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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),
Master of Education (The University of Western Australia)

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.

Signature

Date

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Finally, I thank my family for their nurturing sustenance that kept me focused and made the experience so worthwhile. I thank my husband Peter, my sons Adriano and Alessandro, and my parents Giuseppe and Maria Sollazzo. Thanks Peter, for your morning reflection, "Are we there yet? and when am I getting my desk back?" and to you Mum and Dad for your progressive approach to learning and women as learners. I dedicate this thesis to you Mum (passed away 24 February 2018). You will forever be my inspiration and my light.

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Definition
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
REFF	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.