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

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Publication Details

Poncini, A. (2018). Perceptions of large-scale, standardised testing in religious education: How do religious educators perceive The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment? (Doctor of Philosophy (College of Education)). University of Notre Dame Australia.
<https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theses/210>

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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

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

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

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- 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.
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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

- 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

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.
-

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

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