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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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CHAPTER ELEVEN

DISCUSSION OF THE RESEARCH

11.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the themes that emerged from a synthesis of the key findings in this study. There are six themes identified: Administration, Engagement, Purpose, Professional Formation, Accountability and Assessment Practices. Together, these themes address the GRQ: How do religious educators who work in Catholic schools in Western Australia perceive *The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment (BRLA)* as a large-scale, standardised assessment (LSA) used in Religious Education (RE)? The themes highlight how the religious educators' perceptions were complex and interconnected with their personal and professional experiences of teaching RE and use of LSAs.

11.2 The Presentation of the Chapter

Table 11.1 outlines the structure of the chapter beginning with a synopsis of the research findings. The chapter ends with a conceptual representation, in the form of a matrix that identifies the insights gained from the themes that emerged from the study. The matrix categorises the religious educators according to their complex and interconnected perceptions of the BRLA.

Table 11.1

Overview of Chapter Eleven: Discussion of the Research

11.3	Synopsis of the Research Findings
11.4	Discussion of the Research Themes
11.4.1	Theme One: Administration
11.4.2	Theme Two: Engagement
11.4.3	Theme Three: Purpose
11.4.4	Theme Four: Professional Formation
11.4.5	Theme Five: Accountability
11.4.6	Theme Six: Assessment Practices
11.5	The Matrix of the Research Themes
11.6	Chapter Summary

11.3 Synopsis of the Research Findings

Figure 11.1 identifies seven research findings based on the response data collated, analysed and integrated from the two phases of the study. Findings One, Three, Four and Six were generated from Phase One where an online questionnaire was used with 238 teachers and school leaders of RE who worked in Catholic primary and secondary schools in WA. Findings Two, Five and Seven were generated from Phase Two, semi-structured individual and group interviews conducted with 43 of the 238 religious educators.

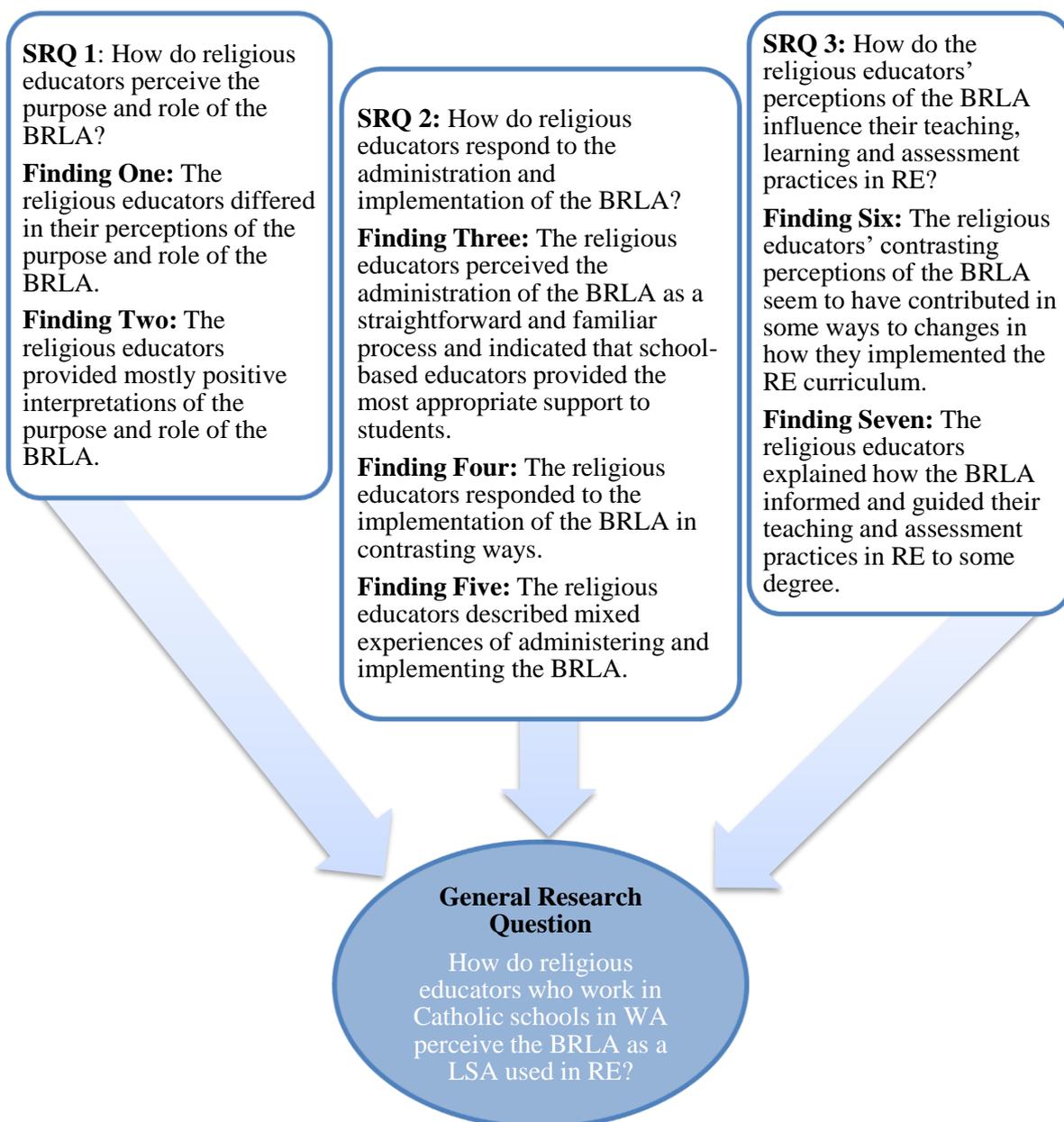


Figure 11.1. Synopsis of the research findings

The research findings are grouped according to the three SRQs, which, in turn, answer the GRQ. Firstly, the findings identify religious educators who perceived the purpose and role of the BRLA in different ways (SRQ 1). Secondly, the findings indicate that the majority of religious educators agreed the BRLA was easy to administer and had similar inbuilt processes, structures and issues associated with other LSAs (SRQ 2). Thirdly, the findings suggest that the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA were influenced by contextual factors such as their experiences of teaching of RE and their use of LSAs in education. These factors combined with the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA seem to have influenced how they taught and assessed student learning in RE (SRQ 3). The next section discusses the research themes. Within the themes are examples of changes to teaching and assessment practices in RE implemented by religious educators working in Catholic schools in WA.

11.4 Discussion of the Research Themes

The six research themes contribute to addressing the GRQ (Figure 11.2) by identifying the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA as manifestations of how they engaged with the assessment and also how they taught students and assessed the students' learning in RE. Theme One, Administration, explores how the religious educators experienced the administration of the BRLA. Theme Two, Engagement, identifies the level of support that the religious educators perceived other stakeholders of the BRLA provided to them and their students in preparation for the assessment. Other stakeholders include system administrators, teachers and parents. Theme Three, Purpose, considers the meaning and value attributed to the BRLA by the religious educators and how differing meanings and values appear to have revealed motivating factors that influenced the religious educators' perceptions. Theme Four, Professional Formation, begins to expose some of the possible rationales for the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA. The theme describes the specific influence that the religious educators' understanding of the nature and role of RE seems to have had on their perceptions of the BRLA. Theme Five, Accountability, relates to the religious educators' interpretation of accountability for student learning in RE. The religious educators' perceptions of LSAs as measures of accountability seem to have contributed to how they perceived the BRLA. Finally, Theme Six, Assessment Practices, draws on the religious educators' assessment practices in RE. These practices appear to be a response by the religious educators to their interpretations of the role of accountability in RE.

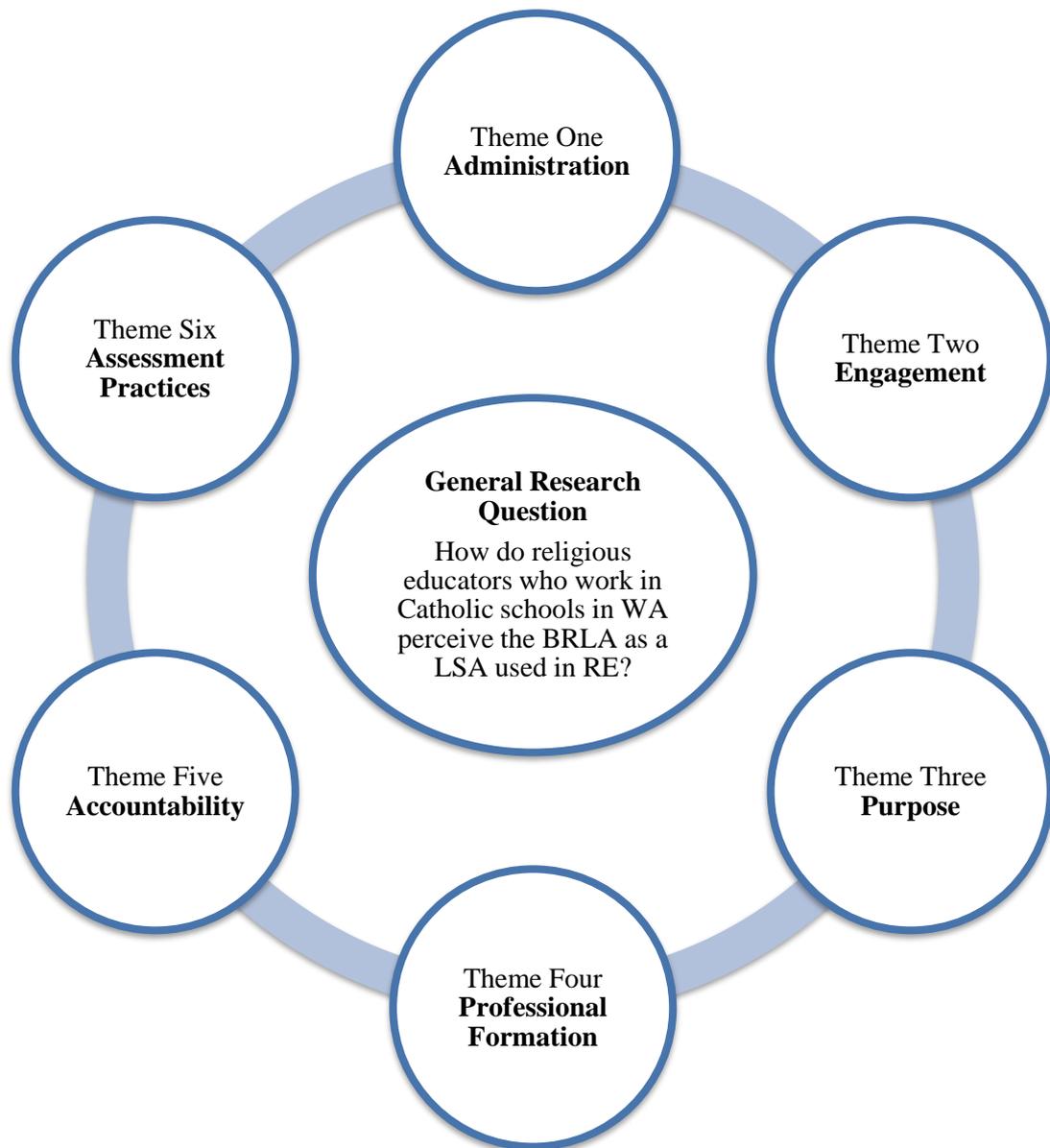


Figure 11.2. The research themes

11.4.1 Theme One: Administration. The first theme seems to suggest that most of the religious educators had positive experiences of administering the BRLA. For example, the majority of religious educators [193 of 233 (82.8%)] agreed the BRLA was easy to administer to students. The religious educators agreed that the administration of the BRLA was straightforward and familiar (Findings Three, Four and Five); that the instructions were appropriate and easy to follow [187 of 233 (80.3%)]; that the CEOWA provided appropriate support documents for the administration of the BRLA [146 of 233 (62.7%)], which were clear and concise; and that students completed the BRLA within the allocated time [151 of

232 (65.1%)). Year Five teachers agreed [37 of 40 (92.5%)] more than any other sub-group, and religious educators aged between 24 to 30 years agreed [46 of 52 (88.5%)] more than any other age group that the administration of the BRLA was straightforward.

When asked to describe their experiences of the BRLA (Findings One, Two, Three, Four and Five), religious educators said that administering the BRLA was similar to administering NAPLAN (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2014). They described the BRLA and NAPLAN as having similar features such as format and style. One religious educator referred to the BRLA as a “Holy NAPLAN”.

The religious educators made constant comparisons between the BRLA and NAPLAN (Findings One, Two, Three, Four and Five). They said that the processes and procedures in the BRLA and NAPLAN had become standard practice for school-based educators. Given the perceived similarities between the BRLA and NAPLAN, some religious educators [e.g. 10 of 43 (23.3%)] explained how it was important to familiarise the students with these types of assessments prior to administration (Finding Five). These religious educators spoke about the need to give students appropriate opportunities to become familiar with the focus of the test items. As one teacher explained:

We don't teach to the test but there is some preparation that is needed before the test. I do go through some of the things But I don't do anything extra than that, I just continue with the RE program as usual and hope that it's enough.

The teacher's interpretation of “teaching to the test” appears in this case, contrary to intensely coaching students (Darling-Hammond & Rustique-Forrester, 2005; Thompson & Cook, 2014). These findings provide a glimpse of new local knowledge about perceptions of test items in LSAs and the concept of “teaching to the test” from a local Catholic perspective. The concept is discussed further in Themes Two, Four and Five where more research findings suggest a disconnect between how the religious educators perceived LSAs and their own in-class assessments as measures of student learning.

One minority group of religious educators in Phase Two [7 of 43 (16.3%)] felt it necessary to clarify how their experience of administering the BRLA was perhaps “like NAPLAN but not the same as NAPLAN” (Finding Five). These religious educators suggested that the BRLA did not get the “same media coverage as NAPLAN” nor did the BRLA use league tables to “judge the performance” of one school against another. As one principal explained:

The BRLA is something that is going on quietly under the surface and the people are not stressed about it. Which is good. Once, you got a truer reading of the NAPLAN,

before everybody started practising and cramming. Today children get stressed and parents put pressure on their children.... NAPLAN seems to have got out of whack and I think that the BRLA being at a lower level is probably a truer reading of the results ...

In comparison to NAPLAN (e.g. Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2012), the BRLA was “less intense”, “less tedious” and with less associated pressures from system administrators, school leaders, parents and the media. The religious educators spoke of the unintended consequences of NAPLAN compared to the BRLA. Again, these findings align to research about the “unintended consequences” of LSAs (Brown & Harris, 2009) and will be discussed further within the other themes.

There are also several examples within the findings (Findings Three and Four) that indicate gender differences regarding the religious educators’ experiences of administering the BRLA. Male religious educators seem to have engaged and responded to the administration of the BRLA in a more positive way than females. For example, more male religious educators than females agreed that:

- the support documents from the CEOWA were appropriate for administering the BRLA to students;
- students completed the BRLA within the allocated time;
- school leaders provided appropriate support to students for the BRLA;
- teachers at their schools provided support to students, in preparations for the BRLA; and
- minimal time was required to prepare students for the assessment.

These findings about gender differences in administering the BRLA may add to research that considers gender differences in education (Nelson Laird, Garver, & Niskodé, 2007; Sabbe & Aelterman, 2007). This study does not aim to draw attention to gender differences as such, instead, the research raises awareness of the possible influence of male and female perceptions on assessments, teaching styles and standards in education.

Although Theme One proposes that the perceptions of the religious educators about the administration of the BRLA were largely positive, there were concerns raised about the time and energy involved (Findings Four and Five). For example, while most religious educators agreed [149 of 233 (63.9%)] the preparations for the administration of the BRLA required minimal organisation, and nearly two-thirds agreed [138 of 233 (59.2%)] it was important to spend time preparing students for the administration of the BRLA, over a third

(36.1%) found the administration process to be “overwhelming” in terms of the amount of time taken to prepare students. Furthermore, over a third agreed [91 of 233 (39.1%)] students required a great deal of time. Some religious educators in Phase Two [7 of 43 (16.3%)] also found their efforts were exasperated when communication from school leaders was perceived as ineffectual. These religious educators made comments such as “We are just given the instructions and asked to administer the BRLA” and “We have never seen the students’ results from the BRLA”. In contrast, other religious educators [10 of 43 (23.3%)] explained how leaders within their schools were instrumental in providing appropriate communication about the BRLA. They suggested that the sharp vision and effective communication by their school leaders managed to improve student learning in RE.

The next theme further specifies the religious educators’ differing perceptions of the BRLA. These perceptions relate to aspects of the implementation of the assessment. The perceptions suggest a link between how the religious educators perceived the BRLA and how they responded to its use as a LSA in RE.

11.4.2 Theme Two: Engagement. Theme Two is also aligned with the religious educators’ response to the administration of the BRLA. The theme offers an insight into how the religious educators’ perceptions of the BRLA may have been influenced by their perceptions of how students and teachers were supported in preparation for the assessment. The level of support was perceived in terms of the religious educators’ engagement with students, their parents and the system administrators of the BRLA at the CEOWA (Findings One, Three, Four, Five, Six and Seven).

11.4.2.1 Perceived engagement by students and parents. Many religious educators seem to have perceived students and parents as unsupportive and disinterested with the BRLA (Findings One, Three and Six). Firstly, statistically significant numbers of religious educators appear ambivalent, having chosen neither to agree or disagree with statements to Likert scale items about how satisfied they believed parents [127 of 234 (54.3%)] and students [115 of 234 (49.1%)] were regarding the BRLA. Likewise, the religious educators showed they were uncertain about the level of support provided by students [117 of 231 (50.6%)] and parents [119 of 231 (51.5%)] in preparation for the BRLA. Furthermore, when asked if they believed parents used the BRLA reports to focus on their children’s learning in RE, nearly two-thirds of the religious educators [138 of 231 (59.7%)] chose neither to agree nor disagree. Similarly, nearly two-thirds [137 of 231 (59.3%)] chose neither to agree nor

disagree that students used the BRLA to focus on their learning in RE. The religious educators' written responses in the online questionnaire and their verbal responses in the semi-structured interviews suggest that perhaps they were not as uncertain about student and parent engagement with the BRLA as identified by their responses to the Likert scale items.

The religious educators explained how “peer-pressure” promoting disengagement with the BRLA was a consequence of the disengaged reality of students in RE and its treatment as an academic learning area. Over half the number of religious educators [124 of 238 (52.1%)] raised concerns and challenges about their teaching experiences in RE, describing student and parental disengagement as one of their most challenging concern [67 of 238 (28.2%)]. Furthermore, less than half [106 of 231 (45.9%)] agreed students treated RE as an academic learning area and a third [82 of 231 (35.5%)] indicated the same about parents.

The religious educators described disengagement in RE as a result of the growing number of “unchurched” and “non-practising” students in Catholic schools. The explanation of one teacher of RE reflects the perceptions of others:

The BRLA deals with what RE content needs to be taught but doesn't allow for the fact that many children have little or no experience outside of the school. The majority of parents do not rate RE as important in the academic sense.

Similarly, one Year Nine teacher of RE wrote:

.... It is difficult for children to truly consolidate their learning when it is not a priority in many families. The church language while explained in teacher background and in some Units of Work [RE curriculum] is not recognised by the children and occasionally by the teachers.

These religious educators also indicated that the CEOWA “underestimates” the value of religion in the “home” and the “broader community”. While most of the religious educators [129 of 236 (54.7%)] believed that parents liked the idea of LSAs gathering information about their children's learning, they thought that parents were “less invested” in the BRLA compared to NAPLAN. For example, in Finding Seven, nearly a quarter [10 of 43 (23.3%)] of religious educators in Phase Two said that parents were only interested in “NAPLAN” and “NAPLAN results”.

Year Nine teachers, in particular, explained how it was difficult to motivate students in RE because they felt students and their parents were becoming increasingly disengaged with the learning area. The teachers thought that students and parents viewed the purpose of

the BRLA as “pointless” and that often there was a “negative” or “slack, it doesn’t matter attitude” to RE. As one Year Nine teacher wrote:

The students don’t value doing the BRLA and doing well in it because many parents and families don’t value Religion in schools.... Anything that has a Catholic logo or presence to it is considered second class or of a lower grade in education because it’s not valued at home, I don’t think that the kids will take any value out of the results for the assessment either.

One teacher explained not only was it “hard work” engaging students and their parents with RE, but also their colleagues. The teacher wrote:

Sadly, not all teachers have given it [Religious Education] the same importance as the other learning areas, so by the time I have the students, some don’t approach the work with the same enthusiasm. Lack of parental support also makes it difficult for the children to apply what is learnt in class.

The religious educators suggested they understood the “value of RE” and “strongly” supported the RE curriculum but were “quite realistic” of the Catholicity of the students and thus struggled to understand the purpose of the BRLA. They perceived that it was “quite difficult” and “sad” that parents seemed disinterested and unsupportive of the learning area and appear to have agreed with one of the Year Nine teachers’ statements for the “removal of the BRLA as a time and paper wasting imposition”. The religious educators believed that the BRLA made it difficult for teachers to maintain credibility in what was seen as an already counter-cultural subject.

The religious educators argued that more support is required from parents and all members of the Catholic school community for students to achieve well in the BRLA. The implications of the research findings suggest that the religious educators’ perceptions of student and parental disengagement with the RE curriculum area may have influenced how they believed it was best to approach the teaching of RE, which, in turn, may have influenced how they perceived the purpose and role of the BRLA.

Theme Two aligns with literature that identifies a general shift in community affiliation with the Catholic Church (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016) and specifically regular attendance of Mass (Dixon, Reid, & Chee, 2013). The theme also reflects Australian research about the influence of secularisation on religious practice (Pascoe, 2007) and literature encouraging Catholic schools, through classroom RE, and their broader curricula to address that influence (Rossiter, 2018). In addition, the theme highlights local, contemporary challenges facing teachers and school leaders of RE. Such challenges may pose issues for

how local (Holohan, 1999) and national (National Catholic Education Commission, 2017b) policies in RE are considered, interpreted and implemented.

The findings suggest further research regarding the perceptions that students and parents have about the BRLA. The findings also suggest that the Directorate of REFF within the CEOWA may possibly need to review the changing circumstances in Catholic schools to better support school-based religious educators with the implementation of the BRLA. Such a review needs to build upon existing strategies developed by the CEOWA aimed at creating community support for Catholic education (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009), especially the role of parents (Suart, 2007).

The existing strategies acknowledge the Church's position of the prominent role that parents have in their child's learning (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 6; Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, paras. 51–65) and the need to support parents in their role (John Paul II, 1988; Vatican Council II, 1965c, para. 52, 1965d, para. 7). The Church is calling for a new evangelisation (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2014; Francis I, 2013; John Paul II, 1990; Paul VI, 1975) that builds upon Catholic mission (Rymarz, 2014). The revival of the identity of Catholic schools (McKinney & Sullivan, 2013; Schuttloffel, 2012) is part of this new evangelising mission. The aim is to draw people back into a relationship with Jesus and the Church. This type of relationship depends upon effective educational leadership (Lavery, 2012; Sharkey, 2007) and system-wide resolutions that build communities founded on trust, belonging and knowledge (D'Orsa & D'Orsa, 2011, 2012, 2013). The Church's call for a new evangelisation is not dissimilar to the call by mainstream education advocating for professional development of educators that extends to the wider school community (Epstein, 2010; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Ratts, Pate, Andrews, Ballard, & Lowney, 2015). Building learning communities beyond student learning and focused on improving student learning is central to this call.

11.4.2.2 Perceived engagement by system administrators. Most religious educators [178 of 233 (76.4%)] agreed that they provided appropriate support to students and nearly two-thirds [138 of 233 (59.2%)] thought that school leaders did as well. However, over a third of the religious educators [84 of 233 (36.1%)] disagreed about the role of the CEOWA in providing them with assistance to prepare students for the BRLA (Finding Three). Groups suggested that they were not given relevant information about the BRLA and that their feedback regarding the BRLA was not valued. Some of these religious educators [10 of 238 (4.2%)] believed that there was a need for the RE curriculum to be updated in response to

how students performed in the BRLA (Findings One, Two, Three and Seven). As one Year Nine teacher commented:

I am happy to have a test such as BRLA, BUT the CEO needs to address the fact that Years Eight and Nine books are resources rather than text; they include more detail than can be reasonably covered; and that the BRLA can unfairly pick miniscule details from these resources.

Similarly, one school leader of RE explained:

The BRLA and the RE Units of Work are very different to each other.... If you're not someone that goes beyond the Units, I don't think the kids are being exposed to the RE content enough. The gap between the BRLA and the Units needs to change, in order for a change, to teaching and assessment practices in Religious Education.

These religious educators perceived a disconnect between the focus of the BRLA and the RE curriculum.

The religious educators argued that even though the BRLA has heightened people's (educators, students and parents) awareness to treat RE as an academic learning area, unless the RE resources or Units of Work containing the essential content in the RE curriculum were updated, there was no purpose in using the BRLA. As one principal within the group explained:

The Units are good, but we seem to be playing catch-up a lot! Changes come along in other curriculum areas particularly in assessment and reporting RE is our first learning area and yet we are all still a little bit in the air about what we are going to do for RE If RE is out there as our first learning area should we be playing catch-up or should we be on the front foot?

As another principal commented, "The BRLA does not relate to what the students are specifically learning because it is so very 'left field' [to the curriculum] and therefore difficult for students to take seriously". The religious educators argued for "student and teacher friendly" RE teaching resource material where the content is clearly defined and can be easily sourced by classroom teachers. They assumed the introduction of the BRLA in 2007 and the developments of the assessment would have brought on a need to review the RE curriculum. The assumption suggests school-based educators require a RE curriculum that explicitly identifies RE content so that teachers can be better supported in their work to prepare students for the BRLA.

The religious educators also questioned whether their feedback about the BRLA was valued and used by the CEOWA (Finding Six). Some religious educators chose to disagree

[45 of 231 (19.5%)] and some chose neither agree nor disagree [74 of 231 (32.0%)] that the CEOWA used feedback from the BRLA. Similarly, a third seem ambivalent that the school feedback to the CEOWA helped develop better assessment practices in RE [77 of 231 (33.3%)] or helped provide professional learning in RE [80 of 231 (34.6%)]. School feedback is collected from the CEOWA at the end of the administration phase each year (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013). The feedback is collected from students, teachers and school leaders. However, this evaluation process of the BRLA and methods of communication between the CEOWA and Catholic schools may need to be part of the review process discussed in the previous theme. Statements of purpose, additional support and guidelines would need to be included.

The next theme suggests that the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA were shaped not only by their initial experiences of engagement with the administration of the assessment but also further informed by their experiences of teaching RE and using LSAs in mainstream education. The religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA and response to it reflect the meaning and purpose they attributed to the BRLA, RE and use of LSAs in general.

11.4.3 Theme Three: Purpose. This theme focuses on the religious educators' contrasting perceptions of the meaning and purpose of the BRLA and how from these perceptions some religious educators valued the assessment as a measure of student learning and many understood the role that the assessment played in the RE curriculum (Findings One and Two). The religious educators' understandings of the meaning and purpose of the BRLA were reflected in how effective they believed the BRLA was as a measure of student learning; how satisfied they and others felt about the assessment; the issues they raised about the BRLA test items; and the time and pressure they associated with the assessment. Theme Three also highlights the differences in perceptions between teachers and school leaders of RE, and that these differences seem to be motivated by their experiences of using LSAs.

Although many of the religious educators [141 of 238 (59.2%)] agreed the BRLA had a role to play in RE, perceptions of purpose varied among groups (Finding One). For example, one group [120 of 234 (51.3%)] rated the BRLA as ineffective as a measure of student learning in RE compared to another group [114 of 234 (48.7%)] who rated the BRLA as an effective measurement tool. Similarly, one group [80 of 238 (33.6%)] raised concerns about the BRLA and questioned its purpose. They explained that the BRLA was an imposition; that it was too difficult for students and irrelevant to the RE curriculum. In contrast, another group of religious educators [79 of 238 (33.2%)] indicated the purpose of

the assessment was to measure student learning in RE. They stated, “I like the BRLA” because it is “an effective”, “informative” and “worthwhile initiative for Catholic education”.

School leaders and teachers of RE seem to have perceived the meaning and purpose of the BRLA differently to each other. School leaders were identified as more satisfied and supportive of the BRLA and more inclined to have used the BRLA as a measure of student learning in RE compared to teachers (Findings One, Three and Four). Almost half the number of religious educators [116 of 234 (49.6%)] agreed that school leaders were more satisfied with the BRLA compared to teachers [75 of 234 (32.1%)] and even students [51 of 234 (21.8%)] and their parents [72 of 234 (30.8%)]. Most of the religious educators [168 of 236 (71.2%)] perceived school leaders valued LSAs more than teachers [105 of 236 (44.5%)], and student dissatisfaction [68 of 234 (29.1%)] was perceived as second to teacher dissatisfaction [89 of 234 (38.0%)] of the BRLA. Also, most primary school leaders of RE [27 of 37 (73.0%)] rated the BRLA higher on the scale of effectiveness compared to Year Three teachers [32 of 55 (58.1%)], who chose to rate the BRLA lower on the scale. The perceived differences between teachers and school leaders of RE about the BRLA aligns with Australian research identifying differences in perceptions about LSAs (Wang et al., 2006). The research identified differences between teachers and students (Guskey, 2007) and school leaders (Pettit, 2010; Thompson & Mockler, 2016). These differences also appear to exist within other Australian Catholic education systems (Pettit, 2009, 2010).

Besides perceived differences, there were also similarities identified between teachers and school leaders of RE about their perceptions of the challenges associated with the BRLA. One of these challenges was the BRLA test items. Many religious educators [129 of 232 (55.6%)] perceived the test items in the 2013 BRLA as relevant to the RE curriculum and disagreed [122 of 231 (52.8%)] that the BRLA test items were poorly constructed. Similarly, nearly half the number of religious educators [103 of 231 (44.6%)] disagreed that students found it difficult to answer most of the test items in the BRLA. However, most religious educators [164 of 232 (70.7%)] also agreed that the BRLA test items contained difficult vocabulary. The explanation by one Year Three teacher reflects these perceptions:

I believe the language used in some parts of the BRLA is too complicated which impedes on the children’s understanding. I think if the language was reworded to a more basic form some children that may have known the answer would be more successful.

The religious educators suggested the vocabulary in the test items needed to be simplified and made less formal and “theological”. The common perception about the BRLA test items by

the teachers and school leaders of RE suggests that their perceptions were dependent upon their understandings of conveying the essential content knowledge used in RE to students. Local (Hackett, 2006, 2008, 2010) and national research (Rossiter, 2010; Rymarz, 2014) has identified religious educators as requiring professional training to improve their understandings and application of the essential content knowledge used in RE. Such training aims to improve the approaches used by teachers to assist students to better access the essential content knowledge in the RE curriculum.

Teachers and school leaders of RE also perceived the BRLA test items as particularly difficult for students with poor English skills and for students who lived within low socio-economic boundaries. Similarly, Australian research identifies groups of educators who perceived the vocabulary used in the NAPLAN test items to be difficult for students (Thompson, 2012). They considered NAPLAN test items as unfair to at-risk groups of students who have difficulty with literacy skills (Decker & Bolt, 2008; Mulford & Silins, 2011). The teachers and school leaders' perceptions of the BRLA test items seem dependent upon their experiences of using LSAs such as NAPLAN.

The religious educators were generally divided about LSAs, suggesting that their perceptions of the BRLA were similar to their perceptions of LSAs generally. For example, just over half the number of religious educators [125 of 236 (53.0%)] agreed that LSAs are useful measures of student learning (Findings One and Six) and just under half [115 of 238 (48.3%)] raised concerns about the BRLA and NAPLAN as LSAs (Findings Three, Six). Furthermore, various groups of religious educators raised concerns about LSAs. One group of religious educators [60 of 238 (25.2%)] described negative experiences of NAPLAN. Another group [51 of 238 (21.4%)] described LSAs such as the BRLA and NAPLAN as stressful activities. They argued that LSAs create anxiety for student and teachers, which is further compounded by parent anxiety. They also indicated that LSAs "cause stress" because the assessments are not designed to cater for the differing needs and learning styles of all students. A third group of religious educators [37 of 238 (15.5%)] described the BRLA as a LSA like NAPLAN that was "time consuming" and required "extra attention". The perception was that students in Years Three, Five and Nine were "over-exposed" to LSAs and teachers responsible for those students were continuously preparing for the administration of LSAs rather than attending to in-class learning.

Some religious educators [41 of 238 (17.2%)] explained how they were "not fans" of LSAs because in their opinion such assessments did not "validly measure student ability". These religious educators argued that the BRLA and NAPLAN as LSAs were focused on

“rote learning rather than critical thinking”. The description of one Year Three teacher reflects the perceptions of the different groups who raised concerns about LSAs:

I feel strongly that the large-scale tests are detrimental to the learning experiences of many children. The test environment is not one that the children are used to these days and for some children, particularly those who struggle with their literacy, it is very unpleasant.

These findings further align with the Australian research regarding the concerns raised by teachers about NAPLAN (e.g. Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2012; Lingard, 2010). The findings also align with international research that identified the concerns teachers have about LSAs (Burgess et al., 2011; Guskey, 2007).

The religious educators’ concerns about the BRLA as a LSA seem to have caused divisions rather than cooperation between groups and with the CEOWA as system administrators of the BRLA. Such divisions have the potential to hinder improvements in student learning in RE because they can undermine the purpose of the BRLA as intended by the CEOWA. The next theme further identifies differences in perceptions about the BRLA that may have been shaped by the religious educators’ understandings of the nature and purpose of RE. Recommendations for how the CEOWA might address differences between religious educators to avoid unnecessary divisions are proposed in the final chapter.

11.4.4 Theme Four: Professional Formation. Theme Four proposes that the religious educators’ perceptions of the BRLA were related to differences in how they treated or perceived the meaning and purpose of RE and, in turn, how they taught the subject area (Findings One, Six and Seven). Most religious educators [196 of 231 (84.8%)] agreed they treated RE as an academic learning area and agreed [187 of 231 (81.0%)] student learning in RE should to be assessed. Most religious educators also agreed school leaders [190 of 231 (82.3%)] and teachers [169 of 231 (73.2%)] within their Catholic schools treated RE as an academic learning area. However, some religious educators described how they [35 of 231(15.2%)], other teachers [29 of 231 (12.6%)] and school leaders [16 of 231 (6.9%)] did not treat RE as an academic learning area. Linked to these descriptions are the arguments that groups of religious educators expressed about the purpose and role of the BRLA. Religious educators identified the challenges they faced with the BRLA and how they believed the assessment was being used in RE to promote an academic focus. The religious educators also perceived the BRLA as “different” to the RE curriculum they taught and assessed because of their stance against an academic focus in RE.

Figure 11.3 represents on a continuum the different approaches religious educators used to teach RE. To the left of the continuum are religious educators who seem to have had a faith-focused approach to teaching RE or, as the research literature describes, a catechetical approach (Hackett, 2006; Rossiter, 1999; Rymarz, 2011). To the right of the continuum are religious educators who appear to have focused on an educational approach to teaching RE. The educational approach is more aligned to local system expectations (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, 2013b; Holohan, 1999) as well as the expectations that comes from the Roman Catholic Church (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982, 1988; Congregation for the Clergy, 1997; Francis I, 2013; Paul VI, 1975; Vatican Council II, 1965d).

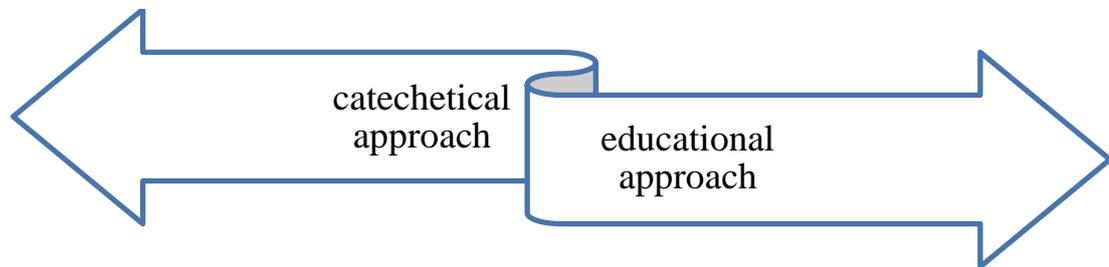


Figure 11.3. Contrasting approaches to the teaching of Religious Education

11.4.4.1 Catechetical approach. Many religious educators seem to have perceived the BRLA from a faith-focused approach to teaching RE (Findings One and Seven). For example, one group [105 of 238 (44.1%)] indicated the BRLA had a limited role to play in RE. Another group [80 of 238 (33.6%)] raised concerns about the use of the BRLA in RE. These groups of religious educators argued that “testing in this area is not necessary” and that the BRLA “had made a subject area that usually creates happiness and discussions about our religion into something stressful”. The comment from one school leader further reflects the perceptions of these groups: “Children would benefit more from being given the opportunity to develop a personal relationship with God in RE classes through learning about the Bible and Church structure”.

Three other explanations by religious educators reflect this faith-focused approach to teaching RE. As one Year Nine teacher wrote, “It takes a philosophical and theological learning environment and attempts to measure doctrine and Catechism teaching that may not

always be relevant or helpful to developing a student's spiritual or even faith life". Similarly, one Year Five teacher wrote:

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

As one school leader wrote:

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

These explanations represent religious educators of various ages, gender and employment role of responsibility in RE. The BRLA was perceived by these religious educators as outside the scope of what they believed was a spiritual and religious learning area aimed at providing students with necessary life skills. The formalised and academic focus that the BRLA had brought to RE had in their opinion, driven students against the RE learning area.

When data were cross-referenced (Finding Six), the following insights were gained from one group of religious educators [86 of 234 (36.8%)]. This group suggested the BRLA had not led to improvements in student learning and more than half that number:

- i. explained the BRLA had not influenced their teaching and assessment practices in RE [65 of 86 (75.6%)];
- ii. rated the BRLA low, on the scale of effectiveness [65 of 86 (75.6%)];
- iii. described negative experiences of using LSAs [60 of 86 (69.8%)];
- iv. disagreed they used the student performance data from the BRLA reports to plan lessons in RE [58 of 86 (67.4%)];
- v. described negative experiences of their use of the BRLA [48 of 86 (55.8%)];
- vi. disagreed LSAs were useful in measuring student learning [46 of 86 (53.5%)].

Under half the number of this group [36 of 86 (41.9%)] agreed the BRLA had no role to play in RE and disagreed [40 of 86 (46.5%)] the use of the BRLA had helped them focus on improving student learning in RE. These religious educators appear to have rejected the educational focus of RE and preferred a more faith-focused approach.

As these religious educators described their teaching experiences of RE, they also identified how they approached the teaching of RE from a faith-focused perspective. Firstly,

over half the number of religious educators [124 of 238 (52.1%)] referred specifically to the pressures placed on them to deliver RE as an academic learning area. Secondly, just under half of the religious educators [114 of 238 (47.9%)] described their experiences of teaching RE with an emphasis on RE as “spiritual” and “religious” activities. They said they “love teaching RE” and as practising Catholics they “enjoyed handing on the faith”. Some religious educators [20 of 114 (17.5%)] argued the importance of all RE teachers to give witness to the Gospel message of Jesus and explained how giving witness, in this way, was a “spiritually moving” experience for them.

Religious educators with a faith-focused approach to teaching RE also presented arguments against the use of LSAs in education. They explained how LSAs such as the BRLA were irrelevant to the teaching of RE because the “whole person” was not acknowledged and catered for. As one school leader of RE wrote:

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

The school leader recommended students would benefit more from opportunities to develop a personal relationship with God in RE classes rather than learn about the structures surrounding Scripture and the Church. The arguments presented by the school leader provide an insight about how these religious educators perceived the BRLA to be their perceptions of teaching RE and how they further questioned the educational focus of RE. In contrast, local system expectations focus on an educational approach to teaching RE (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, 2013b; Holohan, 1999). In this case, RE is considered as part of the evangelising mission of the Church but it occurs within the confines of the educational processes of the classroom. Whereas, a focus on the Catholic faith is considered a responsibility of and an activity for the entire Catholic school community (Holohan, 1999).

11.4.4.2 Educational approach. Contrary to the identified, catechetical approach used to teach RE, many religious educators [99 of 238 (41.6%)] perceived the purpose of the BRLA as appropriately suited to an educational approach to teaching RE (Findings One, Six and Seven). They said that if RE is treated as an academic learning area then the BRLA was justified in its use as a formal assessment in RE. These religious educators perceived the BRLA as having two distinct roles in RE. That is, to ensure the content in the RE curriculum

was being taught and to enhance the academic profile of RE. As one teacher of RE commented:

The BRLA has given RE a greater academic focus. The BRLA also provides the school with well, constructed RE tests as examples of RE assessments. The results can be used to gain an insight into the knowledge students have on RE topics.

A school leader of RE explained:

The BRLA has made parents and students more aware of Religious Education as an academic learning area. Those RE teachers who have prepared students for the BRLA are more aware of what content is assessed and can use this information when teaching other grades, and when having conversations with other teachers.

These religious educators perceived the purpose and role of the BRLA as relevant to improving teaching with a focus on student learning.

Again, when data were cross-referenced (Finding Six), some religious educators [80 of 234 (34.2%)] suggested the BRLA had changed RE and led to improvements in student learning in RE. Of these religious educators, most indicated that:

- i. student learning in RE should be assessed [74 of 80 (92.5%)];
- ii. they treated RE as an academic learning area [73 of 80 (91.3%)];
- iii. the BRLA had a role to play in RE [72 of 80 (90.0%)];
- iv. the BRLA was an effective measure of student learning [70 of 80 (87.5%)];
- v. they used the BRLA to help them focus on student learning in RE [68 of 80 (85.0%)];
- vi. they used LSAs to gather information about student learning [65 of 80 (81.3%)];
- vii. agreed LSAs were useful in measuring student learning [63 of 80 (78.8%)];
- viii. indicated the BRLA had influenced their teaching and assessment practices in RE [63 of 80 (78.8%)].

Most of these religious educators also described their experiences of the BRLA as positive [61 of 80 (76.3%)] and explained how they enjoyed teaching RE [50 of 80 (62.5%)]. The comment by one school leader of RE reflects the perceptions of these religious educators:

I believe that the BRLA raises the status of RE as an academic subject. It also emphasises how important the teaching of RE is as an issue in co-responsibility for teachers and parents in the faith formation of our students. I talk about the test and its importance in the context of Catholic education in general.

Furthermore, some religious educators in Phase Two [15 of 43 (34.9%)] stated how the BRLA had “closed the gap” between RE and other learning areas taught in Catholic schools (Finding Seven).

The religious educators who approached the teaching of RE with an educational focus suggested that the BRLA had “restored balance” to the teaching of RE and that for “far too long” religious educators had focused on the “religious” rather than the “educational” dimensions of RE. As one teacher of RE explained:

Until now, RE was all about exploring one’s feelings; “touchy feely” emotions, driven teaching style. Now I think we are getting more balance coming in with knowledge about the history, knowledge about events, knowledge about Scripture, parts of the Mass and all that sort of language.

Similarly, one school leader explained:

The BRLA has helped us understand that the rigour of assessment practice in RE should be the same as other learning areas and we should be trying to improve the situation at our school ...

The school leader also spoke specifically about the need for raising awareness of the potential absence of rigorous teaching and assessment practices in RE.

School leaders generally identified teachers as requiring effective training in RE to better focus on the educational dimensions of RE. Primary principals [18 of 26 (69.2%)] and Assistant Principals [25 of 37 (67.6%)], in particular, agreed more than teachers that the BRLA had helped them focus on improving student learning in RE and that it was their aim to ensure that classroom teachers do the same. The educational leadership of these school leaders suggests that they had professional training relevant to evidence-based curriculum reforms with an emphasis on whole school learning communities (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

The religious educators who focused on improving student learning perceived the purpose and role of the BRLA as relevant to the teaching of RE. They identified people in their schools who they suggested “struggled” to fully treat RE as an academic learning area and recognise student learning at the core of their teaching. As one teacher of RE explained:

We realise that the rigour of the assessments in RE is not as high as say Maths. The students see that straight away, even if we’ve started talking about an assessment, they already expect that it will be at a lower level and the sort of things that you get from the students is not good ...

Similarly, one principal argued, “Theoretically RE should be assessed as other learning areas but I don’t believe that RE is formally tested at the classroom level”.

The discrepancy between how the religious educators perceived the educational approach to teaching RE and local system expectations (Catholic Education Commission of

Western Australia, 2009, 2013b), appears to make improving student learning in RE challenging for the Catholic education system in WA. Fullan and Quinn (2016) suggest that “Images of coherence have to do with making sense, sticking together, and connecting” (p. 1). Given these images, it seems the Catholic education system in WA may struggle to achieve “coherence” if religious educators have different ideas about the nature and purpose of RE and how it should be taught in Catholic schools. These differences are considered by Fullan and Quinn as part of a list of “wrong drivers”, which if not addressed fail to cultivate and sustain collaborative learning cultures.

Theme Four points to the need for future research about how religious educators construct their perceptions of the nature and role of RE. The aim of the research is to better target the professional formation of teachers and school leaders in Catholic schools so as to improve the teaching of RE (Sullivan, 2016). A possible review of accreditation and university courses may be required. Such a review is endorsed by Church documents, which promote the need for religious educators to be provided with adequate educational training in RE (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, paras. 25–32).

The research findings that led to the theme provide new knowledge about approaches to the teaching of RE in Catholic schools in WA and support literature identifying the complexity surrounding the teaching of RE (O’Donoghue & Byrne, 2014; Rymarz, 2011; Shanahan, 2016). This complexity in Catholic education suggests perceived differences between the intent of professional training in RE and actual teaching practices (Hackett, 2006, 2008, 2010). The findings from this study affirm Scott (2016) and Rossiter’s (2018) proposals to help religious educators unify their awareness of the religious and educational dimensions of RE. Building such an awareness requires specific professional formation (e.g. Gellel & Buchanan, 2015; Rymarz & Hyde, 2013). The next research theme focuses on how the religious educators’ perceptions seem to reflect their understandings of the nature and role of LSAs.

11.4.5 Theme Five: Accountability. This theme identifies the religious educators’ perceptions of the BRLA as possibly being informed by their interpretations of the role of educational accountability (Findings One, Six and Seven). Accountability, in this sense, refers to the responsibility assigned to individuals or groups (Lee, 2008). The religious educators’ interpretations of accountability may have been influenced by their experiences of LSAs such as NAPLAN, of which they were most familiar. Religious educators perceived the purpose and role of the BRLA as a LSA within the context of either an exclusive or inclusive

interpretation of accountability. That is, the BRLA was recognised either as a measure of accountability exclusively informing system and school leaders about the quality of teaching in RE or as a measure of the quality of student learning in RE informing system and school-based religious educators to focus collectively on student learning. The latter interpretation is inclusive.

11.4.5.1 Exclusive interpretation. Many religious educators [105 of 238 (44.1%)] felt that the BRLA had a limited role to play in RE. They defined the role of the BRLA as an accountability measure of student learning that “only informs” and “only satisfies” authorities. As one principal wrote, “The BRLA is an assessment that has to be issued to the students and we followed through with the directive”. The perception was that the potential value of the BRLA was for the benefit of the WA Bishops, the CEOWA and principals. As one teacher of RE suggested:

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

The religious educators also referred to the BRLA as a “negative” and “compulsory” “compliance instrument” that was “far removed” from classroom practices and “just a ploy” by system and school leaders to “check-up on” teachers.

The perception of these religious educators was that the BRLA (and LSAs generally) were “unnecessary”, “counter-productive in education” and “a costly waste of time and money”. Furthermore, the BRLA was identified as “damaging the moral and faith” development of students and “taking away from valuable classroom teaching experiences”. These religious educators also appear to have approached the teaching of RE with a catechetical focus.

Some religious educators who questioned the purpose of the BRLA [80 of 238 (33.6%)] also suggested the assessment was a measure of accountability imposed on them and used to “monitor” teacher efficacy. They explained how the BRLA was designed for two purposes. Firstly, to provide the WA Bishops and the CEOWA with, for example, a “bird’s eye view”, “eye on” or “to keep tabs on” the schools so as primarily to “stay in touch” with teachers and their teaching of RE. Secondly, to “gauge” student learning based on how well teachers “covered” the content in the RE curriculum. These religious educators also referred

to BRLA as a “ranking exercise” to determine the level of student attainment in RE across schools. As one of the teachers stated:

They [the WA Bishops] want to make us [teachers in Catholic schools] more accountable. This is why it is called *The Bishops’ Religious Literacy Assessment*.... So, it [the results] tends to reflect back on the school, the students and obviously, the teachers.

This group wrote that it was their “job” to ensure that the students’ scores were maintained each year. They believed that if student scores were not maintained, teachers were “questioned”, “scrutinised” and “reprimanded” by school leaders. In turn, they believed school leaders were reprimanded by system leaders.

For these religious educators, the BRLA provided opportunities for the WA Bishops through the RE Team at the CEOWA “to find holes in the curriculum” that show which concepts are not being covered and “to determine why”. As one school leader wrote:

I think the Bishops just want to see how we are actually going with Religion, ... and how well students know about the traditions of the Catholic Church. I suppose just for them really to gather information.... Are we teaching them [the RE Units of Work] properly? ...

The religious educators suggested there was value in school and system leaders gaining information about student learning in RE but that there was less value for classroom teachers. This aspect of the theme aligns with Australian research that identifies teachers who perceived NAPLAN to be “a school ranking or policing tool” (Dulfer, Polesel, & Rice, 2012, p. 8). LSAs were identified by classroom teachers as measures used to determine whether process and product meet the desired goals, criteria and targets set by politicians and educational authorities working for the politicians (Lingard et al., 2013).

This aspect of the theme likewise points to differences in interpretations of accountability between teachers and school leaders of RE, which align with differences in perceptions about the BRLA (Findings One, Three and Four). For example, principals and other school leaders of RE suggested the BRLA was a means for providing “them” with information about their teachers in terms of their familiarity with the content knowledge in the RE curriculum. As one principal stated, “The BRLA confirms that we are on the right track and helps focus the Year Three and Five teachers”.

In contrast, teachers of RE referred to the BRLA being exclusively used by school leaders. The teachers explained that there was a lack of communication provided by school leaders about the BRLA, beyond the administration phase. For instance, over half of the

religious educators [127 of 231 (55.0%)] agreed teachers were unaware of the student performance data from the BRLA (Appendix O). The teachers commented that they had “never seen the students’ results” from the BRLA. They perceived the student performance data from the BRLA as “off limits” to them as teachers. These responses suggest the possibility of a perceived lack of control by teachers of RE over the BRLA. This lack of control appears as a manifestation of what Bandura (1993) describes as acts of fear, hopelessness and marginalisation, resulting in the devaluing, alienation, isolation and self-doubt of these staff. The implication is that positive action by school and system leaders to better understand the needs and concerns of classroom teachers is necessary (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Furthermore, and as mentioned previously in Theme Two, Engagement, these school-based religious educators may have responded in this way because they believed the CEOWA did not value their feedback. As one school leader posed:

Are schools really clear on what the Bishops and the CEOWA are actually designing? When was the last time they called everyone together to let us know what to do with the BRLA.... I think there is a challenge here for our Bishops and the CEOWA. I don't think there is common knowledge of the BRLA across WA.

Similarly, one principal contended, “I think the Bishops should be concentrating more on looking at why our schools are full, but our churches are empty”. The school leaders argued that unless the purpose of the BRLA is better articulated and the results made more visible to classroom teachers, the assessment will continue to be identified as an “unjustifiable” measure of the professional teacher quality and outside the scope of school and classroom practices in RE. Again, there appears a need for system leaders such as the CEOWA to address the perceived issue about a lack of communication and guidance regarding the BRLA.

11.4.5.2 Inclusive interpretation. Groups of religious educators [e.g. 79 of 238 (33.2%)] described the BRLA as an appropriate and necessary measure of accountability where system authorities, school leaders and teachers of RE were collectively interested and responsible for student learning in RE (Finding One and Seven). This understanding appears to be grounded in school leadership that focused on student learning in RE and shaped by professional development promoting internal accountability (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). Hattie (2009) argues collective teacher efficacy is the starting point leading to this type of accountability for student learning.

Many religious educators [125 of 236 (53.0%)] who perceived LSAs as useful measures of student learning also argued that LSAs provided opportunities for school members to compare student results within classrooms and across schools; assist teachers to become better acquainted with the curriculum content; track student learning; and improve planning, teaching and assessment practices in RE. As one school leader stated:

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

Another school leader explained:

Accountability is what is needed in RE. It helps students learn about their faith. We need to change the way we teach Religious Education. We need to improve student learning in RE.

These religious educators argued that student learning of the Catholic Faith Tradition was the focus of measurements rather than the personal faith stance of students. As part of their arguments, they posed questions such as “Why are we teaching RE?”, advocating a need for accountability measures in RE. Such views are consistent with evidence-based curriculum reforms that justify the use of LSAs to improve student learning (Popham, 2009; Wang et al., 2006) and the collection of student performance data from multiple measures (Earl & Timperley, 2009; Timperley, 2009, 2010, 2013).

Many religious educators [99 of 238 (41.6%)] also identified the BRLA as a “measurement tool” and “snapshot of student learning” that “effectively” assisted teachers to cover the content in the RE curriculum as well as helping schools and system authorities” to “improve the quality of learning in RE”. The understanding of accountability in this case was an inclusive one where all educators were perceived as responsible for student learning in RE.

Student learning in RE for various groups of religious educators was described in the same way as student learning in other subjects. Some groups [34 of 238 (14.3%)] even referred to the BRLA as a measure of accountability in RE for student learning with “far-reaching benefits”. They described the benefits as being able to compare student data from the BRLA and in-class assessments in RE. As one principal explained, “You can get comparative data from the BRLA so as to get an idea of how students are going in relation to the RE content”. Another principal remarked, “The BRLA is a reminder to us all that these are the basics we need to cover.” The religious educators who indicated that all educators are

responsible for student learning also explained that it was important to achieve and maintain standards in RE similar to other learning areas.

One group of religious educators in Phase Two [24 of 43 (55.8%)] stressed the importance of student learning in RE. They explained how the BRLA informed a broad audience about student learning (Finding Seven). The group's focus was to interrogate student performance data from the BRLA school reports to make future decisions about student learning in RE. Of the 24 religious educators, ten [10 of 43 (23.3%)] spoke specifically about the interrogation of data at a whole school level with all teaching staff present. They indicated that they worked with the BRLA student performance data in the same way they worked with NAPLAN data. Once data were interrogated, the religious educators considered implications for future RE lessons.

This aspect of the theme suggests that groups of religious educators were led by school leaders focused on students' learning and attentive to improving that learning. As one principal explained, "We go through what questions we all seem to get wrong and discuss why we get them wrong". Similarly, another principal described:

We bring the results to a professional learning community meeting. We look at the students results to see how we went as a school. Even though the Year Five teachers are directly involved, I say to the Year Six teachers, "These are the results the students achieved last year and here are the areas you probably need to concentrate on this year."

The school leaders appear to identify structures and processes that encouraged professional learning opportunities for all, beyond the administration of the BRLA and regardless of the level of teacher involvement with the assessment. The religious educators led by these school leaders acknowledged the CEOWA as the developers of the BRLA but suggested student learning in RE was the responsibility of all religious educators. Their interpretation of accountability in RE seems to support the local policy requirements in RE (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013; Hackett et al., 2017) and the research literature that suggest LSAs have the potential to collectively hold teachers, school and system leaders accountable for student learning (Burgess et al., 2011).

Theme Five is consistent with Australian and international studies that identify educators who perceived LSAs as measures of accountability (Biesta, 2010; Cumming & Maxwell, 2004; Rowe, 2005) driving an emergent audit culture that is interested in shaping educational policy decisions and classroom practices (Ball, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Lingard et al., 2013). However, much of these perceptions may have led to confusion

surrounding educational accountability for student learning (Lee, 2008; Linn, 2003). This confusion seems to exist because the word “accountability” has “multiple meanings and purposes and there are several models being used to support the various meanings” (Lee, 2008, p. 610). Lee also argues that the confusion seems to be grounded in perceptions about the use of LSAs based on the question, “Who holds whom accountable and for what purpose?”.

The understandings of accountability that school-based religious educators expressed in this study provide new local knowledge about accountability for student learning in RE. In the interest of developing a culture of improved standards in student learning (e.g. Darling-Hammond, 2010) in RE, the implications from this study and other studies about the use of LSAs suggests that the CEOWA may need to further investigate the religious educators’ interpretations of accountability for student learning in RE to bring about coherence across the system (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

The next theme draws upon the findings that seem to connect religious educators who expressed an exclusive understanding of accountability with a preference for using their own classroom assessments in RE to measure student learning. Alternatively, religious educators who expressed an inclusive understanding of accountability explained how they used a range of assessments including LSAs to measure student learning.

11.4.6 Theme Six: Assessment Practices. This theme suggests that religious educators perceived the BRLA according to their experiences of teaching and assessing students. These experiences were reflected as exclusive or inclusive assessment practices (Findings One, Four, Six and Seven). The manifested practices either excluded or included the use of the BRLA as a LSA.

Figure 11.4 represents the religious educators’ expressions of their assessment practices in RE on a continuum. The left side of the continuum represents religious educators who preferred to use in-class or their own teacher-designed assessments in RE. This preference is labelled as exclusive assessment practices because the use of LSAs such as the BRLA and NAPLAN did not appear to be valued by these educators. The right side of the continuum represents religious educators who preferred to use a range of assessments in RE. The use of LSAs such as the BRLA and NAPLAN were included within this range. This preference is labelled as inclusive assessment practices. Such practices suggest school-based religious educators were exposed to professional training in evidence-based curriculum reforms (Forster, 2009; Hill & Barber, 2014; Masters, 2013). Such training is now being

endorsed by the Australian government through a report calling for leaders and staff in schools to recognise and aspire to excellence in education as their priority (Department of Education and Training, 2018). The report outlines recommendations for improving student learning by building on existing evidence-based reforms that better align classroom and whole system practices in teaching as well as assessment.

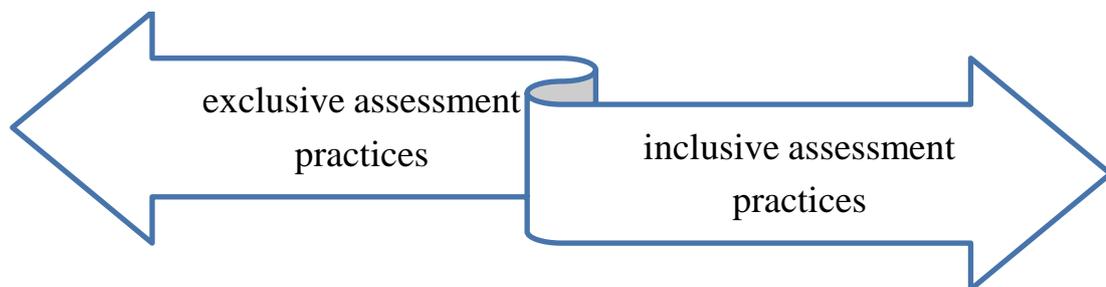


Figure 11.4. Contrasting assessment practices in Religious Education

11.4.6.1 Exclusive assessment practices. Groups of religious educators indicated they preferred to use their own in-class assessments rather than using and trusting LSAs that are developed externally by system administrators (Findings Four and Six). They believed that the BRLA test items were not relevant to the RE curriculum and student performance in the BRLA was different to in-class assessments. Furthermore, they appear to have lacked the confidence needed to use the BRLA school reports and understand how to analyse student data from those reports. These religious educators belonged to groups who also raised concerns about the use of LSAs such as NAPLAN [115 of 238 (48.3%)], perceived the BRLA as having a limited role to play in RE [105 of 238 (44.1%)], and questioned the purpose of the BRLA [80 of 238 (33.6%)]. Such perceptions suggest a possible link between the religious educators' experiences of LSAs and their preference for using in-class assessments to measure student learning in RE.

Some religious educators [44 of 238 (18.5%)] indicated that the BRLA test items were irrelevant to the RE curriculum and showed an exclusive preference for in-class assessments. They commented that the BRLA test items were dissimilar to the RE curriculum because the test items were “complicated”, “too literacy based”, “too content driven” and “different” in comparison to how they assessed in RE. These religious educators suggested that the BRLA caused stress on students and teachers because the needs of all students were not being met. As a result, the BRLA was considered “outside the realm” of regular

classroom practices in RE, “extra work” and “a distraction” to the daily routine of teaching and student learning”.

Similarly, some religious educators [51 of 238 (21.4%)] argued LSAs were irrelevant for classroom use and others [28 of 238 (11.8%)] stated that NAPLAN was irrelevant to the Western Australian literacy and numeracy curricula. Like the BRLA, NAPLAN was considered external to classroom practices and perceived as not catering for the needs of all students. The BRLA was perceived as a LSA that “reminded students of NAPLAN” and that only “capable students” with “good memories” and “proficient in English” were able to achieve good results. As one school leader of RE explained:

NAPLAN does not give an exact description of where a child is “at”. The test does not apply to what they are currently learning in class more so, what they “should” know at their age.

These religious educators suggested that they believed that young and indigenous students with “poor literacy skills” were disadvantaged by the use of LSAs.

This thematic aspect implies that firstly, these religious educators may have taught and assessed RE differently to local policy expectations. This point was raised earlier in Themes Two and Four. Secondly, there may have been a possible disconnect between teacher content knowledge and assessment practices in RE. Thirdly, given a possible disconnect, the religious educators may have felt a lack of control and knowledge about the types of test items students would be required to answer. This aspect aligns with the research literature that identifies teachers as dissatisfied with the use of LSAs for some time (Abrams et al., 2003; Brown & Harris, 2009). Teachers have regarded LSAs such as NAPLAN as an additional task, which has had an impact on school-based curriculum, pedagogical practices and student–teacher relationships (Doecke et al., 2010). A national study involving Western Australian teachers suggests that teachers perceived NAPLAN as stressful and disconnected from classroom practices (Thompson, 2012, p. 69). The teachers considered NAPLAN as having a limited scope and a narrowed view of the curriculum. In turn, they believed LSAs were inappropriate measures used to improve learning standards.

The religious educators in this study made comparisons about student performance based on the type of assessments students completed. These comparisons seem to have led them to prefer their own in-class assessments. For example, most religious educators perceived students to perform better in assessments in RE designed by them [178 of 231 (77.1%)] compared to how students performed in the BRLA [63 of 231 (27.3%)]. Many religious educators agreed [130 of 231 (56.3%)] students who perform poorly in the BRLA

also perform poorly in NAPLAN. In contrast, other religious educators [100 of 231 (43.3%)] disagreed that students who performed poorly in the BRLA also performed poorly in assessments for RE designed by teachers.

As mentioned previously, many of the religious educators perceived the student performance data from the BRLA as unnecessary. For example, nearly half the number of religious educators [112 of 231 (48.5%)] disagreed that teachers at their schools worked collaboratively to analyse student performance from the BRLA, and fewer [105 of 231 (45.5%)] felt confident enough to use the BRLA school reports. Furthermore, just under half the number of religious educators disagreed [104 of 231 (45.0%)] that they used the student performance data from the BRLA reports to plan lessons in RE and even fewer [93 of 231 (40.3%)] chose neither to agree nor disagree teachers used the reports. These religious educators also suggested they preferred to use their own in-class assessments to measure student learning. Those religious educators who used the BRLA reports [34 of 231 (14.7%)], indicated that they identified strengths, weaknesses and misconceptions in student learning.

This aspect of Theme Six seems to align with Australian research about teacher perceptions of student performance data and reports generated from NAPLAN (Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013). The Australian research identifies school leaders as more receptive to the use of LSAs than teachers but require better assistance to analyse data (Pettit, 2009, 2010; Thompson & Mockler, 2016). International studies suggest that school leaders be given appropriate tools to systematically use data from LSAs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010). The aim is to assist school leaders to make better decisions about student learning that involves classroom teachers. Professional learning for school leaders may in turn improve teacher efficacy about the use and analysis of data from LSAs (Timperley, 2009, 2010, 2013; Yates, 2008). In a similar way, this study supports the suggestion that school-based religious educators need to develop and improve assessment practices in RE (Healy & Bush; 2010; White, 2003, 2004).

11.4.6.2 Inclusive assessment practices. Many religious educators [99 of 238 (41.6%)] who agreed the BRLA was an appropriate measure of student learning in RE and described its distinctive role within the RE curriculum also suggested they preferred to use a range of assessment types (Findings One, Six and Seven). These religious educators supported the use of LSAs such as the BRLA and NAPLAN. These religious educators described how they used the BRLA student performance data as “complementary” to their, in-class assessment data. As one principal explained:

If utilised correctly and for the right purpose, large-scale, standardised assessments can help to show strengths, areas needing consolidation and possibly to be the focus for the coming term and year's learning ...

Their assessment practices can be considered inclusive because they used multiple data sources to collect evidence about student learning in RE

Similarly, some religious educators [80 of 234 (34.2%)] who explained that the BRLA had led to improvements in student learning in RE also suggested that the BRLA student performance data informed their teaching and assessment practices in the same way their in-class assessments did. As one teacher of RE explained:

As a teacher and as a school we are more focused on improving our assessment practices. Before the BRLA we were all just doing our own thing in assessment but now we are all expected to have tests like the BRLA format.

Parallel comments were made by two school leaders of RE. One of them explained:

We used to make up our own assessments but now we have a set structure that the whole school follows. We're also more diligent in giving assessments. It's in line with the other subjects. We need to change because RE needs to be made more rigorous.

The other wrote:

My teaching is more explicit in terms of content knowledge and understanding because we focus at our school on student performance data from the BRLA. Now, I read the RE Units of Work more closely and pick out areas within the Units that I may have skipped over before.

These religious educators described how they made use of the student performance data from the BRLA to focus on assessment in RE and follow-up teaching practices. The religious educators commented that their focus was applied across Year levels in RE in a similar way to how NAPLAN had provided focus for them in literacy and numeracy. As a result, all teaching staff within their schools were becoming increasingly involved in analysing student performance data.

The religious educators demonstrated an inclusive approach to assessment and an inclusive understanding of accountability in RE. This thematic aspect of the study aligns with research aimed at identifying ways of closing the gap of differentiation between internal classroom practices and external system practices (Forster, 2009; Hill & Barber, 2014; Masters, 2013). Such an understanding may have come from professional training centred around evidence-based curriculum reforms (Decker & Bolt, 2008). As mentioned previously, the religious educators' exposure to the reforms seems to have been endorsed and promoted

by school leaders. Exposure to such professional development in assessment practice has the potential to build whole school learning capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

The literature regarding evidence-based curriculum reforms promotes the idea that student learning is the responsibility of all educators (Lee, 2008) and that professional training is required by teachers and school leaders to effectively analyse, interpret and regularly compare data from multiple sources (Forster, 2009; Shaddock, 2014). The aim is to inform the learning process as well as the development of the measurement tools (Axworthy, 2005; Timperley, 2009, 2013; Wang et al., 2006). The implications of this literature and Theme Six in this study seems to suggest the need for further investigations about assessment practices in RE.

The next section discusses a representation of the dynamic interplay between the overall research findings and the six themes to emerge from the findings. This interplay aligns with the literature about evidence-based reforms in education. A metanarrative matrix was developed to highlight the identified interplay.

11.5 A Matrix of the Research Themes

The six research themes have attempted to capture and synthesise the key findings regarding the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA. In doing so, the themes reveal a metanarrative based on points of difference and similarity among and between majority and minority groups of school-based religious educators and their perceptions. Figure 11.5 represents the metanarrative as a matrix. The 238 religious educators from this study are placed onto a matrix with four quadrants based on a coordinate plane with two axes. The horizontal axis represents the continuum for approaches to teaching RE (Figure 11.3). The vertical axis represents the continuum for assessment practices in RE (Figure 11.4). Each quadrant represents the relationship or interplay that appears to have existed between the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA and the contextual experiences that influenced those perceptions. That is, the quadrants profile the religious educators according to how they engaged with and responded to the BRLA, within the context of how they approached the teaching of RE and assessed student learning in RE.

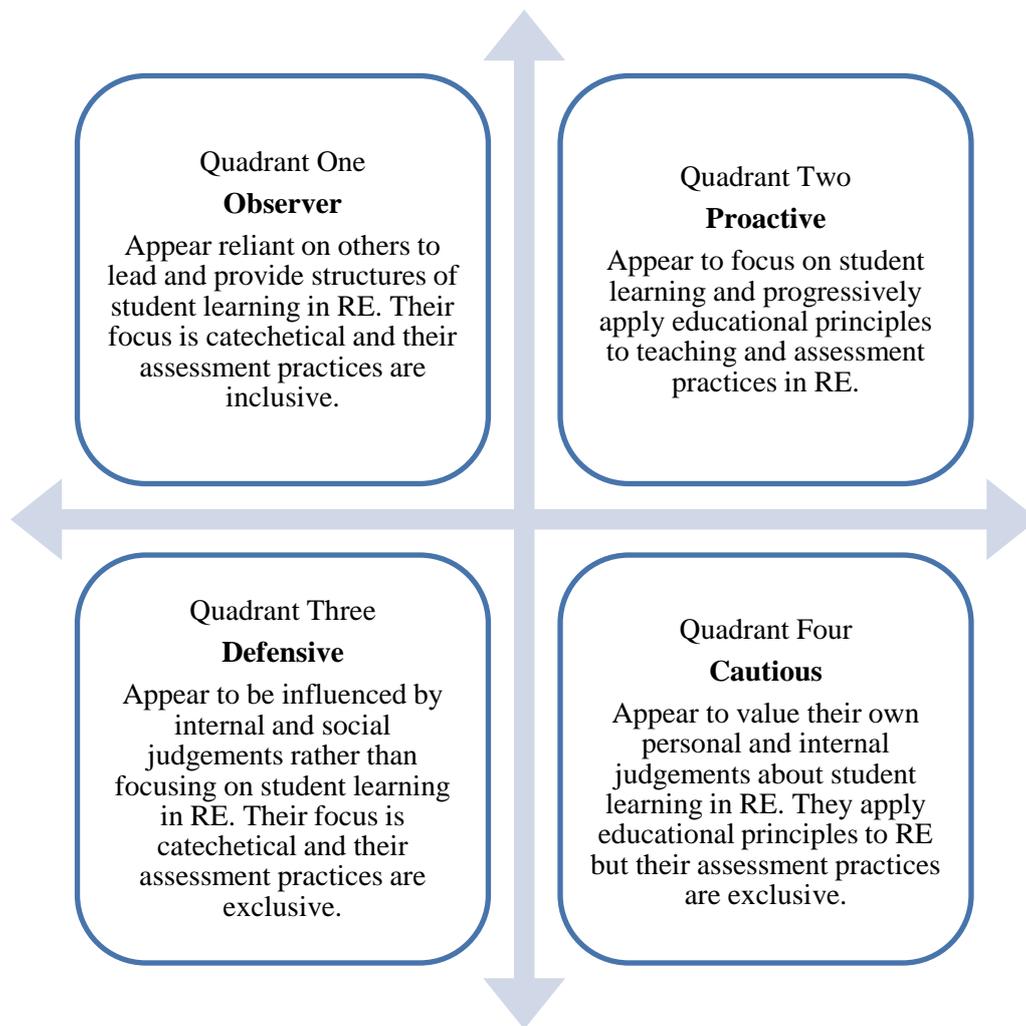


Figure 11.5. A matrix of profile categories of religious educators in this study

Quadrant One represents religious educators who appear to have not treated RE as an academic learning area. Their perceptions of the BRLA seem to suggest that their approach to teaching RE was catechetical and focused more on developing the faith of students rather than educating students about their faith. The use of LSAs was recognised by these religious educators as relevant to other learning areas but not necessarily for RE. These religious educators are labelled “Observer” because they demonstrated awareness of educational principles but did not appear to apply their knowledge readily to RE. Professional formation and leadership in RE focused on education appears appropriate for the needs of these religious educators.

Quadrant Two represents religious educators who appear to have demonstrated an awareness and application of educational principles in RE. These religious educators are labelled “Proactive” because their teaching and assessment practices in RE seem aligned to

evidence-based curriculum reforms that recognise the centrality of student learning in RE. They appear to have undergone professional training in whole school approaches to improving student learning. These religious educators seem to have treated RE as an academic learning area, recognised their responsibility to improve student learning in RE and used a range of assessments in RE including the BRLA. For these religious educators, the use of the BRLA provided complementary data about student learning in RE to data they collected from the RE assessments they developed and administered. This quadrant represents the ideal or optimal teaching and assessment approaches in RE consistent with local system expectations (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, 2013b) and educational literature focused on transformation and curriculum renewal (e.g. Fullan, 2016).

Quadrant Three represents religious educators who appear to have taught RE with a catechetical focus and seem to have lacked appropriate training in assessment of RE. These religious educators appear to be particularly challenged by student disengagement in RE. They are labelled “Defensive” because their perceptions of the BRLA seem to be reliant on teaching and assessment practices that worked solely in their favour. These religious educators appear to have had negative experiences of LSAs and did not trust their use. Furthermore, they may have been hesitant to consider alternative ways of teaching RE because of a lack of confidence or appropriate training in educational measurement and assessment. Further understanding of these religious educators appears necessary to better target their professional formation in RE.

Quadrant Four represents religious educators who appear to have taught RE with an educational focus and seem to have complied with policy expectations in RE. However, these religious educators also appear to have had negative experiences of LSAs and doubtful of such assessments. These religious educators are labelled “Cautious” because they appear to have been tolerant of new developments in RE and education in general but may have perceived externally developed assessments such as LSAs as imposed measures of accountability and without relevance to classroom use. Further understanding of these religious educators may also better target the type of professional formation required in RE for them. The type of professional formation required in RE is addressed in the recommendations from the study.

The metanarrative matrix representing the religious educators in this study has implications for future policy decisions regarding the development of the BRLA and the professional formation of teachers and school leaders of RE. The matrix supports educational

literature that considers the need to better understand the perceptions of educators as they engage with and implement educational curricula (Dinham, 2016; Hattie, 2009). This understanding draws on the seminal works of John Dewey (Thayer, 1982) who argued that education and learning are social and interactive processes worth investigating. The assumption is that such investigations may bring about improvements to student learning in RE.

11.6 Chapter Summary

Until this study, there was a lack of empirical evidence about how teachers and school leaders of RE working in Catholic schools in WA perceived the BRLA. This study has identified the school-based religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA as a LSA used in RE and in doing so has revealed three insights. The first of these insights suggests that the BRLA was not considered by the religious educators as a unique phenomenon but rather as a springboard through which they expressed their individual and collective perceptions of the BRLA based on their personal and professional experiences. The second of these insights suggests that the religious educators' perceptions were complex and contrasting. The BRLA seems to have been perceived according to how religious educators responded to their professional training in RE and approached their teaching of RE. Similarly, how the religious educators experienced the use of LSAs, were exposed to evidence-based curriculum reforms and in turn chose particular assessment practices in RE, also seems to have influenced their perceptions of the BRLA.

The religious educators in this study belong to a teaching profession that engaged with the RE curriculum that shares common elements with other learning areas: the delivery of content, pedagogy and assessment practices. A third insight from the study suggests that as professionals, the religious educators seem to have perceived the BRLA in much the same way as other educators perceived LSAs used in other learning areas. Therefore, the religious educators' perceptions of the BRLA provide new local knowledge that aligns and supports the research literature relating to RE as a learning area and the use of LSAs in various learning areas.

In the concluding chapter of this thesis, recommendations and implications from this study are presented. The recommendations address the contrasting perceptions that religious educators expressed about the BRLA. In consideration of these perceptions, the implications consider within and beyond the teaching and assessment practices in RE classrooms how best to improve student learning in RE.