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2018

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 TWELVE**

### **RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

#### **12.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides two concluding aspects about the study. Firstly, the scope of the research and secondly, fourteen recommendations drawn from the findings and themes. The study addressed the GRQ: How do religious educators who work in Catholic schools in Western Australia perceive *The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment (BRLA)* as a large-scale, standardised assessment (LSA) used in Religious Education (RE)? The findings and themes that emerged are significant because they provide new empirical knowledge about the use of LSAs by teachers and school leaders of RE working in the Catholic education system in WA. The findings and themes also align with local, national and international research about RE and the use of LSAs in education generally. The recommendations reflect this alignment by focusing on student learning in RE. That is, the recommendations focus on an educational approach to teaching RE that endorses evidence-based curriculum reforms in education. The recommendations have implications for the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia (CEOWA) and other Catholic education systems, in terms of the development and implementation of policy decisions and practices in RE. Furthermore, the recommendations point to future research in RE and assessment design and implementation in education.

#### **12.2 The Scope of the Research**

The scope of the research is limited to the Western Australian Catholic education context. The BRLA is administered only to students enrolled in Catholic schools in WA. The study aimed to describe the perceptions that school-based religious educators have about the BRLA. A total of 238 teachers and school leaders of RE, including principals, were involved in this study. They represent 39.6% of an estimated population of school-based religious educators who teach students in Years Three, Five and Nine (Catholic Education Western Australia, 2014). The teachers and school leaders involved in this study worked in one of 65 Catholic primary and secondary schools located within the four Catholic dioceses in WA. At the time of the study the 65 Catholic schools represented 44.2% of the 147 involved with the BRLA.

The study focused specifically on school-based religious educators because they were ultimately responsible for preparing students for the BRLA, administering the assessment and potentially using the data from the students' results to help diagnose student learning in RE. The religious educators in this study were responsible for implementing an educationally based and classroom oriented RE curriculum. They also had knowledge of and involvement with other LSAs apart from the BRLA. No other stakeholders, such as students and parents involved with the assessment were investigated in this study because of limited time and scope for such a broad investigation. The recommendations proposed from this study do, however, identify the need for further investigations involving other stakeholders.

The perceptions of religious educators were investigated using a pragmatic approach to research (Crotty, 1998; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005). This approach focused on the research problem and used a range of theoretical perspectives that allowed a variety of modes of inquiry for gathering quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell, 2009; Punch, 2009). The data were collected, collated, analysed and integrated using mixed methods research and a particular mixed methods design adapted from a "sequential explanatory strategy" (Creswell, 2009, p. 211). The strategy helped enhance the trustworthiness of the overall study by providing breadth and depth to the findings (Bryman, 2012).

The collection of data occurred in two phases between September 2013 and July 2014. An online questionnaire was used in Phase One and semi-structured individual and group interviews were used in Phase Two. In Phase One data were collected from 150 teachers of RE responsible for students in Years Three (n = 55), Five (n = 40) and Nine (n = 55); 57 school leaders responsible for leading RE in Catholic primary (n = 37) and secondary (20) schools; and 31 principals of Catholic primary (n = 26) and secondary (n = 5) schools. These religious educators responded to 90 items, mainly Likert scale and open-ended questions. In Phase Two a total of 43 of the 238 religious educators took part in one of 21 interviews. There were 21 teachers of RE responsible for students in Years Three (n = 5), Five (n = 5) and Nine (n = 11); 14 school leaders responsible for leading RE in Catholic primary (n = 8) and secondary (n = 6) schools; and 8 principals of Catholic primary schools.

The analysis of data occurred in several stages. The different data sets from both phases were collated, processed and analysed separately and later combined and integrated through a process of triangulation (Bryman, 2004; Silverman, 2013). Quantitative techniques that draw from a positivistic perspective to research were used to help analyse the numeric data from the Likert scale items in the online questionnaire. These techniques included descriptive statistics (Babbie, 2008; Gravetter & Wallnau, 2007; Liu, 2014) and Rasch

analysis (Andrich, 1988; Wilson, 2005). Qualitative techniques drawn from Social Constructionism (Creswell, 2009; Crotty, 1998) and associated Interpretivism (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) were used to analyse the written data from the online questionnaire and transcribed data from the interviews.

Seven research findings and six themes emerged from the combined collection and analysis of data from the religious educators. The research findings identify religious educators as having agreed that the administration of the BRLA was straightforward and familiar but disagreed about other aspects of the assessment. The research themes seem to suggest that the contexts of this research (Figure 3.1) were interconnected and influential in shaping the religious educators' contrasting perceptions of the BRLA. These contexts are applicable to the role of religious educators. This is because the contexts relate specifically to RE as a classroom learning area that is implemented by the religious educators, and how the religious educators considered the use of the BRLA as a LSA within that learning area. The religious educators' personal and professional experiences and response to RE and LSAs seem to have influenced how they understood the nature and purpose of RE, LSAs and the BRLA. In turn, their understandings seem to have influenced how they approached the teaching of RE and assessed student learning in RE.

### 12.3 Recommendations

Fourteen recommendations from the research are proposed. The recommendations are categorised under four headings to reflect the research findings and themes and build upon the research literature about RE and the use of LSAs (Figure 12.1). The focus of each heading is student learning and how to best improve this learning in RE. Considerations about the types of religious educators in this study as discussed in the previous chapter (Figure 11.5) also contributed to the structure of the recommendations. The implications target the future developments of the BRLA, policies and practices in RE, and particularly, assessment practices that align to evidence-based curriculum reforms in education.

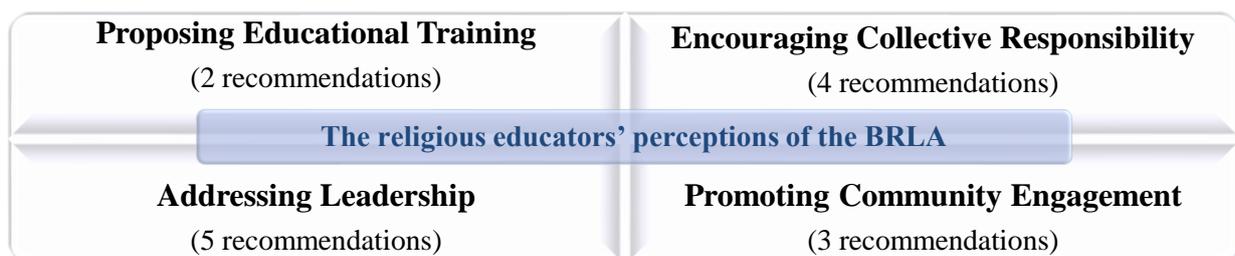


Figure 12.1. The recommendations from the research

**12.3.1 Proposing educational training.** This set of recommendations aim to improve student learning by focusing on improving the professional formation of religious educators in RE. There are two recommendations proposed in this category. The recommendations reflect Theme Four (Professional Formation), which suggests that the religious educators' contrasting perceptions of the BRLA were influenced by their understandings of the nature and role of RE. As represented in Figure 11.2, groups of religious educators either approached the teaching of RE as a catechetical or an educational activity. Of interest to this study are the groups of religious educators who approached the teaching of RE from a catechetical focus. The perceptions of these religious educators challenge local Catholic education policies regarding expected teaching and assessment practices in RE (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, 2013b).

The first recommendation proposes further research about religious educators' perceptions of the meaning, purpose and role of RE [Recommendation 1.1]. The recommendation considers further to this study the influence that the religious educators' perceptions of RE may have on the educational goals of RE. The aim of the recommendation is to better understand the motivations of religious educators about RE so as to focus them on student learning. The recommendation builds on research in RE that targets teacher training and ongoing professional development courses relevant to enriching the educational dimension of RE (Ryan, 2013; Scott, 2016). Furthermore, the recommendation aligns with research literature that attempts to distinguish Catechesis from RE within the context of Catholic education (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006; Holohan, 1999; McKinney & Sullivan, 2013).

The recommendation considers the Church documentation and advocacy proposing a renewal of understandings and considerations for educators working in Catholic schools (Rossiter, 2018). The documentation focuses on the Catholic school and its important role within the Catholic community as a place of synthesis where faith, culture and life come together to educate the whole person (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 37, 1997, para. 11). Teachers and school leaders responsible for RE are called, as are all Catholic educators (Francis I, 2013), firstly to give witness to the Gospel message of Jesus (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982, para. 59; Paul VI, 1975, para. 41) by being Christ-like in the presence of others (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 43, 1982, paras. 32, 33, 1988, para. 110; Vatican II, 1965a) and of teaching the Gospel message of Jesus with enthusiasm and knowledge (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982, para. 59, 1988, paras. 26, 66; John Paul II, 1979, para. 6).

The second recommendation addresses the need for further training and ongoing professional formation for religious educators in RE [Recommendation 1.2]. This recommendation complements the first in this category by addressing the religious educators' apparent lack of substantial content knowledge in RE (Theme Four). The aim of the recommendation is to improve religious educators' awareness and application of the essential content knowledge of the Catholic Faith Tradition. The recommendation considers educational opportunities that develop collective capacity for religious literacy (D'Orsa & D'Orsa, 2013). By strengthening the depth and breadth of religious literacy for teachers and school leaders of RE, students may also develop improved religious literacy. The recommendation builds on literature promoting professional efficacy in education (Dinham, 2016; Hattie, 2009) and, in particular, RE (Buchanan & Rymarz, 2008; Rymarz & Hyde, 2013; Sullivan, 2013). This type of professional efficacy would focus on the educational dimension of RE that in mainstream education helps bring about social reforms on a system-wide scale (National Catholic Education Commission, 2017b). These reforms aim to develop students' knowledge and capabilities (McGunnigle & Hackett, 2015) as well as the learning capacity of students, teachers, school leaders and other school community members (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Fullan and Quinn, 2016).

**12.3.2 Encouraging collective responsibility.** This set of recommendations aims to focus the religious educators' attention on the role of educational accountability for student learning in RE. There are four recommendations in this category. The recommendations address Theme Two (Engagement) and Theme Five (Accountability).

The first recommendation proposes future research regarding religious educators' perceptions of the role of accountability in RE [Recommendation 2.1]. The aim of the research is to investigate religious educators' perceptions of who they believe is responsible for student learning in RE and how they believe student learning can be appropriately measured in RE. Theme Five seems to suggest that the religious educators' contrasting perceptions of the BRLA were influenced by their interpretations of accountability in RE. Of interest to the study are the groups of religious educators who perceived the BRLA as an assessment designed by and for school and system leaders. These groups demonstrated an exclusive understanding of the role of responsibility for student learning in RE. This understanding seems to have been influenced by their experiences of LSAs in mainstream education. Aligned to current evidence-based curriculum reforms in Australian education (Department of Education and Training, 2018), the recommendation considers the need to

close the gap between school-based and system educators about educational accountability (Gill et al., 2016) and measurement and assessment practices in and out of the classroom (Forster, 2009; Hill & Barber, 2014).

The second recommendation relates to the first and calls for changes to the title of *The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment* [Recommendation 2.2]. A change in title should exclude the use of the term "Bishops" to divert unnecessary attention away from the perceived ownership and responsibility of the BRLA from the Bishops and more towards school-based religious educators and system administrators. Such a change would also need to divert attention away from perceived misunderstandings of the term "Literacy". The study found that religious educators associated the term literacy with English skills and the difficulty that students with poor English skills experienced with the language used in the BRLA test items. The intended use of the term literacy in the BRLA is a focus on the content knowledge of the RE curriculum (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2006a, 2013) and not on English literacy skills and capabilities.

The third recommendation builds further on the first two recommendations by proposing teachers and school leaders of RE work with system administrators such as the CEOWA to draft and edit test items for the BRLA [Recommendation 2.3]. Collaboration between school-based religious educators and system administrators already exists at a local level with the development of other LSAs, such as the university entrance examinations (O'Neill, 2014). The aim of the recommendation is to promote collective responsibility for student learning consistent with the research literature encouraging deeper learning of measurement and assessment principles and design (Andrich, 1988; Ridden & Heldsinger, 2014; Wu, Tam, & Jen, 2016).

A fourth recommendation draws on Theme Two, which suggests that groups of religious educators perceived a disconnect between system administrators of the BRLA and their support to school-based religious educators regarding the BRLA. The recommendation proposes the CEOWA in the on-going review of the evaluation process of the BRLA, provide more explicit policy documents about the BRLA that are well aligned to the RE curriculum, and have these documents effectively communicated to all educators regardless of role [Recommendation 2.4]. The aim of the recommendation is to provide transparent information from the CEOWA to all stakeholders about the structures and processes for evaluating the BRLA. In turn, school-based religious educators may develop a better sense of ownership and responsibility for student learning in RE. This recommendation supports the research literature suggesting a need for education to implement visible and transformative provisions

in order to improve accountability of student learning (Lee, 2008; Linn, 2003). The application of the suggested provisions may ensure better alignment between the development of the BRLA test items and the RE curriculum implemented in Catholic schools in WA.

**12.3.3 Addressing leadership.** There are five recommendations in this category addressing all five research themes. The research findings that led to the themes seem to suggest that the religious educators' contrasting perceptions of the BRLA may have been influenced by school leadership in RE. How school leaders of RE focused on student learning and motivated others to do the same appears to be different between Catholic school communities. In turn, teaching and assessment practices in RE also appears to be different. The variances seem apparent in the way religious educators interpreted accountability in RE as either an exclusive or inclusive responsibility for student learning and how they seem to have adopted an exclusive or inclusive assessment practices.

The first recommendation proposes further research investigating the perceptions that religious educators have about the role that assessment plays in RE [Recommendation 3.1]. The aim of the research is to further identify disparities between religious educators based on their employment role of responsibility in Catholic schools and the influence of those disparities on student learning in RE. The recommendation builds on the new knowledge about assessment practices in RE identified in this study and the Australian research literature suggesting a need to review assessment practices in RE (Healy & Bush; 2010; MacDonald, 1990; White & Borg, 2002). The recommendation also supports scholarship in the area of educational measurement and assessment that attempts to improve efficacy in assessment practices by closing the gap of differentiation between assessment types (Masters, 2013; Hill & Barber, 2014). Australian scholarship advocates teachers and school leaders have better access and training related to student performance data from LSAs (Pettit, 2009, 2010; Thompson & Cook, 2014) and in-class assessments (Earl & Timperley, 2009; Shaddock, 2014; Timperley, 2013). The proposed training aims to help school-based educators focus on student learning and be better able to fully integrate the curriculum components of content and pedagogy to improve student learning (Kelly, 2005).

In keeping with educational scholarship about assessment practices, three more recommendations are proposed. These involve consideration for professional training by local universities about assessment design [Recommendation 3.2]; professional training by local universities about analysis of student performance data [Recommendation 3.3]; and

system-wide CEOWA training regarding the analysis and interpretation of data in reports generated from LSAs such as the BRLA and NAPLAN [Recommendation 3.4]. The aim of the recommendation is to provide system-wide support to schools regarding the analysis of student performance data from the BRLA beyond references to longitudinal trends (Wu, 2016) as recommended in Australian research (Pettit, 2009, 2010). Such support promotes accountable leaders of learning, focused on sustained progression of student learning.

The three recommendations aim to make accessible to all teachers and school leaders clearer communication and guidelines about assessment practices in RE. Open communication regarding assessment practices and transparency regarding student performance data may lead to improved leadership at all levels in RE. Furthermore, school-based religious educators may have better opportunities to collaboratively develop assessments (beyond the BRLA), analyse results, moderate student learning and evaluate assessment practices. Given that groups of religious educators suggested they were not confident in using the BRLA school reports, the recommendations also have the potential to improve the use of assessment data for future lesson planning in RE, as well as in literacy and numeracy.

A fifth recommendation in this category draws on what appears as a disparity in perceptions between teachers and school leaders of RE regarding the BRLA and other LSAs. The recommendation proposes future research to investigate the influence that employment role of responsibility may have on assessment practices [Recommendation 3.5]. The aim of the recommendation is to understand how the role of educators may possibly influence the administration of LSAs. This recommendation aligns with Australian research identifying perceptual differences between teachers and school leaders about LSAs and the analysis of data from those assessments (Pettit, 2009, 2010; Thompson & Cook, 2014; Thompson & Mockler, 2016). Other research literature suggests that differences between teachers and school leaders do exist and there is a need to build collective leadership and efficacy by establishing cultural capacity for learning (Dinham, 2016; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Hattie, 2009).

**12.3.4 Promoting community engagement.** This set of recommendations aims to promote student learning in RE by better engaging community support. There are three recommendations proposed in the category. The recommendations reflect Theme Two (Engagement), which seems to suggest that groups of religious educators perceived students and parents as disengaged with the BRLA. Such groups explained how students and parents

were dissatisfied with the BRLA, did not support students and teachers during the administration of the BRLA, and were generally disinterested in the BRLA student reports because they were disinterested in RE as a priority learning area.

The first recommendation builds on the previous category of recommendations regarding leadership and addresses teacher engagement and leadership in RE [Recommendation 4.1]. First, there is a potential need for religious educators to better consider the delivery of interesting and educationally sound RE lessons. Second, there is a potential need for religious educators to be upskilled to confidently lead and promote Catholic school communities (National Catholic Education Commission, 2017a; Sharkey, 2007). The implications for a review of current professional formation programs is necessary in this venture (D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2011, 2012, 2013) and was discussed in the recommendations from the first category (Proposing educational training).

Following on from the first recommendation are two other recommendations specifically aimed at investigating student and parent engagement with the BRLA and RE in general. The first of these recommendations proposes the need for multi-dimensional research investigating student and parent perceptions of the BRLA [Recommendation 4.2]. The second, proposes further research about the perceptions of students and their parents towards religion and RE as part of an organised religion [Recommendation 4.2]. These recommendations align with the research literature in Catholic Religious Education about the prominent role that parents have in their child’s learning (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 6; Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, paras. 51–65) and the need to support parents in their role (John Paul II, 1988; Vatican Council II, 1965c para. 52). The recommendations also build on the research literature about students’ current circumstances pertaining to church life (Dixon et al., 2013) and the need for a renewed mission (Schuttloffel, 2012). This mission is focused on promoting a new evangelisation (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, para. 58c; Francis I, 2013; John Paul II, 1990, para. 33d) that extends beyond the RE classroom and is specific to the spiritual and religious formation of all Catholic educators, including parents and, in turn, students (Rossiter, 2010, 2018; Rymarz, 2010, 2012).

#### **12.4 Implications**

Fourteen recommendations are proposed in this study. The recommendations have implications for Catholic education in WA, in terms of future policy consideration for the development of the BRLA and the professional formation of religious educators. There are

further implications from the recommendations for the CEOWA and other Catholic education systems regarding future policy decisions on teaching and assessment practices in RE. There are also possible implications for further research regarding teaching and assessment practices in RE. Table 12.1 is a summary of the recommendations according to implications for the CEOWA and other Catholic education systems, in terms of policy decisions and practices in RE. The proposed recommendations also have implications for future research about RE and assessment practices in education generally, including the use of LSAs.

Table 12.1

*A Summary of the Recommendations According to Implications*

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Implications for Catholic education in WA:

1. Recommendation 2.2 proposes changes to the title of *The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment*.
2. Recommendation 2.3 proposes a more system-wide, collaborative and inclusive approach to the drafting and editing of the BRLA test items involving teachers and school leaders of RE.
3. Recommendation 2.4 proposes explicit policy documents about the BRLA be produced that are well aligned to the RE curriculum and communicated effectively to all educators regardless of role.
4. Recommendation 3.4 proposes a system-wide approach to improved assessment practices with an emphasis on training educators how to better analysis and interpret data for LSA reports.
5. Recommendation 4.1 proposes system-wide solutions to student and parent disengagement in RE that focus on successful partnerships between parents and school, school and parish.

Implications for policy and practices in RE:

6. Recommendation 3.2 proposes a more unified approach to assessment design whereby teachers work collaboratively on assessments together, within year levels, across year levels and across schools within Catholic education systems.
7. Recommendation 3.3 proposes a more visible, universal and collegial response to data analysis of student learning in RE within Catholic education systems.
8. Recommendation 1.2 proposes the need for more focused professional training and ongoing professional development to improve awareness and content knowledge of the Catholic Faith Tradition.

Implications for future research:

9. Recommendation 2.1 proposes further research to investigate religious educators' perceptions of the role of accountability in RE.
  10. Recommendation 3.1 proposes further research to investigate the perceptions that educators have about assessment types and their role in RE.
  11. Recommendation 3.5 proposes further research to investigate the influence that employment role of responsibility has on the administration of LSAs and assessment practices in general.
  12. Recommendation 1.1 proposes further research about religious educators' perceptions of the meaning, purpose and role of RE and the significance that these perceptions may have on student learning in RE.
  13. Recommendation 4.2 proposes multi-dimensional research investigating student as well as parent perceptions of the BRLA and other assessment types in RE.
  14. Recommendation 4.3 proposes further research investigating student and parent perceptions of RE.
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## 12.5 Concluding Statement

This study identifies religious educators working in Catholic schools in WA as having perceived the BRLA in contrasting ways. The study suggests that the religious educators' perceptions were manifestations of broader contextual complexities regarding RE and the use of LSAs in education. To arrive at these findings, a pragmatic approach to research, driven by the research problem was adopted (Crotty, 1998). The approach used mixed methods research that takes into consideration multiple data sources and methods of data analysis (Creswell, 2009).

As the researcher, and a religious educator myself, it was my intention throughout the study to assume the "role of others" (Charon, 2010, p. 105). In doing so I believe that I have provided new local knowledge about religious educators that aligns with related local (Hackett, 2008, 2010), national (e.g. Rymarz & Hyde, 2013) and international (e.g. Buchanan & Gellel, 2015; Shanahan, 2016) research and literature. The recommendations from my study focus on student learning in RE and the adoption of a whole system approach to the improvement of learning. This approach has evolved from evidence-based curriculum reforms (Hill & Barber, 2014) that currently advocate the necessity for building cultures of learning (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). Such cultural transformation is based on understanding the coherence between educators who work together.

To advance the goal of improving student learning in RE, I believe it is my duty to promote RE as an academic discipline worthy of much needed exploration. I believe that the type of exploration required in RE should be well grounded in educational principles that as Moran (2016, p. 219) points out, encourages religious educators to "practice their religion intelligently" and helps them recognise the priority that RE has in Catholic education.

This study gave me an exciting opportunity to explore the perceptions of religious educators. My motivation for future endeavours is inspired by this study and by the words of Bishop Holohan (1999) who writes, "different philosophies of education have different ideas about knowledge. For the Catholic religious educator, the purpose of knowledge is to enlighten students' experiences so that they are enriched by them" (p. 27). Furthermore, the Bishop says, "students need to learn the language, signs and symbols of the Christian faith that have been renewed by the Second Vatican Council" (p. 58). I look forward to better understanding our Catholic Faith Tradition and providing understandings to others of why it is important for living and relating with God, oneself, others and creation (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994).