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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 TWO

AN OVERVIEW OF THE LOCAL CONTEXT

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the local contexts that helps to situate the extent of the research problem. Given the study focuses on investigating, identifying and understanding the perceptions that religious educators have about *The Bishops' Religious Education Assessment* (BRLA) as a large-scale, standardised assessment (LSA) used in Religious Education (RE), the chapter discusses the role of teachers and school leaders responsible for implementing the RE curriculum. The discussion is positioned within the broader context of the Catholic education system in Western Australia (WA).

2.2 The Presentation of the Chapter

The literature discussed in this chapter is outlined in Table 2.1. This literature contains two narratives relevant to the Catholic education system in WA. Firstly, the people that make up the governance structures of the system and secondly, the development and implementation of the RE curriculum by those people. Historically, the narratives reflect how the Catholic education system is founded on “the unwavering determination of church leaders” who immigrated to WA, “to serve in Catholic schools” (Tannock, 1979, p. 123).

Table 2.1

Overview of Chapter Two: Review of Local Contexts

2.3	Catholic Education in Western Australia
2.3.1	Governance and delegated responsibilities
2.4	The Religious Education Curriculum in Western Australia
2.4.1	Nature and purpose
2.4.2	Content, pedagogy and assessment
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2.4.4	The role of teachers and school leaders of Religious Education
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2.3 Catholic Education in Western Australia

The religious educators who participated in this study worked in Catholic primary and secondary schools, which are part of the Catholic education system in WA. Figure 2.1 locates the Catholic education system in WA on a map of Australia. The map identifies the administrative and geographical divisions of the Catholic Church. (The National Council of Priests in Australia, 2017). As can be seen on the map, the state of WA is the largest of all states and territories in Australia. There are four Catholic dioceses, three of which are located in regional areas of WA. The Perth Archdiocese includes the Perth metropolitan area and regional areas eastward to the state border. The Catholic education system of WA spans across all four dioceses.

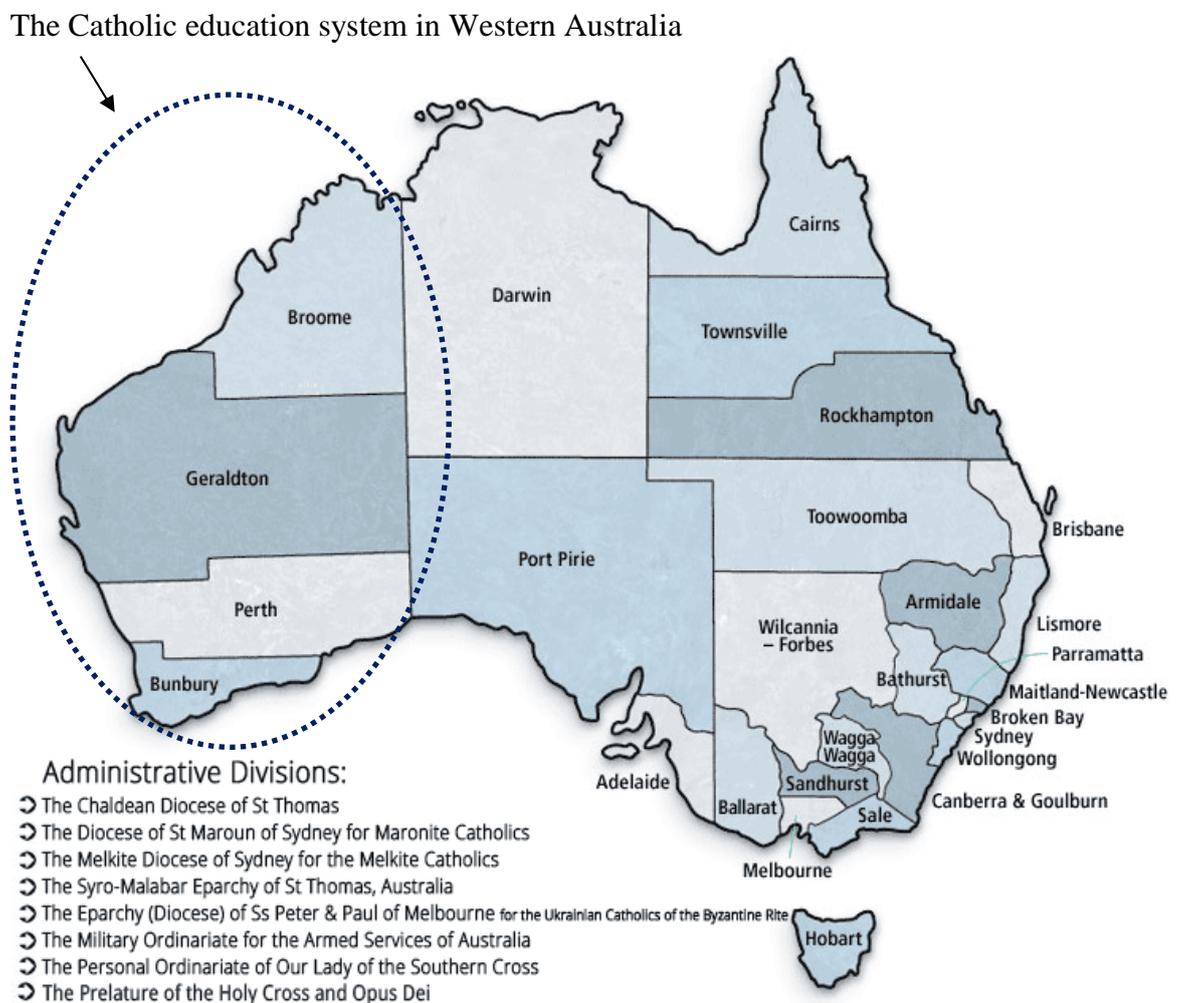


Figure 2.1. The location of the Catholic education system in Western Australia (The National Council of Priests in Australia, 2017)

2.3.1 Governance and delegated responsibilities. The administration of the Catholic education system employs a particular governance structure established by the WA Bishops with specific attention to delegated responsibilities (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2001; Pental, 2008). These delegated responsibilities are outlined in Figure 2.2. The responsibility means that those involved in Catholic education are accountable to the WA Bishops, the State and Federal governments and local communities.

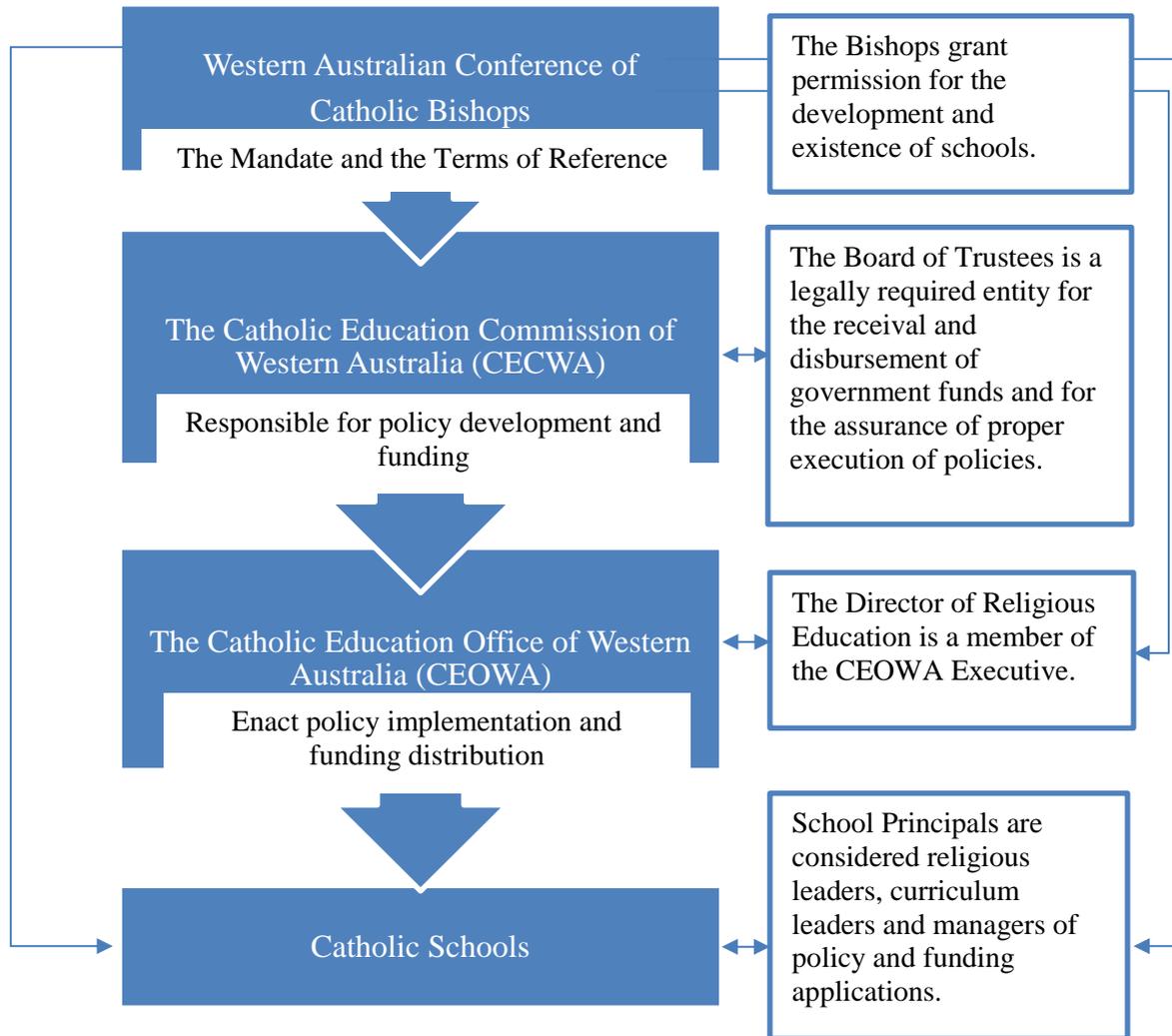


Figure 2.2. The governance structure of Catholic education in WA

2.3.1.1 The Western Australian Conference of Catholic Bishops. Typically, bishops separately govern Catholic education within their own dioceses (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1983, canon 804). However, Catholic education in WA operates as a state-wide system. This

is an arrangement, whereby the Archbishop of Perth and the Bishops of Broome, Geraldton and Bunbury have agreed to work in collaboration to oversee education as one Catholic school system (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009; Tannock, 1979). Together with the Auxiliary Bishop of Perth, the four diocesan bishops are collectively known as the Western Australian Conference of Catholic Bishops (the WA Bishops) (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009). One of the reasons the WA Bishops collaborated was to offset the costs for resourcing schools, especially in regional areas in WA where distance between schools and low population density are considered as major cost factors.

Although the responsibility for Catholic education lies with the WA Bishops, under the Commonwealth system of government in Australia, education is a State government responsibility and the funding of education is a shared responsibility between the State, Territory and Federal governments (Department of Education and Training, 2017). Part of the government responsibility of public funding for education includes funding for curriculum policy and development (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008a). The WA Bishops ensure that Catholic education in WA complies with all government legislation and standards for non-government schools (Catholic Education Western Australia, 2015, p. 21). They do so through delegating responsibility to various groups.

2.3.1.2 The Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia. In 1971, the WA Bishops established the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia (CECWA) to act on their behalf on matters relevant to Catholic education (Pendal, 2008). Unique to WA is the story of the establishment of CECWA as a Board of Trustees (Tannock, 1979). CECWA was established as a reform initiative that involved a shift from parish priests managing Catholic schools to the Catholic community. At the time of the study, CECWA operated under a joint policy agreement known as *The Mandate: Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia 2009–2015* (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009). The Mandate outlines the Terms of Reference that guide CECWA to effectively carry out the educational duties delegated by the WA Bishops (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, p. 49). These duties include the responsibility to act for the WA Bishops in specified matters concerning the education of students in Catholic schools in WA.

Specific to this study is the delegated responsibility within the Terms of Reference that the WA Bishops give to CECWA to oversee the RE curriculum (Catholic Education

Commission of Western Australia, 2009, paras. 62, 105). At the time of the study, the Religious Education and Curriculum Committee (RECC) was responsible for policy recommendations relevant to the implementation of the RE curriculum. The most recent RE policy version developed by the Committee is version 2-B5 (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2013b).

2.3.1.3 The Catholic Education Office of Western Australia. The operational responsibilities of CECWA are exercised through the Office for Catholic education (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 107). This Office is called the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia (CEOWA) and was established by the WA Bishops to act as the secretariat for CECWA. For example, CECWA policy decisions that serve Catholic schools are implemented by the CEOWA. Also, the CEOWA negotiates with governments, other agencies and administrators regarding government funding programs.

A Director of Catholic Education is appointed by the WA Bishops to oversee the executive duties of the CEOWA (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 104). The Director of Catholic Education is assisted by an Executive Team and various Directorates. Among other duties, the Religious Education and Faith Formation (REFF) Directorate of the CEOWA is responsible for developing and implementing the RE curriculum. The REFF Directorate is run by the Director of Religious Education.

2.3.1.4 The Director of Religious Education. The WA Bishops appoint a Director of Religious Education to act exclusively on their behalf regarding RE (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 106). This appointment ensures that principles and procedures from developed RE policies are executed (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 5). The Director of Religious Education and the staff working within the Directorate of Religious Education and Faith Formation are responsible for carrying out catechetical and educational activities that support Catholic schools. The support includes providing ongoing development and review of the RE curriculum and policy statements, assisting staff in Catholic schools to implement the RE curriculum, and providing professional learning opportunities for teachers and school leaders working in Catholic schools in WA.

2.3.1.5 Catholic schools. Catholic schools in WA and around the world are entrusted to fulfil the episcopal, religious and educational responsibilities of the diocesan bishops who

lead them (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 6; Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1983, canon 804). Governance documents issued by CECWA stress the importance of these responsibilities and support Catholic school members to carry them out. These include the Mandate (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009), *The Religious Education Policy, version 2-B5* (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2013b) and *The Curriculum Policy, version 2-B2* (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2013a).

The religious responsibility of a Catholic school is to give witness to the Gospel message (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, paras. 40, 49). The witnessing of the Gospel message is part of the evangelising mission of the Church (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, para. 39; Paul VI, 1975). Giving witness is considered a lifelong relational and formational experience (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, paras. 35, 86, 88, 90, 92) as “transmitted through the Church” (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, paras. 40, 49). To support Catholic schools in WA to give witness to the Gospel message, the CEOWA work with school leaders to develop Evangelisation Plans. The aim of the plans is to ensure that students develop a commitment to restoring God’s harmony in the world (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994, para. 376). To achieve this aim Catholic schools are further supported by the CEOWA to implement a Catholic curriculum that focuses on education and catechetical or faith-based activities. The Evangelisation Plans that are developed are required to outline how schools intend to “integrate faith and culture and faith and life” (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, p. 27, paras. 60, 73).

The Catholic school has a duty to provide students with educational experiences that reflect the Catholic worldview in all the subject areas taught, including RE (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 27). This Catholic worldview is concerned with education that develops the whole human person (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 29). This educational responsibility of a Catholic school in WA is to offer and successfully implement nine learning areas (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2013a, para. 4). RE is considered the “first” priority learning area mandated by the WA Bishops (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, paras. 61, 62; 2013a; 2013b). This priority is universally recognised by the Catholic Church (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, paras. 71, 72; Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1983, canon 756, para. 2). The WA Bishops present RE as the underlying reason for the existence of Catholic schools (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 62; Holohan, 1999). This

idea is also universally recognised by the Church (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 49, 1988, para. 66; Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, para. 80; Convey, 2012; D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012, pp. 18–19).

At the time of this study (2013 and 2014), Catholic education in WA consisted of 161 Catholic schools, comprising 112 primary, 27 secondary and 22 composite schools, with a total of 74,220 students and 4,834 full-time teaching staff (Catholic Education Western Australia, 2014). Of these schools, 147 participated in the BRLA in 2013 and 2014 (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2014). The religious educators involved in this study were employed in one of 65 Catholic primary, secondary and composite schools in WA. These schools represent 44.2% (65 of 147) of Catholic schools within the Catholic education system in WA that participated in the BRLA at the time of the study.

2.3.1.6 Catholic school principals. The delegated responsibility at the Catholic school level in WA is located with the school principals. Principals are considered the religious and educational leaders of a Catholic school because it is their delegated responsibility to promote the universal mission of the Catholic Church (Sayce & Lavery, 2010). This mission is one of evangelisation within their school communities (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, paras. 94, 95). Principals are expected to:

- understand, embrace and effectively communicate the Catholic worldview to their school communities (Buchanan, 2014; Convey, 2012; Sergiovanni, 2006);
- promote their school’s Catholic identity by “striving for deeper relationships with Jesus” so as to become “more effective leaders of Christ-centred school communities” (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 95; McNamara, 2002);
- understand and give witness to the Gospel message of the Catholic Church through the promotion of a Catholic religious life and through the appropriate delivery of the RE curriculum mandated by the WA Bishops (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 62); and,
- lead and manage State, Territory and Federal government policies and initiatives involving teaching, assessment and reporting (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011).

This study involves the voluntary participation of 31 school principals. At the time of the study, 26 of these principals were leaders of Catholic primary schools and five of Catholic secondary schools. Of these principals, eight primary principals also chose to voluntarily participate in Phase Two of the study, involving semi-structured, individual interviews. The findings from the study provide insights about the principals as religious and educational leaders of their Catholic schools in terms of their delegated responsibility for RE.

2.4 The Religious Education Curriculum in Western Australia

Hackett (2006) describes the Catholic RE curriculum in WA as “both a learning area and an integral part of the educational philosophy and structure of the Catholic education system in Western Australia” (p. 36). The RE policies developed by CECWA describe how RE is a learning area but must not be taught to students as “an accessory” alongside other important curriculum areas (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 62). Rather, RE should be implemented with its own importance as an academic activity with the “same systematic demands and rigour as other learning areas” (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, para. 66; Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, para. 73). As an academic activity, RE is reserved for the classroom and allocated appropriate class times for the different Year levels (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2013b). These times range from 15 minutes a day in Pre-Primary through to 220 minutes per week for students in Years 11 and 12.

The CEOWA provides a state-wide RE curriculum developed and implemented under the provision and guidance of the Director of Religious Education (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009) and ultimately prescribed in the Terms of Reference outlined in the Mandate (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, p. 49) by the WA Bishops. Figure 2.3 represents a model of the RE curriculum in WA, highlighting its key components.

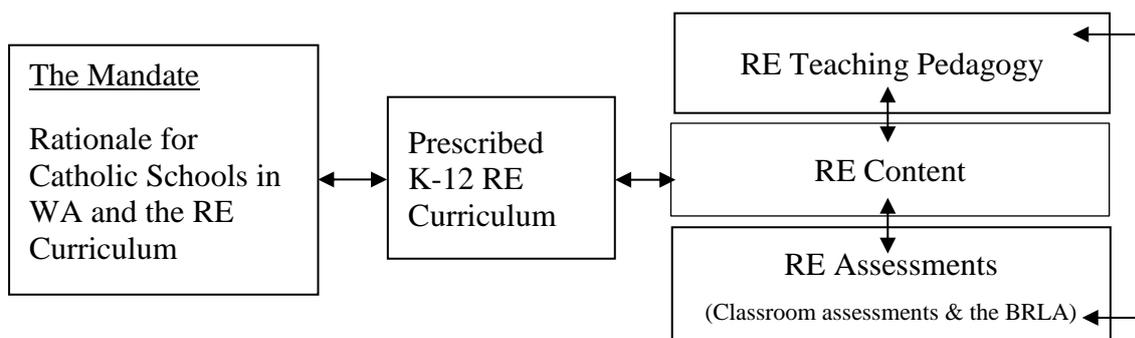


Figure 2.3. A model of the Catholic Religious Education curriculum in WA

2.4.1 Nature and purpose. To understand the nature and purpose of the RE curriculum taught in Catholic schools in WA is to understand divine Revelation (Holohan, 1999). The Church states that Revelation is the belief that God is actively revealing God's self beyond creation and throughout history (Buchanan & Rymarz, 2008; Vatican Council II, 1965b, para. 2). People can experience God's act of self-revelation especially through the Gospel message or the Good News story of the person of Jesus (Francis I, 2013; Paul VI, 1975). This is called Evangelisation.

The Church proclaims Evangelisation in two ways (Holohan, 1999, p. 17). One way is Christian witness and the other is the Ministry of the Word. In the first, people need to be present to receive the Gospel message. A person's presence and charity in terms of accepting God's love is required to give witness to others. In the second, people are assisted through Catechesis or lifelong faith development and knowledge and experience activities to become aware of God. RE as an intended knowledge and experience activity specifically aims to hand on the content of the Christian faith by addressing the factors that influence and challenge the "divine action of the Message" (Holohan, 1999, p. 19). However, RE is not just about teaching the Catholic content nor just about pedagogy.

To overemphasise content to the neglect of teaching process is to cooperate with the self-revealing God in a very limited way. On the other hand, to overemphasise pedagogy to the neglect of content is to deprive students of truths God has revealed. Without these truths, students will be more limited in their capacity to know and to "enter into real intimacy" with God. (Holohan, 1999, p. 12)

The specific interpretation regarding the nature and purpose of the RE curriculum taught in Catholic schools in WA is attributed to Father Gerard Holohan (Huebsch; 2003; Pental, 2008). Pental (2008) argues that Father Holohan (currently the Bishop of Bunbury) was instrumental in the development of RE in WA. Huebsch (2003) argues that Holohan's approach to RE cuts through the language contained in Vatican documents, which were considered difficult to comprehend. The question posed by Holohan, "What should Catholic schools be trying to achieve in religious education?" (Holohan, 1999, p. 7), highlights the focus of his work in addressing what religious educators should do to implement the RE curriculum. Figure 2.4 illustrates Holohan's interpretation of the place of RE as a learning area within the context of Catholic education in WA.

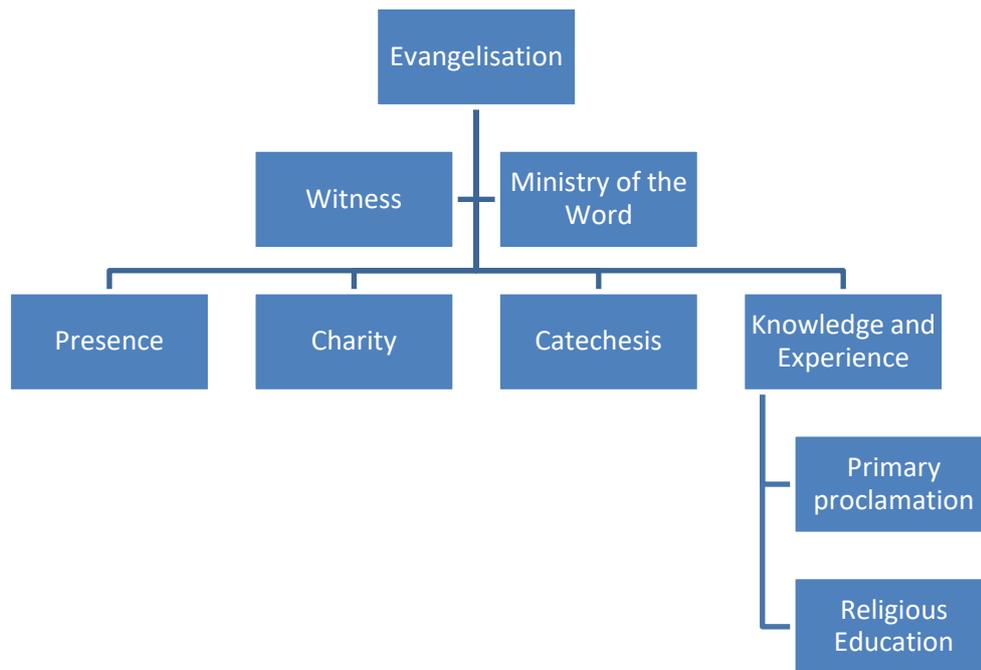


Figure 2.4. The place of Religious Education in Catholic schools in WA (Holohan, 1999, p. 37)

Holohan (1999, p. 29) explains that as an evangelising activity, the rationale for RE is based on a confessional character that promotes a critical understanding of the beliefs of a particular religious faith or confession. The effectiveness of RE depends on the extent to which educators respond to the needs of students who are believers, non-believers and searchers or doubters of faith (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, para. 75). The RE curriculum needs to contribute to the students’ understanding of the Christian faith (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2013b; Holohan, 1999) in relation to the world and the students’ experiences of the world. The appropriate selection of the content of the RE curriculum should be sensitive to what students’ faith situations require and should be presented in ways that relate to the students’ life questions, concerns and choices (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, para. 23; Holohan, 1999, p. 55).

2.4.2 Content, pedagogy and assessment. The content of the RE curriculum draws upon the teachings of the Gospel message and the Christian response to that message. By academically exposing students to this content, it is assumed that students are provided with a context to reflect on their personal experiences of a life in faith (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, para. 69). The aim is to help students learn to critically dialogue with the

world around them in the same way as they potentially do with other acquired knowledge (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, paras. 58, 60, 62; Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, p. 73, para. 41).

The content of the Catholic RE curriculum in WA is presented in Units of Work for school-aged students enrolled in Pre-Primary to Year 12. The Units are educational in focus and contain key understandings, teaching programs and support documents (Hackett, 2006). The language of the Catholic Faith Tradition is used in the RE Units of Work. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994) is a key reference document for that language and its interpretation.

There is a required systematic presentation of the content taught from Pre-Primary to Year 10 (Hackett, 2006; Pental, 2008). Students are generally taken through a three-step interconnected process involving discovering God through human experience; learning about the life and teachings of Jesus relevant to the human experiences presented; and responding as Catholics to those human experiences. In Years 11 and 12, the Senior Secondary RE program varies from this presentation. The Senior Secondary RE program is also aligned with the CECWA policies regarding RE but must fulfil the educational requirements of the State government regarding preparations for students to enter tertiary studies (School Curriculum and Standards Authority, 2016b). The title given to the Senior Secondary RE program is Religion and Life.

The implementation of the content in the RE curriculum from Pre-Primary to Year 12 is evaluated at the system level using formal assessments (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, 2013b). These assessments are developed by the REFF Directorate within the CEOWA. One assessment is the BRLA (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2007b; Hackett, Sayce, & Alteri, 2017). Other assessments include the Senior Secondary Religious Education Common Assessment Tasks for students in Year 11. The Religion and Life exam at the end of Year 12 also contributes to the evaluation process in RE. The exam is developed by the State government's educational authority (School Curriculum and Standards Authority, 2016b). These three assessment types are system-wide, enabling the evaluation of the RE curriculum to be conducted in and across Catholic schools with the same depth and rigour as other learning areas. This study is, however, only interested in the school-based religious educators' involvement with the BRLA.

2.4.3 The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment. *The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment* or BRLA was initially developed in 2006 by the CEOWA (Catholic

Education Office of Western Australia, 2006a). The assessment was originally called *The Archbishops' Religious Literacy Assessment*, as it was trialled across the Archdiocese of Perth with students in Year Seven. In 2007, the BRLA was formally introduced to Catholic schools in all four Catholic dioceses in WA (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2007b). The title of the assessment was changed to *The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment* to acknowledge the state-wide administration of the BRLA to large numbers of students in Years Five, Seven and Nine. In the early years, media attention identified the BRLA within the context of RE as “Knowledge of Bible to get same status as maths and reading as Catholic schools overhaul religious education: Catholic pupils to have faith exams” (Hiatt, 2006).

The BRLA is considered a local example of a LSA because firstly, student cohorts across WA are involved. Secondly, commonly developed test items are used to assess student learning in RE within classrooms, across Year levels and across Catholic schools. Thirdly, standardised marking and reporting procedures are developed and implemented (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013).

There were three possible catalysts that created a climate for such a LSA to be used in RE. Firstly, outcomes-based education focused on improving standards in education (Decker & Bolt, 2008) was at the centre of public and educational discussions. Based on these discussions the public (Zwartz, 2006) and Catholic (Coyne, 2008) media also drew attention to the lack of quality learning standards in Catholic schools, particularly, in RE. Secondly, evidence-based curriculum reforms entered the educational scene shortly after (Forster, 2009). Thirdly, the use of LSAs to collect evidence of student learning were part of these reforms (Shaddock, 2014).

Prior to the introduction of the BRLA, a local example of a LSA was being used by the State government that involved students in Years Three, Five, Seven and Nine in all schools, including Catholic schools. Student learning was measured in literacy, numeracy, science and the humanities subject Society and Environment. This LSA was called the Western Australian Monitoring Standards in Education (WAMSE) (Department of Education of Western Australia, 2011). The Director of Religious Education responded to the use of LSAs as part of the evidence-based curriculum reforms implemented by the State government. The response was the introduction of the BRLA for Catholic schools. The aim of the response was to improve standards in teaching and assessment practices in RE and, in turn, the quality of student learning (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2006; Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2006a). Figure 2.5 is a representation

of the key components of the BRLA’s framework (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013).

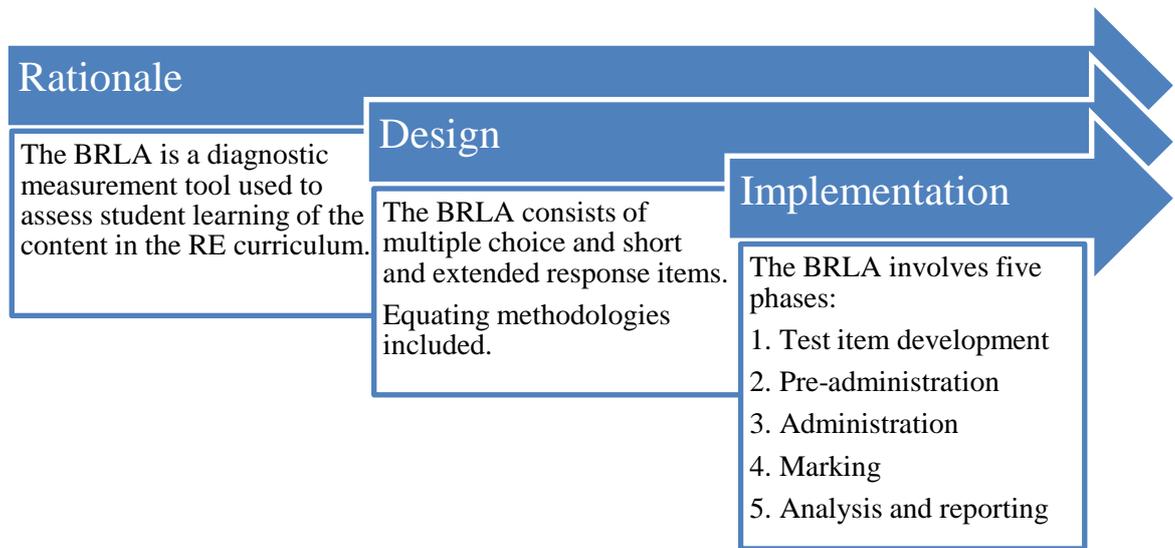


Figure 2.5. The key components of the BRLA

Since 2008, students in Years Three, Five and Nine in Catholic schools across all four Catholic dioceses in WA take part in the BRLA from late July to early August (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013). The participation of various student cohorts has changed over the years. For example, the Year Seven cohort originally participated and later was discontinued. The reason being that the State government allowed Catholic schools in WA to move students from Year Seven in Catholic primary schools to Catholic secondary schools. The change in school location for students in Year Seven meant that a large intake of students from non-government schools would potentially participate in an RE program in Year Seven in their first year of Catholic secondary education without prior knowledge of the content in the RE curriculum (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2008). Another example is Year Five and later Year Three students who originally entered the BRLA as part of an informal process (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2010). For those Year levels, Catholic schools were provided with the test papers and analytical marking keys. Teachers in schools were asked to score the students’ responses to the BRLA. No systematic collation of student performance data was collected and reported (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013). Appendix A describes the historical developments of the BRLA (Hackett et al., 2017).

2.4.3.1 Rationale. The purpose of the BRLA is to measure student knowledge and understanding of the content of the RE curriculum within particular Year levels and across Catholic schools in WA (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013). The content of the RE curriculum is defined within the title of the BRLA as the ‘religious literacy’ that students are expected to know, understand and apply. The results from the BRLA are expected to be used in conjunction with student performance data from other RE assessments developed by classroom teachers. The outcomes of these expectations are to promote school and system-wide improvements in student learning in RE.

2.4.3.2 Design. The BRLA consists of multiple choice, short and extended test items (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013). The test items in the BRLA are criterion referenced against the content in the RE curriculum. Students receive common test items relevant to the content they are expected to have covered in that Year level. Generally, the different test items are presented in two separate sections within the test papers for each Year level. The two sections of the test papers are further subdivided into four key content areas: Jesus, Bible, Church, and Sacraments and Prayer. All test items focus on measuring students’ content knowledge and not the students’ faith responses. The time allocated for students to complete all test items is between 45 and 90 minutes. The older the student cohort, the more test items provided, and the more time given to the students to complete the items.

The design of the BRLA includes an ‘equating program’ (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2012b). This program precedes the administration of the BRLA and involves shortened versions of the BRLA test papers. The aim of the equating program is to establish a measurement scale that becomes the standard by which student scores can be compared over time and across Year levels. A one item or parameter Rasch model is used in the equating program (Andrich, 1988; Andrich et al., 2011). The methodology for the equating program is based on a sample group of approximately 1,000 students. Common test items embedded in the equating assessments are administered to a common group of students who participate in both the equating assessments and the actual BRLA for a particular Year group. At the time of the study, students in Years Five and Nine were involved in the equating program. The students’ responses were formally marked by a team of religious educators employed by the CEOWA. Furthermore, school and student reports were formally produced. Recent developments have focused on establishing online versions of the BRLA and online reporting of student performance (Hackett et al., 2017).

2.4.3.3 Implementation. The implementation into schools of the BRLA comprises five phases (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013). Each phase involves a sequence of procedures that lead into the next phase. In the first phase, known as the design phase, documents are sent out by the CEOWA to school principals advising them of the required procedures to be followed in preparation for the administration of the BRLA. This phase also involves the development of test items. As mentioned, the test items range in number and difficulty for each Year level. The second and third phases of the BRLA are known as the pre-administration and administration phases. During the pre-administration phase, school audits are conducted by the CEOWA to collect contact details of school coordinators that will assist in the administration of the BRLA. Principals and other school leaders of RE are provided with support documents for administering the various assessments during the administration period set for July through to August each year. Teachers of RE are expected to receive the support documentation as they play a major role in preparing students for the administration of the BRLA. A letter to parents (Appendix B) is drafted for schools to use as part of the administration phase to provide parents with the necessary information about the BRLA and the reporting of student performance (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013, p. 14).

The administration phase is followed by the marking phase. During the marking phase, Year Three test papers have generally remained at schools and are marked by teaching staff (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2012b). This practice is in keeping with the informal nature of the Year Three BRLA process. Analytical marking keys are provided by the CEOWA to achieve consistent marking across all test papers. The CEOWA encourages teaching staff to discuss results of the Year Three BRLA and to consider those results in future planning for student learning in RE. Alternatively, and in keeping with the formal BRLA process, Year Five and Year Nine test papers are sent away for marking. A team of religious educators are employed to mark the short and extended response items in both these test papers using analytical marking keys (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2016a). Until 2015, multiple choice questions were scanned and entered into a database by scanning technology managed by Edith Cowan University Australia. Scoring of student responses to multiple choice questions was collated using statistical software. Since 2015, the scoring of multiple choice and short answer test items has involved automated online processes provided by an online service provider (Hackett et al., 2017).

The analysis and reporting phase is the final segment in the implementation of the BRLA. Edith Cowan University Australia and The University of Western Australia are

involved (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2016a). This phase is a formal one that has generally only applied to the Year Five and Year Nine assessment results. The results are analysed using statistical packages and student, school and system reports are produced. The Year Five and Nine test papers are returned to schools so that religious educators can review the test items and results with students. The CEOWA recommends to schools to send test papers and student reports home to parents.

2.4.4 The role of teachers and school leaders of Religious Education. The implementation of the RE curriculum in Catholic schools in WA is the responsibility of a team of professional educators (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, 2013b). This team includes school-based religious educators such as principals, other school leaders and teachers of RE. As trained professionals, these religious educators are expected to understand and promote curriculum implementations including contemporary pedagogical, assessment and reporting designs and practices (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011; Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 65, 2013a, para. 4). They are expected to methodically deliver the content of the RE curriculum using contemporary educational standards (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, paras. 43, 61, 62, 2013b; Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, paras. 58, 60, 62, 70; Holohan, 1999; Ryan, 2007, p. 16). As part of the religious educators' role they may prepare students for the administration of the BRLA as well as engage in other aspects of the implementation of the assessment (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013). This study involves 238 school-based religious educators (150 classroom teachers, 31 school principals and 57 other school leaders) who are responsible for implementing the RE curriculum and preparing students for the BRLA.

To effectively carry out their role, all school-based religious educators in WA are encouraged to continually maintain their professional training (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982, paras. 59, 64–70) in Church history, Catholic theology (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, paras. 96, 97) and in content and pedagogy (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, para. 62). Professional training is available to religious educators through tertiary courses at The University of Notre Dame Australia (2017), the Catholic Institute of Western Australia (2011) and the CEOWA accredited program (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2013c). Until this study, the extent to which school-based religious educators understand, interpret and fulfil or respond to their expected

roles within Catholic education in WA was empirically unknown, and a source of the research problem.

2.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the local context of the study. The presentation was in two parts. The first part was an overview of Catholic education in WA. The overview contained details of the governance structure of the Catholic education system. The second part was an explanation of the RE curriculum developed by the CEOWA. This is a mandated curriculum with educational requirements and standards that the WA Bishops expect religious educators to uphold as their delegated staff working in Catholic schools. The WA Bishops expect the same standards and approaches to teaching and assessment practices in RE as in other learning areas. This expectation extends to one of the assessment components of the RE curriculum called the BRLA. The chapter concludes with a local perspective of school-based religious educators who work in Catholic education in WA and their role in implementing the RE curriculum.

As an education system, Catholic education in WA has applied religious and educational principles outlined in Church documents (Holohan, 1999). At the same time, the system is influenced by national and world-wide trends and curriculum reforms in education (Buchanan, 2009; Ryan, 2007, p. 16). The next chapter reviews more contextual literature from a global perspective of RE as well as assessment practices in education. These practices are evidence-based and include the use of LSAs. In western countries the use of LSAs in RE has become a feature, showing further alignment between RE and other learning areas.