identify strengths and weaknesses in student learning. In contrast, only a minority [14 of 68 (20.6%)] agreed they used the student data from the BRLA reports to plan lessons in RE. Significant numbers of these religious educators [29 of 68 (42.6%)] described negative experiences of LSAs and the challenges they faced teaching RE [28 of 68 (41.2%)]. The groups' ambivalence about the influence of the BRLA on their teaching and assessment practices in RE suggests that they may not have considered changes to how they implemented the RE curriculum. This evidence raises implications for the professional formation and training of religious educators in terms of teaching and assessment practices in RE.

The cross-referenced response data from all three investigations suggests that there were connections between the different rationales that groups of religious educators provided

about the BRLA as a LSA and its use in RE, and how they chose to teach and assess student learning in RE. These connections are consistent with evidence that led to Findings One and Two regarding the religious educators' contrasting perceptions of the purpose and role of the BRLA, and in Findings Three, Four and Five about the religious educators' response to the administration and implementation of the assessment. Groups of religious educators who demonstrated support for the BRLA argued that the assessment had led to changes in RE. In contrast, groups of religious educators who raised concerns about the BRLA suggested that limited changes had occurred in RE as a result of the use of the assessment. Therefore, it appears that the BRLA was perceived by groups of religious educators as having changed teaching and assessment practices in RE to some degree. These changes seem motivated by contextual factors such as the religious educators' personal and professional experiences and in turn, perceptions of teaching RE and using LSAs in education.

### **9.3 Chapter Summary**

This chapter discussed Finding Six and is summarised in Figure 9.1. Finding Six explains the influence that the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA had on their teaching and assessment practices in RE. The level of influence was described and explained by groups of religious educators through different rationales. These rationales relate to how religious educators valued the BRLA, understood its purpose and attributed the assessment to improvements in student learning in RE.

Finding Six identifies two distinct groups of religious educators. Firstly, those who disagreed the use of the BRLA had led to improvements in student learning; and secondly, those who agreed. The latter group were predominately primary school leaders of RE. As a group, they identified the BRLA as a beneficial measure of accountability in RE, used the BRLA reports to better understand student learning, and described whole school and system changes to the way RE was implemented at their schools. The finding suggests that how the religious educators in this study perceived the BRLA and responded to the assessment was contextual to their experiences of teaching RE and using LSAs. Furthermore, the religious educators' overall perceptions seem to have influenced how they taught and assessed students in RE. The next chapter helps to further build upon and define the profiles of contrasting groups of religious educators and their different perceptions of the BRLA.

## Specific Research Question Three

How do the religious educators' perceptions of BRLA influence their teaching and assessment practices in Religious Education?

### Contributing Questions

Describe your experience of the BRLA. (Item 12)

Describe your experience of teaching RE. (Item 33)

I find LSA to be useful in measuring student learning.  
(Item 35)

I like to use LSA to gather information about student learning.  
(Item 36)

Describe your experience of using LSA. (Item 37)

How would you rate the BRLA?  
(Item 39)

I believe that the BRLA has led to improvements in student learning in Religious Education. (Item 41)

The use of the BRLA has helped people in my school to focus on improving student learning in Religious Education. (Item 79)

I feel confident in using the BRLA school reports. (Item 68)

People at my school use the BRLA school and student reports to identify strengths and weaknesses in student learning in RE (Item 70)

Teachers at my school work collaboratively to analyse the student results in the BRLA school reports. (Item 71)

I use the student data from the BRLA school reports to plan lessons in RE. (Item 72)

I believe that the CEOWA uses feedback from schools about the BRLA to: help improve the structure of the BRLA [Item 80]

What influence do you believe the BRLA has had in RE? (Item 81)

## Finding Six from Phase One

**Finding Six:** The religious educators' contrasting perceptions of the BRLA seem to have contributed in some ways to changes to their implementation of the RE curriculum.

**Sub-finding 6.1:** The religious educators disagreed about whether the use of the BRLA had led to improvements in student learning in RE.

80 of 234 (34.2%) agreed, 86 of 234 (36.8%) disagreed and 68 of 234 (29.1%) chose neither to agree nor disagree that the BRLA led to improvements in student learning.

**Sub-finding 6.2:** Leaders of RE in Catholic primary schools agreed more than other sub-groups of religious educators that the BRLA had helped them focus on improving student learning in RE.

127 of 231 (55.0%) agreed the BRLA had helped them. 118 of 231 (51.1%) agreed school leaders were helped. 96 of 231 (41.6%) agreed other teachers were helped. An analysis of variance identifies Catholic primary school leaders using the BRLA to help them focus attention on student learning in RE.

**Sub-finding 6.3:** The religious educators disagreed about the use of the BRLA reports to inform teaching and assessment practices in RE.

116 of 231 (50.2%) used the BRLA reports to identify strengths and weaknesses in student learning in RE. 105 of 231 (45.5%) felt confident using the reports, 102 of 231 (44.2%) agreed school leaders used the BRLA reports and 93 of 231 (40.3%) chose neither to agree nor disagree teachers used the reports. 112 of 231 (48.5%) disagreed teachers at their school work collaboratively to analyse student data from the reports. 104 of 231 (45.0%) disagreed they use the student performance data from the BRLA reports to plan lessons in RE.

**Sub-finding 6.4:** Half the number of religious educators neither agreed nor disagreed about student and parent use of the BRLA reports.

116 of 231 (50.2%) neither agreed nor disagreed students and 113 of 231 (48.9%) that parents used the reports. Similarly, religious educators seemed undecided about parents [137 of 231 (59.3%)] and students [136 of 231 (58.9%)] using the BRLA to focus on improving learning in RE.

**Sub-finding 6.5:** The religious educators disagreed about the use of the school feedback about the BRLA by the CEOWA.

112 of 231 (48.5%) agreed the CEOWA used feedback from the BRLA to help improve the structure of the BRLA. 98 of 231 (42.4%) agreed feedback helped the CEOWA develop better assessment practices in RE. 91 of 231 (39.4%) agreed feedback helped the CEOWA provide professional learning in RE.

**Sub-finding 6.6:** The religious educators presented different rationales for the influence they perceived the BRLA had on their teaching and assessment practices in RE.

Figure 9.1. Summary of Finding Six

## **CHAPTER TEN**

### **FINDING SEVEN**

#### **10.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents Finding Seven, that similar to Finding Six, addresses SRQ 3: How do the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA influence their teaching and assessment practices in Religious Education? Finding Seven emerged from the data provided by 43 religious educators as a sub-sample of the 238 religious educators in the study who volunteered to participate in the second phase of the study. Phase Two used individual and group interviews to obtain information from the 43 religious educators. Four guiding questions and subsequent contributing questions were used during the interviews:

1. How have you dealt with the BRLA?
2. In what direction has the BRLA taken you in Religious Education?
3. What benefits, disadvantages or possible changes has the BRLA had on teaching and assessment practices in Religious Education?
4. What insights have you gained from your experience of the BRLA?

The response data from the interviews supports Finding Six and adds further to the contrasting profiles developed to describe groups of religious educators according to their perceptions of the BRLA and the contribution that their perceptions seem to have had on the implementation of the RE curriculum.

#### **10.2 The Presentation of Finding Seven**

The discussion of Finding Seven follows the order of the five sub-findings listed in Table 10.1. The sub-findings led to the key finding by revealing how religious educators engaged with the BRLA and with others also engaging with the assessment. Through these interactions, groups of religious educators described how the BRLA informed and guided their teaching and assessment practices in RE to some degree.

Finding Seven shows how different groups of religious educators with contrasting perceptions of the BRLA provided contrasting rationales for the level of influence they believed that the BRLA has had on their teaching and assessment practices in RE. First, the finding affirms the evidence that led to Findings Two (Chapters Six) and Five (Chapter Eight) that most of the religious educators who were involved in Phase Two [36 of 43 (83.7%)] supported the use of the BRLA. Second, the finding supports the evidence in

Findings One (Chapter Five) and Two (Chapter Six) that the religious educators belong to larger groups who perceived the purpose and role of the BRLA as an appropriate and effective measure of student learning in RE. These religious educators identified RE as an academic learning area and suggested that the BRLA had helped them to improve student learning in RE by focusing their attention on their teaching and assessment practices. They explained that teacher engagement with student performance data from the BRLA reports was important for improving student learning in RE. They commented that the BRLA may not have been used to its full potential in driving improvements in student learning. The interviewees questioned how school leaders managed the BRLA and communicated information about the assessment.

Table 10.1

*Overview of Chapter Ten: Finding Seven*

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10.2 Finding Seven: The religious educators explained how the BRLA informed and guided their teaching and assessment practices in RE to some degree.

10.2.1 Sub-finding 7.1: Religious educators explained how the BRLA had enhanced the profile of RE.

10.2.2 Sub-finding 7.2: Religious educators explained how they used the student performance data from the BRLA reports.

10.2.3 Sub-finding 7.3: Religious educators explained how the BRLA had improved their teaching practices in RE.

10.2.4 Sub-finding 7.4: Religious educators explained how the BRLA had improved their assessment practices in RE.

10.2.5 Sub-finding 7.5: Religious educators described the challenges they experienced with the BRLA and how these challenges limited changes to their teaching and assessment practices in RE.

10.3 Chapter Summary

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In contrast to the evidence presented by the majority of religious educators in Phase Two, Finding Seven also identifies a minority group of [7 of 43 (16.3%)] religious educators who demonstrated no support for the BRLA. They perceived the assessment as not having informed any aspect of their classroom practices in RE. This group represent the larger groups of religious educators in Phase One who raised concerns about the BRLA. The

concerns raised relate to the perceived irrelevance of the BRLA as a LSA used in RE. The groups' perceptions of the BRLA and its limited influence on their teaching and assessment practices in RE appears connected to contextual factors such as their experiences of teaching RE and using LSAs in other learning areas.

**10.2.1 Sub-finding 7.1.** Thirty-six of the 43 religious educators (83.7%) who demonstrated support for the BRLA used language to suggest that RE is an academic learning area and that the BRLA was a tool “enhancing” the academic focus of the learning area. The religious educators made statements such as “We value the BRLA” because it has “lifted the profile of RE and demonstrated the required rigour that is in keeping with other academic learning areas”. They described the value of the BRLA as a means of ensuring teachers did more than focus on the faith element of the RE curriculum. The BRLA was acknowledged by these participants as a useful measure of student learning in RE that had “validated” the teaching of the RE content. As a result, the BRLA was considered as a scope for informing future teaching decisions in RE. Table 10.2 lists more examples of common expressions used by these religious educators. These examples further highlight how religious educators in Phase Two of the study perceived the BRLA to have changed the dynamics of RE in their classrooms and in their schools.

The principals of Catholic primary schools who participated in Phase Two stressed the concept that RE is the “first” learning area in Catholic schools. They made reference to policy documents such as *The Mandate: Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia 2009–2015* (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, paras. 61, 62) and *The Religious Education Policy, version 2-B5* (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2013b). These school leaders of RE argued they had a responsibility to ensure that as school leaders they encouraged, promoted and modelled good teaching and assessment practices in RE, as well as all other learning areas. As one principal explained:

Religious Education is about the transmission of knowledge. Students need to be taught about their religion rather than imposing it on them. Teachers need to convey faith and how to apply and transfer their faith to the contemporary world.

Similarly, another principal said, “The BRLA ... has given credibility to the learning area ... makes people realise there are facts to be learnt in RE and that it is not all about feelings and actions”. The response to the BRLA by the school leaders of RE reflect changes to teaching and assessment practices in RE. These changes included a focus on student learning.

Table 10.2

*Statements About the Influence of the BRLA in Religious Education*

- 
- The BRLA lifts the profile and status of RE as an academic learning area with the same rigour as other learning areas.
  - We take the BRLA seriously like we do NAPLAN as this is how we treat all learning in our school.
  - The BRLA gives RE a place in the Catholic school curriculum like Literacy and Numeracy.
  - We recognise through the use of the BRLA that faith and content are important but that there is a difference.
  - The assessment has ensured that we do not fluff around anymore in RE. We need to focus on teaching the content knowledge in RE.
  - The BRLA gives a focus to the teachers as well as the students as to what kind of things they should be making sure they have covered.
  - The assessment has ensured more of an urgency to cover the content. Before the BRLA, we in the primary school probably spent too much time on activities like making posters or doing the filler stuff.
  - Until the BRLA, there were all those years where RE was all “airy-fairy”, about feelings and not much facts.
  - The BRLA gives balance to the RE curriculum that tends to be full of “wonder” questions.
- 

**10.2.2 Sub-finding 7.2.** Twenty-five of the 43 religious educators (58.1%) described student learning in RE as important. To improve students’ learning in RE, these religious educators explained how they used the student performance data from the BRLA reports. As one of the teachers of RE commented, the analysis of student performance data from the BRLA was perceived as the “first step towards change in RE”. The participants acknowledged that the changes to RE based on the use of the BRLA data had led to improvements in student learning.

Within this group of 25 religious educators, 34.9% (15 of 43) described how as a first step towards change in RE, they interrogated the student performance data from the BRLA to inform teaching and assessment practices. They referred to the school and student reports provided by the CEOWA to gauge the students’ quality of learning. As one primary school leader of RE said:

We have started looking at the results more as a whole school and certainly it features in our curriculum plan. We look at areas that perhaps need more focus .... The Year Five reports are quite a nice summary of the students’ results. There are very clear



graphs and you can see your school does quite well in this area or this is a focus area so you're getting longitudinal studies as well.

The school leader commented that the Year Five reports were "appreciated" to the point that their school had begun using the student data from the reports in their curriculum planning documents. The aim was to use the student performance data from the reports to determine how well their students performed within their school and how their students performed compared to other students across the State.

Ten religious educators [10 of 43 (23.3%)] spoke of the interrogation of data at a whole school level. Two primary teachers of RE from the same Catholic school and two principals explained how they discussed the student performance data from the BRLA and considered implications of that data in future RE lessons. As one of the principals explained, "We go through what questions we all seem to get wrong and discuss why we get them wrong". The other principal described the process used at their school to bring about change to lesson planning in RE:

We bring the results to a Professional Learning Community meeting. We look at the students results to see how we went as a school. Even though the Year Five teachers are directly involved, I say to the Year Six teachers, "These are the results the students achieved last year and here are the areas you probably need to concentrate on this year."

The religious educators explained how as a teaching staff within their Catholic schools, they collectively analysed the NAPLAN (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2014) data and compared that data with the BRLA data. They explained how they tracked and aligned the BRLA data with the data from NAPLAN and with student performance data from classroom assessments in RE. As one teacher of RE explained:

We focus on different aspects that have been shown to be weaknesses in the student performance data. An example might be the focus on parables. The children knew them but because they didn't know the name of the parable they couldn't make the connection in the BRLA. Hence, we spend more time on the parables. In the past, we may have just read the parable once and moved on but now we discuss it and study it more through activities etc.

This group of ten suggested they focused on understanding the strengths, weaknesses and misconceptions that students had about the content in the RE curriculum to improve the quality of student learning in RE.

The religious educators who spoke of the need to analyse student performance data at a whole school level also spoke about systemic attention to student learning. They considered it important for all teachers together with school leaders, to be aware of the quality of learning required in the RE curriculum. They also suggested school and whole system leadership were responsible for driving and promoting a student learning agenda. A sharp vision and effective communication by school leaders was stated by these religious educators as factors driving successful change in RE.

Two further claims were presented by the 25 religious educators. These claims were specific to the implementation of the Senior Secondary Religious Education courses called Religion and Life (School Curriculum and Standards Authority, 2016b). Three religious educators within the group described how the student performance data from the BRLA were used as a prerequisite, and success criteria for entry into the courses. The religious educators commented that the BRLA was “good training” for students who were considering the Religion and Life courses of study offered in Catholic schools in Years Eleven and Twelve. They explained how the BRLA was a means towards an improved focus on the importance of the upper secondary courses in RE. As one secondary school leader of RE explained:

I think now with Religion and Life I take the BRLA very seriously. You can actually see the place of the BRLA, from a community point of view of our need to be informed Catholics rather than uninformed Catholics.

The school leader indicated that the BRLA and the Religion and Life course provided the academic direction RE was taking into the future in Western Australian Catholic schools.

Seven religious educators [7 of 43 (16.3%)] described how the inclusion of the BRLA student performance data in the academic reports given to parents ensured that students “take the assessment seriously when it is administered”. For one secondary school leader of RE, student engagement in RE was considered much better with the publication by the school of their students’ BRLA results. The school leader said:

The BRLA is actually having something of an impact in Year Eight. We do a presentation to the whole Year Eight parent body and provide a Religious Education point of view. We present parents with some information about where we think the students are headed.

The school leader mentioned that the Year Eight student cohort was shown how teachers were preparing students for the Year Nine BRLA. Similarly, a Year Nine teacher from the same school as the school leader commented:

I gave last year's paper to my Year 9 class today and they did the multiple choice and without me even saying anything they marked it and I heard them say, "Oh I didn't do well in the Bible and I didn't do so well in the Sacrament." So, they actually analysed their own results to determine what they did and didn't do and how they could do better.

The teacher also identified the raised level of student engagement since the school had focused on the BRLA achievement results with parents and students.

The seven religious educators seem to have considered the importance of focusing on student learning despite what they perceived as a lack of parental support in RE compared to other learning areas. As one principal explained:

A school curriculum today should be about picking up what is not happening in families .... Family support for education may not be the same as in the past but teachers, and particularly teachers of Religious Education, have an obligation to use effective pedagogy and assessment practices in order to improve student learning .... Unlike for NAPLAN, the results from the BRLA are different to the results in classroom assessments. Perhaps we need to attend to the teaching of content in RE more closely.

The principal suggested that the practice of attending to student learning was their priority for all learning areas offered at their school, but perhaps had not been effectively executed in RE until the advent of the BRLA. Similarly, another principal said, "Things are out of our control like literacy levels and church attendance, but we have to try to improve things and the BRLA has helped us to do so". The assumption of these school leaders of RE was that all teachers were conscious of the fact that the BRLA provided results that helped teachers learn more about students and engaged parents with their child's learning in RE. They considered the BRLA as having provided opportunities for teachers and school leaders to view student learning in RE in the same way as student learning in other subjects.

**10.2.3 Sub-finding 7.3.** Fifteen of the 43 religious educators (34.9%) in Phase Two of the study described ways they analysed student performance data from the BRLA to bring about improvements in their teaching practices in RE. As a Year Three teacher and a school leader of RE from the same school described, the student performance data from the BRLA had "definitely impacted on how we teach in RE".

Table 10.3

*Statements About the Influence of the BRLA on Teaching Practices*

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- Student performance data and the assessment itself has helped me to vigorously go over the RE content and not just to gloss over it.
  - The BRLA has given us more of a sense of direction in the teaching of RE.
  - The BRLA has given us more formality.
  - The BRLA reminds us to revisit important content.
  - I focus on the essential content in the RE curriculum.
  - The BRLA is a framework or an overview for teachers and students.
  - There are facts to be learnt in RE.
  - The BRLA helps us concentrate on covering the mandated RE content, knowledge and understandings in RE.
  - The RE content is being taught more effectively as a result of the BRLA.
  - The BRLA guides teachers through the RE content.
  - The BRLA is pressured work but a good thing as it is an opportunity to go back through some things to find out and remind students what they have done in terms of the basics and what they should know.
  - We say we have to teach the children the etiquette of church.
  - There is an opportunity for applying continuity to teaching the RE content.
  - Teaching staff have identified the content they and students need to learn in RE.
  - The BRLA is not the “be all and end all”, I understand its place, but I see it as a tool that validates my teaching.
  - They are here to stay. Testing and assessment is not going away. The BRLA has given us an opportunity to grapple with the language behind our faith.
  - A “scope and sequence of RE content is being developed” as a result of the BRLA for our school.
  - I go deeper into Scripture rather than just gloss over it.
  - We have identified the need for specific PD in Scripture as a result of reviewing student responses to BRLA test items.
  - We integrate and use scriptural text in English classes. That way students learn to analyse the Bible better to understand what the language actually means.
  - We are learning to differentiate in RE and accommodate for student learning styles much better than the past.
- 

As identified in Table 10.3, the group of 15 religious educators used specific language to describe how the BRLA had influenced the nature of their teaching in RE. They particularly spoke about how the BRLA was “guiding” teachers by helping them to “focus on the essential content in the RE curriculum”. One principal suggested students needed to know the specific and essential content of the RE curriculum and that the BRLA had “pointed us in that direction”. As one teacher explained:

A little bit too much was thrown out the window. RE became all about feelings and so on. Now I think we are getting more balance coming in with knowledge about the history, knowledge about events, knowledge about Scripture, parts of the Mass and all that sort of language.

These religious educators identified the importance of “explicitly teaching” the content, knowledge, understandings and skills within the RE curriculum. Further to the explanations above one Year Nine teacher said:

Even if the students don’t know who Bishop [X] and Archbishop [Y] are, they still need to know who’s leading the Church and what is the relevance of our bishops to the Pope and things like that.

Similarly, a primary school leader of RE explained:

My teaching is more explicit in terms of content, knowledge and understanding because we focus at our school on student performance data from the BRLA. Now, I read the RE Units of Work more closely and pick out areas within the Units that I may have skipped over before .... As a school, we look at the areas of weakness from the student performance data and compile “warm-ups” from these areas. Our whole school does warm-ups before each assessment in all subjects; each week the students do warm-up tests. They focus on explicit instructions for recall. They are only five minutes long and are for revision of what they’ve learned in the past week, the past term and the past years.

Collectively, these religious educators suggested the BRLA had provided an opportunity for applying continuity to teaching the RE content and “created a space” for visible change in RE that focused people’s attention to the importance of understanding student learning of that content. They explained the more they engaged with the BRLA, the more they “got to know the content in the RE curriculum”.

The 15 religious educators also spoke about the importance of reviewing student responses to test items as “effective pedagogical practice”. One principal explained:

Once you get the results I consider the area that the students did not do well in. For example, Jesus or Church or Prayer. I ask them, “Which area is the weakest? Why do you think that is the case?”. I would probably have a couple of sessions where I went through and said to students, “Why did you all put down that answer? What did you think the answer might be?”. That kind of learning. I think that as we go on we are getting more conscious of doing that sort of thing.

Similarly, one school leader of RE said:

There is pressure to improve teaching in RE. It is a good thing. For example, when you review their responses to test items with students, it gives the students and you an opportunity to go back through some things with kids that they've done and remind them of what they've done. The BRLA reminds you of some basics and gives you an excuse and an opportunity to revisit things ... with kids and all the whole RE program in a way that helps everyone meet concepts again, hear them again and internalise them.

These religious educators identified the benefits of reviewing students' responses to test items. They seem to have believed they were able to better understand how to identify and address the needs of their students.

The group explained how the BRLA had strengthened their focus on Scripture and Prayer. Year Nine teachers said that the BRLA had helped heighten teachers' awareness of the importance of Scripture. As one Year Nine teacher stated, "The BRLA gives us an indication of how we're teaching and if it's working. RE is meatier to teach now". Another Year Nine teacher suggested, "I've been going over a couple of the Old Testament scriptures and discussing them with the students, so I know the area that they are weak in". Similarly, one principal explained:

We now notice, for example, the children's understanding of the exact words in the core prayers was a bit "slack", they could "sort of say the prayers" but when they had to fill in the gaps, which is a pretty standard test item, they said the wrong words, they wrote the wrong words. Now, we make sure that in Year Two, the students are taught the actual words, they take them home for homework and we test them. The same is true for Year Five, they didn't know, they couldn't name the Seven Sacraments or do things like that. We have definitely focused more on our weaknesses. I should have checked out what our actual weaknesses were at our school.

These religious educators proposed the BRLA had encouraged them to "go over concepts in RE that are considered essential". The added focus provided by the BRLA to RE had led them to an awareness of the need for professional development and training in RE for teachers that was specific to the Bible.

The group confronted the issue raised by other religious educators that the BRLA test items did not reflect the content in the RE curriculum. As one principal said, "I challenge those that do not believe the test items in the BRLA cover the content in the RE curriculum. If you have taught the content, you will identify from where the items were taken within the content". Similarly, a school leader of RE explained:

Look, you get lots of people who complain about the content and say, “Oh the content hasn’t been covered” and if you actually know the content, you know it has been covered in the BRLA. It is covered in the previous years too. I know that for a fact having taught Year Six and I remember the test in Year Seven. If you have covered all of the content in the RE curriculum there should be no surprises in the test, so I don’t buy into that criticism of the test. The content that is tested is covered. Maybe there is sometimes, obscurity in what is being chosen from the content but that might be a deliberate approach to try and weed out whether all of the content has been taught in the way it should be.

There was an expectation that other religious educators developed a better understanding of the RE curriculum and come to know what is “expected of them”.

The 15 religious educators considered the content in the RE curriculum as “central” to their faith. They used language to describe the necessary changes they perceived were required in RE to focus teachers on the content knowledge of the Catholic faith. As one teacher of RE commented, “Students and teachers need to learn about the religious content on which our faith is grounded”. As another teacher explained:

I enjoy teaching RE because it’s just not simply, sit here and pray with the students, although that’s part of it. RE is very academic. It’s an academic subject like any other subject where there are outcomes to be learnt; there are knowledge and skills and if all students are given opportunities to learn this enables them to have a positive attitude towards people of other faiths. Exploring the Catholic faith gives students the experience and the skills to explore other faiths as well. In Society and Environment, there is a lot of world knowledge, there’s History, there’s Geography. RE is like Society and Environment. It is a very real subject and a very relevant subject that I think really makes sense to students. And when they apply themselves, I think they get a lot out of it.

The common perception of the group was, as teachers focus on the Catholic content in the RE curriculum, the faith of students and the teachers is “enriched and enhanced”. The content in the RE curriculum was perceived as a “valuable tool” that provides opportunities for students and teachers to find out about “their religion” and “other religions of the world” and, in turn, makes “better connections with the world”.

The group remarked how other teachers and school leaders at their schools did not “necessarily” perceive the content in the RE curriculum as central and important to their work in Catholic schools. They also suggested teachers and school leaders did not understand the

value of teaching RE as an academic subject. As one teacher of RE stated, “Teachers cannot test faith but at least in Catholic schools we can impart the knowledge of our Faith tradition”.

Similarly, one school leader explained:

The BRLA reinforces the rigour required in Religious Education .... I think there was a tendency in the past for RE to be taught differently .... No one wanted to stress the students out with RE and there was literally colouring in and stuff .... As you develop the RE Units or courses and develop your teaching expertise, you actually see that the academic rigour builds a depth into the teaching that actually is quite enriching for the students. They are actually getting taught content that they don't know. This expands their wisdom and understanding of the world they live in .... When I talk to my colleagues that are more experienced than I, I can see that they and the students are really involved in terms of what they get from RE now ....

Like the school leader, others in the group argued that for “far too long” teachers may have fallen into the “trap” of wanting to do their own thing in RE. One teacher elaborated:

There is the trap of teaching RE just through our own faith, but we need to remember to follow the Guidelines [RE curriculum] too. In the primary school especially, we have concentrated on our own Catholic beliefs and the loving, caring side of our faith. I know in the early childhood years we didn't focus on the knowledge as much. The BRLA has changed that and now we see that both are important.

The perceived assumption was the teaching of RE compared to other learning areas used a “softer” approach that did not focus on academic rigour. Also, the perceived approach to the teaching RE focused more on faith and less about the content of the faith. According to the 15 religious educators, the BRLA had reinforced their belief that teaching content about the Catholic Faith Tradition was important in the delivery of the RE curriculum.

**10.2.4 Sub-finding 7.4.** Six religious educators [6 of 43 (14.0%)] who had identified ways the BRLA has influenced their teaching practices in RE, also suggested the BRLA had influenced and improved their assessment practices in RE (Table 10.4). They described how the BRLA had heightened teachers' awareness of RE requiring more formalised assessments. They spoke about the specific role the BRLA had played in modelling effective assessment practices in RE to meet this need.



Table 10.4

*Statements About the Influence of the BRLA on Assessment Practices*

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- The BRLA has given focus to assessment practices in RE.
  - The BRLA has become a model of assessment practices.
  - We review student responses and learn how to write better assessments.
  - The BRLA is a good moderation exercise.
  - We mark the test items together as a team and learn about students' strengths, weaknesses and misconceptions in their learning of the RE content.
  - We pick up on areas of weakness and decide to actually try to physically improve that. That's similar to what we do for NAPLAN ... we put lots of work into it and are pleased to see that it pays off.
- 

The group of six seem to have considered the BRLA as a model of good assessment practice. They acknowledged the academic focus that the BRLA had brought to assessment practices in RE. The explanation from one principal reflects the perceptions of the group:

If you are going to be reporting in Religious Education, you need to assess. There are lots of ways to assess, from observation of children .... [By entering] into discussions where they can show physically that they understand how to make the Sign of the Cross and so on. The BRLA is part of the assessment process in RE and everything is important because you have to know what they have learnt so you can move on to the next lesson. It is one form of assessment, the same as we have NAPLAN.

Similarly, one school leader explained:

We used to make up our own assessments but now we have a set structure that the whole school follows. We're also more diligent in giving assessments; it's in line with the other subjects. We need to change because RE needs to be made more rigorous.

These religious educators identified how the BRLA had provided the opportunity for teachers and school leaders to critically reflect on the following questions: "Does the BRLA results align with my assessments?"; "How well does it align?"; and "How can we improve the construction of our assessments?".

The comments from the six religious educators suggest a whole school approach to the teaching and assessment was adopted at their schools. They showed that the approach was used in RE, and that the BRLA was a tool used as part of the approach to provide a whole school focus on assessment and remedial teaching practices across Year levels in RE. As one teacher explained:

Our testing/assessment structures are more focused .... As a teacher you need to be more focused. Before the BRLA we were all just doing our own thing in assessment but now we are all expected to have tests like the BRLA format. There is clear content and knowledge that the students should know .... Our students showed a weakness in the Bible stories. They didn't know the details so the BRLA pointed this out .... As a school we have focused on the Bible stories and created activities around them. We realised that it wasn't enough just to read the Bible stories, but we had to find the relevance in them for the children and put more effort into teaching this .... We are spending less time on airy-fairy stuff, like making a poster, and more time on the knowledge component .... We're treating RE as a core learning area .... The BRLA has made RE more of an important learning area .... Pressure makes us accountable as teachers. Schools are busy places and the BRLA makes us accountable as a school. The principals and other school leaders of RE who spoke about a whole school approach in RE described the student performance data from the BRLA as evidence used by all teaching staff (Kindergarten and above) to dialogue for action towards improving assessment practices in RE.

The school leaders spoke about the strategies they used to improve assessment practices in RE. For example, one principal explained how "a little prayer booklet" was developed and sent home to parents. Students were expected to learn the prayers and be assessed on how well they knew the prayers. Within that scenario, teachers, students and parents were aware of the content of prayers taught in RE and the type of assessments used to measure student knowledge about prayer.

Three teachers of RE explained how they were more "diligent" in preparing assessments in line with other learning areas. They also explained how collaboration between teaching staff occurred to review assessment practices and, in turn, improve those practices. School leaders drove the collaboration. One school leader of RE working in a school with one of the three teachers elaborated on the collective effort to improve assessment practices in RE:

Our push or focus has been I guess, probably because of the BRLA, to assess RE well and how to instruct teachers to differentiate about what to assess and how to assess different areas. We are much more encouraging our teachers to do formal testing in RE so that they show children that assessment is part of RE. The BRLA does have a place and certain parts of it are really important. There's a difference when you assess

the content, you evaluate and then you direct your teaching from there and even integrate learning from other areas.

For these religious educators, more formal assessments were being developed in RE at the classroom and whole school levels.

Furthermore, the six religious educators described how teachers at their school focused on assessment practices in RE as a result of the BRLA marking process. One teacher of RE described the marking experience as “a means for facilitating discussions about student learning across Year levels”. As one primary school leader of RE said, “We have made the Year Three marking experience work for us ... we have used it as a positive to inform teaching. It supports teacher accountability”. As one teacher said, “I think the whole teaching staff get an insight as to what the BRLA is about and what sort of questions are being asked. It gives teachers an insight as to what the kids are thinking”. The group explained how they marked the responses to the Year Three test items as a teaching staff and gained “valuable” assessment experience. They commented that the marking process introduced by the CEOWA as a form of moderation exercise seemed to “help” staff learn what students “really knew” about the content in the RE curriculum. One school leader elaborated by saying:

Teaching the content in the RE curriculum is everyone’s job. We build upon the content. The content in the RE curriculum is not something that just needs to be covered in Year Three. It has to start from Kindy and has to work its way up.

The group identified two benefits from marking the Year Three BRLA test items as a teaching staff. Firstly, teachers recognised their part to play in teaching RE that was beyond the Year levels in which the BRLA was administered. Secondly, teachers collectively gained understandings about their knowledge and misconceptions of the content.

The religious educators recommended a need for assessment practices in RE to mirror those in other learning areas. As one teacher of RE remarked, “RE should be assessed in the same manner as any of the other teaching areas but I don’t know that it always is. We don’t often have formal assessments in RE”. Similarly, one principal said, “Theoretically RE should be assessed as other learning areas but I don’t believe that it is formally tested at the classroom level”. Two teachers from secondary Catholic schools in regional WA explained the challenges confronting RE teachers in terms of assessment practices. One of the teachers said:

We realise that the rigour of the assessments in RE is not as high as say Maths. The students see that straight away. Even if we’ve started talking about an assessment, they already expect that it will be at a lower level and the sort of things that you get

from the students is not good. Personally, I'm not a great fan of the way that we assess our students in RE .... I think it should be more rigorous .... We are trying to change things.

In addition to the perceived lack of rigour in assessment practices in RE, the group also commented that “students do not put in the effort”. The religious educators raised the previously discussed concern about disengagement in RE from students, their parents and other teachers.

The recommendation for more support and guidance from the CEOWA was also expressed by the religious educators. The level of support was assumed as required to assist teachers and school leaders to improve assessment practices in RE. One school leader of RE explained:

I think probably something we could do better is when it comes to looking at the data. Perhaps schools need to have some guidance there and support. Perhaps we need to call on consultants to come out to schools and give schools some steps they can go through to interpret data.

Assistance was perceived necessary to focus attention on “interrogating and interpreting” the student performance data from the BRLA, and to train educators to develop better assessments.

Until this point, the majority of religious educators who seem to have supported the BRLA and explained how the assessment influenced their teaching and assessment practices in RE have been identified. The groups that formed the majority of religious educators in Phase Two of the study represent larger groups of religious educators in Phase One. For example, the 33.2% (79 of 238) who demonstrated support for the BRLA, the 48.7% (114 of 234) who rated the BRLA as an effective measure of student learning, and the 59.2% (141 of 238) who perceived the BRLA as having a distinct role to play in RE. How these religious educators perceived the BRLA and the level of influence they perceived the assessment to have had in RE was demonstrated in two ways. They used language to explain that the BRLA had heightened teachers' awareness of the academic nature of RE and provided practical examples of change to their teaching and assessment practices in RE. In contrast to these groups, a minority group of religious educators remarked that the BRLA had not influenced their classroom practices in RE.

**10.2.5 Sub-finding 7.5.** Ten of the 43 religious educators (23.3%) described the BRLA as a challenging experience and explained how the challenges they faced limited

changes to their teaching and assessment practices in RE. In seven out of ten cases, the lack of change was attributed to the perception that the BRLA was irrelevant to the RE curriculum.

Seven religious educators [7 of 43 (16.3%)] specifically used language suggesting no change had occurred in RE since the introduction of the BRLA. This group provided several reasons for their perceptions and inaction in RE. Their rationales appear contextually associated with their motivations and responses to the BRLA as a LSA and to their professional training in RE. The rationales provided by the group are a summary of the concerns raised by larger numbers of religious educators in Phase Two about the BRLA. These concerns were previously addressed and led to Findings One (Chapter Five), Three, Four (Chapter Seven) and Six (Chapter Nine).

**10.2.5.1 Perceived student and parent disengagement in RE.** The religious educators identified a lack of engagement by students and their parents to the teaching of RE (Table 10.5). They suggested that students in secondary schools were particularly difficult to motivate and teach in RE. The religious educators considered the BRLA had little value or influence on their teaching and assessment practices in RE because for them, although they were aware that RE should be treated as an academic learning area and that the BRLA reinforces that concept, “little was done” in their schools. Students and parents in their schools were perceived as not interested in RE and RE was perceived as not treated like an academic learning area by students and their parents. As one Year Nine teacher explained, the parents were only interested in NAPLAN results. The teacher elaborated by saying:

The students don't value doing the BRLA and doing well in it because many parents and families don't value Religion in schools. They send their children to Catholic schools because it's a great school within the area not so much because it's a great Catholic school. Anything that has a Catholic logo or presence to it is considered second class or of a lower grade in education because it's not valued at home. I don't think that the kids will take any value out of the results for the assessment either.

Given the perceived reality of disengagement in RE, these religious educators suggested it was “pointless” using the student performance data from the BRLA to initiate changes to teaching and assessment practices in RE.

Table 10.5

*Statements About Student and Parental Disengagement*

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Teachers of Religious Education

- A lack of family support is the issue in RE.
- There is no point in testing in RE because students are not interested in learning the RE content or treating RE like an academic subject.
- Year Nine students are influenced by secular issues questioning the existence of God.
- Students are not living or practising their religion at home.
- I am old, and students do not want to engage with me.

School Leaders of Religious Education

- Parents don't care.
- The intake of students from non-Catholic families in secondary schools makes it difficult to build on knowledge and understanding in RE.

Principals

- Parents do not appear to be interested in the BRLA.
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**10.2.5.2 Perceived lack of teacher efficacy in RE.** The religious educators suggested teachers lacked the motivation to teach RE and the professional training and faith formation in RE necessary to improve teaching and assessment practices. These religious educators were mainly principals and other school leaders. As one school leader said, “Teachers might not know all there is to know about RE but may also not be interested and that is why students can’t answer all the questions in the BRLA correctly”. Similarly, one principal said, teachers required “far more” professional training in the content knowledge of RE. The principal further explained:

Practising Catholics understand and model their faith better than non-Catholics do. I think the difficulty may come when I find that younger teachers may not always be practising their own faith and so there can be that problem where they are not up to date where the Church is because they are not actively practising their own faith. I think this can sometimes reflect in the classroom and certainly I have seen this when they prepare the liturgies. So, it is up to the school to continually give them that professional development.

The school leaders recommended time be set aside for specific professional development in RE. They suggested that professional development should focus on areas of weakness in

content knowledge as identified in the BRLA student performance data. They also suggested time be set aside for the formation of faith.

**10.2.5.3 Perceived time constraints.** The religious educators described the Catholic curriculum as “over-crowded” and that there was not enough time to devote to changes in RE. As one principal stated, “The BRLA is a valuable tool for us but I suppose we have many other demands in the literacy and the numeracy area and our main focus, to be honest, is in those areas”. Another principal explained:

The BRLA has given us a focus that RE can stand alongside all the other learning areas in terms of its knowledge base; not that faith aspect that we are looking for, that is the other aspect of the Catholic school, that’s not assessed through the BRLA. RE has a body of knowledge. Those facts can be passed on to the children. We owe it to the kids to make religion engaging. We need to motivate them and to make RE a subject that is as rigorous as all the others. The BRLA has given us a sniff in that direction. I don’t think we have gone down the path as much as we want to; it’s the start of our journey. We have so many other needs at the moment in terms of priorities; it’s there but on the back burner more than on the front burner.

Both principals suggested that the BRLA provides data on student learning that informed the direction of teaching and assessment practices but that “little was done about it”. The school leaders of RE acknowledged that they “should be doing more” and considered the need for “assistance to do more”.

**10.2.5.4 Perceived challenges with the RE curriculum.** The religious educators described the RE curriculum as outdated. They suggested that the BRLA had not prompted change to the RE curriculum as the curriculum continued to be in “draft” form. They said that even though the BRLA has heightened people’s awareness to treat RE as an academic learning area, unless the RE resources or Units of Work containing the content in the RE curriculum were reviewed and updated, “there was no need to use the BRLA” to inform or change classroom practices in RE. As one principal explained:

The RE Units of Work provide a lot of variety ... there is a lot of reference to role play, music and writing tasks and there is a lot of variety within those Units for teachers to choose palliative ways to teach the RE content, but more rigour is required for teachers to focus on the knowledge and understandings of the curriculum. The Units are good, but we seem to be playing catch-up a lot! Changes come along in

other curriculum areas particularly in assessment and reporting. Next year we will be reporting against the West Australian Curriculum for English, Maths, History and Science. RE is our first learning area and yet we are all still a little bit in the air about what we are going to do for RE. Subject areas now have judging standards available on the SCSA website to assist teachers with learning standards and grade descriptors for reporting. We constantly play catch-up in RE. If RE is out there as our first learning area should we be playing catch-up or should we be on the front foot?

The principal argued they did not believe the current Units of Work highlighted the essential knowledge to be taught in RE and recommended the need for a review of the RE curriculum that drives change consistent with other learning areas.

**10.2.5.5 Perceived irrelevance of the BRLA.** Besides the perceived nature of the RE curriculum, the religious educators identified differences between the BRLA and the content in the RE curriculum (Table 10.6). For religious educators, the BRLA test items were more knowledge based compared to how they taught RE. Religious educators spoke about the teaching of RE as being more about “discussions” and less about assessments. They compared the BRLA to the content in the RE curriculum, suggesting the “academic nature of the BRLA” was different to the “faith-based nature” of the identified content. One school leader explained:

The BRLA and the RE Units of Work are very different to each other. The assessment is very knowledge based on Gospels and the Church and everything like that. Whereas the Units of Work are very different, so we do a lot of teaching on top of the RE Units. If you’re not someone that goes beyond the Units, I don’t think the kids are being exposed to the RE content enough. The gap between the BRLA and the Units needs to change in order for a change in teaching and assessment practices in Religious Education.

Similarly, one Year Nine teacher stated, “The BRLA is full of clerical speak which as a type of language is of no use to the students.” These religious educators stressed the importance of faith and spirituality in their response to teaching RE. It appears that based on this perception, the use of the BRLA to inform practices in RE was “pointless”.



Table 10.6

*Perceived Differences Between the BRLA and the RE Curriculum*

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Teachers of Religious Education

- The BRLA is far too content driven.
  - The BRLA is full of clerical speak .... We don't need to learn words like the "magisterium" because the language is out dated.
  - The BRLA is more knowledge based than how we teach.
  - We don't assess formally in Religious Education.
  - The BRLA questions do not link to the content in the *Come Follow Me* [RE curriculum resource material].
  - The BRLA does not affect planning in RE because there are the Units of Work.
  - We do not cover all the content in the RE curriculum.
  - RE is more than just teaching the curriculum content. There is a personal level.
  - We need to focus on the quality and not the quantity of content in RE. Our focus should be on evangelisation.
  - RE is not an academic subject it is a religious subject and should be taught that way.
  - I don't teach the RE curriculum, I teach about spirituality and the religious angle and I encourage mysticism.
  - The BRLA hasn't changed the way I teach RE. We struggle to teach the students about spirituality and the experiences that go along with that; there isn't enough time to teach all the things they need to know to excel in the BRLA.
  - We need more questions related to their lives.
  - Faith cannot be judged by a test.
  - I don't use the BRLA results. I don't believe the RE curriculum is relevant to today's students. The RE curriculum is boring.
- 

School Leaders of Religious Education

- The RE curriculum is laden in heavy content.
  - As a system are we treating RE too academically and not looking deeply enough at the students' spirituality?
  - I really think because it's Religion, because it's not SOSE [Studies of Society and Environment] and it's not Science and it's not Maths, I think because it's Religion you should really have some sort of attitudinal scale. Not necessarily to your faith but about your positive experience of Religious Education within the school.
  - Is faith going to be measured in the BRLA in the future? ... So, as a standardised test I believe that you can measure their knowledge, but you can't measure their interpretation of a Bible reading and you can't measure your school's evangelisation. ... Will the students be able to make a comment about their faith?
- 

School Principals

- The BRLA has not made people like RE more. It actually puts the kids off RE. Besides the BRLA is not connected to life.
  - A different focus is reflected in the BRLA as compared to the RE Units of Work
- 

Aligned to the comments positioning RE as a faith and spiritual activity one school leader explained:

Assessing knowledge is different to assessing the personal relationship that students have with God and that's more observable in the anecdotal format in the classroom.

How well students respond and participate to their relationships with God and other people is important. I wonder if the BRLA results align with what I have on the assessments from the kids. I don't think the BRLA can ever replace the holistic view of how the child is going with their Religion because some of the kiddies who are very poor at acquiring knowledge, who express that knowledge poorly in written form may be very spiritual.

However, another principal challenged the claim about RE being a purely spiritual activity by saying:

One of the key insights I've learnt from my experience of the BRLA is a misconception that a lot of teaching staff have that the content covered in the test has not been addressed or is different and that is simply not true. I don't buy into that criticism of the test. I challenge anyone who says that the questions in the BRLA are not relevant to the Units of Work. If you have taught the RE Units of Work, you will notice where the questions come from. I know for a fact because I have taught the content. If you have taught the content, there will not be any surprises in the test.

The latter principal's argument reflects the earlier concern raised about teacher efficacy in RE. The principal suggested that when classroom teachers have a better understanding of the RE curriculum, they may also have a better understanding of the BRLA and its connection to the curriculum. Given that groups of religious educators focused on faith and spirituality, their response to the BRLA and its lack of perceived influence in RE may have been a result of personal and collective interpretations of their professional training and formation in RE. The different interpretations of the nature and role of RE within Catholic education is an identified context addressed in the review of literature for this study.

**10.2.5.6 Perceived lack of communication by school leaders.** Religious educators used language such as "we are just told to administer the assessment" and "we are only told a week in advance about the BRLA". They suggested school leaders "only wanted to know if the students did well". They implied that little change to teaching and assessment practices in RE had occurred in their classrooms or schools because they had not seen the student performance data from the BRLA. According to one teacher of RE:

I don't see any results .... As a comparison, as Head of Maths we get the NAPLAN results and I itemise through them, like there is no tomorrow! I go through the results and look for strengths and weaknesses in student learning. I organise the results according to classes and talk to teachers about the following year's teaching required

in Maths. I say, “Next year, these areas will need a little more teaching because you’re going to have to bridge the gaps” and things like that. If the class has done well in an area I say, “Over here, you’re pretty strong so actually that area is probably not much of an issue so maybe you’ve got an opportunity to extend students”. I do the same thing with the Head of English when we look at the literacy results. Whereas I don’t know that we’ve ever gotten the results back from the Bishops’ Literacy test to do a similar sort of analysis. Perhaps we have but I haven’t seen it. I see value in it but I don’t think that value is being recognised at a school level.

Another teacher of RE recommended:

We need to do what we do for NAPLAN. If we want to evaluate each year and to go forth from each year, I should get the results back from my Year Five this year. That information should then go to Year Six and they should be investigating, for example, ... these kids didn’t know ... the prayer ... the Hail Mary. They were asked to write who the founder of the Catholic Church was, they didn’t know the Bishops etc. These are concepts you had to teach next year but the teacher won’t get any of that I don’t think. They won’t even get a look.

These religious educators suggested there were no real benefits from the BRLA, especially to teachers and students. They seem to have believed that it was “pointless” to use the BRLA if the results from the assessment were unavailable to those classroom teachers directly or indirectly involved with the assessment.

The rationales provided by the ten religious educators as to why they believed the BRLA had not influenced their classroom or school practices in RE reflect the perceptions and rationales of other larger groups of religious educators involved in Phase One. For example, the 33.6% (80 of 238) of religious educators who raised concerns about the BRLA, the 51.3% (120 of 234) who perceived the BRLA as an ineffective measure of student learning, and the 44.1% (105 of 238) who perceived the BRLA as having a limited role to play in RE. This evidence suggests a possible close link between how religious educators perceived the purpose and role of the BRLA (SRQ 1) and the influence of their perceptions on how they made use of the BRLA student performance data to inform their teaching and assessment practices in RE (SRQ 3).

### **10.3 Chapter Summary**

Finding Seven was discussed in this chapter. A summary of this key finding is presented in Figure 10.1. The finding identifies majority and minority groups of religious

educators involved in the interviews who, based on their perceptions of the BRLA, provided various rationales for the level of influence that the BRLA had on their teaching and assessment practices in RE. Majority groups used specific language to describe and explain how the BRLA had brought about changes to RE, including the enhanced academic profile of RE as a learning area; an improved focus on the content in the RE curriculum; an improved focus on student learning in RE; and better analysis and interpretation of the student performance data from the BRLA reports. Some groups described the changes to RE as felt across the whole school. In contrast, a minority group challenged the idea that the BRLA had changed their teaching and learning practices in RE. These religious educators perceived limited change had occurred as a result of the BRLA, for a number of reasons. They believed students and parents were disengaged in RE; time constraints limited change; a lack of teacher efficacy in RE was evident; the RE curriculum was outdated and the content in the curriculum was different to the BRLA test items; and there was a lack of communication by school leaders about the BRLA and the results about student performance.

The last six chapters presented the key findings in this study. Throughout the findings, a set of common response patterns are identified. The next chapter discusses these response patterns as the research themes to emerge from the findings.

## Specific Research Question Three

How do the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA influence their teaching and assessment practices in Religious Education?

### Contributing Questions

How have you dealt with the BRLA?

In what direction has the BRLA taken you in RE?

What benefits, disadvantages or possible changes has the BRLA had on teaching and assessment practices in RE?

What insights have you gained from your experience of the BRLA?

## Finding Seven from Phase Two

**Finding Seven:** The religious educators explained how the BRLA informed and guided their teaching and assessment practices in RE to some degree.

**Sub-finding 7.1:** Religious educators [36 of 43 (83.7%)] explained that the BRLA had enhanced the profile of RE.

**Sub-finding 7.2:** Religious educators [25 of 43 (58.1%)] explained how they used the student performance data from the BRLA reports. School Leaders demonstrated more use of the BRLA than Teachers.

15 of 43 (34.9%) explained how they interrogated the student performance data from the BRLA reports to inform teaching and assessment practices in RE.

10 of 43 (23.3%) spoke of the interrogation of data at a whole school level.

**Sub-finding 7.3:** Religious educators [15 of 43 (34.9%)] explained how the BRLA had improved their teaching practices in RE by helping them to focus on the essential content.

**Sub-finding 7.4:** Religious educators [6 of 43 (14.0%)] explained how the BRLA had improved assessment practices in RE. The BRLA had encouraged formal assessment practices.

**Sub-finding 7.5:** Religious educators [10 of 43 (23.3%)] described the challenges they experienced with the BRLA that limited changes to their teaching and assessment practices in RE.

7 of 43 (16.3%) indicated the BRLA was irrelevant to the RE curriculum and that the BRLA had not influenced how they taught and assessed in RE.

Figure 10.1. Summary of Finding Seven

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## DISCUSSION OF THE RESEARCH

### 11.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the themes that emerged from a synthesis of the key findings in this study. There are six themes identified: Administration, Engagement, Purpose, Professional Formation, Accountability and Assessment Practices. Together, these themes address the GRQ: How do religious educators who work in Catholic schools in Western Australia perceive *The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment (BRLA)* as a large-scale, standardised assessment (LSA) used in Religious Education (RE)? The themes highlight how the religious educators' perceptions were complex and interconnected with their personal and professional experiences of teaching RE and use of LSAs.

### 11.2 The Presentation of the Chapter

Table 11.1 outlines the structure of the chapter beginning with a synopsis of the research findings. The chapter ends with a conceptual representation, in the form of a matrix that identifies the insights gained from the themes that emerged from the study. The matrix categorises the religious educators according to their complex and interconnected perceptions of the BRLA.

Table 11.1

*Overview of Chapter Eleven: Discussion of the Research*

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11.3	Synopsis of the Research Findings
11.4	Discussion of the Research Themes
11.4.1	Theme One: Administration
11.4.2	Theme Two: Engagement
11.4.3	Theme Three: Purpose
11.4.4	Theme Four: Professional Formation
11.4.5	Theme Five: Accountability
11.4.6	Theme Six: Assessment Practices
11.5	The Matrix of the Research Themes
11.6	Chapter Summary

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### 11.3 Synopsis of the Research Findings

Figure 11.1 identifies seven research findings based on the response data collated, analysed and integrated from the two phases of the study. Findings One, Three, Four and Six were generated from Phase One where an online questionnaire was used with 238 teachers and school leaders of RE who worked in Catholic primary and secondary schools in WA. Findings Two, Five and Seven were generated from Phase Two, semi-structured individual and group interviews conducted with 43 of the 238 religious educators.

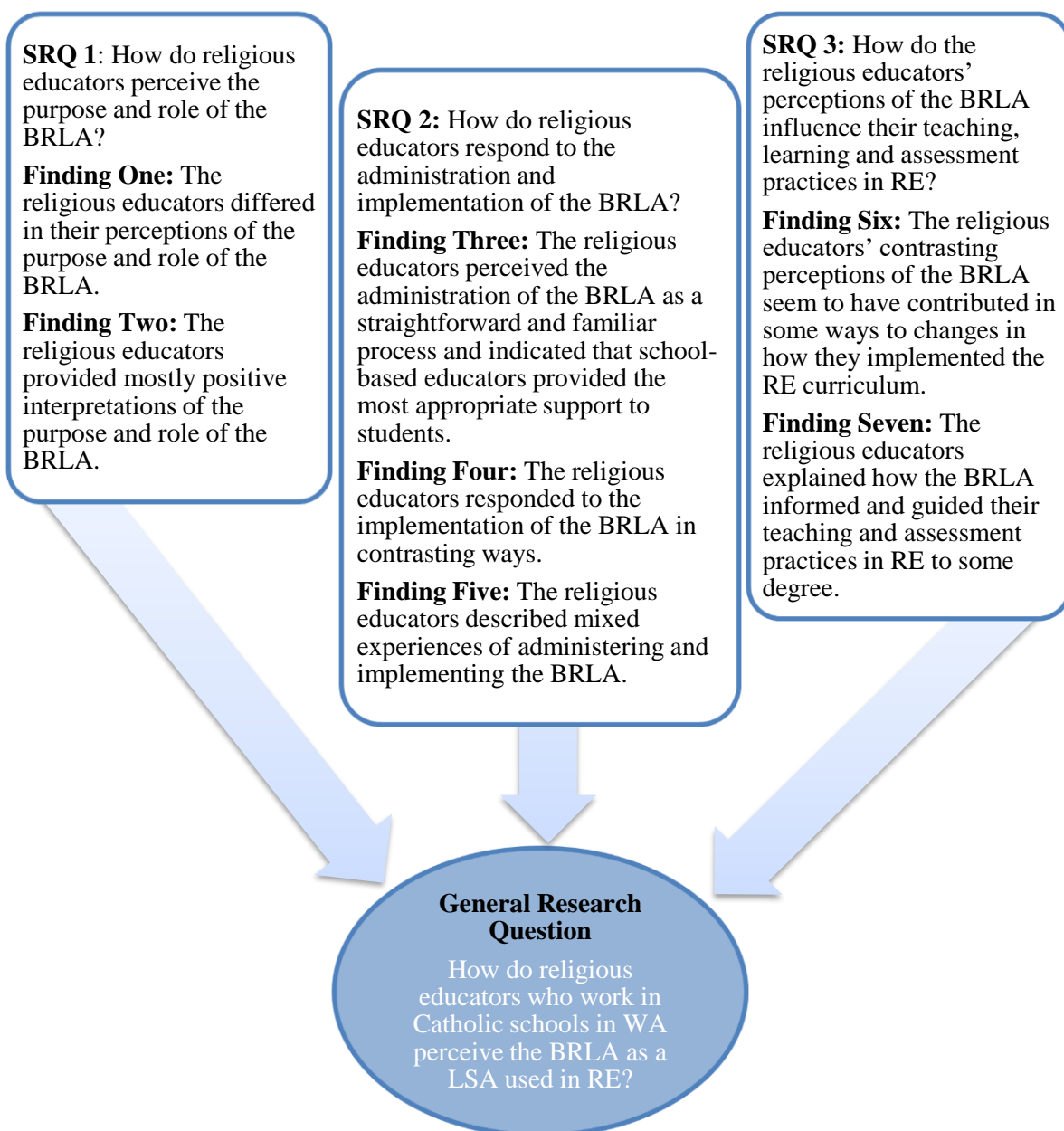


Figure 11.1. Synopsis of the research findings

The research findings are grouped according to the three SRQs, which, in turn, answer the GRQ. Firstly, the findings identify religious educators who perceived the purpose and role of the BRLA in different ways (SRQ 1). Secondly, the findings indicate that the majority of religious educators agreed the BRLA was easy to administer and had similar inbuilt processes, structures and issues associated with other LSAs (SRQ 2). Thirdly, the findings suggest that the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA were influenced by contextual factors such as their experiences of teaching of RE and their use of LSAs in education. These factors combined with the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA seem to have influenced how they taught and assessed student learning in RE (SRQ 3). The next section discusses the research themes. Within the themes are examples of changes to teaching and assessment practices in RE implemented by religious educators working in Catholic schools in WA.

#### **11.4 Discussion of the Research Themes**

The six research themes contribute to addressing the GRQ (Figure 11.2) by identifying the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA as manifestations of how they engaged with the assessment and also how they taught students and assessed the students' learning in RE. Theme One, Administration, explores how the religious educators experienced the administration of the BRLA. Theme Two, Engagement, identifies the level of support that the religious educators perceived other stakeholders of the BRLA provided to them and their students in preparation for the assessment. Other stakeholders include system administrators, teachers and parents. Theme Three, Purpose, considers the meaning and value attributed to the BRLA by the religious educators and how differing meanings and values appear to have revealed motivating factors that influenced the religious educators' perceptions. Theme Four, Professional Formation, begins to expose some of the possible rationales for the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA. The theme describes the specific influence that the religious educators' understanding of the nature and role of RE seems to have had on their perceptions of the BRLA. Theme Five, Accountability, relates to the religious educators' interpretation of accountability for student learning in RE. The religious educators' perceptions of LSAs as measures of accountability seem to have contributed to how they perceived the BRLA. Finally, Theme Six, Assessment Practices, draws on the religious educators' assessment practices in RE. These practices appear to be a response by the religious educators to their interpretations of the role of accountability in RE.



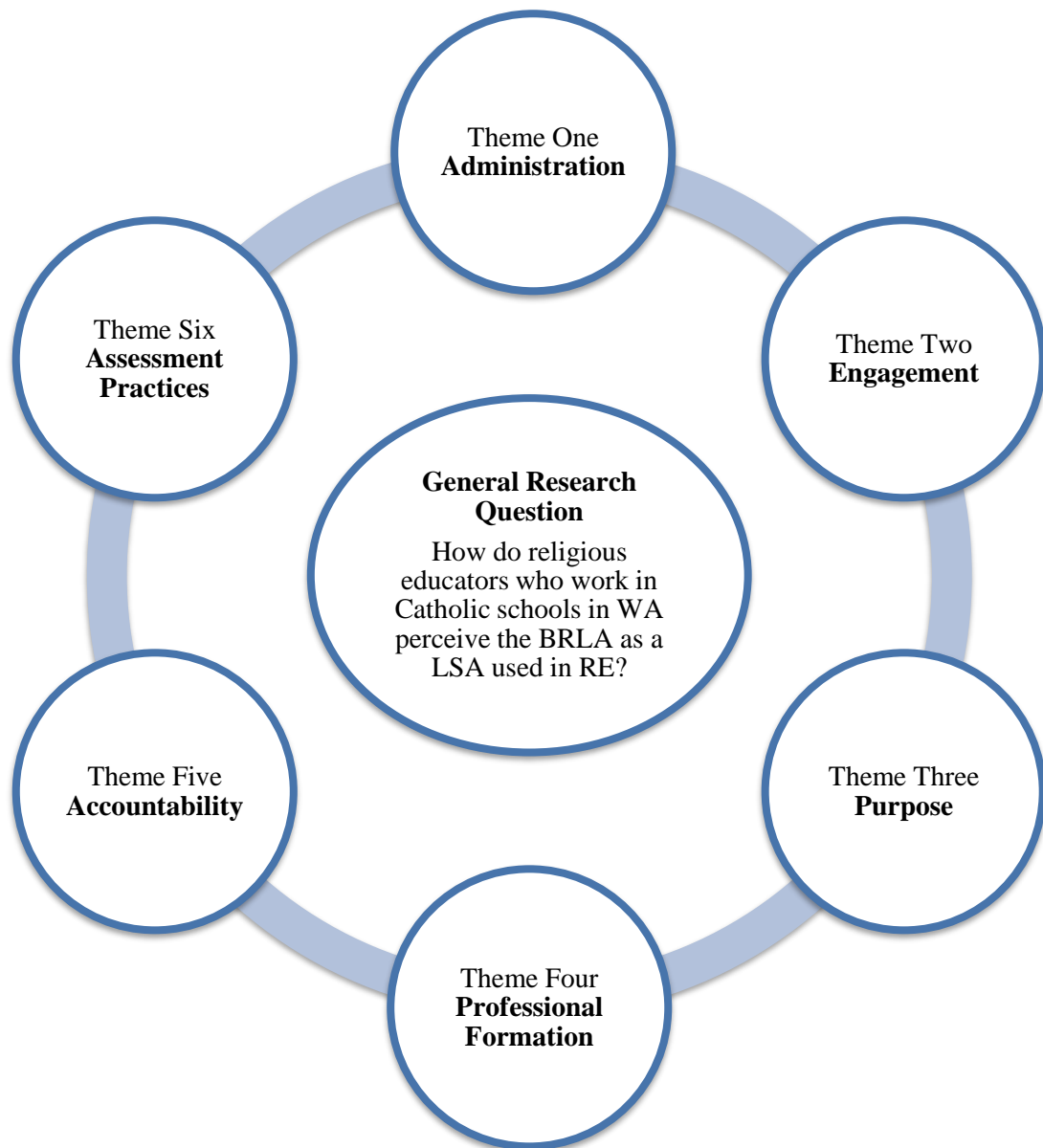


Figure 11.2. The research themes

**11.4.1 Theme One: Administration.** The first theme seems to suggest that most of the religious educators had positive experiences of administering the BRLA. For example, the majority of religious educators [193 of 233 (82.8%)] agreed the BRLA was easy to administer to students. The religious educators agreed that the administration of the BRLA was straightforward and familiar (Findings Three, Four and Five); that the instructions were appropriate and easy to follow [187 of 233 (80.3%)]; that the CEOWA provided appropriate support documents for the administration of the BRLA [146 of 233 (62.7%)], which were clear and concise; and that students completed the BRLA within the allocated time [151 of

232 (65.1%)). Year Five teachers agreed [37 of 40 (92.5%)] more than any other sub-group, and religious educators aged between 24 to 30 years agreed [46 of 52 (88.5%)] more than any other age group that the administration of the BRLA was straightforward.

When asked to describe their experiences of the BRLA (Findings One, Two, Three, Four and Five), religious educators said that administering the BRLA was similar to administering NAPLAN (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2014). They described the BRLA and NAPLAN as having similar features such as format and style. One religious educator referred to the BRLA as a “Holy NAPLAN”.

The religious educators made constant comparisons between the BRLA and NAPLAN (Findings One, Two, Three, Four and Five). They said that the processes and procedures in the BRLA and NAPLAN had become standard practice for school-based educators. Given the perceived similarities between the BRLA and NAPLAN, some religious educators [ e.g. 10 of 43 (23.3%)] explained how it was important to familiarise the students with these types of assessments prior to administration (Finding Five). These religious educators spoke about the need to give students appropriate opportunities to become familiar with the focus of the test items. As one teacher explained:

We don't teach to the test but there is some preparation that is needed before the test. I do go through some of the things .... But I don't do anything extra than that, I just continue with the RE program as usual and hope that it's enough.

The teacher's interpretation of “teaching to the test” appears in this case, contrary to intensely coaching students (Darling-Hammond & Rustique-Forrester, 2005; Thompson & Cook, 2014). These findings provide a glimpse of new local knowledge about perceptions of test items in LSAs and the concept of “teaching to the test” from a local Catholic perspective. The concept is discussed further in Themes Two, Four and Five where more research findings suggest a disconnect between how the religious educators perceived LSAs and their own in-class assessments as measures of student learning.

One minority group of religious educators in Phase Two [7 of 43 (16.3%)] felt it necessary to clarify how their experience of administering the BRLA was perhaps “like NAPLAN but not the same as NAPLAN” (Finding Five). These religious educators suggested that the BRLA did not get the “same media coverage as NAPLAN” nor did the BRLA use league tables to “judge the performance” of one school against another. As one principal explained:

The BRLA is something that is going on quietly under the surface and the people are not stressed about it. Which is good. Once, you got a truer reading of the NAPLAN,

before everybody started practising and cramming. Today children get stressed and parents put pressure on their children.... NAPLAN seems to have got out of whack and I think that the BRLA being at a lower level is probably a truer reading of the results ...

In comparison to NAPLAN (e.g. Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2012), the BRLA was “less intense”, “less tedious” and with less associated pressures from system administrators, school leaders, parents and the media. The religious educators spoke of the unintended consequences of NAPLAN compared to the BRLA. Again, these findings align to research about the “unintended consequences” of LSAs (Brown & Harris, 2009) and will be discussed further within the other themes.

There are also several examples within the findings (Findings Three and Four) that indicate gender differences regarding the religious educators’ experiences of administering the BRLA. Male religious educators seem to have engaged and responded to the administration of the BRLA in a more positive way than females. For example, more male religious educators than females agreed that:

- the support documents from the CEOWA were appropriate for administering the BRLA to students;
- students completed the BRLA within the allocated time;
- school leaders provided appropriate support to students for the BRLA;
- teachers at their schools provided support to students, in preparations for the BRLA; and
- minimal time was required to prepare students for the assessment.

These findings about gender differences in administering the BRLA may add to research that considers gender differences in education (Nelson Laird, Garver, & Niskodé, 2007; Sabbe & Aelterman, 2007). This study does not aim to draw attention to gender differences as such, instead, the research raises awareness of the possible influence of male and female perceptions on assessments, teaching styles and standards in education.

Although Theme One proposes that the perceptions of the religious educators about the administration of the BRLA were largely positive, there were concerns raised about the time and energy involved (Findings Four and Five). For example, while most religious educators agreed [149 of 233 (63.9%)] the preparations for the administration of the BRLA required minimal organisation, and nearly two-thirds agreed [138 of 233 (59.2%)] it was important to spend time preparing students for the administration of the BRLA, over a third

(36.1%) found the administration process to be “overwhelming” in terms of the amount of time taken to prepare students. Furthermore, over a third agreed [91 of 233 (39.1%)] students required a great deal of time. Some religious educators in Phase Two [7 of 43 (16.3%)] also found their efforts were exasperated when communication from school leaders was perceived as ineffectual. These religious educators made comments such as “We are just given the instructions and asked to administer the BRLA” and “We have never seen the students’ results from the BRLA”. In contrast, other religious educators [10 of 43 (23.3%)] explained how leaders within their schools were instrumental in providing appropriate communication about the BRLA. They suggested that the sharp vision and effective communication by their school leaders managed to improve student learning in RE.

The next theme further specifies the religious educators’ differing perceptions of the BRLA. These perceptions relate to aspects of the implementation of the assessment. The perceptions suggest a link between how the religious educators perceived the BRLA and how they responded to its use as a LSA in RE.

**11.4.2 Theme Two: Engagement.** Theme Two is also aligned with the religious educators’ response to the administration of the BRLA. The theme offers an insight into how the religious educators’ perceptions of the BRLA may have been influenced by their perceptions of how students and teachers were supported in preparation for the assessment. The level of support was perceived in terms of the religious educators’ engagement with students, their parents and the system administrators of the BRLA at the CEOWA (Findings One, Three, Four, Five, Six and Seven).

**11.4.2.1 Perceived engagement by students and parents.** Many religious educators seem to have perceived students and parents as unsupportive and disinterested with the BRLA (Findings One, Three and Six). Firstly, statistically significant numbers of religious educators appear ambivalent, having chosen neither to agree or disagree with statements to Likert scale items about how satisfied they believed parents [127 of 234 (54.3%)] and students [115 of 234 (49.1%)] were regarding the BRLA. Likewise, the religious educators showed they were uncertain about the level of support provided by students [117 of 231 (50.6%)] and parents [119 of 231 (51.5%)] in preparation for the BRLA. Furthermore, when asked if they believed parents used the BRLA reports to focus on their children’s learning in RE, nearly two-thirds of the religious educators [138 of 231 (59.7%)] chose neither to agree nor disagree. Similarly, nearly two-thirds [137 of 231 (59.3%)] chose neither to agree nor

disagree that students used the BRLA to focus on their learning in RE. The religious educators' written responses in the online questionnaire and their verbal responses in the semi-structured interviews suggest that perhaps they were not as uncertain about student and parent engagement with the BRLA as identified by their responses to the Likert scale items.

The religious educators explained how “peer-pressure” promoting disengagement with the BRLA was a consequence of the disengaged reality of students in RE and its treatment as an academic learning area. Over half the number of religious educators [124 of 238 (52.1%)] raised concerns and challenges about their teaching experiences in RE, describing student and parental disengagement as one of their most challenging concern [67 of 238 (28.2%)]. Furthermore, less than half [106 of 231 (45.9%)] agreed students treated RE as an academic learning area and a third [82 of 231 (35.5%)] indicated the same about parents.

The religious educators described disengagement in RE as a result of the growing number of “unchurched” and “non-practising” students in Catholic schools. The explanation of one teacher of RE reflects the perceptions of others:

The BRLA deals with what RE content needs to be taught but doesn't allow for the fact that many children have little or no experience outside of the school. The majority of parents do not rate RE as important in the academic sense.

Similarly, one Year Nine teacher of RE wrote:

.... It is difficult for children to truly consolidate their learning when it is not a priority in many families. The church language while explained in teacher background and in some Units of Work [RE curriculum] is not recognised by the children and occasionally by the teachers.

These religious educators also indicated that the CEOWA “underestimates” the value of religion in the “home” and the “broader community”. While most of the religious educators [129 of 236 (54.7%)] believed that parents liked the idea of LSAs gathering information about their children's learning, they thought that parents were “less invested” in the BRLA compared to NAPLAN. For example, in Finding Seven, nearly a quarter [10 of 43 (23.3%)] of religious educators in Phase Two said that parents were only interested in “NAPLAN” and “NAPLAN results”.

Year Nine teachers, in particular, explained how it was difficult to motivate students in RE because they felt students and their parents were becoming increasingly disengaged with the learning area. The teachers thought that students and parents viewed the purpose of

the BRLA as “pointless” and that often there was a “negative” or “slack, it doesn’t matter attitude” to RE. As one Year Nine teacher wrote:

The students don’t value doing the BRLA and doing well in it because many parents and families don’t value Religion in schools.... Anything that has a Catholic logo or presence to it is considered second class or of a lower grade in education because it’s not valued at home, I don’t think that the kids will take any value out of the results for the assessment either.

One teacher explained not only was it “hard work” engaging students and their parents with RE, but also their colleagues. The teacher wrote:

Sadly, not all teachers have given it [Religious Education] the same importance as the other learning areas, so by the time I have the students, some don’t approach the work with the same enthusiasm. Lack of parental support also makes it difficult for the children to apply what is learnt in class.

The religious educators suggested they understood the “value of RE” and “strongly” supported the RE curriculum but were “quite realistic” of the Catholicity of the students and thus struggled to understand the purpose of the BRLA. They perceived that it was “quite difficult” and “sad” that parents seemed disinterested and unsupportive of the learning area and appear to have agreed with one of the Year Nine teachers’ statements for the “removal of the BRLA as a time and paper wasting imposition”. The religious educators believed that the BRLA made it difficult for teachers to maintain credibility in what was seen as an already counter-cultural subject.

The religious educators argued that more support is required from parents and all members of the Catholic school community for students to achieve well in the BRLA. The implications of the research findings suggest that the religious educators’ perceptions of student and parental disengagement with the RE curriculum area may have influenced how they believed it was best to approach the teaching of RE, which, in turn, may have influenced how they perceived the purpose and role of the BRLA.

Theme Two aligns with literature that identifies a general shift in community affiliation with the Catholic Church (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016) and specifically regular attendance of Mass (Dixon, Reid, & Chee, 2013). The theme also reflects Australian research about the influence of secularisation on religious practice (Pascoe, 2007) and literature encouraging Catholic schools, through classroom RE, and their broader curricula to address that influence (Rossiter, 2018). In addition, the theme highlights local, contemporary challenges facing teachers and school leaders of RE. Such challenges may pose issues for

how local (Holohan, 1999) and national (National Catholic Education Commission, 2017b) policies in RE are considered, interpreted and implemented.

The findings suggest further research regarding the perceptions that students and parents have about the BRLA. The findings also suggest that the Directorate of REFF within the CEOWA may possibly need to review the changing circumstances in Catholic schools to better support school-based religious educators with the implementation of the BRLA. Such a review needs to build upon existing strategies developed by the CEOWA aimed at creating community support for Catholic education (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009), especially the role of parents (Suart, 2007).

The existing strategies acknowledge the Church's position of the prominent role that parents have in their child's learning (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 6; Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, paras. 51–65) and the need to support parents in their role (John Paul II, 1988; Vatican Council II, 1965c, para. 52, 1965d, para. 7). The Church is calling for a new evangelisation (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2014; Francis I, 2013; John Paul II, 1990; Paul VI, 1975) that builds upon Catholic mission (Rymarz, 2014). The revival of the identity of Catholic schools (McKinney & Sullivan, 2013; Schuttloffel, 2012) is part of this new evangelising mission. The aim is to draw people back into a relationship with Jesus and the Church. This type of relationship depends upon effective educational leadership (Lavery, 2012; Sharkey, 2007) and system-wide resolutions that build communities founded on trust, belonging and knowledge (D'Orsa & D'Orsa, 2011, 2012, 2013). The Church's call for a new evangelisation is not dissimilar to the call by mainstream education advocating for professional development of educators that extends to the wider school community (Epstein, 2010; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Ratts, Pate, Andrews, Ballard, & Lowney, 2015). Building learning communities beyond student learning and focused on improving student learning is central to this call.

**11.4.2.2 Perceived engagement by system administrators.** Most religious educators [178 of 233 (76.4%)] agreed that they provided appropriate support to students and nearly two-thirds [138 of 233 (59.2%)] thought that school leaders did as well. However, over a third of the religious educators [84 of 233 (36.1%)] disagreed about the role of the CEOWA in providing them with assistance to prepare students for the BRLA (Finding Three). Groups suggested that they were not given relevant information about the BRLA and that their feedback regarding the BRLA was not valued. Some of these religious educators [10 of 238 (4.2%)] believed that there was a need for the RE curriculum to be updated in response to

how students performed in the BRLA (Findings One, Two, Three and Seven). As one Year Nine teacher commented:

I am happy to have a test such as BRLA, BUT the CEO needs to address the fact that Years Eight and Nine books are resources rather than text; they include more detail than can be reasonably covered; and that the BRLA can unfairly pick miniscule details from these resources.

Similarly, one school leader of RE explained:

The BRLA and the RE Units of Work are very different to each other.... If you're not someone that goes beyond the Units, I don't think the kids are being exposed to the RE content enough. The gap between the BRLA and the Units needs to change, in order for a change, to teaching and assessment practices in Religious Education.

These religious educators perceived a disconnect between the focus of the BRLA and the RE curriculum.

The religious educators argued that even though the BRLA has heightened people's (educators, students and parents) awareness to treat RE as an academic learning area, unless the RE resources or Units of Work containing the essential content in the RE curriculum were updated, there was no purpose in using the BRLA. As one principal within the group explained:

The Units are good, but we seem to be playing catch-up a lot! Changes come along in other curriculum areas particularly in assessment and reporting .... RE is our first learning area and yet we are all still a little bit in the air about what we are going to do for RE .... If RE is out there as our first learning area should we be playing catch-up or should we be on the front foot?

As another principal commented, "The BRLA does not relate to what the students are specifically learning because it is so very 'left field' [to the curriculum] and therefore difficult for students to take seriously". The religious educators argued for "student and teacher friendly" RE teaching resource material where the content is clearly defined and can be easily sourced by classroom teachers. They assumed the introduction of the BRLA in 2007 and the developments of the assessment would have brought on a need to review the RE curriculum. The assumption suggests school-based educators require a RE curriculum that explicitly identifies RE content so that teachers can be better supported in their work to prepare students for the BRLA.

The religious educators also questioned whether their feedback about the BRLA was valued and used by the CEOWA (Finding Six). Some religious educators chose to disagree



[45 of 231 (19.5%)] and some chose neither agree nor disagree [74 of 231 (32.0%)] that the CEOWA used feedback from the BRLA. Similarly, a third seem ambivalent that the school feedback to the CEOWA helped develop better assessment practices in RE [77 of 231 (33.3%)] or helped provide professional learning in RE [80 of 231 (34.6%)]. School feedback is collected from the CEOWA at the end of the administration phase each year (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013). The feedback is collected from students, teachers and school leaders. However, this evaluation process of the BRLA and methods of communication between the CEOWA and Catholic schools may need to be part of the review process discussed in the previous theme. Statements of purpose, additional support and guidelines would need to be included.

The next theme suggests that the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA were shaped not only by their initial experiences of engagement with the administration of the assessment but also further informed by their experiences of teaching RE and using LSAs in mainstream education. The religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA and response to it reflect the meaning and purpose they attributed to the BRLA, RE and use of LSAs in general.

**11.4.3 Theme Three: Purpose.** This theme focuses on the religious educators' contrasting perceptions of the meaning and purpose of the BRLA and how from these perceptions some religious educators valued the assessment as a measure of student learning and many understood the role that the assessment played in the RE curriculum (Findings One and Two). The religious educators' understandings of the meaning and purpose of the BRLA were reflected in how effective they believed the BRLA was as a measure of student learning; how satisfied they and others felt about the assessment; the issues they raised about the BRLA test items; and the time and pressure they associated with the assessment. Theme Three also highlights the differences in perceptions between teachers and school leaders of RE, and that these differences seem to be motivated by their experiences of using LSAs.

Although many of the religious educators [141 of 238 (59.2%)] agreed the BRLA had a role to play in RE, perceptions of purpose varied among groups (Finding One). For example, one group [120 of 234 (51.3%)] rated the BRLA as ineffective as a measure of student learning in RE compared to another group [114 of 234 (48.7%)] who rated the BRLA as an effective measurement tool. Similarly, one group [80 of 238 (33.6%)] raised concerns about the BRLA and questioned its purpose. They explained that the BRLA was an imposition; that it was too difficult for students and irrelevant to the RE curriculum. In contrast, another group of religious educators [79 of 238 (33.2%)] indicated the purpose of

the assessment was to measure student learning in RE. They stated, “I like the BRLA” because it is “an effective”, “informative” and “worthwhile initiative for Catholic education”.

School leaders and teachers of RE seem to have perceived the meaning and purpose of the BRLA differently to each other. School leaders were identified as more satisfied and supportive of the BRLA and more inclined to have used the BRLA as a measure of student learning in RE compared to teachers (Findings One, Three and Four). Almost half the number of religious educators [116 of 234 (49.6%)] agreed that school leaders were more satisfied with the BRLA compared to teachers [75 of 234 (32.1%)] and even students [51 of 234 (21.8%)] and their parents [72 of 234 (30.8%)]. Most of the religious educators [168 of 236 (71.2%)] perceived school leaders valued LSAs more than teachers [105 of 236 (44.5%)], and student dissatisfaction [68 of 234 (29.1%)] was perceived as second to teacher dissatisfaction [89 of 234 (38.0%)] of the BRLA. Also, most primary school leaders of RE [27 of 37 (73.0%)] rated the BRLA higher on the scale of effectiveness compared to Year Three teachers [32 of 55 (58.1%)], who chose to rate the BRLA lower on the scale. The perceived differences between teachers and school leaders of RE about the BRLA aligns with Australian research identifying differences in perceptions about LSAs (Wang et al., 2006). The research identified differences between teachers and students (Guskey, 2007) and school leaders (Pettit, 2010; Thompson & Mockler, 2016). These differences also appear to exist within other Australian Catholic education systems (Pettit, 2009, 2010).

Besides perceived differences, there were also similarities identified between teachers and school leaders of RE about their perceptions of the challenges associated with the BRLA. One of these challenges was the BRLA test items. Many religious educators [129 of 232 (55.6%)] perceived the test items in the 2013 BRLA as relevant to the RE curriculum and disagreed [122 of 231 (52.8%)] that the BRLA test items were poorly constructed. Similarly, nearly half the number of religious educators [103 of 231 (44.6%)] disagreed that students found it difficult to answer most of the test items in the BRLA. However, most religious educators [164 of 232 (70.7%)] also agreed that the BRLA test items contained difficult vocabulary. The explanation by one Year Three teacher reflects these perceptions:

I believe the language used in some parts of the BRLA is too complicated which impedes on the children’s understanding. I think if the language was reworded to a more basic form some children that may have known the answer would be more successful.

The religious educators suggested the vocabulary in the test items needed to be simplified and made less formal and “theological”. The common perception about the BRLA test items by

the teachers and school leaders of RE suggests that their perceptions were dependent upon their understandings of conveying the essential content knowledge used in RE to students. Local (Hackett, 2006, 2008, 2010) and national research (Rossiter, 2010; Rymarz, 2014) has identified religious educators as requiring professional training to improve their understandings and application of the essential content knowledge used in RE. Such training aims to improve the approaches used by teachers to assist students to better access the essential content knowledge in the RE curriculum.

Teachers and school leaders of RE also perceived the BRLA test items as particularly difficult for students with poor English skills and for students who lived within low socio-economic boundaries. Similarly, Australian research identifies groups of educators who perceived the vocabulary used in the NAPLAN test items to be difficult for students (Thompson, 2012). They considered NAPLAN test items as unfair to at-risk groups of students who have difficulty with literacy skills (Decker & Bolt, 2008; Mulford & Silins, 2011). The teachers and school leaders' perceptions of the BRLA test items seem dependent upon their experiences of using LSAs such as NAPLAN.

The religious educators were generally divided about LSAs, suggesting that their perceptions of the BRLA were similar to their perceptions of LSAs generally. For example, just over half the number of religious educators [125 of 236 (53.0%)] agreed that LSAs are useful measures of student learning (Findings One and Six) and just under half [115 of 238 (48.3%)] raised concerns about the BRLA and NAPLAN as LSAs (Findings Three, Six). Furthermore, various groups of religious educators raised concerns about LSAs. One group of religious educators [60 of 238 (25.2%)] described negative experiences of NAPLAN. Another group [51 of 238 (21.4%)] described LSAs such as the BRLA and NAPLAN as stressful activities. They argued that LSAs create anxiety for student and teachers, which is further compounded by parent anxiety. They also indicated that LSAs "cause stress" because the assessments are not designed to cater for the differing needs and learning styles of all students. A third group of religious educators [37 of 238 (15.5%)] described the BRLA as a LSA like NAPLAN that was "time consuming" and required "extra attention". The perception was that students in Years Three, Five and Nine were "over-exposed" to LSAs and teachers responsible for those students were continuously preparing for the administration of LSAs rather than attending to in-class learning.

Some religious educators [41 of 238 (17.2%)] explained how they were "not fans" of LSAs because in their opinion such assessments did not "validly measure student ability". These religious educators argued that the BRLA and NAPLAN as LSAs were focused on

“rote learning rather than critical thinking”. The description of one Year Three teacher reflects the perceptions of the different groups who raised concerns about LSAs:

I feel strongly that the large-scale tests are detrimental to the learning experiences of many children. The test environment is not one that the children are used to these days and for some children, particularly those who struggle with their literacy, it is very unpleasant.

These findings further align with the Australian research regarding the concerns raised by teachers about NAPLAN (e.g. Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2012; Lingard, 2010). The findings also align with international research that identified the concerns teachers have about LSAs (Burgess et al., 2011; Guskey, 2007).

The religious educators’ concerns about the BRLA as a LSA seem to have caused divisions rather than cooperation between groups and with the CEOWA as system administrators of the BRLA. Such divisions have the potential to hinder improvements in student learning in RE because they can undermine the purpose of the BRLA as intended by the CEOWA. The next theme further identifies differences in perceptions about the BRLA that may have been shaped by the religious educators’ understandings of the nature and purpose of RE. Recommendations for how the CEOWA might address differences between religious educators to avoid unnecessary divisions are proposed in the final chapter.

**11.4.4 Theme Four: Professional Formation.** Theme Four proposes that the religious educators’ perceptions of the BRLA were related to differences in how they treated or perceived the meaning and purpose of RE and, in turn, how they taught the subject area (Findings One, Six and Seven). Most religious educators [196 of 231 (84.8%)] agreed they treated RE as an academic learning area and agreed [187 of 231 (81.0%)] student learning in RE should to be assessed. Most religious educators also agreed school leaders [190 of 231 (82.3%)] and teachers [169 of 231 (73.2%)] within their Catholic schools treated RE as an academic learning area. However, some religious educators described how they [35 of 231(15.2%)], other teachers [29 of 231 (12.6%)] and school leaders [16 of 231 (6.9%)] did not treat RE as an academic learning area. Linked to these descriptions are the arguments that groups of religious educators expressed about the purpose and role of the BRLA. Religious educators identified the challenges they faced with the BRLA and how they believed the assessment was being used in RE to promote an academic focus. The religious educators also perceived the BRLA as “different” to the RE curriculum they taught and assessed because of their stance against an academic focus in RE.

Figure 11.3 represents on a continuum the different approaches religious educators used to teach RE. To the left of the continuum are religious educators who seem to have had a faith-focused approach to teaching RE or, as the research literature describes, a catechetical approach (Hackett, 2006; Rossiter, 1999; Rymarz, 2011). To the right of the continuum are religious educators who appear to have focused on an educational approach to teaching RE. The educational approach is more aligned to local system expectations (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, 2013b; Holohan, 1999) as well as the expectations that comes from the Roman Catholic Church (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982, 1988; Congregation for the Clergy, 1997; Francis I, 2013; Paul VI, 1975; Vatican Council II, 1965d).

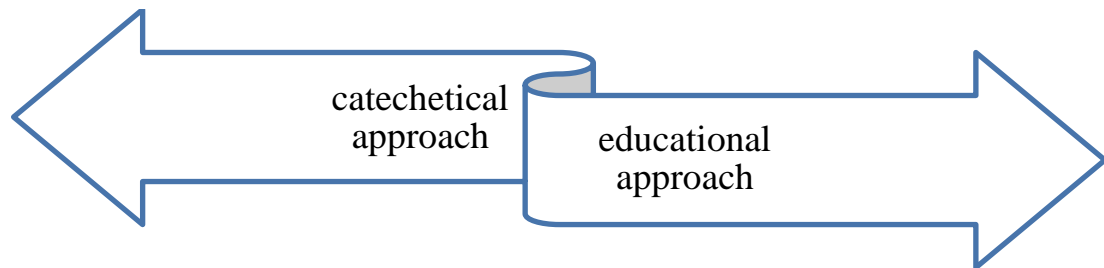


Figure 11.3. Contrasting approaches to the teaching of Religious Education

**11.4.4.1 Catechetical approach.** Many religious educators seem to have perceived the BRLA from a faith-focused approach to teaching RE (Findings One and Seven). For example, one group [105 of 238 (44.1%)] indicated the BRLA had a limited role to play in RE. Another group [80 of 238 (33.6%)] raised concerns about the use of the BRLA in RE. These groups of religious educators argued that “testing in this area is not necessary” and that the BRLA “had made a subject area that usually creates happiness and discussions about our religion into something stressful”. The comment from one school leader further reflects the perceptions of these groups: “Children would benefit more from being given the opportunity to develop a personal relationship with God in RE classes through learning about the Bible and Church structure”.

Three other explanations by religious educators reflect this faith-focused approach to teaching RE. As one Year Nine teacher wrote, “It takes a philosophical and theological learning environment and attempts to measure doctrine and Catechism teaching that may not

always be relevant or helpful to developing a student's spiritual or even faith life". Similarly, one Year Five teacher wrote:

This is my first year of being part of the BRLA, but I believe measurement of Christian literacy is not something that assists in spreading the Gospel Values and Christian lifestyle. Students in today's technological multimedia society need to be related to on their level, so that they can connect with their developing spirituality.

As one school leader wrote:

I think the BRLA is a waste of time especially at primary level. I am a teacher at a Catholic school and have a very strong faith. I send my children to Catholic schools. However, I really hate when my children's experience during Religious Education is given a grade. I feel since formal assessment in this area it has turned many older children off learning about God.

These explanations represent religious educators of various ages, gender and employment role of responsibility in RE. The BRLA was perceived by these religious educators as outside the scope of what they believed was a spiritual and religious learning area aimed at providing students with necessary life skills. The formalised and academic focus that the BRLA had brought to RE had in their opinion, driven students against the RE learning area.

When data were cross-referenced (Finding Six), the following insights were gained from one group of religious educators [86 of 234 (36.8%)]. This group suggested the BRLA had not led to improvements in student learning and more than half that number:

- i. explained the BRLA had not influenced their teaching and assessment practices in RE [65 of 86 (75.6%)];
- ii. rated the BRLA low, on the scale of effectiveness [65 of 86 (75.6%)];
- iii. described negative experiences of using LSAs [60 of 86 (69.8%)];
- iv. disagreed they used the student performance data from the BRLA reports to plan lessons in RE [58 of 86 (67.4%)];
- v. described negative experiences of their use of the BRLA [48 of 86 (55.8%)];
- vi. disagreed LSAs were useful in measuring student learning [46 of 86 (53.5%)].

Under half the number of this group [36 of 86 (41.9%)] agreed the BRLA had no role to play in RE and disagreed [40 of 86 (46.5%)] the use of the BRLA had helped them focus on improving student learning in RE. These religious educators appear to have rejected the educational focus of RE and preferred a more faith-focused approach.

As these religious educators described their teaching experiences of RE, they also identified how they approached the teaching of RE from a faith-focused perspective. Firstly,

over half the number of religious educators [124 of 238 (52.1%)] referred specifically to the pressures placed on them to deliver RE as an academic learning area. Secondly, just under half of the religious educators [114 of 238 (47.9%)] described their experiences of teaching RE with an emphasis on RE as “spiritual” and “religious” activities. They said they “love teaching RE” and as practising Catholics they “enjoyed handing on the faith”. Some religious educators [20 of 114 (17.5%)] argued the importance of all RE teachers to give witness to the Gospel message of Jesus and explained how giving witness, in this way, was a “spiritually moving” experience for them.

Religious educators with a faith-focused approach to teaching RE also presented arguments against the use of LSAs in education. They explained how LSAs such as the BRLA were irrelevant to the teaching of RE because the “whole person” was not acknowledged and catered for. As one school leader of RE wrote:

Large-scale, standardised assessments like the BRLA are limited in capturing what really matters about a person. The assessment is not in keeping with the Christian outlook on the value of the whole person and the complexity and dignity of each individual.

The school leader recommended students would benefit more from opportunities to develop a personal relationship with God in RE classes rather than learn about the structures surrounding Scripture and the Church. The arguments presented by the school leader provide an insight about how these religious educators perceived the BRLA to be their perceptions of teaching RE and how they further questioned the educational focus of RE. In contrast, local system expectations focus on an educational approach to teaching RE (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, 2013b; Holohan, 1999). In this case, RE is considered as part of the evangelising mission of the Church but it occurs within the confines of the educational processes of the classroom. Whereas, a focus on the Catholic faith is considered a responsibility of and an activity for the entire Catholic school community (Holohan, 1999).

**11.4.4.2 Educational approach.** Contrary to the identified, catechetical approach used to teach RE, many religious educators [99 of 238 (41.6%)] perceived the purpose of the BRLA as appropriately suited to an educational approach to teaching RE (Findings One, Six and Seven). They said that if RE is treated as an academic learning area then the BRLA was justified in its use as a formal assessment in RE. These religious educators perceived the BRLA as having two distinct roles in RE. That is, to ensure the content in the RE curriculum

was being taught and to enhance the academic profile of RE. As one teacher of RE commented:

The BRLA has given RE a greater academic focus. The BRLA also provides the school with well, constructed RE tests as examples of RE assessments. The results can be used to gain an insight into the knowledge students have on RE topics.

A school leader of RE explained:

The BRLA has made parents and students more aware of Religious Education as an academic learning area. Those RE teachers who have prepared students for the BRLA are more aware of what content is assessed and can use this information when teaching other grades, and when having conversations with other teachers.

These religious educators perceived the purpose and role of the BRLA as relevant to improving teaching with a focus on student learning.

Again, when data were cross-referenced (Finding Six), some religious educators [80 of 234 (34.2%)] suggested the BRLA had changed RE and led to improvements in student learning in RE. Of these religious educators, most indicated that:

- i. student learning in RE should be assessed [74 of 80 (92.5%)];
- ii. they treated RE as an academic learning area [73 of 80 (91.3%)];
- iii. the BRLA had a role to play in RE [72 of 80 (90.0%)];
- iv. the BRLA was an effective measure of student learning [70 of 80 (87.5%)];
- v. they used the BRLA to help them focus on student learning in RE [68 of 80 (85.0%)];
- vi. they used LSAs to gather information about student learning [65 of 80 (81.3%)];
- vii. agreed LSAs were useful in measuring student learning [63 of 80 (78.8%)];
- viii. indicated the BRLA had influenced their teaching and assessment practices in RE [63 of 80 (78.8%)].

Most of these religious educators also described their experiences of the BRLA as positive [61 of 80 (76.3%)] and explained how they enjoyed teaching RE [50 of 80 (62.5%)]. The comment by one school leader of RE reflects the perceptions of these religious educators:

I believe that the BRLA raises the status of RE as an academic subject. It also emphasises how important the teaching of RE is as an issue in co-responsibility for teachers and parents in the faith formation of our students. I talk about the test and its importance in the context of Catholic education in general.

Furthermore, some religious educators in Phase Two [15 of 43 (34.9%)] stated how the BRLA had “closed the gap” between RE and other learning areas taught in Catholic schools (Finding Seven).



The religious educators who approached the teaching of RE with an educational focus suggested that the BRLA had “restored balance” to the teaching of RE and that for “far too long” religious educators had focused on the “religious” rather than the “educational” dimensions of RE. As one teacher of RE explained:

Until now, RE was all about exploring one’s feelings; “touchy feely” emotions, driven teaching style. Now I think we are getting more balance coming in with knowledge about the history, knowledge about events, knowledge about Scripture, parts of the Mass and all that sort of language.

Similarly, one school leader explained:

The BRLA has helped us understand that the rigour of assessment practice in RE should be the same as other learning areas and we should be trying to improve the situation at our school ...

The school leader also spoke specifically about the need for raising awareness of the potential absence of rigorous teaching and assessment practices in RE.

School leaders generally identified teachers as requiring effective training in RE to better focus on the educational dimensions of RE. Primary principals [18 of 26 (69.2%)] and Assistant Principals [25 of 37 (67.6%)], in particular, agreed more than teachers that the BRLA had helped them focus on improving student learning in RE and that it was their aim to ensure that classroom teachers do the same. The educational leadership of these school leaders suggests that they had professional training relevant to evidence-based curriculum reforms with an emphasis on whole school learning communities (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

The religious educators who focused on improving student learning perceived the purpose and role of the BRLA as relevant to the teaching of RE. They identified people in their schools who they suggested “struggled” to fully treat RE as an academic learning area and recognise student learning at the core of their teaching. As one teacher of RE explained:

We realise that the rigour of the assessments in RE is not as high as say Maths. The students see that straight away, even if we’ve started talking about an assessment, they already expect that it will be at a lower level and the sort of things that you get from the students is not good ...

Similarly, one principal argued, “Theoretically RE should be assessed as other learning areas but I don’t believe that RE is formally tested at the classroom level”.

The discrepancy between how the religious educators perceived the educational approach to teaching RE and local system expectations (Catholic Education Commission of

Western Australia, 2009, 2013b), appears to make improving student learning in RE challenging for the Catholic education system in WA. Fullan and Quinn (2016) suggest that “Images of coherence have to do with making sense, sticking together, and connecting” (p. 1). Given these images, it seems the Catholic education system in WA may struggle to achieve “coherence” if religious educators have different ideas about the nature and purpose of RE and how it should be taught in Catholic schools. These differences are considered by Fullan and Quinn as part of a list of “wrong drivers”, which if not addressed fail to cultivate and sustain collaborative learning cultures.

Theme Four points to the need for future research about how religious educators construct their perceptions of the nature and role of RE. The aim of the research is to better target the professional formation of teachers and school leaders in Catholic schools so as to improve the teaching of RE (Sullivan, 2016). A possible review of accreditation and university courses may be required. Such a review is endorsed by Church documents, which promote the need for religious educators to be provided with adequate educational training in RE (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, paras. 25–32).

The research findings that led to the theme provide new knowledge about approaches to the teaching of RE in Catholic schools in WA and support literature identifying the complexity surrounding the teaching of RE (O’Donoghue & Byrne, 2014; Rymarz, 2011; Shanahan, 2016). This complexity in Catholic education suggests perceived differences between the intent of professional training in RE and actual teaching practices (Hackett, 2006, 2008, 2010). The findings from this study affirm Scott (2016) and Rossiter’s (2018) proposals to help religious educators unify their awareness of the religious and educational dimensions of RE. Building such an awareness requires specific professional formation (e.g. Gellel & Buchanan, 2015; Rymarz & Hyde, 2013). The next research theme focuses on how the religious educators’ perceptions seem to reflect their understandings of the nature and role of LSAs.

**11.4.5 Theme Five: Accountability.** This theme identifies the religious educators’ perceptions of the BRLA as possibly being informed by their interpretations of the role of educational accountability (Findings One, Six and Seven). Accountability, in this sense, refers to the responsibility assigned to individuals or groups (Lee, 2008). The religious educators’ interpretations of accountability may have been influenced by their experiences of LSAs such as NAPLAN, of which they were most familiar. Religious educators perceived the purpose and role of the BRLA as a LSA within the context of either an exclusive or inclusive

interpretation of accountability. That is, the BRLA was recognised either as a measure of accountability exclusively informing system and school leaders about the quality of teaching in RE or as a measure of the quality of student learning in RE informing system and school-based religious educators to focus collectively on student learning. The latter interpretation is inclusive.

**11.4.5.1 Exclusive interpretation.** Many religious educators [105 of 238 (44.1%)] felt that the BRLA had a limited role to play in RE. They defined the role of the BRLA as an accountability measure of student learning that “only informs” and “only satisfies” authorities. As one principal wrote, “The BRLA is an assessment that has to be issued to the students and we followed through with the directive”. The perception was that the potential value of the BRLA was for the benefit of the WA Bishops, the CEOWA and principals. As one teacher of RE suggested:

The BRLA is for Principals, Assistant Principals and Deputies and for the CEOWA administrators, to check on the progress of RE in schools. I suppose to give value to RE as being as important as, if not more important than the other subjects. We have a standardised test for other subjects, why not RE?

The religious educators also referred to the BRLA as a “negative” and “compulsory” “compliance instrument” that was “far removed” from classroom practices and “just a ploy” by system and school leaders to “check-up on” teachers.

The perception of these religious educators was that the BRLA (and LSAs generally) were “unnecessary”, “counter-productive in education” and “a costly waste of time and money”. Furthermore, the BRLA was identified as “damaging the moral and faith” development of students and “taking away from valuable classroom teaching experiences”. These religious educators also appear to have approached the teaching of RE with a catechetical focus.

Some religious educators who questioned the purpose of the BRLA [80 of 238 (33.6%)] also suggested the assessment was a measure of accountability imposed on them and used to “monitor” teacher efficacy. They explained how the BRLA was designed for two purposes. Firstly, to provide the WA Bishops and the CEOWA with, for example, a “bird’s eye view”, “eye on” or “to keep tabs on” the schools so as primarily to “stay in touch” with teachers and their teaching of RE. Secondly, to “gauge” student learning based on how well teachers “covered” the content in the RE curriculum. These religious educators also referred

to BRLA as a “ranking exercise” to determine the level of student attainment in RE across schools. As one of the teachers stated:

They [the WA Bishops] want to make us [teachers in Catholic schools] more accountable. This is why it is called *The Bishops’ Religious Literacy Assessment*.... So, it [the results] tends to reflect back on the school, the students and obviously, the teachers.

This group wrote that it was their “job” to ensure that the students’ scores were maintained each year. They believed that if student scores were not maintained, teachers were “questioned”, “scrutinised” and “reprimanded” by school leaders. In turn, they believed school leaders were reprimanded by system leaders.

For these religious educators, the BRLA provided opportunities for the WA Bishops through the RE Team at the CEOWA “to find holes in the curriculum” that show which concepts are not being covered and “to determine why”. As one school leader wrote:

I think the Bishops just want to see how we are actually going with Religion, ... and how well students know about the traditions of the Catholic Church. I suppose just for them really to gather information.... Are we teaching them [the RE Units of Work] properly? ...

The religious educators suggested there was value in school and system leaders gaining information about student learning in RE but that there was less value for classroom teachers. This aspect of the theme aligns with Australian research that identifies teachers who perceived NAPLAN to be “a school ranking or policing tool” (Dulfer, Polesel, & Rice, 2012, p. 8). LSAs were identified by classroom teachers as measures used to determine whether process and product meet the desired goals, criteria and targets set by politicians and educational authorities working for the politicians (Lingard et al., 2013).

This aspect of the theme likewise points to differences in interpretations of accountability between teachers and school leaders of RE, which align with differences in perceptions about the BRLA (Findings One, Three and Four). For example, principals and other school leaders of RE suggested the BRLA was a means for providing “them” with information about their teachers in terms of their familiarity with the content knowledge in the RE curriculum. As one principal stated, “The BRLA confirms that we are on the right track and helps focus the Year Three and Five teachers”.

In contrast, teachers of RE referred to the BRLA being exclusively used by school leaders. The teachers explained that there was a lack of communication provided by school leaders about the BRLA, beyond the administration phase. For instance, over half of the

religious educators [127 of 231 (55.0%)] agreed teachers were unaware of the student performance data from the BRLA (Appendix O). The teachers commented that they had “never seen the students’ results” from the BRLA. They perceived the student performance data from the BRLA as “off limits” to them as teachers. These responses suggest the possibility of a perceived lack of control by teachers of RE over the BRLA. This lack of control appears as a manifestation of what Bandura (1993) describes as acts of fear, hopelessness and marginalisation, resulting in the devaluing, alienation, isolation and self-doubt of these staff. The implication is that positive action by school and system leaders to better understand the needs and concerns of classroom teachers is necessary (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Furthermore, and as mentioned previously in Theme Two, Engagement, these school-based religious educators may have responded in this way because they believed the CEOWA did not value their feedback. As one school leader posed:

Are schools really clear on what the Bishops and the CEOWA are actually designing? When was the last time they called everyone together to let us know what to do with the BRLA.... I think there is a challenge here for our Bishops and the CEOWA. I don't think there is common knowledge of the BRLA across WA.

Similarly, one principal contended, “I think the Bishops should be concentrating more on looking at why our schools are full, but our churches are empty”. The school leaders argued that unless the purpose of the BRLA is better articulated and the results made more visible to classroom teachers, the assessment will continue to be identified as an “unjustifiable” measure of the professional teacher quality and outside the scope of school and classroom practices in RE. Again, there appears a need for system leaders such as the CEOWA to address the perceived issue about a lack of communication and guidance regarding the BRLA.

**11.4.5.2 Inclusive interpretation.** Groups of religious educators [e.g. 79 of 238 (33.2%)] described the BRLA as an appropriate and necessary measure of accountability where system authorities, school leaders and teachers of RE were collectively interested and responsible for student learning in RE (Finding One and Seven). This understanding appears to be grounded in school leadership that focused on student learning in RE and shaped by professional development promoting internal accountability (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). Hattie (2009) argues collective teacher efficacy is the starting point leading to this type of accountability for student learning.

Many religious educators [125 of 236 (53.0%)] who perceived LSAs as useful measures of student learning also argued that LSAs provided opportunities for school members to compare student results within classrooms and across schools; assist teachers to become better acquainted with the curriculum content; track student learning; and improve planning, teaching and assessment practices in RE. As one school leader stated:

I think when people know that there is a standardised test across the board they feel that it is a little bit more serious. We need to keep up with certain standards. I think teachers and students feel this way about the BRLA.

Another school leader explained:

Accountability is what is needed in RE. It helps students learn about their faith. We need to change the way we teach Religious Education. We need to improve student learning in RE.

These religious educators argued that student learning of the Catholic Faith Tradition was the focus of measurements rather than the personal faith stance of students. As part of their arguments, they posed questions such as “Why are we teaching RE?”, advocating a need for accountability measures in RE. Such views are consistent with evidence-based curriculum reforms that justify the use of LSAs to improve student learning (Popham, 2009; Wang et al., 2006) and the collection of student performance data from multiple measures (Earl & Timperley, 2009; Timperley, 2009, 2010, 2013).

Many religious educators [99 of 238 (41.6%)] also identified the BRLA as a “measurement tool” and “snapshot of student learning” that “effectively” assisted teachers to cover the content in the RE curriculum as well as helping schools and system authorities” to “improve the quality of learning in RE”. The understanding of accountability in this case was an inclusive one where all educators were perceived as responsible for student learning in RE.

Student learning in RE for various groups of religious educators was described in the same way as student learning in other subjects. Some groups [34 of 238 (14.3%)] even referred to the BRLA as a measure of accountability in RE for student learning with “far-reaching benefits”. They described the benefits as being able to compare student data from the BRLA and in-class assessments in RE. As one principal explained, “You can get comparative data from the BRLA so as to get an idea of how students are going in relation to the RE content”. Another principal remarked, “The BRLA is a reminder to us all that these are the basics we need to cover.” The religious educators who indicated that all educators are

responsible for student learning also explained that it was important to achieve and maintain standards in RE similar to other learning areas.

One group of religious educators in Phase Two [24 of 43 (55.8%)] stressed the importance of student learning in RE. They explained how the BRLA informed a broad audience about student learning (Finding Seven). The group's focus was to interrogate student performance data from the BRLA school reports to make future decisions about student learning in RE. Of the 24 religious educators, ten [10 of 43 (23.3%)] spoke specifically about the interrogation of data at a whole school level with all teaching staff present. They indicated that they worked with the BRLA student performance data in the same way they worked with NAPLAN data. Once data were interrogated, the religious educators considered implications for future RE lessons.

This aspect of the theme suggests that groups of religious educators were led by school leaders focused on students' learning and attentive to improving that learning. As one principal explained, "We go through what questions we all seem to get wrong and discuss why we get them wrong". Similarly, another principal described:

We bring the results to a professional learning community meeting. We look at the students results to see how we went as a school. Even though the Year Five teachers are directly involved, I say to the Year Six teachers, "These are the results the students achieved last year and here are the areas you probably need to concentrate on this year."

The school leaders appear to identify structures and processes that encouraged professional learning opportunities for all, beyond the administration of the BRLA and regardless of the level of teacher involvement with the assessment. The religious educators led by these school leaders acknowledged the CEOWA as the developers of the BRLA but suggested student learning in RE was the responsibility of all religious educators. Their interpretation of accountability in RE seems to support the local policy requirements in RE (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013; Hackett et al., 2017) and the research literature that suggest LSAs have the potential to collectively hold teachers, school and system leaders accountable for student learning (Burgess et al., 2011).

Theme Five is consistent with Australian and international studies that identify educators who perceived LSAs as measures of accountability (Biesta, 2010; Cumming & Maxwell, 2004; Rowe, 2005) driving an emergent audit culture that is interested in shaping educational policy decisions and classroom practices (Ball, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Lingard et al., 2013). However, much of these perceptions may have led to confusion

surrounding educational accountability for student learning (Lee, 2008; Linn, 2003). This confusion seems to exist because the word “accountability” has “multiple meanings and purposes and there are several models being used to support the various meanings” (Lee, 2008, p. 610). Lee also argues that the confusion seems to be grounded in perceptions about the use of LSAs based on the question, “Who holds whom accountable and for what purpose?”.

The understandings of accountability that school-based religious educators expressed in this study provide new local knowledge about accountability for student learning in RE. In the interest of developing a culture of improved standards in student learning (e.g. Darling-Hammond, 2010) in RE, the implications from this study and other studies about the use of LSAs suggests that the CEOWA may need to further investigate the religious educators’ interpretations of accountability for student learning in RE to bring about coherence across the system (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

The next theme draws upon the findings that seem to connect religious educators who expressed an exclusive understanding of accountability with a preference for using their own classroom assessments in RE to measure student learning. Alternatively, religious educators who expressed an inclusive understanding of accountability explained how they used a range of assessments including LSAs to measure student learning.

**11.4.6 Theme Six: Assessment Practices.** This theme suggests that religious educators perceived the BRLA according to their experiences of teaching and assessing students. These experiences were reflected as exclusive or inclusive assessment practices (Findings One, Four, Six and Seven). The manifested practices either excluded or included the use of the BRLA as a LSA.

Figure 11.4 represents the religious educators’ expressions of their assessment practices in RE on a continuum. The left side of the continuum represents religious educators who preferred to use in-class or their own teacher-designed assessments in RE. This preference is labelled as exclusive assessment practices because the use of LSAs such as the BRLA and NAPLAN did not appear to be valued by these educators. The right side of the continuum represents religious educators who preferred to use a range of assessments in RE. The use of LSAs such as the BRLA and NAPLAN were included within this range. This preference is labelled as inclusive assessment practices. Such practices suggest school-based religious educators were exposed to professional training in evidence-based curriculum reforms (Forster, 2009; Hill & Barber, 2014; Masters, 2013). Such training is now being



endorsed by the Australian government through a report calling for leaders and staff in schools to recognise and aspire to excellence in education as their priority (Department of Education and Training, 2018). The report outlines recommendations for improving student learning by building on existing evidence-based reforms that better align classroom and whole system practices in teaching as well as assessment.

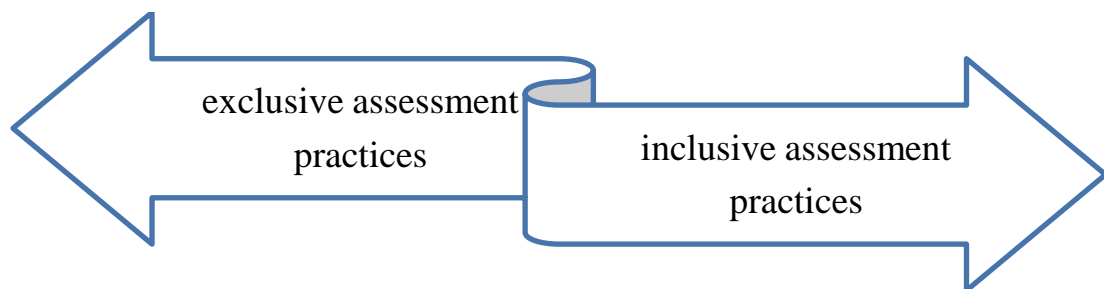


Figure 11.4. Contrasting assessment practices in Religious Education

**11.4.6.1 Exclusive assessment practices.** Groups of religious educators indicated they preferred to use their own in-class assessments rather than using and trusting LSAs that are developed externally by system administrators (Findings Four and Six). They believed that the BRLA test items were not relevant to the RE curriculum and student performance in the BRLA was different to in-class assessments. Furthermore, they appear to have lacked the confidence needed to use the BRLA school reports and understand how to analyse student data from those reports. These religious educators belonged to groups who also raised concerns about the use of LSAs such as NAPLAN [115 of 238 (48.3%)], perceived the BRLA as having a limited role to play in RE [105 of 238 (44.1%)], and questioned the purpose of the BRLA [80 of 238 (33.6%)]. Such perceptions suggest a possible link between the religious educators' experiences of LSAs and their preference for using in-class assessments to measure student learning in RE.

Some religious educators [44 of 238 (18.5%)] indicated that the BRLA test items were irrelevant to the RE curriculum and showed an exclusive preference for in-class assessments. They commented that the BRLA test items were dissimilar to the RE curriculum because the test items were “complicated”, “too literacy based”, “too content driven” and “different” in comparison to how they assessed in RE. These religious educators suggested that the BRLA caused stress on students and teachers because the needs of all students were not being met. As a result, the BRLA was considered “outside the realm” of regular

classroom practices in RE, “extra work” and “a distraction” to the daily routine of teaching and student learning”.

Similarly, some religious educators [51 of 238 (21.4%)] argued LSAs were irrelevant for classroom use and others [28 of 238 (11.8%)] stated that NAPLAN was irrelevant to the Western Australian literacy and numeracy curricula. Like the BRLA, NAPLAN was considered external to classroom practices and perceived as not catering for the needs of all students. The BRLA was perceived as a LSA that “reminded students of NAPLAN” and that only “capable students” with “good memories” and “proficient in English” were able to achieve good results. As one school leader of RE explained:

NAPLAN does not give an exact description of where a child is “at”. The test does not apply to what they are currently learning in class more so, what they “should” know at their age.

These religious educators suggested that they believed that young and indigenous students with “poor literacy skills” were disadvantaged by the use of LSAs.

This thematic aspect implies that firstly, these religious educators may have taught and assessed RE differently to local policy expectations. This point was raised earlier in Themes Two and Four. Secondly, there may have been a possible disconnect between teacher content knowledge and assessment practices in RE. Thirdly, given a possible disconnect, the religious educators may have felt a lack of control and knowledge about the types of test items students would be required to answer. This aspect aligns with the research literature that identifies teachers as dissatisfied with the use of LSAs for some time (Abrams et al., 2003; Brown & Harris, 2009). Teachers have regarded LSAs such as NAPLAN as an additional task, which has had an impact on school-based curriculum, pedagogical practices and student–teacher relationships (Doecke et al., 2010). A national study involving Western Australian teachers suggests that teachers perceived NAPLAN as stressful and disconnected from classroom practices (Thompson, 2012, p. 69). The teachers considered NAPLAN as having a limited scope and a narrowed view of the curriculum. In turn, they believed LSAs were inappropriate measures used to improve learning standards.

The religious educators in this study made comparisons about student performance based on the type of assessments students completed. These comparisons seem to have led them to prefer their own in-class assessments. For example, most religious educators perceived students to perform better in assessments in RE designed by them [178 of 231 (77.1%)] compared to how students performed in the BRLA [63 of 231 (27.3%)]. Many religious educators agreed [130 of 231 (56.3%)] students who perform poorly in the BRLA

also perform poorly in NAPLAN. In contrast, other religious educators [100 of 231 (43.3%)] disagreed that students who performed poorly in the BRLA also performed poorly in assessments for RE designed by teachers.

As mentioned previously, many of the religious educators perceived the student performance data from the BRLA as unnecessary. For example, nearly half the number of religious educators [112 of 231 (48.5%)] disagreed that teachers at their schools worked collaboratively to analyse student performance from the BRLA, and fewer [105 of 231 (45.5%)] felt confident enough to use the BRLA school reports. Furthermore, just under half the number of religious educators disagreed [104 of 231 (45.0%)] that they used the student performance data from the BRLA reports to plan lessons in RE and even fewer [93 of 231 (40.3%)] chose neither to agree nor disagree teachers used the reports. These religious educators also suggested they preferred to use their own in-class assessments to measure student learning. Those religious educators who used the BRLA reports [34 of 231 (14.7%)], indicated that they identified strengths, weaknesses and misconceptions in student learning.

This aspect of Theme Six seems to align with Australian research about teacher perceptions of student performance data and reports generated from NAPLAN (Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013). The Australian research identifies school leaders as more receptive to the use of LSAs than teachers but require better assistance to analyse data (Pettit, 2009, 2010; Thompson & Mockler, 2016). International studies suggest that school leaders be given appropriate tools to systematically use data from LSAs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010). The aim is to assist school leaders to make better decisions about student learning that involves classroom teachers. Professional learning for school leaders may in turn improve teacher efficacy about the use and analysis of data from LSAs (Timperley, 2009, 2010, 2013; Yates, 2008). In a similar way, this study supports the suggestion that school-based religious educators need to develop and improve assessment practices in RE (Healy & Bush; 2010; White, 2003, 2004).

**11.4.6.2 Inclusive assessment practices.** Many religious educators [99 of 238 (41.6%)] who agreed the BRLA was an appropriate measure of student learning in RE and described its distinctive role within the RE curriculum also suggested they preferred to use a range of assessment types (Findings One, Six and Seven). These religious educators supported the use of LSAs such as the BRLA and NAPLAN. These religious educators described how they used the BRLA student performance data as “complementary” to their, in-class assessment data. As one principal explained:

If utilised correctly and for the right purpose, large-scale, standardised assessments can help to show strengths, areas needing consolidation and possibly to be the focus for the coming term and year's learning ...

Their assessment practices can be considered inclusive because they used multiple data sources to collect evidence about student learning in RE

Similarly, some religious educators [80 of 234 (34.2%)] who explained that the BRLA had led to improvements in student learning in RE also suggested that the BRLA student performance data informed their teaching and assessment practices in the same way their in-class assessments did. As one teacher of RE explained:

As a teacher and as a school we are more focused on improving our assessment practices. Before the BRLA we were all just doing our own thing in assessment but now we are all expected to have tests like the BRLA format.

Parallel comments were made by two school leaders of RE. One of them explained:

We used to make up our own assessments but now we have a set structure that the whole school follows. We're also more diligent in giving assessments. It's in line with the other subjects. We need to change because RE needs to be made more rigorous.

The other wrote:

My teaching is more explicit in terms of content knowledge and understanding because we focus at our school on student performance data from the BRLA. Now, I read the RE Units of Work more closely and pick out areas within the Units that I may have skipped over before.

These religious educators described how they made use of the student performance data from the BRLA to focus on assessment in RE and follow-up teaching practices. The religious educators commented that their focus was applied across Year levels in RE in a similar way to how NAPLAN had provided focus for them in literacy and numeracy. As a result, all teaching staff within their schools were becoming increasingly involved in analysing student performance data.

The religious educators demonstrated an inclusive approach to assessment and an inclusive understanding of accountability in RE. This thematic aspect of the study aligns with research aimed at identifying ways of closing the gap of differentiation between internal classroom practices and external system practices (Forster, 2009; Hill & Barber, 2014; Masters, 2013). Such an understanding may have come from professional training centred around evidence-based curriculum reforms (Decker & Bolt, 2008). As mentioned previously, the religious educators' exposure to the reforms seems to have been endorsed and promoted

by school leaders. Exposure to such professional development in assessment practice has the potential to build whole school learning capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

The literature regarding evidence-based curriculum reforms promotes the idea that student learning is the responsibility of all educators (Lee, 2008) and that professional training is required by teachers and school leaders to effectively analyse, interpret and regularly compare data from multiple sources (Forster, 2009; Shaddock, 2014). The aim is to inform the learning process as well as the development of the measurement tools (Axworthy, 2005; Timperley, 2009, 2013; Wang et al., 2006). The implications of this literature and Theme Six in this study seems to suggest the need for further investigations about assessment practices in RE.

The next section discusses a representation of the dynamic interplay between the overall research findings and the six themes to emerge from the findings. This interplay aligns with the literature about evidence-based reforms in education. A metanarrative matrix was developed to highlight the identified interplay.

### **11.5 A Matrix of the Research Themes**

The six research themes have attempted to capture and synthesise the key findings regarding the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA. In doing so, the themes reveal a metanarrative based on points of difference and similarity among and between majority and minority groups of school-based religious educators and their perceptions. Figure 11.5 represents the metanarrative as a matrix. The 238 religious educators from this study are placed onto a matrix with four quadrants based on a coordinate plane with two axes. The horizontal axis represents the continuum for approaches to teaching RE (Figure 11.3). The vertical axis represents the continuum for assessment practices in RE (Figure 11.4). Each quadrant represents the relationship or interplay that appears to have existed between the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA and the contextual experiences that influenced those perceptions. That is, the quadrants profile the religious educators according to how they engaged with and responded to the BRLA, within the context of how they approached the teaching of RE and assessed student learning in RE.

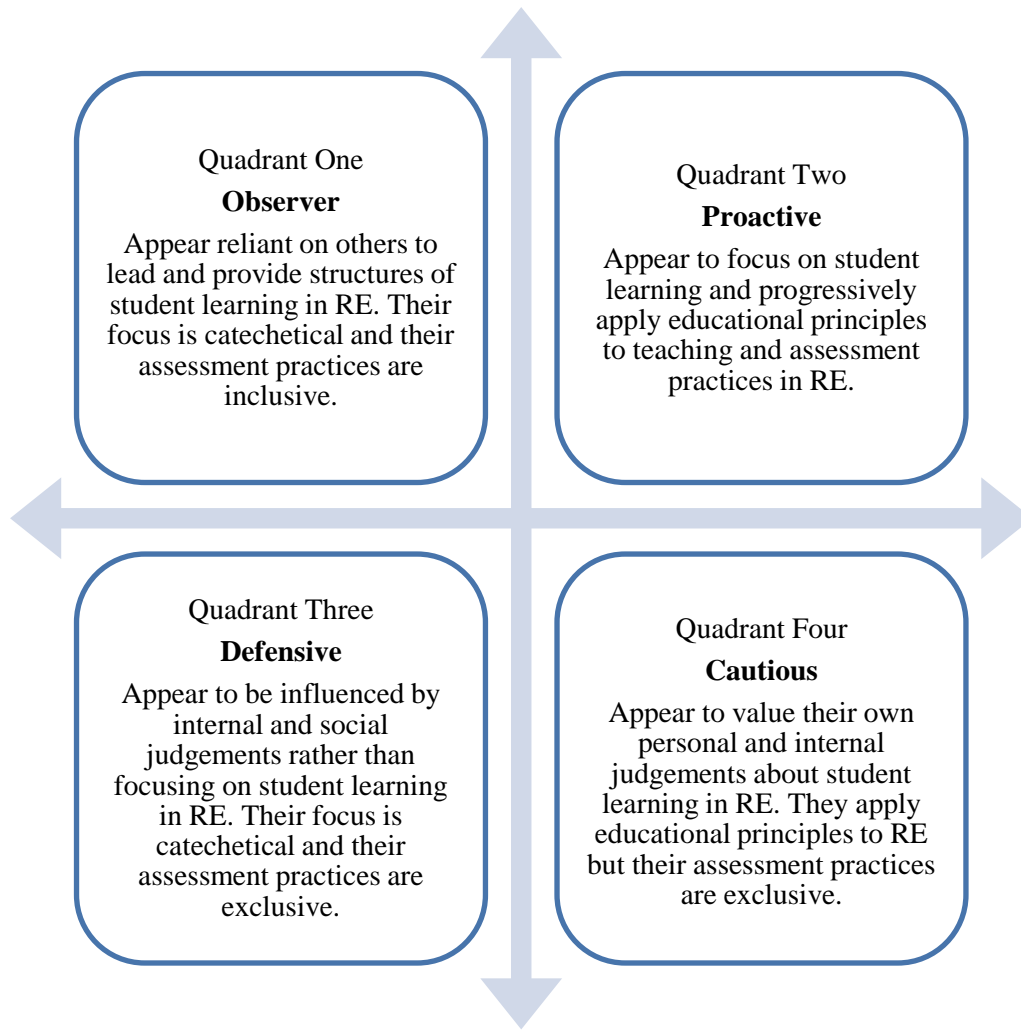


Figure 11.5. A matrix of profile categories of religious educators in this study

Quadrant One represents religious educators who appear to have not treated RE as an academic learning area. Their perceptions of the BRLA seem to suggest that their approach to teaching RE was catechetical and focused more on developing the faith of students rather than educating students about their faith. The use of LSAs was recognised by these religious educators as relevant to other learning areas but not necessarily for RE. These religious educators are labelled “Observer” because they demonstrated awareness of educational principles but did not appear to apply their knowledge readily to RE. Professional formation and leadership in RE focused on education appears appropriate for the needs of these religious educators.

Quadrant Two represents religious educators who appear to have demonstrated an awareness and application of educational principles in RE. These religious educators are labelled “Proactive” because their teaching and assessment practices in RE seem aligned to

evidence-based curriculum reforms that recognise the centrality of student learning in RE. They appear to have undergone professional training in whole school approaches to improving student learning. These religious educators seem to have treated RE as an academic learning area, recognised their responsibility to improve student learning in RE and used a range of assessments in RE including the BRLA. For these religious educators, the use of the BRLA provided complementary data about student learning in RE to data they collected from the RE assessments they developed and administered. This quadrant represents the ideal or optimal teaching and assessment approaches in RE consistent with local system expectations (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, 2013b) and educational literature focused on transformation and curriculum renewal (e.g. Fullan, 2016).

Quadrant Three represents religious educators who appear to have taught RE with a catechetical focus and seem to have lacked appropriate training in assessment of RE. These religious educators appear to be particularly challenged by student disengagement in RE. They are labelled “Defensive” because their perceptions of the BRLA seem to be reliant on teaching and assessment practices that worked solely in their favour. These religious educators appear to have had negative experiences of LSAs and did not trust their use. Furthermore, they may have been hesitant to consider alternative ways of teaching RE because of a lack of confidence or appropriate training in educational measurement and assessment. Further understanding of these religious educators appears necessary to better target their professional formation in RE.

Quadrant Four represents religious educators who appear to have taught RE with an educational focus and seem to have complied with policy expectations in RE. However, these religious educators also appear to have had negative experiences of LSAs and doubtful of such assessments. These religious educators are labelled “Cautious” because they appear to have been tolerant of new developments in RE and education in general but may have perceived externally developed assessments such as LSAs as imposed measures of accountability and without relevance to classroom use. Further understanding of these religious educators may also better target the type of professional formation required in RE for them. The type of professional formation required in RE is addressed in the recommendations from the study.

The metanarrative matrix representing the religious educators in this study has implications for future policy decisions regarding the development of the BRLA and the professional formation of teachers and school leaders of RE. The matrix supports educational

literature that considers the need to better understand the perceptions of educators as they engage with and implement educational curricula (Dinham, 2016; Hattie, 2009). This understanding draws on the seminal works of John Dewey (Thayer, 1982) who argued that education and learning are social and interactive processes worth investigating. The assumption is that such investigations may bring about improvements to student learning in RE.

## **11.6 Chapter Summary**

Until this study, there was a lack of empirical evidence about how teachers and school leaders of RE working in Catholic schools in WA perceived the BRLA. This study has identified the school-based religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA as a LSA used in RE and in doing so has revealed three insights. The first of these insights suggests that the BRLA was not considered by the religious educators as a unique phenomenon but rather as a springboard through which they expressed their individual and collective perceptions of the BRLA based on their personal and professional experiences. The second of these insights suggests that the religious educators' perceptions were complex and contrasting. The BRLA seems to have been perceived according to how religious educators responded to their professional training in RE and approached their teaching of RE. Similarly, how the religious educators experienced the use of LSAs, were exposed to evidence-based curriculum reforms and in turn chose particular assessment practices in RE, also seems to have influenced their perceptions of the BRLA.

The religious educators in this study belong to a teaching profession that engaged with the RE curriculum that shares common elements with other learning areas: the delivery of content, pedagogy and assessment practices. A third insight from the study suggests that as professionals, the religious educators seem to have perceived the BRLA in much the same way as other educators perceived LSAs used in other learning areas. Therefore, the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA provide new local knowledge that aligns and supports the research literature relating to RE as a learning area and the use of LSAs in various learning areas.

In the concluding chapter of this thesis, recommendations and implications from this study are presented. The recommendations address the contrasting perceptions that religious educators expressed about the BRLA. In consideration of these perceptions, the implications consider within and beyond the teaching and assessment practices in RE classrooms how best to improve student learning in RE.



## **CHAPTER TWELVE**

### **RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

#### **12.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides two concluding aspects about the study. Firstly, the scope of the research and secondly, fourteen recommendations drawn from the findings and themes. The study addressed the GRQ: How do religious educators who work in Catholic schools in Western Australia perceive *The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment (BRLA)* as a large-scale, standardised assessment (LSA) used in Religious Education (RE)? The findings and themes that emerged are significant because they provide new empirical knowledge about the use of LSAs by teachers and school leaders of RE working in the Catholic education system in WA. The findings and themes also align with local, national and international research about RE and the use of LSAs in education generally. The recommendations reflect this alignment by focusing on student learning in RE. That is, the recommendations focus on an educational approach to teaching RE that endorses evidence-based curriculum reforms in education. The recommendations have implications for the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia (CEOWA) and other Catholic education systems, in terms of the development and implementation of policy decisions and practices in RE. Furthermore, the recommendations point to future research in RE and assessment design and implementation in education.

#### **12.2 The Scope of the Research**

The scope of the research is limited to the Western Australian Catholic education context. The BRLA is administered only to students enrolled in Catholic schools in WA. The study aimed to describe the perceptions that school-based religious educators have about the BRLA. A total of 238 teachers and school leaders of RE, including principals, were involved in this study. They represent 39.6% of an estimated population of school-based religious educators who teach students in Years Three, Five and Nine (Catholic Education Western Australia, 2014). The teachers and school leaders involved in this study worked in one of 65 Catholic primary and secondary schools located within the four Catholic dioceses in WA. At the time of the study the 65 Catholic schools represented 44.2% of the 147 involved with the BRLA.

The study focused specifically on school-based religious educators because they were ultimately responsible for preparing students for the BRLA, administering the assessment and potentially using the data from the students' results to help diagnose student learning in RE. The religious educators in this study were responsible for implementing an educationally based and classroom oriented RE curriculum. They also had knowledge of and involvement with other LSAs apart from the BRLA. No other stakeholders, such as students and parents involved with the assessment were investigated in this study because of limited time and scope for such a broad investigation. The recommendations proposed from this study do, however, identify the need for further investigations involving other stakeholders.

The perceptions of religious educators were investigated using a pragmatic approach to research (Crotty, 1998; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005). This approach focused on the research problem and used a range of theoretical perspectives that allowed a variety of modes of inquiry for gathering quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell, 2009; Punch, 2009). The data were collected, collated, analysed and integrated using mixed methods research and a particular mixed methods design adapted from a "sequential explanatory strategy" (Creswell, 2009, p. 211). The strategy helped enhance the trustworthiness of the overall study by providing breadth and depth to the findings (Bryman, 2012).

The collection of data occurred in two phases between September 2013 and July 2014. An online questionnaire was used in Phase One and semi-structured individual and group interviews were used in Phase Two. In Phase One data were collected from 150 teachers of RE responsible for students in Years Three (n = 55), Five (n = 40) and Nine (n = 55); 57 school leaders responsible for leading RE in Catholic primary (n = 37) and secondary (20) schools; and 31 principals of Catholic primary (n = 26) and secondary (n = 5) schools. These religious educators responded to 90 items, mainly Likert scale and open-ended questions. In Phase Two a total of 43 of the 238 religious educators took part in one of 21 interviews. There were 21 teachers of RE responsible for students in Years Three (n = 5), Five (n = 5) and Nine (n = 11); 14 school leaders responsible for leading RE in Catholic primary (n = 8) and secondary (n = 6) schools; and 8 principals of Catholic primary schools.

The analysis of data occurred in several stages. The different data sets from both phases were collated, processed and analysed separately and later combined and integrated through a process of triangulation (Bryman, 2004; Silverman, 2013). Quantitative techniques that draw from a positivistic perspective to research were used to help analyse the numeric data from the Likert scale items in the online questionnaire. These techniques included descriptive statistics (Babbie, 2008; Gravetter & Wallnau, 2007; Liu, 2014) and Rasch

analysis (Andrich, 1988; Wilson, 2005). Qualitative techniques drawn from Social Constructionism (Creswell, 2009; Crotty, 1998) and associated Interpretivism (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) were used to analyse the written data from the online questionnaire and transcribed data from the interviews.

Seven research findings and six themes emerged from the combined collection and analysis of data from the religious educators. The research findings identify religious educators as having agreed that the administration of the BRLA was straightforward and familiar but disagreed about other aspects of the assessment. The research themes seem to suggest that the contexts of this research (Figure 3.1) were interconnected and influential in shaping the religious educators' contrasting perceptions of the BRLA. These contexts are applicable to the role of religious educators. This is because the contexts relate specifically to RE as a classroom learning area that is implemented by the religious educators, and how the religious educators considered the use of the BRLA as a LSA within that learning area. The religious educators' personal and professional experiences and response to RE and LSAs seem to have influenced how they understood the nature and purpose of RE, LSAs and the BRLA. In turn, their understandings seem to have influenced how they approached the teaching of RE and assessed student learning in RE.

### 12.3 Recommendations

Fourteen recommendations from the research are proposed. The recommendations are categorised under four headings to reflect the research findings and themes and build upon the research literature about RE and the use of LSAs (Figure 12.1). The focus of each heading is student learning and how to best improve this learning in RE. Considerations about the types of religious educators in this study as discussed in the previous chapter (Figure 11.5) also contributed to the structure of the recommendations. The implications target the future developments of the BRLA, policies and practices in RE, and particularly, assessment practices that align to evidence-based curriculum reforms in education.

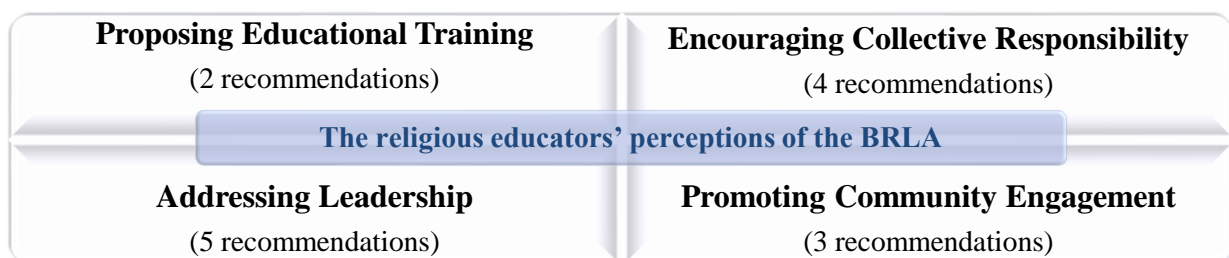


Figure 12.1. The recommendations from the research

**12.3.1 Proposing educational training.** This set of recommendations aim to improve student learning by focusing on improving the professional formation of religious educators in RE. There are two recommendations proposed in this category. The recommendations reflect Theme Four (Professional Formation), which suggests that the religious educators' contrasting perceptions of the BRLA were influenced by their understandings of the nature and role of RE. As represented in Figure 11.2, groups of religious educators either approached the teaching of RE as a catechetical or an educational activity. Of interest to this study are the groups of religious educators who approached the teaching of RE from a catechetical focus. The perceptions of these religious educators challenge local Catholic education policies regarding expected teaching and assessment practices in RE (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, 2013b).

The first recommendation proposes further research about religious educators' perceptions of the meaning, purpose and role of RE [Recommendation 1.1]. The recommendation considers further to this study the influence that the religious educators' perceptions of RE may have on the educational goals of RE. The aim of the recommendation is to better understand the motivations of religious educators about RE so as to focus them on student learning. The recommendation builds on research in RE that targets teacher training and ongoing professional development courses relevant to enriching the educational dimension of RE (Ryan, 2013; Scott, 2016). Furthermore, the recommendation aligns with research literature that attempts to distinguish Catechesis from RE within the context of Catholic education (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006; Holohan, 1999; McKinney & Sullivan, 2013).

The recommendation considers the Church documentation and advocacy proposing a renewal of understandings and considerations for educators working in Catholic schools (Rossiter, 2018). The documentation focuses on the Catholic school and its important role within the Catholic community as a place of synthesis where faith, culture and life come together to educate the whole person (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 37, 1997, para. 11). Teachers and school leaders responsible for RE are called, as are all Catholic educators (Francis I, 2013), firstly to give witness to the Gospel message of Jesus (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982, para. 59; Paul VI, 1975, para. 41) by being Christ-like in the presence of others (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 43, 1982, paras. 32, 33, 1988, para. 110; Vatican II, 1965a) and of teaching the Gospel message of Jesus with enthusiasm and knowledge (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982, para. 59, 1988, paras. 26, 66; John Paul II, 1979, para. 6).

The second recommendation addresses the need for further training and ongoing professional formation for religious educators in RE [Recommendation 1.2]. This recommendation complements the first in this category by addressing the religious educators' apparent lack of substantial content knowledge in RE (Theme Four). The aim of the recommendation is to improve religious educators' awareness and application of the essential content knowledge of the Catholic Faith Tradition. The recommendation considers educational opportunities that develop collective capacity for religious literacy (D'Orsa & D'Orsa, 2013). By strengthening the depth and breadth of religious literacy for teachers and school leaders of RE, students may also develop improved religious literacy. The recommendation builds on literature promoting professional efficacy in education (Dinham, 2016; Hattie, 2009) and, in particular, RE (Buchanan & Rymarz, 2008; Rymarz & Hyde, 2013; Sullivan, 2013). This type of professional efficacy would focus on the educational dimension of RE that in mainstream education helps bring about social reforms on a system-wide scale (National Catholic Education Commission, 2017b). These reforms aim to develop students' knowledge and capabilities (McGunnigle & Hackett, 2015) as well as the learning capacity of students, teachers, school leaders and other school community members (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Fullan and Quinn, 2016).

**12.3.2 Encouraging collective responsibility.** This set of recommendations aims to focus the religious educators' attention on the role of educational accountability for student learning in RE. There are four recommendations in this category. The recommendations address Theme Two (Engagement) and Theme Five (Accountability).

The first recommendation proposes future research regarding religious educators' perceptions of the role of accountability in RE [Recommendation 2.1]. The aim of the research is to investigate religious educators' perceptions of who they believe is responsible for student learning in RE and how they believe student learning can be appropriately measured in RE. Theme Five seems to suggest that the religious educators' contrasting perceptions of the BRLA were influenced by their interpretations of accountability in RE. Of interest to the study are the groups of religious educators who perceived the BRLA as an assessment designed by and for school and system leaders. These groups demonstrated an exclusive understanding of the role of responsibility for student learning in RE. This understanding seems to have been influenced by their experiences of LSAs in mainstream education. Aligned to current evidence-based curriculum reforms in Australian education (Department of Education and Training, 2018), the recommendation considers the need to

close the gap between school-based and system educators about educational accountability (Gill et al., 2016) and measurement and assessment practices in and out of the classroom (Forster, 2009; Hill & Barber, 2014).

The second recommendation relates to the first and calls for changes to the title of *The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment* [Recommendation 2.2]. A change in title should exclude the use of the term "Bishops" to divert unnecessary attention away from the perceived ownership and responsibility of the BRLA from the Bishops and more towards school-based religious educators and system administrators. Such a change would also need to divert attention away from perceived misunderstandings of the term "Literacy". The study found that religious educators associated the term literacy with English skills and the difficulty that students with poor English skills experienced with the language used in the BRLA test items. The intended use of the term literacy in the BRLA is a focus on the content knowledge of the RE curriculum (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2006a, 2013) and not on English literacy skills and capabilities.

The third recommendation builds further on the first two recommendations by proposing teachers and school leaders of RE work with system administrators such as the CEOWA to draft and edit test items for the BRLA [Recommendation 2.3]. Collaboration between school-based religious educators and system administrators already exists at a local level with the development of other LSAs, such as the university entrance examinations (O'Neill, 2014). The aim of the recommendation is to promote collective responsibility for student learning consistent with the research literature encouraging deeper learning of measurement and assessment principles and design (Andrich, 1988; Ridden & Heldinger, 2014; Wu, Tam, & Jen, 2016).

A fourth recommendation draws on Theme Two, which suggests that groups of religious educators perceived a disconnect between system administrators of the BRLA and their support to school-based religious educators regarding the BRLA. The recommendation proposes the CEOWA in the on-going review of the evaluation process of the BRLA, provide more explicit policy documents about the BRLA that are well aligned to the RE curriculum, and have these documents effectively communicated to all educators regardless of role [Recommendation 2.4]. The aim of the recommendation is to provide transparent information from the CEOWA to all stakeholders about the structures and processes for evaluating the BRLA. In turn, school-based religious educators may develop a better sense of ownership and responsibility for student learning in RE. This recommendation supports the research literature suggesting a need for education to implement visible and transformative provisions

in order to improve accountability of student learning (Lee, 2008; Linn, 2003). The application of the suggested provisions may ensure better alignment between the development of the BRLA test items and the RE curriculum implemented in Catholic schools in WA.

**12.3.3 Addressing leadership.** There are five recommendations in this category addressing all five research themes. The research findings that led to the themes seem to suggest that the religious educators' contrasting perceptions of the BRLA may have been influenced by school leadership in RE. How school leaders of RE focused on student learning and motivated others to do the same appears to be different between Catholic school communities. In turn, teaching and assessment practices in RE also appears to be different. The variances seem apparent in the way religious educators interpreted accountability in RE as either an exclusive or inclusive responsibility for student learning and how they seem to have adopted an exclusive or inclusive assessment practices.

The first recommendation proposes further research investigating the perceptions that religious educators have about the role that assessment plays in RE [Recommendation 3.1]. The aim of the research is to further identify disparities between religious educators based on their employment role of responsibility in Catholic schools and the influence of those disparities on student learning in RE. The recommendation builds on the new knowledge about assessment practices in RE identified in this study and the Australian research literature suggesting a need to review assessment practices in RE (Healy & Bush; 2010; MacDonald, 1990; White & Borg, 2002). The recommendation also supports scholarship in the area of educational measurement and assessment that attempts to improve efficacy in assessment practices by closing the gap of differentiation between assessment types (Masters, 2013; Hill & Barber, 2014). Australian scholarship advocates teachers and school leaders have better access and training related to student performance data from LSAs (Pettit, 2009, 2010; Thompson & Cook, 2014) and in-class assessments (Earl & Timperley, 2009; Shaddock, 2014; Timperley, 2013). The proposed training aims to help school-based educators focus on student learning and be better able to fully integrate the curriculum components of content and pedagogy to improve student learning (Kelly, 2005).

In keeping with educational scholarship about assessment practices, three more recommendations are proposed. These involve consideration for professional training by local universities about assessment design [Recommendation 3.2]; professional training by local universities about analysis of student performance data [Recommendation 3.3]; and

system-wide CEOWA training regarding the analysis and interpretation of data in reports generated from LSAs such as the BRLA and NAPLAN [Recommendation 3.4]. The aim of the recommendation is to provide system-wide support to schools regarding the analysis of student performance data from the BRLA beyond references to longitudinal trends (Wu, 2016) as recommended in Australian research (Pettit, 2009, 2010). Such support promotes accountable leaders of learning, focused on sustained progression of student learning.

The three recommendations aim to make accessible to all teachers and school leaders clearer communication and guidelines about assessment practices in RE. Open communication regarding assessment practices and transparency regarding student performance data may lead to improved leadership at all levels in RE. Furthermore, school-based religious educators may have better opportunities to collaboratively develop assessments (beyond the BRLA), analyse results, moderate student learning and evaluate assessment practices. Given that groups of religious educators suggested they were not confident in using the BRLA school reports, the recommendations also have the potential to improve the use of assessment data for future lesson planning in RE, as well as in literacy and numeracy.

A fifth recommendation in this category draws on what appears as a disparity in perceptions between teachers and school leaders of RE regarding the BRLA and other LSAs. The recommendation proposes future research to investigate the influence that employment role of responsibility may have on assessment practices [Recommendation 3.5]. The aim of the recommendation is to understand how the role of educators may possibly influence the administration of LSAs. This recommendation aligns with Australian research identifying perceptual differences between teachers and school leaders about LSAs and the analysis of data from those assessments (Pettit, 2009, 2010; Thompson & Cook, 2014; Thompson & Mockler, 2016). Other research literature suggests that differences between teachers and school leaders do exist and there is a need to build collective leadership and efficacy by establishing cultural capacity for learning (Dinham, 2016; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Hattie, 2009).

**12.3.4 Promoting community engagement.** This set of recommendations aims to promote student learning in RE by better engaging community support. There are three recommendations proposed in the category. The recommendations reflect Theme Two (Engagement), which seems to suggest that groups of religious educators perceived students and parents as disengaged with the BRLA. Such groups explained how students and parents



were dissatisfied with the BRLA, did not support students and teachers during the administration of the BRLA, and were generally disinterested in the BRLA student reports because they were disinterested in RE as a priority learning area.

The first recommendation builds on the previous category of recommendations regarding leadership and addresses teacher engagement and leadership in RE [Recommendation 4.1]. First, there is a potential need for religious educators to better consider the delivery of interesting and educationally sound RE lessons. Second, there is a potential need for religious educators to be upskilled to confidently lead and promote Catholic school communities (National Catholic Education Commission, 2017a; Sharkey, 2007). The implications for a review of current professional formation programs is necessary in this venture (D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2011, 2012, 2013) and was discussed in the recommendations from the first category (Proposing educational training).

Following on from the first recommendation are two other recommendations specifically aimed at investigating student and parent engagement with the BRLA and RE in general. The first of these recommendations proposes the need for multi-dimensional research investigating student and parent perceptions of the BRLA [Recommendation 4.2]. The second, proposes further research about the perceptions of students and their parents towards religion and RE as part of an organised religion [Recommendation 4.2]. These recommendations align with the research literature in Catholic Religious Education about the prominent role that parents have in their child’s learning (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 6; Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, paras. 51–65) and the need to support parents in their role (John Paul II, 1988; Vatican Council II, 1965c para. 52). The recommendations also build on the research literature about students’ current circumstances pertaining to church life (Dixon et al., 2013) and the need for a renewed mission (Schuttloffel, 2012). This mission is focused on promoting a new evangelisation (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, para. 58c; Francis I, 2013; John Paul II, 1990, para. 33d) that extends beyond the RE classroom and is specific to the spiritual and religious formation of all Catholic educators, including parents and, in turn, students (Rossiter, 2010, 2018; Rymarz, 2010, 2012).

#### **12.4 Implications**

Fourteen recommendations are proposed in this study. The recommendations have implications for Catholic education in WA, in terms of future policy consideration for the development of the BRLA and the professional formation of religious educators. There are

further implications from the recommendations for the CEOWA and other Catholic education systems regarding future policy decisions on teaching and assessment practices in RE. There are also possible implications for further research regarding teaching and assessment practices in RE. Table 12.1 is a summary of the recommendations according to implications for the CEOWA and other Catholic education systems, in terms of policy decisions and practices in RE. The proposed recommendations also have implications for future research about RE and assessment practices in education generally, including the use of LSAs.

Table 12.1

*A Summary of the Recommendations According to Implications*

---

Implications for Catholic education in WA:

1. Recommendation 2.2 proposes changes to the title of *The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment*.
2. Recommendation 2.3 proposes a more system-wide, collaborative and inclusive approach to the drafting and editing of the BRLA test items involving teachers and school leaders of RE.
3. Recommendation 2.4 proposes explicit policy documents about the BRLA be produced that are well aligned to the RE curriculum and communicated effectively to all educators regardless of role.
4. Recommendation 3.4 proposes a system-wide approach to improved assessment practices with an emphasis on training educators how to better analysis and interpret data for LSA reports.
5. Recommendation 4.1 proposes system-wide solutions to student and parent disengagement in RE that focus on successful partnerships between parents and school, school and parish.

Implications for policy and practices in RE:

6. Recommendation 3.2 proposes a more unified approach to assessment design whereby teachers work collaboratively on assessments together, within year levels, across year levels and across schools within Catholic education systems.
7. Recommendation 3.3 proposes a more visible, universal and collegial response to data analysis of student learning in RE within Catholic education systems.
8. Recommendation 1.2 proposes the need for more focused professional training and ongoing professional development to improve awareness and content knowledge of the Catholic Faith Tradition.

Implications for future research:

9. Recommendation 2.1 proposes further research to investigate religious educators' perceptions of the role of accountability in RE.
  10. Recommendation 3.1 proposes further research to investigate the perceptions that educators have about assessment types and their role in RE.
  11. Recommendation 3.5 proposes further research to investigate the influence that employment role of responsibility has on the administration of LSAs and assessment practices in general.
  12. Recommendation 1.1 proposes further research about religious educators' perceptions of the meaning, purpose and role of RE and the significance that these perceptions may have on student learning in RE.
  13. Recommendation 4.2 proposes multi-dimensional research investigating student as well as parent perceptions of the BRLA and other assessment types in RE.
  14. Recommendation 4.3 proposes further research investigating student and parent perceptions of RE.
-

## 12.5 Concluding Statement

This study identifies religious educators working in Catholic schools in WA as having perceived the BRLA in contrasting ways. The study suggests that the religious educators' perceptions were manifestations of broader contextual complexities regarding RE and the use of LSAs in education. To arrive at these findings, a pragmatic approach to research, driven by the research problem was adopted (Crotty, 1998). The approach used mixed methods research that takes into consideration multiple data sources and methods of data analysis (Creswell, 2009).

As the researcher, and a religious educator myself, it was my intention throughout the study to assume the "role of others" (Charon, 2010, p. 105). In doing so I believe that I have provided new local knowledge about religious educators that aligns with related local (Hackett, 2008, 2010), national (e.g. Rymarz & Hyde, 2013) and international (e.g. Buchanan & Gellel, 2015; Shanahan, 2016) research and literature. The recommendations from my study focus on student learning in RE and the adoption of a whole system approach to the improvement of learning. This approach has evolved from evidence-based curriculum reforms (Hill & Barber, 2014) that currently advocate the necessity for building cultures of learning (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). Such cultural transformation is based on understanding the coherence between educators who work together.

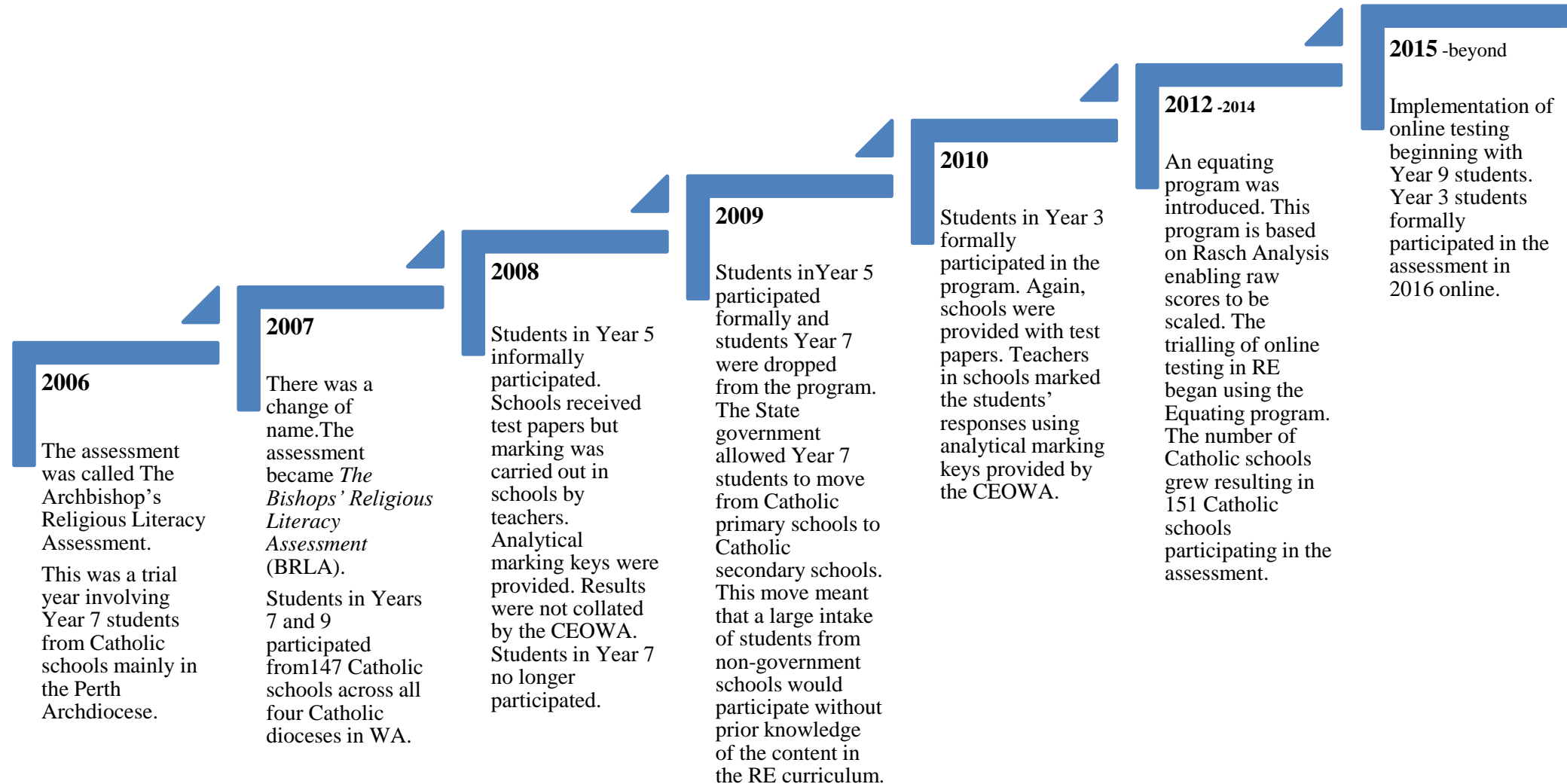
To advance the goal of improving student learning in RE, I believe it is my duty to promote RE as an academic discipline worthy of much needed exploration. I believe that the type of exploration required in RE should be well grounded in educational principles that as Moran (2016, p. 219) points out, encourages religious educators to "practice their religion intelligently" and helps them recognise the priority that RE has in Catholic education.

This study gave me an exciting opportunity to explore the perceptions of religious educators. My motivation for future endeavours is inspired by this study and by the words of Bishop Holohan (1999) who writes, "different philosophies of education have different ideas about knowledge. For the Catholic religious educator, the purpose of knowledge is to enlighten students' experiences so that they are enriched by them" (p. 27). Furthermore, the Bishop says, "students need to learn the language, signs and symbols of the Christian faith that have been renewed by the Second Vatican Council" (p. 58). I look forward to better understanding our Catholic Faith Tradition and providing understandings to others of why it is important for living and relating with God, oneself, others and creation (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994).

## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### A Timeline of the Developments of the BRLA



## **Appendix B**

### **Sample Letter to Parents**

This is a copy of a sample letter used by school principals to inform parents about *The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment*. Retrieved from *The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment. Guidelines for Administration 2013, Year 9* (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013, p. 14).

Dear Parents

#### **THE BISHOPS' RELIGIOUS LITERACY ASSESSMENT 2013 YEAR NINE**

At the request of the Western Australian Bishops, Year 9 students in Catholic schools across Western Australia will take part in *The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment* (BRLA) during the week commencing **Monday 29 July** (Week Two, Term Three).

Students enrolled in Year 9 who are following a regular classroom program are expected to participate. Students with disability are also entitled to participate in the assessment. Exemptions may apply.

#### **The Nature and Role of the BRLA**

*The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment* is a large-scale, standardised assessment program. The program consists of a series of Religious Education (RE) tests developed and marked by the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia (CEOWA). Formal school and student reports are produced by the CEOWA for students in Year 5 and Year 9.

The BRLA provides a 'point in time', snapshot of student performance in RE. Students' knowledge and understanding of the content of the RE curriculum is assessed using a combination of multiple choice, short and extended response items. Students' faith is not assessed. The use of the BRLA complements the school-based assessment programs in RE.

Please contact your child's teacher or me if you have any inquiries regarding the administration of *The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment 2013*.

Yours sincerely

School Principal

## Appendix C

### A Timeline of the Research

This timeline contains dates and information about the main events of the study.

#### 2012

- 6 March The Low Risk Ethics application was submitted.
- 10 May Ethics approval was granted by The University of Notre Dame Australia.
- 1 June The Director of Catholic Education of Western Australia approved the study.
- 13 September The Research Proposal was submitted.
- 24 November The Research Proposal was presented.

#### 2013

- March–April The implementation of Phase One began.  
A single user licence with Qualtrics was purchased.  
Online questionnaire items were reviewed and trialled. A pilot study involved twenty teachers of RE who were employed as casual relief teaching staff in Catholic schools and who were also employed by the Catholic Education Office in Western Australia to mark the BRLA.  
Two research assistants were employed and professional training began.
- 17 May The primary researcher sent letters to Catholic primary and secondary principals associations requesting support for the study.
- 1 June The primary researcher sent letters to 147 principals who led Catholic schools involved with the BRLA, seeking permission to conduct the study with religious educators employed in their schools. The letter included information about the study, consent forms for teachers and school leaders responsible for RE. The consent forms included contact details for research assistants to be able to email participating religious educators.
- June The research assistants collated participant responses and coordinated the administration of the online questionnaire. They prepared logins for accessing the questionnaire and corresponded with religious educators via email.
- August–September The online questionnaire was administered to participants. The completion of the questionnaire was coordinated by the research assistants. Initial emails were sent from the research

	assistants to the participants who volunteered for the Phase Two interviews.
October	Non-identifiable processed data from the online questionnaire was provided to the primary researcher for analysis. Initial analysis led to considerations for Phase Two.
<b>2014</b>	
February	The implementation of Phase Two began.  The research assistants were trained for conducting the interviews.  The interview questions were reviewed and trialled. A pilot study involved twenty teachers of RE who were employed as casual relief teaching staff in Catholic schools and who were also employed by the Catholic Education Office in Western Australia to mark the BRLA.  The research assistants coordinated follow-up correspondence with participants involved in the individual and group interviews. The configuration of the interviews was established.
10 March	First individual interviews with school principals began.
6 May	First group interview with teachers and school leaders of RE began.
24 June	Final interview was conducted.
July	The full analysis of the response data from Phase One and Phase Two began.

## Appendix D

### Approval by the Human Research Ethics Committee

This is a copy of the letter sent by the HREC of The University of Notre Dame Australia giving approval to conduct the study.



19 Mouat Street (PO Box 1225)  
Fremantle, Western Australia 6959  
Telephone: +61 8 9433 0555  
Facsimile: +61 8 9433 0544  
Email: enquiries@nd.edu.au  
Internet: www.nd.edu.au

ABN: 69 330 643 210

CRICOS PROVIDER CODE: 01032F

10 May 2012

Prof Chris Hackett  
School of Education  
University of Notre Dame Australia  
Fremantle Campus

Reference Number: 012016F

Dear Chris,

I am writing to you in regards to your Low Risk Application for Ethics Clearance for your proposed research, to be undertaken as a student project at The University of Notre Dame Australia. The title of the project is: *"The Bishops' religious literacy assessment: How do religious education teachers in WA catholic Schools perceive this standardised assessment?"*

Your proposal has been reviewed by the University's Human Research Ethics Committee, and based on the information provided has been assessed as meeting all the requirements as mentioned in the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007)*. I am therefore pleased to advise that ethical clearance has been granted for this proposed study.

***All research projects are approved subject to standard conditions of approval. Please read the attached document for details of these conditions.***

On behalf of the Human Research Ethics Committee, I wish you well with what promises to be a most interesting and valuable study.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Natalie Giles'.

Dr Natalie Giles  
Executive Officer, Human Research Ethic Committee  
Research Office

cc: Prof Michael O'Neill, Dean, School of Education.



## Appendix E

### Permission from the Director of Catholic Education

This is a copy of the letter from the Director of Catholic Education of Western Australia, Mr Ron Dullard, giving his permission to conduct the study.



CATHOLIC EDUCATION  
OFFICE OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

DIRECTOR OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION

1 June 2012

Mrs Antonella Poncini  
172 Amelia Street  
BALCATTWA WA 6021

Dear Antonella

**RE: THE BISHOPS' RELIGIOUS LITERACY ASSESSMENT:  
HOW DO RELIGIOUS EDUCATION TEACHERS IN WA CATHOLIC SCHOOLS  
PERCEIVE THIS STANDARDISED ASSESSMENT?**

Thank you for your completed application received 28 May 2012, whereby this PhD project envisages to identify current teaching practices of religious education in Western Australian Catholic schools and also inform the specific nature of professional learning that Catholic religious education teachers require to effectively improve the quality of teaching and learning in religious education.

I give in principle support for all Catholic schools in Western Australia to participate in this valuable study. However, consistent with CEOWA policy, participation in your research project will be the decision of the individual principal and staff members.

The conditions of CEOWA approval are as follows:

1. A final copy of the interview schedule is to be provided to the CEOWA before you can implement it in each Catholic school.
2. As your research project is being conducted for longer than one year, a completion of annual reports as well as a final report are to be forwarded to the CEOWA.

Responsibility for quality control of ethics and methodology of the proposed research resides with the institution supervising the research. The CEOWA notes that the University of Notre Dame Australia Human Research Ethics Committee has granted permission for the duration of this research project (Reference Number: 012016F).

Any changes to the proposed methodology will need to be submitted for CEOWA approval prior to implementation. The focus and outcomes of your research project are of interest to the CEOWA. It is therefore a condition of approval that the research findings of this study are forwarded to the CEOWA.

Further enquiries may be directed to Tanya Davies at [davies.tanya@ceo.wa.edu.au](mailto:davies.tanya@ceo.wa.edu.au) or (08) 6380 5379.

I wish you all the best with your research.

Yours sincerely

Ron Dullard

50 Ruislip Street, Leederville WA 6007 PO Box 198, Leederville WA 6903 T (08) 6380 5210 F (08) 6380 5110  
E [dullard.ron@ceo.wa.edu.au](mailto:dullard.ron@ceo.wa.edu.au) W [ceo.wa.edu.au](http://ceo.wa.edu.au)

## Appendix F

### Request for Support

This is copy of a letter sent to the Catholic principals' associations asking them to discuss the support of the study with their members.

17 May 2013

Mr [X]  
The President  
Catholic Secondary Principals' Association  
PO Box 4265  
Myaree Business Centre WA 6960

Dear [X],

I would like your support to conduct a study in Religious Education (RE). I am enrolled in a Doctor of Philosophy degree at The University of Notre Dame Australia (UNDA). The title of my study is, THE BISHOPS' RELIGIOUS LITERACY ASSESSMENT: How do Religious Education teachers in WA Catholic schools perceive this large-scale, standardised assessment? Professor Chris Hackett is supervising the study. The Human Research Ethics Committee at NDA and the Director of the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia (CEOWA) have approved the study.

Given the increased use of system wide assessments in education there is a lack of research about teacher perceptions of such assessments. My study aims to provide a local context to systematic explorations regarding teachers' perceptions of the use of large-scale, standardised assessments in RE.

The study will be conducted in two phases. An online questionnaire will be used in the first phase and semi-structured individual and group interviews will be used in the second phase. It is my intention to start collecting data for the first phase of the study in the weeks following the administration of the BRLA. That is, the online questionnaire is scheduled to be completed between Monday 5 and Friday 16 August. Follow up interviews for the second phase of the study will be conducted between Term Four this year and Term One in 2014.

Would you be so kind to bring the study to the attention of your members and encourage them to support the study by asking RE teachers who are directly involved with the BRLA to participate in the online questionnaire and follow up interviews. Following my correspondence with you, I will present my study in writing to individual Catholic primary and secondary principals and reinforce the significance of RE teachers' participation.

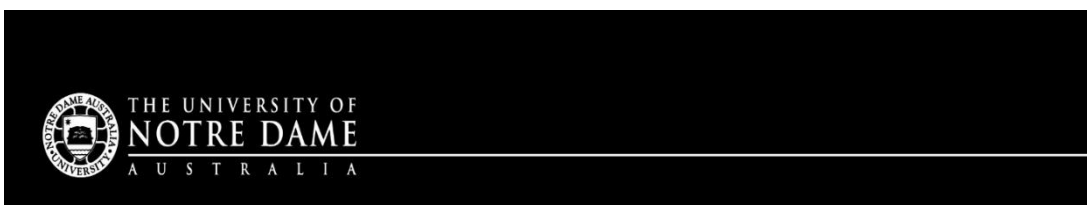
You can obtain further information about the study at any time by contacting either Professor Chris Hackett on 94330159 or at [chris.hackett@nd.edu.au](mailto:chris.hackett@nd.edu.au) or myself on 0437051306 or at [poncini.antonella@ceo.wa.edu.au](mailto:poncini.antonella@ceo.wa.edu.au) to discussion further details of the study.

Yours sincerely  
Antonella Poncini

## Appendix G

### Letter to School Principals

This is a copy of the letter sent to school principals detailing information about the study and requesting their permission to communicate with religious educators working in their Catholic schools. Similar letters were sent to teachers and school leaders of RE.



### Information Sheet

Dear Principal,

I am a student at The University of Notre Dame Australia who is enrolled in a Doctor of Philosophy degree within the School of Education. As part of my course I am required to complete a doctoral thesis. The title of the study I wish to conduct is, **THE BISHOPS' RELIGIOUS LITERACY ASSESSMENT: How do Religious Education teachers in WA Catholic schools perceive this large-scale, standardised assessment?**

Given the increased use of system wide or large-scale, standardised assessments and the educational emphasis on Religious Education, the study aims to explore RE teachers' perceptions of the use of a large scale, standardised assessments in Religious Education.

Your support of this research is greatly appreciated. To conduct my research, I require your approval to coordinate contact with Religious Education (RE) teachers in your school via a research assistant and the Head of Religious Education / Assistant Principal. RE teachers in particular, who are directly involved with teaching students in Years Three, Five and Nine and who prepare for and administer *The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment* (BRLA) will be contacted to participate in this study. The involvement of these RE teachers with the BRLA and their close affiliation with the Religious Education curriculum are the reasons for selecting them. You are also invited to voluntarily participate in the study if you are directly involved with preparing students for the BRLA.

The study will be conducted in two phases. The purpose of the first phase is to explore RE teachers' perceptions of the BRLA. The purpose of the second phase is to explore in more depth the basis for these perceptions and to describe how RE perceptions of the BRLA relate to their professional understanding of teaching, learning and assessment in RE.

RE teachers will be asked to initially complete an online questionnaire using SurveyMonkey. The online questionnaire is part of the first phase of the study and will be scheduled to be administered during the middle of Term Three. It will take approximately **TWENTY MINUTES** (20) to complete. The questionnaire is divided into two sections and comprises a series of Likert scale items and short and extended response items.

Section 1: Demographic Information

Section 2: Response Items

- A. The Purpose and Role
- B. Administration and Implementation
- C. Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Religious Education

At the end of the questionnaire RE teachers will be invited to participate in semi-structured individual and group interviews. RE teachers who volunteer to participate in the interviews will form an interviewing pool. The research assistant will select from this pool a balanced and representative group of participants who meet demographic, geographic and school-type criteria.

A series of one hour, individual and group interviews will be conducted during Terms Three and Four of 2013. The interviews will further explore and clarify patterns of responses and themes that emerged from the online questionnaire. A research assistant will be employed by me to conduct the interviews.

As you are aware, I am employed as a consultant in Religious Education by the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia (CEOWA). My role at the CEOWA involves the development, implementation and analysis of the BRLA. As a result of my employment with the CEOWA, there may be a potential conflict of interest between the participants of the study and myself. Therefore, in order to adhere to ethical guidelines for conducting research, a number of measures will be adopted.

1. The study only involves voluntary participants.
2. Prior to completing any part of the online questionnaire and participating in interviews, participants will be asked to read and sign a consent form.
3. Information collected from the study will be treated as strictly confidential.
4. To protect the anonymity of participants, a birthdate code will be created by participating RE teachers at the end of the online questionnaire.
5. A research assistant will use the birth date code to coordinate contact with RE teachers for follow up interview process.
6. The birth date code will minimise the risk of identification of participants by the researcher.
7. No person from the CEOWA will be able to identify the participants or any information they provide in the study.
8. A research assistant will transcribe all information from the interviews.
9. Only non-identifiable data will be provided to me by the research assistant.
10. RE teachers may at any time withdraw their consent to participate in the study.

Professor Chris Hackett of the School of Education is supervising the study. The Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Notre Dame Australia has approved the study. The protocol adopted by the University of Notre Dame Australia Human Research Ethics Committee for the protection of privacy will be adhered to and relevant sections of the *Privacy Act* are available at <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/>. I have enclosed a copy of the approval as well as copies of letters to RE teachers.

I take this opportunity to thank you for your support of my study. I am confident that the findings of the research will be of benefit to the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia and to your school community.

Please read, sign and return the consent form attached to the following address <to be advised>. You can obtain further information about the study at any time by contacting me by telephone on 0437 051 306 or by email at [poncini@bigpond.net.au](mailto:poncini@bigpond.net.au). Alternatively, you may contact Professor Chris Hackett on 93440159 or [chris.hackett@nd.edu.au](mailto:chris.hackett@nd.edu.au).

Yours sincerely,

Antonella Poncini

*If participants have any complaint regarding the manner in which a research project is conducted, it should be directed to the Executive Officer of the Human Research Ethics Committee, Research Office, The University of Notre Dame Australia, PO Box 1225 Fremantle WA 6959, phone (08) 9433 0943.*

## Appendix H

### Informed Consent Forms

This is an example of the conditions that the religious educators consented to when they volunteered to participate in Phase One and Phase Two of the study. The informed consent was made available to participants at the start of the online questionnaire. Refer to Appendix I.



### INFORMED CONSENT FORM

I, (*participant's name*) \_\_\_\_\_ hereby agree to be a participant in the above research project.

- I have read and understood the Information Sheet about this project and any questions have been answered to my satisfaction.
- I understand that I may withdraw from participating in the project at any time without prejudice.
- I understand that all information gathered by the researcher will be treated strictly confidential, except in instances of legal requirements such as court subpoenas, freedom of information requests, or mandated reporting by some professionals.
- I understand that a birthdate code will be ascribed to all voluntary participants in the first phase of the study to ensure that the risk of identification is minimised.
- I understand that a research assistant will be employed by the primary researcher to contact me using the birthdate code for voluntary participation in the second phase of the study. This measure, I understand is also to ensure that the risk of identification is minimised.
- I understand that the research assistant will transcribe all information from the interview process and only provide non-identifiable data to the primary researcher. This measure, I understand is also to ensure that the risk of identification is minimised.
- I understand that participants of a single stream Catholic school in a country town may be at risk of being identified by the main researcher.
- I understand that the protocol adopted by The University of Notre Dame Australia Human Research Ethics Committee for the protection of privacy will be adhered to and relevant sections of the *Privacy Act* are available at <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/>
- I agree that any research data gathered for the study may be published provided my name or other identifying information is not disclosed.

*If participants have any complaint regarding the manner in which a research project is conducted, it should be directed to the Executive Officer of the Human Research Ethics Committee, Research Office, The University of Notre Dame Australia, PO Box 1225 Fremantle WA 6959, phone (08) 9433 0943.*

## Appendix I

### The Online Questionnaire

This is a copy of the front cover and items of the online questionnaire used to collect data for Phase One of the study. The questionnaire was made available online to the religious educators by Qualtrics: Online Survey Software and Insight Platform (Qualtrics Online Solutions, 2013). The items have been presented in hard copy in Word rather than as a PDF version of the online format. This is because the online format is difficult to display and contain in set pages.

Qualtrics Survey Software Page 1 of 17

*The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment:  
How do Religious Education teachers in WA Catholic schools perceive this large-scale, standardised assessment?*

Default Question Block

**THE BISHOPS' RELIGIOUS LITERACY ASSESSMENT:  
How do Religious Education teachers in WA Catholic schools perceive this  
large-scale, standardised assessment?**

Thank you for volunteering to complete this questionnaire. It should take you between twenty to thirty minutes to complete. Your thoughts and opinions are greatly appreciated and will contribute to research focussed on assessment design as well as improving student learning in Religious Education.

The information gathered from this questionnaire is considered strictly confidential. All information will be analysed and reported without disclosing your identity. The data collected will be concealed in the HIPPA-compliant, Qualtrics-secure database until it has been deleted by the primary researcher.

You can obtain further information about this questionnaire or the study in general by contacting Professor Chris Hackett on 94330159 or [chris.hackett@nd.edu.au](mailto:chris.hackett@nd.edu.au)

**Statements for Consent**

- I understand that I may withdraw from participating in the questionnaire at any time without prejudice. If you desire to withdraw, please close your internet browser.
- I understand that all information from this questionnaire will be treated as strictly confidential, except in instances of legal requirements such as court subpoenas, freedom of information requests, or mandated reporting by some professionals.
- I understand that a research assistant is employed by the primary researcher to deal directly with the information from this questionnaire.
- I understand that only non-identifiable data will be provided to the primary researcher.
- I understand that a birthday code will be ascribed to me at the end of this questionnaire if I decide to volunteer to participate in followup interviews.
- I understand that the research assistant will contact me directly if I volunteer to participate in followup interviews.
- I understand that if I am an employee of a single stream Catholic school in a country town my identity may be at risk of being identified by the primary researcher.
- I understand that the protocol adopted by The University of Notre Dame Australia Human Research Ethics Committee for the protection of privacy will be adhered to and relevant sections of the *Privacy Act* are available at <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/>
- I agree that any research data gathered for the study may be published provided my name or other identifying information is not disclosed.

<https://asia.qualtrics.com/ControlPanel/Ajax.php?action=GetSurveyPrintPreview&T=1...> 4/12/2013

Item Category	Item Number	Item Description
Consent to participate in the online questionnaire (2)		
Consent	Q3	I have read and understood all the above statements of consent.
	Q4	State your desire (of your own free will) to complete the online questionnaire.
Consent to participate in follow up semi-structured group interviews (2)		
Consent	Q87	Please write the date you were born using the following format (dd/mm/yyyy).
	Q88	Write the suburb or town of the school where you currently teach.
Demographic Items (16)		
Gender	Q6	What is your gender? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Male</li> <li>• Female</li> </ul>
Age	Q7	What is your age? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 24 years or less</li> <li>• 25 to 34 years</li> <li>• 35 to 44 years</li> <li>• 45 to 54 years</li> <li>• 55 to 64 years</li> <li>• 65 or more years</li> </ul>
Educational qualification	Q14	Write the details about your most recently completed educational qualifications. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Title of Educational Qualification</li> <li>• Educational Institution</li> <li>• Year of completion</li> <li>• Area of specialisation</li> </ul>
Educational training	Q15	What specific educational training have you had? –Dropdown menu – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early Childhood</li> <li>• Primary Years 1 to 7</li> <li>• Secondary Years 7 to 10</li> <li>• Secondary Years 7 to 12</li> <li>• Other</li> </ul>
Accreditation	Q16	What is the highest WA Catholic Accreditation course you have completed? –Dropdown menu – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working towards accreditation to teach RE</li> <li>• Completed accreditation to teach RE</li> <li>• Working towards completing accreditation to lead RE</li> <li>• Completed accreditation to lead RE</li> </ul>

Item Category	Item Number	Item Description
Teaching Experience	Q18	How many years have you been teaching?
	Q19	How many years have you taught in a Catholic school in Western Australia? –Dropdown menu – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One year or less</li> <li>• 2 to 5 years</li> <li>• 6 to 10 years</li> <li>• 11 to 15 years</li> <li>• 16 to 20 years</li> <li>• 21 years or more</li> </ul>
School Location	Q21	In which diocese is the school where you teach located? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Broome Diocese</li> <li>• Bunbury Diocese</li> <li>• Geraldton Diocese</li> <li>• Perth Archdiocese</li> </ul>
Student Enrolment Numbers	Q22	How many students are enrolled at the school where you teach? –Dropdown menu – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 100 or less</li> <li>• 101 to 300 students</li> <li>• 301 to 500 students</li> <li>• more than 500 students</li> </ul>
Years at current school	Q24	How many years have you taught at the school where you are currently teaching? –Dropdown menu – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One year or less</li> <li>• 2 to 5 years</li> <li>• 6 to 10 years</li> <li>• 11 to 15 years</li> <li>• 16 to 20 years</li> <li>• 21 years or more</li> </ul>
Educational Title /Current Status	Q25	Which title best describes your current teaching employment? –Dropdown menu – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Classroom teacher</li> <li>• Assistant Principal of Religious Education</li> <li>• Assistant Principal</li> <li>• Head of Department (Religious Education)</li> <li>• School Principal</li> <li>• Deputy Principal</li> <li>• Other</li> </ul>



Item Category	Item Number	Item Description
Teaching of RE	Q27	How many years have you taught Religious Education in a Catholic school in WA? –Dropdown menu – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One year or less</li> <li>• 2 to 5 years</li> <li>• 6 to 10 years</li> <li>• 11 to 15 years</li> <li>• 16 to 20 years</li> <li>• 21 years or more</li> </ul>
	Q28	Have you taught RE in a Catholic school outside of WA?
	Q29	How many years have you taught RE in a Catholic school outside of WA? –Dropdown menu – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One year or less</li> <li>• 2 to 5 years</li> <li>• 6 to 10 years</li> <li>• 11 to 15 years</li> <li>• 16 to 20 years</li> <li>• 21 years or more</li> </ul>
	Q31	In which year level do you teach RE? K to Year 12 options
	Q32	How many classes do you teach of RE? –Dropdown menu – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kindy</li> <li>• Pre-primary</li> <li>• Year 1</li> <li>• Year 2</li> <li>• Year 3</li> <li>• Year 4</li> <li>• Year 5</li> <li>• Year 6</li> <li>• Year 7</li> <li>• Year 8</li> <li>• Year 9</li> <li>• Year 10</li> <li>• Year 11</li> <li>• Year 12</li> </ul>
<b>The BRLA Items (56)</b>		
Involvement	Q9	How many years have you been involved with the BRLA? –Dropdown menu – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One year or less</li> <li>• 2 to 5 years</li> <li>• 6 to 10 years</li> <li>• 11 to 15 years</li> <li>• 16 to 20 years</li> <li>• 21 years or more</li> </ul>

<b>Item Category</b>	<b>Item Number</b>	<b>Item Description</b>
Awareness of the BRLA by other school community groups	Q10	Teachers at my school are aware of the BRLA even though they do not teach students in Years 3, 5 or 9.
	Q69	Teachers at my school are aware of the BRLA school and student reports even though they do not teach students in Years 3, 5 and 9.
Perceived role of the BRLA	Q11	I believe that the BRLA has a role to play in Religious Education in Catholic schools.
The BRLA Rating as a measurement tool	Q39	How would you rate the BRLA as a measurement tool? 0 to 100 rating scale.
Satisfaction rating of the BRLA by others	Q40a,b,c,d	How satisfied do you think people you know are with the BRLA? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• other teachers</li> <li>• school leaders</li> <li>• parents</li> <li>• students</li> </ul>
The BRLA's effectiveness as a measure of student learning in RE	Q60	Teachers at my school feel that the test items in the 2013 BRLA effectively measured student learning in Religious Education.
	Q61	Over the years, the test items in the BRLA have not effectively measured student learning in Religious Education.
	Q65	I believe that the test items in the BRLA effectively measure student learning in Religious Education.
Support for Administering the BRLA	Q43	The Catholic Education Office of Western Australia provides appropriate support documents to teachers in preparation for the administration of the BRLA.
	Q44	The Catholic Education Office provides appropriate support to teachers preparing students for the BRLA.
	Q45a,b,c,d,e	People at my school provide appropriate support to students in preparation for the BRLA: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• me</li> <li>• other teachers</li> <li>• school leaders</li> <li>• parents</li> <li>• students</li> </ul>
Preparation time for the BRLA	Q47	Students require a great deal of time to prepare for the BRLA.
	Q48	Teachers at my school feel that it is necessary to spend time preparing students for the BRLA.
	Q49	I feel that there is a great deal of pressure placed on teachers to prepare students for the BRLA.

Item Category	Item Number	Item Description
Administration of the BRLA	Q51	The organisation involved prior to administering the BRLA is minimal.
	Q52	I find the BRLA easy to administer to students.
	Q53	The instructions for administration are difficult to follow.
	Q55	My students complete the BRLA within the allocated time.
	Q56	My students experience difficulty with the vocabulary used in the BRLA.
Relevancy of test items in the BRLA	Q58	The test items in the 2013 BRLA were relevant to the Religious Education curriculum.
	Q59	Over the years, the test items in the BRLA have been irrelevant to the Religious Education curriculum.
	Q63	The test items in the BRLA are generally poorly constructed.
	Q64	My students find it difficult to answer most of the test items.
	Q66	I find it useful to review the BRLA test items with my students.
Use of reports and analysis of data from the BRLA	Q68	I feel confident in using the BRLA school reports.
	Q70 a, b, c, d, e	People at my school use the BRLA school and student reports to identify strengths and weaknesses in student learning in Religious Education: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• me</li> <li>• other teachers</li> <li>• school leaders</li> <li>• parents</li> <li>• students</li> </ul>
	Q71	Teachers at my school work collaboratively to analyse the student results in the BRLA school reports.
	Q72	I use the student data from the BRLA school reports to plan lessons in Religious Education.
Student Performance in the BRLA	Q74	My students perform well in RE assessments: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• classroom assessments</li> <li>• the BRLA</li> </ul>
	Q75 a, b, c	I believe that student who perform poorly in the BRLA also perform poorly in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• classroom assessment in Religious Education</li> <li>• NAPLAN</li> <li>• WAMSE</li> </ul>

<b>Item Category</b>	<b>Item Number</b>	<b>Item Description</b>
Whether the BRLA has led to improvements in RE	Q41	I believe that the BRLA has led to improvements in student learning in Religious Education.
	Q79 a, b, c, d, e	The use of the BRLA has helped people in my school to focus on improving student learning in Religious Education: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Me</li> <li>• other teachers</li> <li>• school leaders</li> <li>• parents</li> <li>• students</li> </ul>
	Q80 a, b, c	I believe that the Catholic Education Office uses feedback from schools about the BRLA to help: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• improve the structure of the BRLA</li> <li>• develop better assessment practices in RE</li> <li>• provide professional learning in Religious Education</li> </ul>
Experience of the BRLA	Q12 open	Describe your experience of the BRLA.
Influence of the BRLA	Q81 open	What influence do you believe the BRLA has had in Religious Education?
Additional comments	Q83 open	Please comment on any aspect of the BRLA that you believe needs attention.
<b>LSA Items (7)</b>		
Usefulness of LSA	Q35	I find large-scale, standardised assessments to be useful in measuring student learning.
Usefulness of LSA to gather information about student learning	Q36 a, b, c, d, e	People I know like to use large-scale, standardised assessments to gather information about student learning- <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Me</li> <li>• other teachers</li> <li>• school leaders</li> <li>• parents</li> <li>• students</li> </ul>
Experience of LSAs	Q37	Describe your experience of large-scale, standardised assessments other than the BRLA.
<b>Religious Education Items (7)</b>		
The treatment of RE	Q77 a, b, c, d, e	People in my school treat Religious Education as an academic learning area <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Me</li> <li>• other teachers</li> <li>• school leaders</li> <li>• parents</li> <li>• students</li> </ul>
	Q78	I believe that student learning in Religious Education needs to be assessed.
Experience of teaching RE	Q33 open	Describe your experience of teaching Religious Education.

## Appendix J

### The Online Questionnaire Items Specific to the BRLA

This is a copy of the items used in the online questionnaire to collect information from the religious educators regarding their perceptions of the BRLA. There are also items relating to the context of the study such as RE and the use of LSAs. The items used to collect demographic information from the religious educators are not included.

The items in the online questionnaire consisted of statements that required respondents to use ratings of:

- Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1, Disagree (D) = 2, Neither agree nor disagree (N) = 3, Agree (A) = 4, Strongly Agree (SA) = 5.
- Very Dissatisfied (VD) = (1); Dissatisfied (D) = 2; Somewhat Dissatisfied (SD) = 3; Neutral (N) = 4; Somewhat Satisfied (SS) = 5; Satisfied (S) = 6; and, Very Satisfied (VS) = 7.
- Zero to one hundred on a scale of effectiveness. The zero rating on the scale was considered as the least possible score of effectiveness and one hundred as the highest possible score of effectiveness.

<b>Item Number and Description</b>		<b>Scoring</b>				
<b>Q10</b>	Teachers at my school are aware of the BRLA even though they do not teach students in Years 3, 5 or 9.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
		1	2	3	4	5
<b>Q11</b>	I believe that the BRLA has a role to play in Religious Education in Catholic schools.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
		1	2	3	4	5
<b>Q12</b>	Describe your experience of the BRLA.	written response				
<b>Q33</b>	Describe your experience of teaching Religious Education.	written response				
<b>Q35</b>	I find large-scale, standardised assessments to be useful in measuring student learning.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
		1	2	3	4	5
<b>Q36 a, b, c, d, e</b>	People I know like to use large-scale, standardised assessments to gather information about student learning-me, other teachers, school leaders, parents, students.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
		1	2	3	4	5
<b>Q37</b>	Describe your experience of large-scale, standardised assessments other than the BRLA.	written response				
<b>Q39</b>	How would you rate the effectiveness of the BRLA as a tool for measuring student learning?	Scale from 0 to 100 with intervals of 10				

Item Number and Description		Scoring						
<b>Q40a, b, c, d</b>	How satisfied do you think people you know are with the BRLA? -other teachers, school leaders, parents, students.	<b>VD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>SS</b>	<b>S</b>	<b>VS</b>
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<b>Q41</b>	I believe that the BRLA has led to improvements in student learning in Religious Education.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>		
		1	2	3	4	5		
<b>Q43</b>	The Catholic Education Office of Western Australia provides appropriate support documents to teachers in preparation for the administration of the BRLA.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>		
		1	2	3	4	5		
<b>Q44</b>	The Catholic Education Office of Western Australia provides appropriate support to teachers preparing students for the BRLA.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>		
		1	2	3	4	5		
<b>Q45a, b, c, d, e</b>	People at my school provide appropriate support to students in preparation for the BRLA: me, other teachers, school leaders, parents, students.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>		
		1	2	3	4	5		
<b>Q47</b>	Students require a great deal of time to prepare for the BRLA.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>		
		1	2	3	4	5		
<b>Q48</b>	Teachers at my school feel that it is necessary to spend time preparing students for the BRLA.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>		
		1	2	3	4	5		
<b>Q49</b>	I feel that there is a great deal of pressure placed on teachers to prepare students for the BRLA.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>		
		1	2	3	4	5		
<b>Q51</b>	The organisation involved prior to administering the BRLA is minimal.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>		
		1	2	3	4	5		
<b>Q52</b>	I find the BRLA easy to administer to students.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>		
		1	2	3	4	5		
<b>Q53</b>	The instructions for administration are difficult to follow.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>		
		1	2	3	4	5		
<b>Q55</b>	My students complete the BRLA within the allocated time.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>		
		1	2	3	4	5		
<b>Q56</b>	My students experience difficulty with the vocabulary used in the BRLA.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>		
		1	2	3	4	5		

Item Number and Description		Scoring				
<b>Q58</b>	The test items in the 2013 BRLA were relevant to the Religious Education curriculum.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
		1	2	3	4	5
<b>Q59</b>	Over the years, the test items in the BRLA have been irrelevant to the Religious Education curriculum.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
		1	2	3	4	5
<b>Q60</b>	Teachers at my school feel that the test items in the 2013 BRLA effectively measured student learning in Religious Education.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
		1	2	3	4	5
<b>Q61</b>	Over the years, the test items in the BRLA have not effectively measured student learning in Religious Education.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
		1	2	3	4	5
<b>Q63</b>	The test items in the BRLA are generally poorly constructed.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
		1	2	3	4	5
<b>Q64</b>	My students find it difficult to answer most of the test items.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
		1	2	3	4	5
<b>Q65</b>	I believe that the test items in the BRLA effectively measure student learning in Religious Education.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
		1	2	3	4	5
<b>Q66</b>	I find it useful to review the BRLA test items with my students.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
		1	2	3	4	5
<b>Q68</b>	I feel confident in using the BRLA school reports.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
		1	2	3	4	5
<b>Q69</b>	Teachers at my school are aware of the BRLA school and student reports even though they do not teach students in Years 3, 5 and 9.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
		1	2	3	4	5
<b>Q70a, b, c, d, e</b>	People at my school use the BRLA school and student reports to identify strengths and weaknesses in student learning in Religious Education: me, other teachers, school leaders, parents and students	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
		1	2	3	4	5
<b>Q71</b>	Teachers at my school work collaboratively to analyse the student results in the BRLA school reports.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
		1	2	3	4	5
<b>Q72</b>	I use the student data from the BRLA school reports to plan lessons in Religious Education.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
		1	2	3	4	5

Item Number and Description		Scoring				
<b>Q74a, b</b>	My students perform well in RE assessments: classroom assessments, the BRLA.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
		1	2	3	4	5
<b>Q75a, b, c</b>	I believe that student who perform poorly in the BRLA also perform poorly in: classroom assessment in Religious Education, NAPLAN, WAMSE.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
		1	2	3	4	5
<b>Q77a, b, c, d, e</b>	People in my school treat Religious Education as an academic learning area: me, other teachers, school leaders, parents, students.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
		1	2	3	4	5
<b>Q78</b>	I believe that student learning in Religious Education needs to be assessed.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
		1	2	3	4	5
<b>Q79 a, b, c, d, e</b>	The use of the BRLA has helped people in my school to focus on improving student learning in Religious Education: me, other teachers, school leaders, parents, students.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
		1	2	3	4	5
<b>Q80a, b, c</b>	I believe that the Catholic Education Office uses feedback from schools about the BRLA to help: improve the structure of the BRLA, develop better assessment practices in Religious Education, provide professional learning in Religious Education.	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
		1	2	3	4	5
<b>Q81</b>	What influence do you believe the BRLA has had in Religious Education.?	written response				
<b>Q83</b>	Please comment on any aspect of the BRLA that you believe needs attention.	written response				



## **Appendix K**

### **The Nine Stimulus Questions for the Interviews**

These questions were used for all of the semi-structured individual and group interviews. For the first question, the participants were provided with a worksheet (Y-chart) to focus their attention on what the BRLA looked like, sounded like and felt like to them.

1. What does teaching, learning and assessment look, sound and feel like in RE for you?
2. What does the BRLA mean or represent for you?
3. What do you understand to be the intended purpose and role of the BRLA?
4. What is involved in administering the BRLA?
5. How have you used the BRLA in RE?
6. In what direction has the BRLA taken you in RE?
7. What benefits, disadvantages or possible changes has the BRLA had on teaching, learning and assessment in RE?
8. What insights, have you gained from your experience of the BRLA?
9. Is there is anything else you would like to say or add in this interview about the BRLA or RE in general?

## Appendix L

### The Nine Stimulus Questions and Contributing Questions

The following questions were provided to the research assistants as part of their training for the interviews. The questions have been listed according to the SRQ they address.

#### Notes for the Interviewers

- Establish an inviting, comfortable and engaging interview experience from the start.
- Allow participants the time and space to freely discuss and dialogue with you and each other.
- Allow participants to tell their story about the BRLA within the context of teaching RE and using large-scale, standardised assessments.
- Encourage participants to share their understanding of other people's experiences of the BRLA. [*other teachers, school leaders, students, parents*]

Initially ask the open-ended questions that are in bold (the nine stimulus questions) and give participants the opportunity to convey their thoughts, understandings, feelings, ideas, opinions and experiences in response to those questions.

**1. What does teaching, learning and assessment look, sound and feel like in RE for you?**

- What does RE mean to you?
- How do you feel teaching and /or leading the RE curriculum?
- What strategies do you use to teach RE?
- How do you engage students in RE?
- What kind of teacher/leader do you believe you have to be to teach/lead RE?
- What kind of training do you believe you have to have to teach/lead RE?
- How does learning occur in RE?
- How do students respond to the content from the RE curriculum you teach?
- How do you measure student learning in RE?
- What type of assessments do you use in RE?

#### Addressing Specific Research Question 1

**2. What does the BRLA mean or represent for you?**

- Why does the BRLA mean this to you?
- Have you always felt this way about the BRLA?
- What do you think has influenced your perceptions?
- How have you acted towards the BRLA in your classroom?

**3. What do you understand to be the intended purpose and role of the BRLA?**

- What type of role do you believe the BRLA plays in RE?
- What is your understanding about large-scale, standardised assessments?
- How does the BRLA fulfil its purpose and role as a large-scale, standardised assessment?
- How do others in your school consider the BRLA?
- What have been the unintended consequences of the BRLA?

Addressing Specific Research Question 2

**4. What is involved in administering the BRLA?**

- What is your role in preparing students for the BRLA?
- How do you prepare students for the BRLA?
- What support do you and others provide students and teachers who are administered the BRLA?
- How appropriate is the support offered by the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia?
- How appropriate is the support offered by the school community?

**5. How have you used the BRLA in RE?**

- How do you engage students with the BRLA?
- How do you engage parents with the BRLA?
- What do you do with the students' results?
- How does the school engage with the BRLA school reports?
- How do school leaders engage with the BRLA school reports?

Addressing Specific Research Question 3

**6. In what direction has the BRLA taken you in RE?**

- What changes have you seen in your role?
- What changes have you seen to the school community's understanding?
- What changes have you seen in the decisions in RE made by school leaders?

**7. What benefits, disadvantages or possible changes has the BRLA had on:**

- teaching in RE?
- how you assess student learning in RE?
- How have the changes come about?
- Who or what has caused the changes?
- How widespread are the changes?

**8. What insights, have you gained from your experience of the BRLA?**

- Have there been any issues?
- How has the quality of student learning in RE improved?
- How has the quality of teaching in RE improved?
- How has the quality of assessing students improved?

**9. Is there anything else you would like to say or add in this interview about the BRLA or RE in general?**

## Appendix M

### The Composition and Schedule of the Semi-Structured Interviews

Twenty-one interviews were conducted. There were 43 religious educators who volunteered: 21 teachers of RE [Year Three (n = 5), Year Five (n = 5) and Year Nine (n = 11)] and 22 school leaders of RE [APREs (n = 8), RECs (n = 6) and principals of primary schools (n = 8)].

The 21 teachers of RE comprise:

- five female Year Three teachers;
- three female and two male Year Five teachers; and
- six female and seven male Year Nine teachers.

The 22 school leaders of RE comprise:

- five female and three male APREs;
- four female and two male RECs; and
- three female and five male principals of primary schools.

The teachers and school leaders of RE were employed in Catholic schools within the Archdiocese of Perth and the dioceses of Broome and Geraldton.

The age of these participants ranged is between greater than 21 years and less than 70 years.

<b>Interview Type</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Dates</b>
Individual interviews	Eight principals from Catholic primary schools	10 March–1 April
Group interview (2 participants)	Catholic primary school in the northern suburbs Year Three teacher Year Five teacher	6 May
Group interview (2 participants)	Religious Education Coordinators	8 May
Group interview (3 participants)	Catholic primary school in the southern suburbs Two Year Three teachers APRE	13 May
Group interview (3 participants)	Catholic secondary school in the southern suburbs Two Year Nine teachers REC	15 May
Group interview (2 participants)	Catholic secondary school in southern suburbs Two Year Nine teachers	20 May
Group interview (3 participants)	Catholic secondary school in the inner north-west suburbs Two Year Nine teachers REC	22 May
Group interview (3 participants)	Catholic primary school in north-east suburbs Year Three teacher Year Five teacher APRE	27 May

<b>Interview Type</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Dates</b>
Group interview (3 participants)	Catholic composite school [primary and secondary] Year Five teachers Two Year Nine teachers	27 May
Group interview (5 participants)	Catholic primary school leaders of RE Five APREs	3 June
<b>Interview Type</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Dates</b>
Group interview (2 participants)	Catholic secondary teachers of RE Two Year Nine Teachers	12 June
Group interview (2 participants)	Catholic composite school [primary and secondary] in a regional town Year Five teacher Year Nine teacher	16 June
Group interview (3 participants)	Catholic primary teachers of RE Year Three teacher Year Five teacher APRE	17 June
Group interview (2 participants)	Catholic secondary teachers of RE in Catholic secondary schools in regional towns Video conference Two Year Nine teachers	24 June

## Appendix N

### Statistics for the Likert scale Items in the Online Questionnaire

The item descriptions are an abridged version.

<b>Item Number and Description</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>10</b> Teachers at my school are aware of the BRLA.	238	4.14	0.988
<b>11</b> I believe that the BRLA has a role to play in RE.	238	3.47	0.962
<b>35</b> I find LSAs useful.	236	3.24	1.070
<b>36a</b> I use LSAs to gather information about students.	236	3.19	1.105
<b>36b</b> Other teachers use LSAs to gather information ...	236	3.17	0.941
<b>36c</b> School leaders use LSAs to gather information ...	236	3.75	0.895
<b>36d</b> Parents use LSAs to gather information ...	236	3.50	0.897
<b>36e</b> Students use LSAs to gather information ...	236	2.72	0.958
<b>40a</b> How satisfied do you think teachers are with the BRLA?	234	3.82	1.472
<b>40b</b> How satisfied are school leaders with the BRLA?	234	4.46	1.441
<b>40c</b> How satisfied are parents are with the BRLA?	234	4.20	1.091
<b>40d</b> How satisfied are students are with the BRLA?	234	3.82	1.265
<b>41</b> I believe that the BRLA has led to improvements ...	234	2.91	1.044
<b>43</b> The CEOWA provides appropriate support documents.	233	3.51	1.047
<b>44</b> The CEOWA provides appropriate support.	233	3.02	1.091
<b>45a</b> I provide appropriate support to students.	233	3.84	0.835
<b>45b</b> Teachers provide appropriate support to students.	233	3.48	0.905
<b>45c</b> School leaders provide appropriate support to students.	233	3.48	0.956
<b>45d</b> Parents provide appropriate support to students.	233	2.92	0.877
<b>45e</b> Students provide appropriate support to students.	233	3.02	0.886
<b>47</b> Students require a great deal of time to prepare for the BRLA.	233	3.06	1.013
<b>48</b> Teachers feel that it is necessary to spend time preparing.	233	3.43	1.028
<b>49</b> I feel a great deal of pressure is placed on teachers to prepare.	233	3.05	1.072
<b>51</b> The organisation prior to administering the BRLA is minimal.	233	3.46	0.890
<b>52</b> I find the BRLA easy to administer to students.	233	3.87	0.708
<b>53</b> The instructions for administration are difficult to follow.	233	2.17	0.773
<b>55</b> My students complete the BRLA within the allocated time.	232	3.49	1.065
<b>56</b> My students experience difficulty with the vocabulary.	232	3.78	0.992
<b>58</b> The test items in the 2013 BRLA were relevant to the RE ...	232	3.32	0.918
<b>59</b> Over the years the test items have been irrelevant to the RE ...	232	2.93	0.914
<b>60</b> Teachers feel that the 2013 test items were effective in ...	232	2.83	0.874
<b>61</b> Over the years the test items have not effectively measured ...	232	3.23	0.915
<b>63</b> The test items in the BRLA are generally poorly constructed.	231	2.62	0.875
<b>64</b> My students find it difficult to answer most of the test items.	231	2.89	0.979
<b>65</b> The test items effectively measure student learning in RE.	231	2.90	0.977
<b>66</b> I find it useful to review the BRLA test items with students.	231	3.46	0.926
<b>68</b> I feel confident in using the BRLA school reports.	231	3.19	0.985
<b>69</b> Teachers at my school are aware of the BRLA reports ...	231	3.29	1.030
<b>70a</b> I use the BRLA reports to diagnose student learning in RE.	231	3.20	1.036
<b>70b</b> Teachers use the BRLA reports.	231	2.86	0.924
<b>70c</b> School leaders use the BRLA reports.	231	3.21	0.960
<b>70d</b> Parents use the BRLA reports.	231	2.62	0.856
<b>70e</b> Students use the BRLA reports.	231	2.63	0.854
<b>71</b> Teachers at my school work collaboratively with the reports.	231	2.72	1.051
<b>72</b> I use the student data from the reports to plan lessons in RE.	231	2.71	1.033
<b>74a</b> My students perform well in class assessments in RE.	231	3.79	0.567

<b>Item Number and Description</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>74b</b> My students perform well in the BRLA.	231	2.91	0.860
<b>75a</b> Student who perform poorly in the BRLA also perform poorly in class assessment in RE.	231	2.99	1.032
<b>75b</b> Student who perform poorly in the BRLA also perform poorly in NAPLAN.	231	3.48	0.946
<b>75c</b> I believe that student who perform poorly in the BRLA also perform poorly in WAMSE.	231	3.42	0.923
<b>77a</b> I treat Religious Education as an academic learning area.	231	4.13	0.834
<b>77b</b> Teachers treat RE as an academic learning area.	231	3.77	0.898
<b>77c</b> School leaders treat RE as an academic learning area.	231	4.06	0.834
<b>77d</b> Parents treat RE as an academic learning area.	231	3.07	0.967
<b>77e</b> Students treat RE as an academic learning area.	231	3.21	1.010
<b>78</b> Student learning in Religious Education needs to be assessed.	231	3.94	0.952
<b>79a</b> The BRLA has helped me to focus on improving student learning in RE.	231	3.35	1.031
<b>79b</b> The BRLA has helped teachers to focus on improving student learning in RE.	231	3.12	0.961
<b>79c</b> The BRLA has helped school leaders to focus on improving student learning in RE.	231	3.39	0.939
<b>79d</b> The BRLA has helped parents to focus on improving student learning in RE.	231	2.77	0.750
<b>79e</b> The BRLA has helped students to focus on improving student learning in RE.	231	2.78	0.757
<b>80a</b> The CEOWA uses feedback from schools about the BRLA to help improve the structure of the BRLA.	231	3.29	0.918
<b>80b</b> The CEOWA uses feedback from schools about the BRLA to help develop better assessment practices in RE.	231	3.19	0.980
<b>80c</b> The CEOWA uses feedback from schools about the BRLA to help provide professional learning in RE.	231	3.12	0.984

## Appendix O

### Additional Statistics Relevant to the Teaching of RE and the Use of LSAs

These Likert scale Items provide information about to the religious educators' perceptions of teacher awareness of the BRLA, Religious Education and the use of large-scale, standardised assessments.

Item Number and Description		SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	SD
<b>10</b>	Teachers at my school are aware of the BRLA. (n = 238)	7 2.9%	16 6.7%	11 4.6%	106 44.5%	98 41.2%	4.14	0.988
<b>35</b>	I find LSAs useful. (n = 236)	17 7.2%	48 20.3%	46 19.5%	111 47.0%	14 5.9%	3.24	1.070
<b>36a</b>	I use LSAs to gather information about students. (n = 236)	22 9.3%	47 19.9%	42 17.8%	113 47.9%	12 5.1%	3.19	1.105
<b>36b</b>	Other teachers use LSAs to gather information ... (n = 236)	11 4.7%	48 20.3%	72 30.5%	99 41.9%	6 2.5%	3.17	0.941
<b>36c</b>	School leaders use LSAs to gather information ... (n = 236)	3 1.3%	24 10.2%	41 17.4%	129 54.7%	39 16.5%	3.75	0.895
<b>36d</b>	Parents use LSAs to gather information ... (n = 236)	4 1.7%	28 11.9%	75 31.8%	104 44.1%	25 10.6%	3.50	0.897
<b>36e</b>	Students use LSAs to gather information ... (n = 236)	30 12.7%	59 25.0%	95 40.3%	51 21.6%	1 0.4%	2.72	0.958
<b>69</b>	Teachers at my school are aware of the BRLA reports ... (n = 231)	13 5.6%	46 19.9%	45 19.5%	114 49.4%	13 5.6%	3.29	1.030
<b>77a</b>	I treat Religious Education as an academic learning area. (n = 231)	0	16 6.9%	19 8.2%	115 49.8%	81 35.1%	4.13	0.834
<b>77b</b>	Teachers treat RE as an academic learning area. (n = 231)	2 0.9%	27 11.7%	33 14.3%	130 56.3%	39 16.9%	3.77	0.898
<b>77c</b>	School leaders treat RE as an academic learning area. (n = 231)	0	16 6.9%	25 10.8%	118 51.1%	72 31.2%	4.06	0.834
<b>77d</b>	Parents treat RE as an academic learning area. (n = 231)	10 4.3%	58 25.1%	81 35.1%	70 30.3%	12 5.2%	3.07	0.967
<b>77e</b>	Students treat RE as an academic learning area. (n = 231)	12 5.2%	47 20.3%	67 29.0%	90 39.0%	15 6.5%	3.21	1.010
<b>78</b>	Student learning in Religious Education needs to be assessed. (n = 231)	7 3.0%	16 6.9%	21 9.1%	126 54.5%	61 26.4%	3.94	0.952

*Note.* Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1, Disagree (D) = 2, Neither agree nor disagree (N) = 3, Agree (A) = 4, Strongly Agree (SA) = 5.



## Appendix P

### Results from Non-Parametric Tests

In SPSS the Independent Samples Mann-Whitney U test was performed to determine whether the religious educators' gender may have influenced their response to any of the Likert scale items. Similarly, the Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test was used to determine whether age and employment role of responsibility in RE were variables influencing the religious educators' choice of response.

Listed below are the statistics for Likert scale items that show a less than 0.05 probability of difference. For each listed item there is at least a 95% probability that the distribution of responses is not the same across each of the variables.

<b>Item Number and Description</b>	<b>Test</b>	<b>Variable</b>	<b>Significance</b>
<b>10</b> Teachers at my school are aware of the BRLA.	Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	Employment role	0.000
<b>11</b> I believe that the BRLA has a role to play in RE.	Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	Employment role	0.022
<b>35</b> I find LSAs useful.	Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	Employment role	0.002
<b>36a</b> I use LSAs to gather information about students.	Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	Employment role	0.000
<b>36b</b> Other teachers use LSAs to gather information ...	Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	Employment role	0.015
<b>36c</b> School leaders use LSAs to gather information ...	Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	Employment role	0.041
<b>43</b> The CEOWA provides appropriate support documents.	Independent Samples Mann-Whitney U Test Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	Gender	0.015
		Age	0.026
		Employment role	0.006
<b>44</b> The CEOWA provides appropriate support.	Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	Employment role	0.043
<b>45b</b> Teachers provide appropriate support to students.	Independent Samples Mann-Whitney U Test Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	Gender	0.018
		Employment role	0.003
<b>45c</b> School leaders provide appropriate support to students.	Independent Samples Mann-Whitney U Test Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	Gender	0.013
		Employment role	0.000
<b>47</b> Students require a great deal of time to prepare for the BRLA.	Independent Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	Gender	0.003
<b>51</b> The organisation prior to administering the BRLA is minimal.	Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	Employment role	0.000
<b>52</b> I find the BRLA easy to administer to students.	Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	Age	0.029
		Employment role	0.007

Item Number and Description		Test	Variable	Significance
55	My students complete the BRLA within the allocated time.	Independent Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	Gender	0.022
		Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	Employment role	0.000
56	My students experience difficulty with the vocabulary.	Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	Employment role	0.039
66	I find it useful to review the BRLA test items with students.	Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	Employment role	0.003
68	I feel confident in using the BRLA school reports.	Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	Employment role	0.002
70a	I use the BRLA reports to diagnose student learning in RE.	Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	Employment role	0.000
70c	School leaders use the BRLA reports.	Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	Employment role	0.029
72	I use the student data from the reports to plan lessons in RE.	Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	Employment role	0.019
77d	Parents treat RE as an academic learning area.	Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	Employment role	0.001
78	Student learning in Religious Education needs to be assessed.	Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	Employment role	0.028
79a	The BRLA has helped me to focus on improving student learning in RE	Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	Employment role	0.009
79b	The BRLA has helped teachers to focus on improving student learning in RE.	Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	Employment role	0.009
79c	The BRLA has helped school leaders to focus on improving student learning in RE.	Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	Employment role	0.000
79e	The BRLA has helped students to focus on improving student learning in RE.	Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	Employment role	0.048

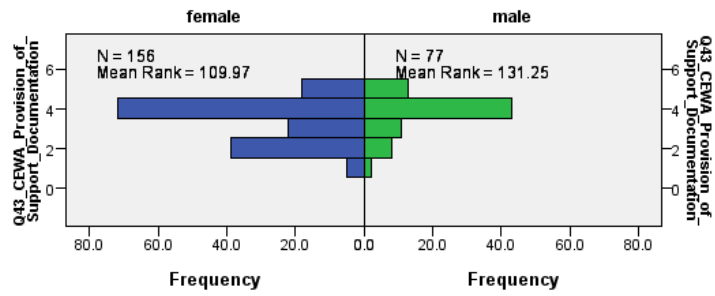
An example of non-parametric test outputs using the response data to Likert scale item 43 is provided. The outputs show the unequal mean ranks for each group according to each of the variables analysed. The frequency of the response data is shown first.

#### Q43\_CEWA\_Provision\_of\_Support\_Documentation

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	7	2.9	3.0	3.0
	2	47	19.7	20.2	23.2
	3	33	13.9	14.2	37.3
	4	115	48.3	49.4	86.7
	5	31	13.0	13.3	100.0
	Total	233	97.9	100.0	
Missing	System	5	2.1		
Total		238	100.0		

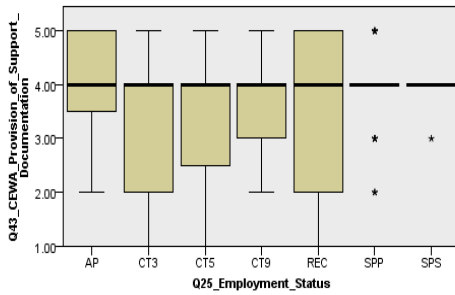
### Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test

Q6\_Gender



<b>Total N</b>	233
<b>Mann-Whitney U</b>	7,103.000
<b>Wilcoxon W</b>	10,106.000
<b>Test Statistic</b>	7,103.000
<b>Standard Error</b>	450.476
<b>Standardized Test Statistic</b>	2.435
<b>Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test)</b>	.015

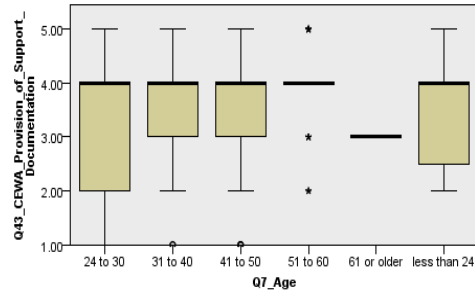
### Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test



<b>Total N</b>	233
<b>Test Statistic</b>	17.996
<b>Degrees of Freedom</b>	6
<b>Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test)</b>	.006

1. The test statistic is adjusted for ties.

### Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test



<b>Total N</b>	233
<b>Test Statistic</b>	12.702
<b>Degrees of Freedom</b>	5
<b>Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test)</b>	.026

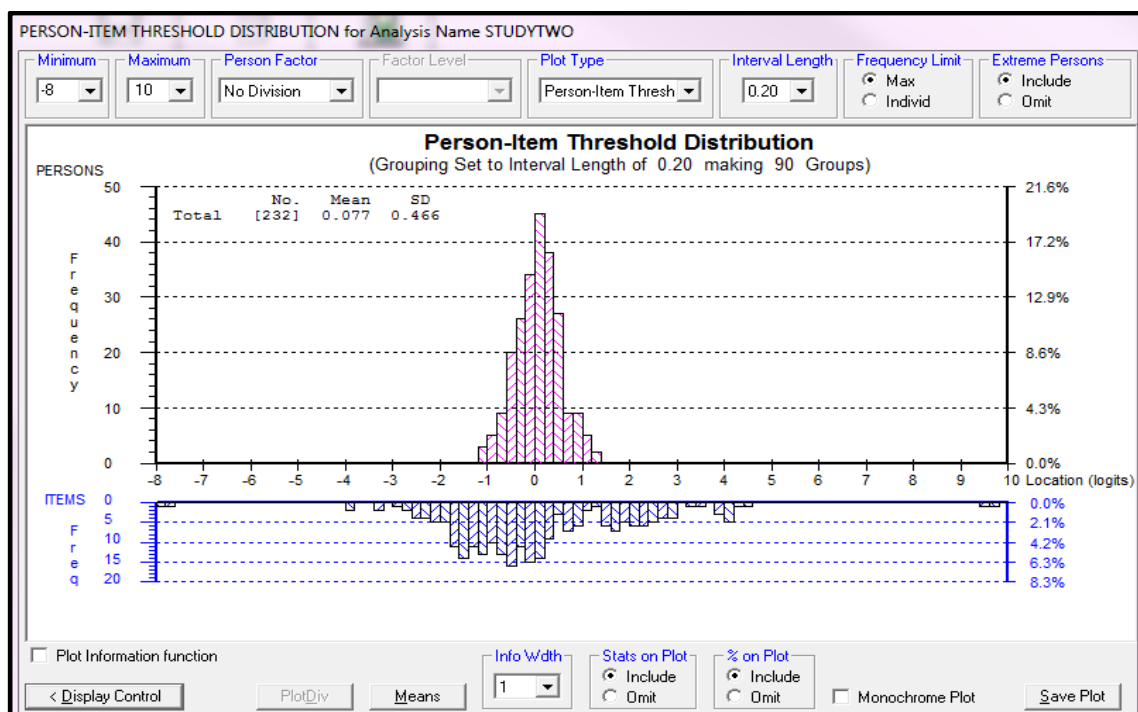
1. The test statistic is adjusted for ties.

## Appendix Q

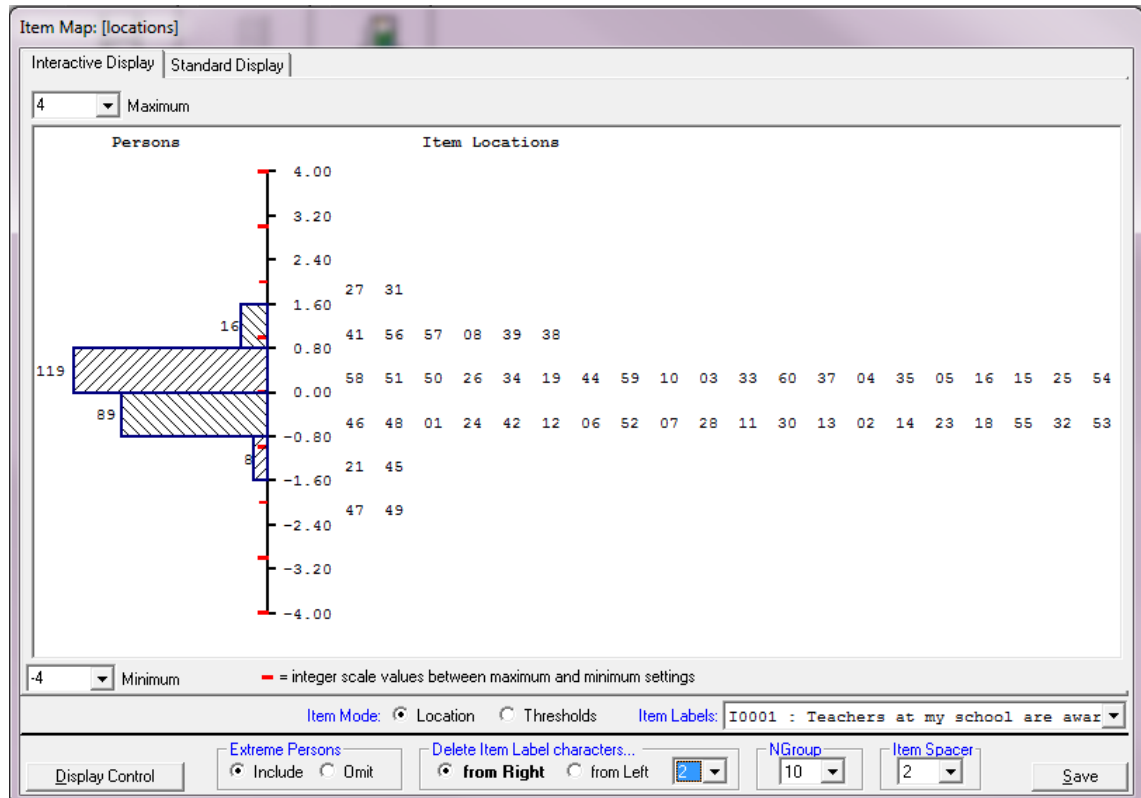
### Results from Rasch Analysis

An item analysis of the Likert scale items was conducted. The RUMM2030 software program (Andrich, Sheridan, & Luo, 2011) was used for the analysis. The program was initially used in the pilot study to evaluate the original online questionnaire items. The analysis suggests that the online questionnaire items were reliable and targeted the audience well. Examples of various outputs from the RUMM2030 program are provided. These examples relate to the Likert scale items used in the online questionnaire for the actual study. The results for the pilot study are summarised in Table 4.5 (Chapter Four).

The first figure displays the person-item threshold distribution for the actual study and suggests, according to the concentration of persons in the middle of the output graph that the items appropriately targeted the representative sample of religious educators involved. The items are grouped on a latent measurement construct according to the responses of the religious educators to each item.



The second display is an item map that relates to the individual item fit in ascending order of fit residuals.



The table on the next page shows the statistics for each of the 60 five-point Likert scale item location and fit to each individual religious educator. The mean of the fit residual is 0.117 and the standard deviation is 2.287. The yellow highlights identify the extreme fit residual values set at  $\pm 2.5$ . The select probability base was 0.01. The blue highlights the probabilities below the Bonferroni adjustment. The adjustment is equal to 0.000167 for the 60 items. The Bonferroni adjustment is used on the confidence intervals in consideration of margins of error in the religious educators' responses to the items. Differential Item Functioning (DIF) is consistent for all items. The Standard Error (SE) is identified for each item.

## Individual Item fit

The item descriptions are an abridged version of the five-point Likert scale items in the actual study.

Items	Location on scale continuum	SE	Fit Residual*	DIF	ChiSq**	DIF	Probability	
53	The BRLA has helped me to focus on improving student learning in RE.	-0.077	0.072	-2.886*	224.15	24.822	3	0.000018
54	The BRLA has helped teachers to focus on improving student learning in RE.	0.385	0.076	-2.797*	224.15	33.822	3	0
31	The test items effectively measure student learning in RE.	2.071	0.074	-2.36	224.15	18.029	3	0.000435
35	I use the BRLA reports to diagnose student learning in RE.	0.205	0.07	-2.227	224.15	21.879	3	0.00007
55	The BRLA has helped school leaders to focus on improving student learning in RE.	-0.132	0.079	-2.183	224.15	29.532	3	0.000002
9	I believe that the BRLA has led to improvements in student learning in RE.	0.446	0.07	-2.119	224.15	20.134	3	0.000161
3	I find LSAs useful.	0.079	0.068	-2.019	224.15	8.041	3	0.045177
4	I use LSAs to gather information about students.	0.188	0.066	-1.922	224.15	9.12	3	0.027736
59	CEOWA uses feedback from schools about the BRLA to help develop better assessment practices in RE.	0.067	0.074	-1.609	224.15	16.345	3	0.000964
32	I find it useful to review the BRLA test items with students.	-0.122	0.078	-1.511	224.15	9.823	3	0.020136
27	Teachers feel that the 2013 test items were effective in measuring student learning in RE.	2.008	0.082	-1.459	224.15	17.5	3	0.000559
41	I use the student data from the reports to plan lessons in RE.	0.885	0.07	-1.455	224.15	13.386	3	0.003873
36	Teachers use the BRLA reports.	0.689	0.078	-1.448	224.15	13.209	3	0.004207
33	I feel confident in using the BRLA school reports.	0.095	0.074	-1.395	224.15	13.744	3	0.003276
39	Students use the BRLA reports.	1.086	0.084	-1.328	224.15	15.664	3	0.00133
10	CEOWA provides appropriate support documents.	0.07	0.067	-1.302	224.15	6.226	3	0.101132
38	Parents use the BRLA reports.	1.086	0.083	-1.267	224.15	15.281	3	0.001592
57	The BRLA has helped students to focus on improving student learning in RE.	0.921	0.095	-1.263	224.15	21.846	3	0.000071**

Items		Location on scale continuum	SE	Fit Residual*	DIF	ChiSq**	DIF	Probability
5	Other teachers use LSAs to gather information about student learning.	0.218	0.076	-1.225	224.15	11.895	3	0.007752
2	I believe that the BRLA has a role to play in RE.	-0.327	0.076	-1.206	224.15	9.786	3	0.02048
37	School leaders use the BRLA reports.	0.163	0.075	-1.196	224.15	10.843	3	0.012607
25	The test items in the 2013 BRLA were relevant to the RE curriculum.	0.253	0.078	-1.16	224.15	8.97	3	0.029692
60	The CEOWA uses feedback from schools about the BRLA to help provide professional learning in RE.	0.135	0.074	-1.153	224.15	14.132	3	0.002732
56	The BRLA has helped parents to focus on improving student learning in RE.	0.916	0.096	-1.12	224.15	21.739	3	0.000075**
58	The CEOWA uses feedback from schools about the BRLA to help improve the structure of the BRLA.	0.004	0.079	-0.929	224.15	16.662	3	0.00083
12	I provide appropriate support to students.	-0.697	0.085	-0.883	224.15	5.542	3	0.136137
11	The CEOWA provides appropriate support.	-0.397	0.069	-0.857	224.15	7.234	3	0.064793
14	School leaders provide appropriate support to students.	-0.265	0.075	-0.794	224.15	11.611	3	0.00884
13	Teachers provide appropriate support to students.	-0.328	0.079	-0.627	224.15	7.198	3	0.065862
40	Teachers at my school work collaboratively with the reports.	0.766	0.069	-0.517	224.15	3.386	3	0.335821
6	School leaders use LSAs to gather information about student learning.	-0.696	0.078	-0.456	224.15	0.891	3	0.827602
15	Parents provide appropriate support to students.	0.251	0.082	-0.415	224.15	9.906	3	0.019385
52	Student learning in Religious Education needs to be assessed.	-0.609	0.073	-0.402	224.15	0.394	3	0.941566
43	My students perform well in the BRLA.	0.514	0.083	-0.317	224.15	4.362	3	0.22498
8	Students use LSAs to gather information about their learning.	1.053	0.075	-0.289	224.15	1.311	3	0.726482
47	I treat Religious Education as an academic learning area.	-2.39	0.083	-0.192	224.15	3.297	3	0.348016
16	Students provide appropriate support to students.	0.24	0.081	0.001	224.15	9.973	3	0.018801
48	Teachers treat RE as an academic learning area.	-0.776	0.078	0.09	224.15	1.373	3	0.711881
34	Teachers at my school are aware of the BRLA reports.	0.032	0.07	0.124	224.15	0.605	3	0.895257
49	School leaders treat RE as an academic learning area.	-2.328	0.082	0.161	224.15	1.803	3	0.614273
42	My students perform well in class assessments in RE.	-0.698	0.117	0.175	224.15	11.052	3	0.011447

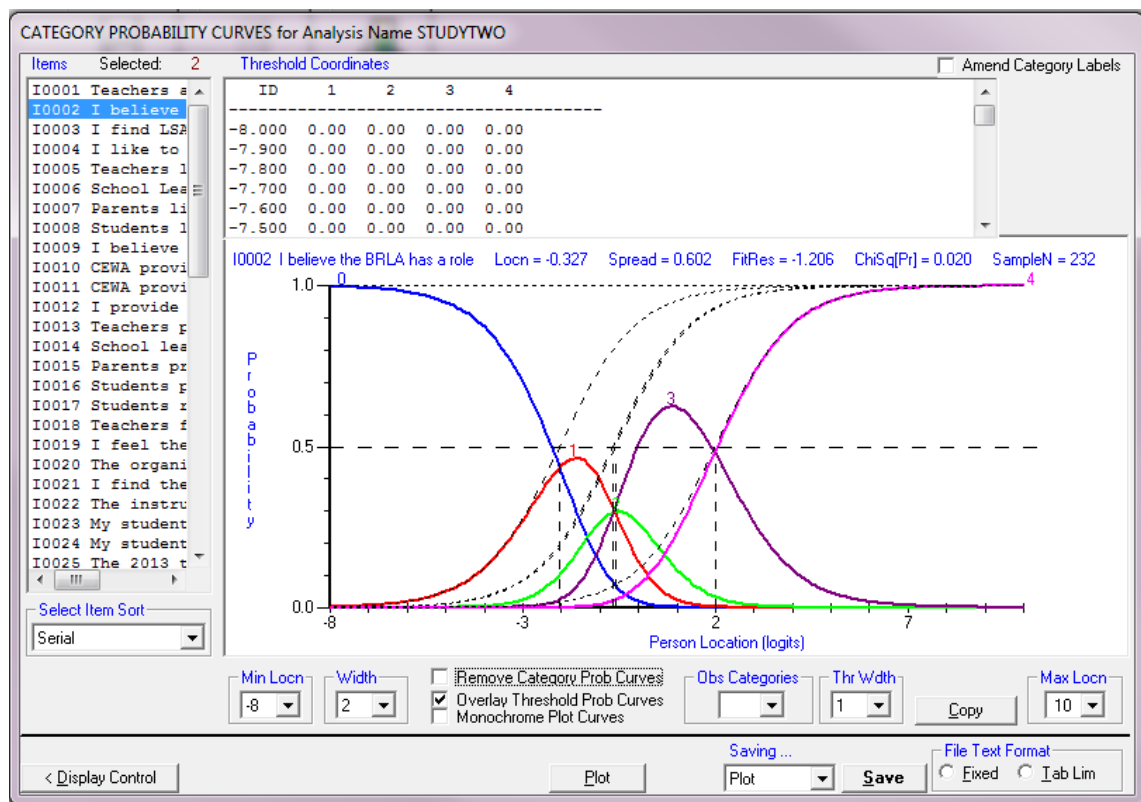
Items	Location on scale continuum	SE	Fit Residual*	DIF	ChiSq**	DIF	Probability	
21	I find the BRLA easy to administer to students.	-0.957	0.095	0.182	224.15	1.982	3	0.576226
7	Parents use LSAs to gather information about their children's learning.	-0.465	0.078	0.355	224.15	0.224	3	0.973578
50	Parents treat RE as an academic learning area.	0.03	0.074	0.936	224.15	2.822	3	0.419926
51	Students treat RE as an academic learning area.	0.012	0.071	0.969	224.15	2.064	3	0.559311
44	Student who perform poorly in the BRLA also perform poorly in class assessment in RE.	0.049	0.07	1.101	224.15	1.375	3	0.711431
1	Teachers at my school are aware of the BRLA.	-0.772	0.071	1.152	224.15	3.251	3	0.354551
18	Teachers feel that it is necessary to spend time preparing.	-0.156	0.069	1.364	224.15	6.532	3	0.088425
46	I believe that student who perform poorly in the BRLA also perform poorly in WAMSE.	-0.783	0.076	1.513	224.15	1.862	3	0.60148
45	Student who perform poorly in the BRLA also perform poorly in NAPLAN.	-0.824	0.075	1.517	224.15	2.644	3	0.449753
20	The organisation prior to administering the BRLA is minimal.	-0.005	0.075	2.28	224.15	32.324	3	0**
22	The instructions for administration are difficult to follow.	0.696	0.078	2.33	224.15	69.292	3	0***
17	Students require a great deal of time to prepare for the BRLA.	-0.019	0.069	3.014*	224.15	28.04	3	0.000004**
23	My students complete the BRLA within the allocated time.	-0.245	0.065	3.089*	224.15	25.377	3	0.000014**
19	I feel a great deal of pressure is placed on teachers to prepare.	0.034	0.066	3.204*	224.15	24.369	3	0.000022**
29	The test items in the BRLA are generally poorly constructed.	-0.03	0.071	4.602*	224.15	137.539	3	0***
24	My students experience difficulty with the vocabulary.	-0.764	0.068	4.803*	224.15	80.413	3	0***
26	Over the years the test items have been irrelevant to the RE curriculum.	0.031	0.072	6.256*	224.15	149.172	3	0***
28	Over the years the test items have not effectively measured student learning in RE.	-0.42	0.071	6.639*	224.15	179.383	3	0***
30	My students find it difficult to answer most of the test items.	-0.395	0.067	7.431*	224.15	169.27	3	0***

\* Difference between observed and expected values – fit /log residual. \*\* Item trait interaction test of fit as represented by the chi square value.

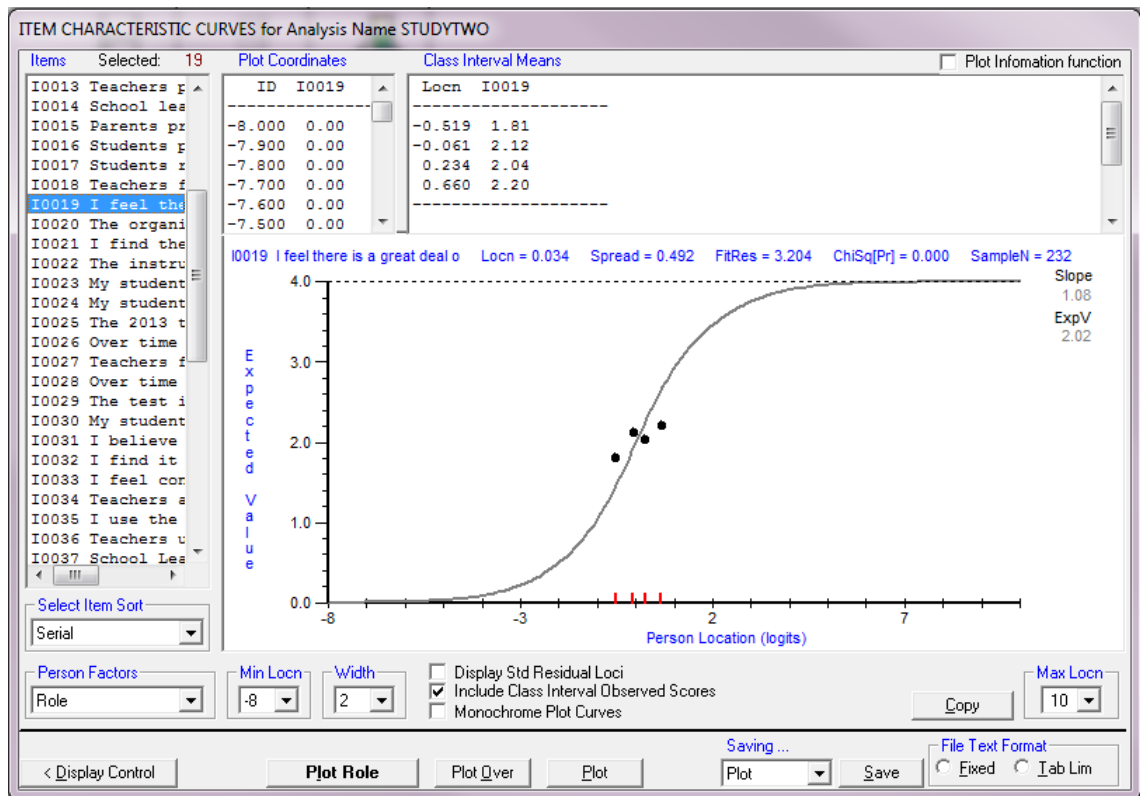
\*\*\*Items written in the negative context.



This display represents the Category Probability Curves for Item 2 (Likert scale Item 11). The curves show graphically the range of the ordered categories in the Likert scale as intended for appropriately targeting a sample audience. The display provides consistent and complementary results to the traditional frequency count (Wu, Tam, & Jen, 2016) as identified in Excel and SPSS. These results suggest more religious educators chose to agree than disagree that the BRLA has a role to play in RE.



This display is an example of the Item Characteristic Curves (ICC) for Item 19 (Likert scale Item 49). The item trait chi square value is graphically represented on the ICC as an indicator of item behaviour. Consistent with the statistics table (Individual Item Fit), the graphic shows that there is slight misfit for the statement, “I feel a great deal of pressure is placed on teachers to prepare students for the BRLA”. Even though Rasch modelling was applied to help determine the appropriateness of the online questionnaire items, possible reasons for the misfit are unknown (Wu, Tam, & Jen, 2016).



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