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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 ONE**

## **THE RESEARCH DEFINED**

### **1.1 Introduction**

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

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

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

### **1.3 The Research Problem**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The three SRQs that support the GRQ are:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

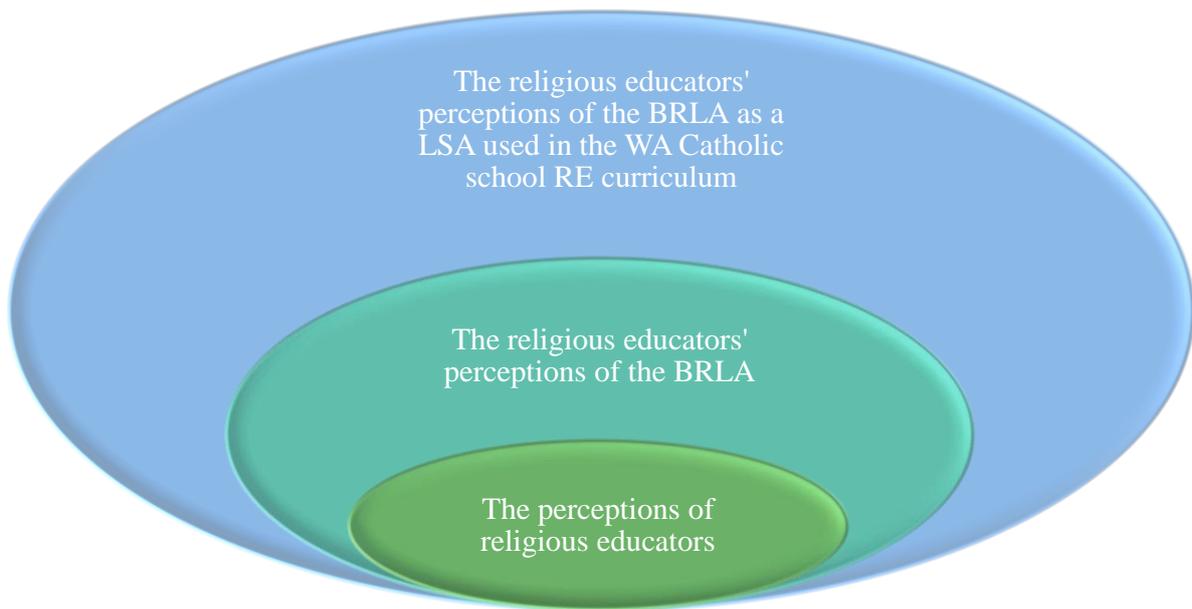
The research findings offer insights about teaching and assessment practices in RE that support research relating to a range of aspects about RE as a learning area. For example, policy changes (Vidovich, 2007) in RE that recognise the need for a shared vision (Hattie, 2009; Heritage & Yeagley, 2005;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

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

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

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

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



*Figure 1.1.* The scope of the research

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

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

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

## **1.8 Thesis Overview**

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

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

Table 1.1  
*Thesis Overview*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **1.9 Chapter Summary**

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