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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 FIVE

FINDING ONE

5.1 Introduction

This chapter reports the first key finding that emerged from Phase One of the study. The finding addresses SRQ 1: How do religious educators perceive the purpose and role of the BRLA as a large-scale, standardised assessment in Religious Education? Response data from 238 religious educators to ten online questionnaire items were collected and analysed. For analysis and reporting, these respondents were categorised into two groups based on their employment role. Group one comprises 55 Year Three teachers, 40 Year Five teachers and 55 Year Nine teachers, all responsible for implementing the RE curriculum. Collectively, this group of 150 classroom teachers is referred to as teachers of RE. Group two comprises 37 APREs, 20 RECs and 31 school principals. Collectively this group of 88 religious educators are referred to as school leaders of RE. The analysis of response data from the religious educators that led to Finding One involved three processes. Firstly, written data from four open-ended items were collated, coded and categorised. Secondly, numeric data from six structured response items were collated and statistically analysed. Thirdly, the processed data were combined, integrated and cross-referenced.

5.2 The Presentation of Finding One

Table 5.1 outlines the structure of the chapter in terms of the presentation of Finding One. The evidence to support the finding is explained through the use of three sub-findings. The sub-findings emerged from separate and combined investigations. The investigations targeted response data from the religious educators relating to their perceptions of the meaning and value of the BRLA and, in turn, the purpose and role of the BRLA within the RE curriculum. Open-ended questions, a rating scale and Likert scale items mostly applying five ordered categories were used.

Finding One suggests that the religious educators differed in their perceptions of the purpose and role of the BRLA. Groups of religious educators disagreed about the nature and purpose of the BRLA and the role it played as an assessment in RE. The disagreements seem to be based on the religious educators' personal and professional experiences of the BRLA and, more broadly, of teaching RE and using LSAs in education.

Table 5.1

Overview of Chapter Five: Finding One

5.2	Finding One: The religious educators differed in their perceptions of the purpose and role of the BRLA.
5.2.1	Sub-finding 1.1: Groups of religious educators perceived the purpose of the BRLA in different ways.
5.2.2	Sub-finding 1.2: The majority of religious educators believed the BRLA had a role to play in RE but disagreed about the type of role.
5.2.3	Sub-finding 1.3: Groups of religious educators provided contrasting rationales for their perceptions of the purpose and role of the BRLA.
5.3	Chapter Summary

5.2.1 Sub-finding 1.1. Response data to six online questionnaire items were used to investigate the religious educators’ perceptions of the purpose of the BRLA. The investigation considered three aspects. Firstly, how the religious educators perceived their experiences of the BRLA and what those experiences implied. Secondly, how the religious educators perceived the effectiveness of the BRLA as a measure of student learning in RE. Thirdly, how satisfied the religious educators perceived people in their school communities to be about the BRLA. The results from the investigation identify groups of religious educators with similar numbers, who either raised concerns about or expressed support for the BRLA.

5.2.1.1 Described experiences of the BRLA. The religious educators were asked to describe their experiences of the BRLA. Table 5.2 lists examples of common descriptions used by respondents about their experiences. These descriptions are categorised according to three response patterns. Two-thirds of the respondents [159 of 238 (66.8%)] described the meaning and purpose of the BRLA as part of their experiences. One-third of the respondents [79 of 238 (33.2%)] chose to focus on operational experiences of administering the BRLA. The response data from these respondents is considered in Chapter Seven as it relates specifically to the administration and implementation of the BRLA (SRQ 2).

Table 5.2

Described experiences of the BRLA

Response Pattern One: Expressions of concern about the BRLA

One group of 80 of 238 respondents (33.6%) used phrases such as, the BRLA is:

- a distraction from our work and just another thing we have to do.
- is not a test that caters for students' ages, abilities or differentiated learning styles.
- is an English literacy test rather than a measure of religious literacy.
- too difficult and stressful for students and teachers.
- only for the more capable students who are able to memorise and rote learn facts.
- too content driven and an examination of doctrine.
- not supported by students, parents or teaching colleagues unless they are practising Catholics and go to Mass.
- a logistical nightmare and of little relevance to classroom practices and, reporting.

Response Pattern Two: Expressions of support for the BRLA

One group of 79 of 238 respondents (33.2%) used phrases such as, the BRLA is:

- fine, good, great, rewarding, positive and a worthwhile undertaking.
- a useful, effective and valuable assessment tool for Catholic schools, that is, interesting and thought provoking and very informative.
- a good initiative for the system.
- an easy process to understand.
- inclusive and complementary to classroom practices in RE.
- not receiving the attention, it deserves.
- better than nothing.

Response Pattern Three: Expressions regarding operational experiences

One group of 79 of 238 respondents (33.2%) uses phrases such as:

- I assist students and teachers with the administration of the BRLA.
- I inform the students, teachers and parents about the processes for administering the BRLA.
- I review past test items with students.
- I followed all the instructions.

Note. Partial response data to Open-ended Item 12: Describe your experience of the BRLA ($N = 238$).

5.2.1.1.1 *Response Pattern One.* A total of 80 of 238 respondents (33.6%) raised concerns about the use of the BRLA and questioned the purpose of the assessment. The group suggested the BRLA was a “distraction” to the work carried out in RE classes. These respondents were mainly teachers [56 of 80 (70.0%)], compared to school leaders of RE [13 of 80 (16.3%)] and principals [11 of 80 (13.8%)]. These 56 teachers represent 37.3% of the teachers of RE (56 of 150) involved in Phase One of this study and 23.5% of the total number of respondents (56 of 238) in that phase. The Year Three and Year Nine teachers in particular, made comments such as the BRLA is “an extraordinary waste of resources and time” and “what is the point of this?”. Table 5.3 presents the frequency of expressed concerns from the group about the BRLA and from a sub-group who specifically described the BRLA as challenging.

Table 5.3
The Frequency of Described Concerns About the BRLA

Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		Total (%)
Year 3 (n = 55)	Year 5 (n = 40)	Year 9 (n = 55)	APRE (n = 37)	REC (n = 20)	CPP (n = 26)	CSP (n = 5)	
22	15	19	6	7	8	3	80 (33.6)

^a*Major concern -The BRLA was challenging.*

Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		Total (%)
Year 3 (n = 55)	Year 5 (n = 40)	Year 9 (n = 55)	APRE (n = 37)	REC (n = 20)	CPP (n = 26)	CSP (n = 5)	
13 of 22	8 of 15	6 of 19	6 of 6	4 of 7	3 of 8	1 of 3	41 of 80 (51.3) 41 of 238 (17.2)

Note. Partial responses to Open-ended Item 12: Describe your experience of the BRLA (N = 238).

^an = 41 religious educators as a sub-group of the 80 religious educators who raised concerns.

APRE represents Assistant Principals as school leaders of RE in Catholic primary schools.

REC represents Religious Education Coordinators as school leaders of RE in Catholic secondary schools.

CPP represents Catholic primary principals and CSP represents Catholic secondary principals.

The respondents identified the purpose of the assessment as a “form of accountability” aimed at finding out how well teachers “cover” the content in the RE

curriculum. For these respondents, the BRLA was an “imposed” form of accountability; a “compulsory” and “negative” “compliance instrument” that, as a LSA, “informs” and “only satisfies” the WA Bishops and system authorities such as the CEOWA. As one principal wrote, “The BRLA is an assessment that had to be issued to the students and we followed through with the directive”.

The respondents also described the BRLA as “just another thing to do” in what they suggested was a “crowded curriculum”. They explained how the purpose of the BRLA was “unclear” and had “never been communicated” by school leaders and system authorities. As one Year Nine teacher stated, “It is difficult to appreciate the purpose of the BRLA because there should be more feedback on the results”. Furthermore, they described the BRLA as a “Holy NAPLAN”. The respondents raised concerns about the BRLA and associated those concerns with NAPLAN (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2014). They provided specific arguments about the challenges that LSAs such as the BRLA and NAPLAN present to students and teachers. As will be identified throughout the six chapters, the groups’ concerns provide a noteworthy context for why they questioned the purpose of the BRLA.

Common concerns about the BRLA were raised by the group of 80 respondents. Firstly, more than half [41 of 80 (51.3%)] described the BRLA as a challenging LSA. These 41 respondents represent 17.2% (41 of 238) of the total number of respondents in Phase One. These respondents questioned the validity of the assessment. They argued the BRLA was irrelevant to the RE curriculum and suggested a “noticeable difference between the language used in the content of the RE curriculum and the BRLA”. For example, as one Year Five teacher wrote:

I found some of the language or vocabulary to be beyond many of the children and the content at times to be very theological. There were some questions which seemed to be designed to trick children. I wonder at the validity of an assessment for young children when our main objective is to help develop them as young Catholics living out Gospel values. I do not believe this is reflected in the assessment.

Similarly, one Year Three teacher wrote:

If the intent of the BRLA is purely to make lower school religion a more academic subject, then it is effective. My question about the purpose of Religious Education as a holistic subject remains.

Year Nine teachers also questioned the validity of the BRLA and argued the assessment was designed only for students who are “better able to perform on pen and paper tests”. They

commented, “The BRLA is a rote learning exercise” for students who have “sound memories”. One secondary school leader of RE responsible for Year Nine students suggested a correlation between student performance in the BRLA as a LSA and students’ literacy skills:

Many classroom teachers do stress about the BRLA. However, some don’t see the relevance of it. Looking at the students’ results, I can see that good literacy skills are needed to answer the questions.

Further to these concerns, 19 respondents (8.0% of 238) argued specifically that the BRLA as a LSA was challenging for students because “assessments such as these” do not consider the “English competency of students”. A total of 18 respondents (7.6% of 238) stated the BRLA was challenging because it “causes stress” for students and teachers. For these respondents, the BRLA as a LSA was “too literacy based” and “not suitable for the ages and learning styles of students”. These respondents appear to have questioned the validity of the BRLA based on their perceptions of student learning in RE.

The 19 respondents also described the purpose of the BRLA as a “measure of students’ English capabilities rather than their religious literacy”. They suggested students “struggle” to read the questions and answer the written sections in the BRLA. They remarked, students only achieve “good results” in LSAs when they demonstrate highly competent comprehension skills. These respondents also indicated the vocabulary in the BRLA was inappropriate for students, particularly for “young” students, students with “poor literacy skills” and “indigenous students”. The accuracy of measuring student knowledge of RE, using the BRLA, was questioned by the group because they perceived students to perform poorly in the BRLA.

The Year Three teachers, within the group described their experience of the BRLA test items as “above the students’ abilities” and the language and question structure to be “too dense for children of this age”. The teachers referred to the BRLA test items as “obstacles” that “inadequately reflect student knowledge of the topics” taught in RE classes. As one of the teachers explained:

I believe that the BRLA does not test students on the work that they are learning in school. It is difficult for students to revise for the test because we spend more time on completing the program and I believe that the BRLA does not take into consideration specific needs and learning abilities. I believe that the BRLA does not properly assess students’ learning and it is viewed as something negative.

Further investigation regarding the respondents' perceptions of the difficulty of the BRLA test items is discussed in Chapter Seven. Within Chapter Seven attention is given to the respondents' reactions to aspects of the implementation and administration of the BRLA that include opinions of the design and structure of test items.

The 18 respondents who specifically referred to the BRLA as a stressful LSA for students and teachers comprised: six Year Three teachers, five Year Five teachers, four Year Nine teachers, two school leaders of RE in Catholic primary schools and one school leader of RE in a Catholic secondary school. Three reasons were provided by the group for why they perceived the BRLA to have caused stress. Firstly, nine respondents [9 of 238 (3.8%)] perceived LSAs such as the BRLA as "emotionally damaging" because students may not have covered all the content in the RE curriculum. For these respondents, students felt inadequately prepared for the BRLA. Secondly, nine other respondents [9 of 238 (3.8%)] perceived students in Years Three, Five and Nine to be "over tested" and exposed heavily to the use of LSAs. Thirdly, seven respondents [7 of 238 (2.9%)] perceived the BRLA as "too content driven" and "damaging to their students' faith".

The religious educators who raised concerns about the BRLA, suggested that students need to be adequately prepared for engaging with LSAs and "sitting this style of test". Year Three teachers, in particular, commented that Year Three students are not familiar with the "formal LSA" experience. As one Year Three teacher explained:

I found the BRLA to be a bit pointless. I think the BRLA puts undue stress on Year Three children. Their program of work focuses on discussions, drawings, roleplay etc. To ask questions in a formalised style like the Bishops' test, confuses them, even if they know the answer. At this age, we still have children that struggle with reading, even though we as teachers can read to them.

A feature of the teacher's argument is about the difficulty of the language used in LSAs test items and a suggestion that the RE learning area is not to be taught and assessed in a formal manner.

The respondents explained that the language used in the BRLA test items presented a challenge for them and caused pressure on them to prepare students. They felt that students needed guidance with the difficult language anticipated in the test items and compelled to "teach to the test, even though it was recommended not to". They wrote statements such as, "the expectations of school leaders and parents place undue pressure upon us as teachers". They also wrote statements such as, "There is way too much emphasis on these types of tests". The BRLA was identified by these respondents as a LSA "outside the realms" of

regular classroom practices and “a distraction to the work of students and teachers”. As a consequence of their perceptions, the respondents indicated that they “treated the BRLA in isolation” because “it had no use or benefit” to RE. In the words of one school leader, “Purpose! The CEOWA needs to be more explicit about why we need the BRLA”. According to the respondents, if a specific purpose for the BRLA did exist, it has not been communicated effectively to them.

As the 80 respondents described their concerns about the BRLA, they also seem to have described their dislike of LSAs. Groups of religious educators wrote statements similar to the following:

- “I don’t think a lot about standardised testing”
- “I am not a fan of these tests”
- “Large-scale, standardised assessments don’t always measure ability in an area”
- “As one form of assessment, LSAs, disadvantage students from low socio-economic background”
- “LSAs focus on rote learning not critical thinking”
- “I find that we spend too much time on standardised testing and less time on teaching content”.

The comments identify the respondents’ general perceptions of LSAs as distinctive and contrary to the classroom environment. As one school leader explained:

I feel strongly that the large-scale tests are detrimental to the learning experiences of many children. The test environment is not one that the children are used to these days and for some children, particularly those who struggle with their literacy, it is a very unpleasant. The results are usually given very late in the year and are often of no benefit to the current teacher.

The statements by two respondents further reflect the perceptions of the group about LSAs. Firstly, one Year Nine teacher wrote, “Other important curriculum subject matter is not attended to properly because we are trying to cram basic knowledge so that it can be tested”. Secondly, one Year Five teacher wrote:

Just another stress for the Year Five students of WA. Standardised tests have no place in education. Along with NAPLAN and WAMSE, the BRLA is just another test, and has no religious benefit to students. I have lost a lot of valuable teaching time due to standardised tests.

For these respondents, the BRLA is “a pointless waste of time and resources” that “serves no purpose or role and the administration of it should be stopped”.

The 80 respondents proposed points of difference between the BRLA and how they perceived the nature of RE and their classroom practices in RE. These differences are noteworthy and will be addressed further in this study. Furthermore, the respondents’ perceptions of LSAs are also addressed within the study because they provide contextual information about the respondents’ perceptions of the BRLA as a LSA used in RE.

5.2.1.1.2 Response Pattern Two. A total of 79 of 238 respondents (33.2%) described their experiences of the BRLA as positive and seem to have argued predominately in support of the BRLA. The respondents described the BRLA as an appropriate measure of student learning used in RE. Firstly, 34 of the 79 respondents (14.3% of 238) described the BRLA as a necessary LSA. Secondly, 15 of the 79 respondents (6.3% of 238) described their treatment of RE as an academic learning area and felt that the BRLA was justified in its use as a formal assessment. In contrast to the previous group of 80, an apparent appreciation for the use of LSAs seems evident in these respondents’ statements of support for the BRLA. Table 5.4 presents the frequency of expressions of support for the BRLA. There are noticeable differences between the respondents’ expressions according to their employment role of responsibility.

Table 5.4
The Frequency of Described Support for the BRLA

Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		Total (%)
Year 3 (n = 55)	Year 5 (n = 40)	Year 9 (n = 55)	AP (n = 37)	REC (n = 20)	SPP (n = 26)	SPS (n = 5)	
23	16	15	9	7	8	1	79 (33.2)

Note. Partial responses to Open-ended Item 12: Describe your experience of the BRLA (N = 238).

The 34 respondents who described the BRLA as a necessary LSA specifically identified the purpose of the BRLA as a “tool” for gathering information about student learning in RE. They stated that the BRLA has “established a form of accountability in Religious Education” that “ensures the content in the RE curriculum is well taught”. These respondents consistently made comparisons between the BRLA and NAPLAN and the

benefits of using such LSAs. They suggested LSAs such as NAPLAN and the BRLA are “needed in education”. As one teacher wrote:

I found that the BRLA was a little intimidating for Year Three students as first timers but appropriate in that students now have some prior knowledge of the assessment. I think having it after NAPLAN was a great idea as they already had experience in such a formalised test.

The teacher indicated that with more exposure to LSAs, young students become accustomed to the formalities of such assessments.

The 34 respondents also referred to the BRLA as a “low stakes standardised test” that according to them was not as much of a “burden” and a “source of stress” on students and teachers compared to NAPLAN. However, the respondents also cautioned against the misuse of student results from what they termed “these types of assessments”. As one school leader of RE wrote, “Large-scale, standardised assessments in education are necessary but it is important that the results be used wisely”. One principal directly compared the BRLA with NAPLAN and commented specifically on the misuse of students’ results. The principal wrote:

As a large-scale, standardised assessment like NAPLAN, the BRLA has given RE a greater academic focus. NAPLAN used to be the same. I believe there is far too much emphasis now placed on the NAPLAN tests. NAPLAN has gone from being a very useful tool to assess student progress to now where schools are judged according to their NAPLAN results.

The principal acknowledged the academic focus that they perceived the BRLA has brought to the RE learning area.

The group of 15 respondents who justified the use of the BRLA within an academic context, identified the purpose of the assessment in two ways. Firstly, they identified the BRLA as a tool that helps teachers to target the content in the RE curriculum and secondly, as a means for ensuring that RE is recognised and treated in the same way as other learning areas, in terms of teaching and assessment practices. For this group, RE was considered an academic learning area that “can” and “should be formally assessed”. They were concerned that students, parents and colleagues do not seriously treat RE as a learning area. These respondents explained that RE does not receive “the treatment that it should within Catholic education” and “the support from parents” that “they believed”, the “subject requires”.

The expressions of six respondents within the group of 15 reflect the common argument that RE should be treated as an academic learning area. One Year Five teacher

stated, “More time needs to be given to ensure that Religious Education has a prominent role in our Catholic schools and given the equality it deserves”. One Year Three teacher wrote:

We have many standardised tests in English and Mathematics so, it is great to have a formal test in Religion to show parents that Religion is the most important learning area in Catholic schools.

One Year Nine teacher explained that “The value of the BRLA has the hallmarks of a LSA that makes people and, in particular, parents come to understand the importance of Religious Education”. Another Year Nine teacher working in a remote Catholic secondary school explained:

I live and work in an indigenous community which does not value formal RE and therefore do not see the relevance of assessment and reporting in RE. However, in all fairness, the same could be said for many elements of formal schooling. The main priority for many of our families is that their children learn the basics of reading and writing and, for many children, just getting to school and through the day is a challenge. For those families who are a part of the church, whether it be Catholic or other, the BRLA is seen as only a small indicator of achievement.

Another secondary school leader suggested that not only is RE not treated in the same way as other learning areas by students and their families, but also that “RE is not being supported by colleagues” within their own school.

For the 15 respondents, the BRLA, as a LSA, had “elevated the RE learning area to the academic status” they perceived RE should receive. The respondents commented, “RE is the first subject in Catholic schools” and as an initiative, the BRLA had “lifted the profile of RE” and helped people come to recognise RE as a “serious” learning area. As one principal explained:

The BRLA, as a LSA like NAPLAN, gives us some knowledge about how well we’re teaching what the bishops expect children to know. When children have just school as their only or most consistent link to the Catholic Church then it is important for us to give many opportunities for them to express their faith and to use their knowledge.

The BRLA was identified as an opportunity for Catholic schools to build student knowledge and the cultural capacity that the Catholic Faith Tradition appears to require today (D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012, 2013).

The analysis of data from the group of 79 respondents identifies differences in described support for the BRLA according to their employment role of responsibility in RE. For example, 54 teachers (68.4% of 79) who expressed support for the BRLA suggested the

BRLA was “beneficial” and “effective measurement tool”. As one Year Three teacher commented:

I found the BRLA an interesting standardised test as it did assess the students on a wide range of concepts from Jesus to the Bible, which was beneficial. It did showcase the students’ strengths and weaknesses in terms of what they know about our Religion and areas that need to be focused on more in the classroom.

Similarly, one Year Nine teacher explained, “The BRLA is a wonderful test that ensures students are aware of their religion and the importance of knowledge within its field”.

Likewise, another Year Nine teacher’s comment reflects those of the group, “I believe the BRLA has been a positive experience that gives a focus to the teaching of Year Eight and Nine Religious Education programs”. The teachers described the BRLA as a “provider of valuable data for Catholic schools” and “a good initiative in curriculum planning and implementation”.

Sixteen school leaders of RE (20.3% of 79) expressed support for the BRLA. For example, one primary school leader wrote, “The BRLA is a good experience, a good opportunity to make sure that essential learning is covered”. Another primary school leader wrote, “The BRLA provides good data to show what the students are learning in Religious Education”. Secondary school leaders of RE also provided similar comments. One secondary school leader wrote, “I have found the BRLA experience rewarding and is a good indication of students understanding of the RE course”. Another school leader explained, “I think the BRLA makes Religious Education more accountable because it supports the report writing process”. School leaders of RE identified the BRLA as a useful tool that highlights the “strengths and weaknesses in teaching and student understanding of religious concepts”. The school leaders seem to have perceived the purpose of the BRLA as a complementary data source of student learning in RE to in-class assessments.

Nine principals expressed support for the BRLA (11.4% of 79), referring to the assessment as “a tool that had raised the status of RE as a subject with the same rigour as the other eight learning areas” implemented in Catholic schools in WA. The comments of three principals reflect the common argument of support. As one principal stated, “I’m a school leader and am very interested in the data it gives”. Another principal explained:

The BRLA provides the school with well-constructed RE tests which provide examples of RE assessments and the results can be used to gain an insight into the knowledge students have on the topic.

A third principal wrote:

The BRLA provides teachers with a focus in teaching. This does not mean “teaching to the test” rather providing direction with the teacher’s understanding of the requirements of elements of their teaching in RE.

According to the principals and the other school leaders of RE, the data from the BRLA was important and provided a focus for classroom teachers to consider in more depth the content in the RE curriculum.

The group of 79 respondents who described support for the BRLA referred to the assessment as a measure of accountability in RE with “far-reaching benefits”. They seem to have focused on student learning in RE, suggesting the BRLA was a “measurement tool” for diagnosing student learning. The group indicated the BRLA was a “snapshot of student learning” that “effectively assists teachers to cover the content in the RE curriculum”. Further to this claim, the group indicated that teachers, schools and system authorities such as the CEOWA can use the BRLA to “improve the quality of learning in RE”. The next section highlights contrasting perceptions of the effectiveness of the BRLA as a measure of students’ learning in RE.

5.2.1.2 Perceived effectiveness of the BRLA. According to the response data to Item 39 and Likert scale Items 60, 61 and 65, the religious educators in this study had differing perceptions of the effectiveness of the BRLA and more specifically, the BRLA test items. The analysis of response data to these online questions considers the previous analysis of response data to Open-ended Item 12 regarding the religious educators’ described experiences of the BRLA.

5.2.1.2.1 Perceived measure of effectiveness. A rating scale divided in intervals of ten, beginning with zero and ending in one hundred was used to capture response data for Item 39. On the scale, zero was deemed the lowest possible rating, fifty was the mid-point and one hundred, the highest rating. Equal numbers of respondents rated the BRLA either as an effective or ineffective measure of student learning in RE.

Four sets of statistics regarding the response data to Item 39 are presented in Table 5.5. That is, the frequency of the respondents’ ratings on the scale within intervals of ten; the mean and standard deviation of the respondents’ total ratings; the frequency of the respondents’ ratings according to their employment role of responsibility of RE; and the mean of the respondents’ ratings also according to their employment role. The rationale for displaying the frequency of ratings according to the respondents’ role is based on evidence

from non-parametric testing. Analysis of variance for Item 39 using the Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test identifies a rejection of the null hypothesis of 0.010. This p value is less than 0.05 and suggests the probability of a difference between the response data from teachers and school leaders of RE.

Table 5.5

The Frequency of the Ratings of Effectiveness

Frequency of Ratings [(Mean Rating = 48.6) (SD = 24.02) (*p = 0.010)]									
0–10	11–20	21–30	31–40	41–50	51–60	61–70	71–80	81–90	91–100
26 (11.1%)	15 (6.4%)	19 (8.1%)	26 (11.1%)	34 (14.5%)	32 (13.7%)	37 (15.8%)	25 (10.7%)	18 (7.7%)	2 (0.9%)

1. Frequency of ratings according to employment role of responsibility.

Rating	Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		Total	%
	Year 3 (n=55)	Year 5 (n=40)	Year 9 (n=55)	APRE (n=37)	REC (n=20)	CPP (n=26)	CSP (n=5)		
0 to 50	32	20	31	9	12	12	4	120	51.3
51 to 100	23	20	21	27	8	14	1	114	48.7

2. The mean of the ratings for each group of respondents.

	Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)	
	Year 3 (n=55)	Year 5 (n=40)	Year 9 (n=55)	APRE (n=37)	REC (n=20)	CPP (n=26)	CSP (n=5)
Mean	45	53	45	59	44	50	25
SD	3.58	2.08	3.52	2.95	1.49	2.68	0.85

Note. Response data to Item 39: How would you rate the effectiveness of the BRLA as a measure of student learning in Religious Education? (n = 234)

*The p value is the statistical probability of the rejection of a null hypothesis, 0.05 or less, in non-parametric testing using the Kruskal-Wallis Test to measure differences according to employment role of responsibility.

Table 5.5 shows that according to the frequency of the respondents' ratings on the scale and given that 50 is considered the mid-point, 120 of 234 religious educators (51.3%) rated the BRLA between zero and 50 compared to 114 of 234 (48.7%) who chose a rating between 51 and 100. This result shows a statistically significant difference of 2.6% in how the religious educators rated the BRLA above or below 50. Furthermore, the mean of the

respondents' total ratings at 48.6 on the scale and the standard deviation of 24.02 as the distribution of ratings reflect the frequency of ratings above and below 50.

According to the frequency of ratings from the respondents as categorised into employment role of responsibility, more leaders of RE in Catholic primary schools [27 of 37 (73.0%) Assistant Principals] rated the BRLA 51 or more on the scale compared to other groups of religious educators. The Catholic primary school leaders, including principals [41 of 63 (65.1%)] rated the BRLA higher on the scale of effectiveness than their colleagues in Catholic secondary schools [9 of 25 (36.0%)]. More Year Three teachers [32 of 55 (58.1%)] and Year Nine teachers [31 of 55 (56.4%)] chose a rating of 50 and below.

5.2.1.2.2 Perceived effectiveness of test items. The analysis of response data to Likert scale Items 60, 61 and 65 identifies groups of respondents with contrasting perceptions about the effectiveness of the BRLA test items. Table 5.6 is a summary of the analysis. One inference from the analysis draws on the number of respondents who chose neither to agree nor disagree to statements in Items 60, 61 and 65. Close to or more than a third of the religious educators chose neither to agree nor disagree about the effectiveness of the BRLA test items. These numbers are mostly greater than the number of respondents who chose to agree or to disagree. From this evidence it appears that significant numbers of religious educators decided to be ambivalent about the BRLA test items.

Three other inferences are drawn from the analysis of response data to Items 60, 61 and 65. Firstly, in response to Item 60, less than a third of the respondents [59 of 232 (25.4%)] agreed that teachers felt the 2013 BRLA test items effectively measured student learning compared to more than a third who disagreed [84 of 232 = 71 disagree + 13 strongly disagree (36.2%)]. Similarly, more than a third of the respondents [88 of 232 (37.9%)] chose neither to agree nor disagree that teachers felt the 2013 BRLA effectively measured student learning in RE. As is discussed further in Chapter Seven, the response data to Item 58 identifies contrary evidence. That is, 129 of 232 respondents [125 agree + 4 strongly agree (55.6%)] agreed the test items in the 2013 BRLA were relevant to the RE curriculum. This evidence applies to more than half the total number of religious educators in the study.

Table 5.6

Perceptions of the Effectiveness of the BRLA Test Items

Item Description	Frequency of Responses					Mean (SD)
	SD = 1	D = 2	N = 3	A = 4	SA = 5	
Teachers at my school feel that the test items in the 2013 BRLA effectively measured student learning in RE. [Item 60 (n = 232)]	13 5.6%	72 31.0%	88 37.9%	59 25.4%	0 0.0%	2.83 (0.876)
Over the years, the test items in the BRLA have not effectively measured student learning in RE. [Item 61 (n = 232)]	3 1.3%	48 20.7%	92 39.7%	70 30.2%	19 8.2%	2.90 (0.975)
I believe that the test items in the BRLA effectively measure student learning in RE. [Item 65 (n = 231)]	19 8.2%	66 28.6%	66 28.6%	80 34.6%	0 0.0%	3.23 (0.915)

Note. The three items consisted of statements that required religious educators to use one of five ratings. The ratings are: Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1, Disagree (D) = 2, Neither agree nor disagree (N) = 3, Agree (A) = 4, Strongly Agree (SA) = 5. To reflect missing response data, the percentages presented in the table represent the valid percent as calculated in SPSS.

The second inference draws on the analysis of response data to Item 61. That analysis shows that more than a third [89 of 232 = 70 agree + 19 strongly agree (38.4%)] of respondents agreed that over the years, the test items in the BRLA had not effectively measured student learning in RE compared to those who disagreed [51 of 231 = 48 disagree + 3 strongly disagree (22.1%)]. However, there were more respondents [92 of 231 (39.8%)] who chose neither to agree nor disagree that the BRLA test items over time were not effective compared to those who either agreed or disagreed.

The third inference draws from the analysis of response data to Item 65. From that analysis, less than a third of the respondents [80 of 231 (34.6%)] believed the BRLA test items effectively measured student learning in RE compared to more than a third [85 of 231 = 66 disagree + 19 strongly disagree (36.8%)] who disagreed. Although more numbers of religious educators indicated that teachers at their schools felt the BRLA test items were ineffective, just as many religious educators chose to agree the test items were effective or chose neither to agree nor disagree. These statistics suggest that the religious educators were divided in their perceptions of the effectiveness of the BRLA test items.

5.2.1.3 Perceived satisfaction with the BRLA. Response data to Likert scale Item 40 were analysed (Table 5.7) to understand how satisfied religious educators thought people in their school communities were about the BRLA. Seven ordered categories were presented to the religious educators. The scores ranged from one (very dissatisfied) to seven (very satisfied). A neutral score of 4 was included.

Table 5.7
Perceptions of People's Satisfaction with the BRLA

Item Description	Frequency of Responses							Mean (SD)
	1=Very Dissatisfied	2=Dissatisfied	3=Somewhat Dissatisfied	4=Neutral	5=Somewhat Satisfied	6=Satisfied	7=Very Satisfied	
How satisfied do you think other teachers you know are with the BRLA? [Item 40a (n = 234)]	15 6.4%	37 15.8%	37 15.8%	70 29.9%	39 16.7%	34 14.5%	2 0.9%	3.82 (1.472)
How satisfied do you think school leaders you know are with the BRLA? [Item 40b (n = 234)]	7 3.0%	24 10.3%	15 6.4%	72 30.8%	48 20.5%	60 25.6%	8 3.4%	4.46 (1.441)
How satisfied do you think parents you know are with the BRLA? [Item 40c (n = 234)]	4 1.7%	15 6.4%	16 6.8%	127 54.3%	41 17.5%	29 12.4%	2 0.9%	4.20 (1.091)
How satisfied do you think students you know are with the BRLA? [Item 40d (n = 234)]	13 5.6%	26 11.1%	29 12.4%	115 49.1%	26 11.1%	24 10.3%	1 0.4%	3.82 (1.265)

Note. To reflect missing response data, the percentages presented in the table represent the valid percent as calculated in SPSS.

Three inferences are drawn from the analysis. Firstly, 116 of 234 respondents [48 somewhat satisfied + 60 satisfied + 8 very satisfied (49.6%)] thought school leaders were the most satisfied group in their Catholic school communities with the BRLA. The respondents identified teachers [75 of 234 (32.1%)], parents [72 of 234 (30.8%)] and students [51 of 234

(21.8%)] as less satisfied with the BRLA compared to school leaders. According to the respondents, students were possibly less likely to be satisfied with the BRLA. Secondly, the respondents identified teachers as being more dissatisfied [89 of 234 (38.0%)] with the BRLA than other people in their school communities. Student dissatisfaction was perceived as second to teacher dissatisfaction [68 of 234 (29.1%)]. School leaders were perceived as slightly more dissatisfied with the BRLA [46 of 234 (19.7%)] compared to parents [35 of 234 (15.0%)]. Thirdly, parents were perceived as possibly the least dissatisfied with the BRLA. However, half the number of respondents chose neither to agree or disagree with statements about how satisfied they thought parents [127 of 234 (54.3%)] and students [115 of 234 (49.1%)] were about the BRLA.

The collation and analysis of response data presented thus far has dealt with sub-finding 1.1 that identifies groups of religious educators with contrasting perceptions of the purpose of the BRLA. The religious educators' perceptions appear to be founded on their experiences of the BRLA. Based on different experiences, groups of religious educators either raised concerns about the BRLA or supported the assessment in RE. Furthermore, groups of religious educators either rated the BRLA as an effective or ineffective measure of student learning in RE. The religious educators also differed in their perceptions of the BRLA according to their employment role of responsibility in RE. For example, firstly, the religious educators agreed school leaders were more satisfied with the BRLA than other people in their school communities. Secondly, more school leaders expressed support for the BRLA [16 of 79 (20.3%)] compared to school leaders who raised concerns [13 of 80 (16.3%)]. Thirdly, slightly more teachers raised concerns about the BRLA [56 of 80 (70.0%)] compared to those who expressed support [54 of 79 respondents (68.4%)]. Fourthly, slightly more principals also raised concerns about the BRLA [11 of 80 (13.8%)] compared to those who expressed support [9 of 79 (11.4%)]. The next sub-finding (1.2) shows evidence to suggest that the religious educators were less divided in their perceptions of the role of the BRLA.

5.3.2 Sub-finding 1.2. The response data to five items were analysed to arrive at this sub-finding. Two investigations were carried out. Each investigation led to an aspect of the sub-finding. Firstly, response data to Likert scale Item 11 were analysed. For this item, the religious educators were asked to indicate their belief about the role of the BRLA in RE. Secondly, written comments to Open-ended Item 81 were analysed and compared with the response data to Item 11. Item 81 required respondents to explain the influence they believed

the BRLA has had in RE. The analysis seems to suggest that the majority of religious educators believed the BRLA had a role to play in RE but disagreed about the type of role.

5.2.2.1 Perceived role of the BRLA. Table 5.8 is a summary of the analysis of response data to Likert scale Item 11. A total of 141 of 238 respondents [119 agree + 22 strongly agree (59.2%)] believed the BRLA has a role to play in the RE curriculum that is implemented in Catholic schools in WA. In contrast, 42 of 238 respondents [34 disagree + 8 strongly disagree (17.6%)] believed the BRLA has no role to play. Less than a quarter of the respondents [55 of 238 (23.1%)] chose neither to agree nor disagree. These results suggest that many religious educators perceived the BRLA as having a role to play in RE.

Table 5.8
Perceptions of the Role of the BRLA

Item Description	Frequency of Responses					Mean (SD)
	SD = 1	D = 2	N = 3	A = 4	SA = 5	
I believe that the BRLA has a role to play in Religious Education in Catholic schools.	8 3.4%	34 14.3%	55 23.1%	119 50.0%	22 9.2%	3.47 (0.962)

(p = 0.022)

Note. Likert scale Item 11: I believe that the BRLA has a role to play in Religious Education ($N = 238$). The item used a five-point scale with the following ratings: Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1, Disagree (D) = 2, Neither agree nor disagree (N) = 3, Agree (A) = 4, Strongly Agree (SA) = 5. To reflect missing response data, the percentages presented in the table represent the valid percent as calculated in SPSS.

An analysis of variance for Item 11, using the Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test identifies a rejection of the null hypothesis of 0.022. This p value is less than 0.05 and suggests the probability of a difference in the response data to Item 11 between respondents. To further investigate this probability of difference, a frequency of the data according to the respondents' employment role of responsibility in RE was calculated (Table 5.9). Principals of Catholic primary schools [20 out of 26 (61.5%)] and Year Five teachers [23 out of 40 (57.5%)] perceived more than other sub-groups that the BRLA had a role to play in RE. In contrast, principals of Catholic secondary schools perceived the BRLA had no role.

Table 5.9

The Frequency of Data for Item 11 According to Role

	Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		Total
	Yr 3	Yr 5	Yr 9	APRE	REC	CPP	CSP	
Strongly disagree	0	1	2	1	2	2	0	8
Disagree	8	3	10	4	4	2	3	34
Neither agree nor disagree	17	9	15	7	3	2	2	55
Agree	27	23	22	20	11	16	0	119
Strongly agree	3	4	6	5	0	4	0	22
Total*	55	40	55	37	20	26	5	238

Note. Likert scale Item 11: I believe that the BRLA has a role to play in Religious Education ($N = 238$).

*The total refers to the number of religious educators who responded to the questionnaire item.

5.2.2.2 Perceived type of role. To further explore the religious educators' perceptions of the role of the BRLA, the response data to Open-ended Item 81 were analysed. For the item, respondents were required to explain the influence they believed the BRLA has had in RE. Three response patterns are identified from the data. Two of the response patterns consist of contrasting rationales provided by the respondents about the type of role the BRLA has played in RE. The third response pattern identifies 34 of 238 respondents (14.3%) who were not sure what role the BRLA played in RE. Of this group, 28 are teachers of RE [11 Year Three, seven Year Five and ten Year Nine teachers] and six school leaders of RE in Catholic primary schools. The analysis suggests groups of religious educators disagreed about the type of role the BRLA plays in RE.

5.2.2.2.1 A distinct role. Response pattern one identifies 99 of 238 respondents (41.6%) who explained the BRLA had a distinct role (Table 5.10). Of the group, more than half are school leaders of RE in Catholic primary schools [22 of 37 (59.5%)]. For these respondents, the BRLA had one of three distinct roles that they suggested improved student learning, teaching in RE and generally built cultural capacity in RE.

Table 5.10

The Frequency of Data Regarding the Distinct Role of the BRLA

	Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		Total (%)
	Yr 3 (n=55)	Yr 5 (n=40)	Yr 9 (n=55)	APRE (n=37)	REC (n=20)	CPP (n=26)	CSP (n=5)	
Ensured coverage of RE content	12	13	11	15	7	4	0	62
Raised the profile of RE	1	1	5	6	4	10	0	27
Total*	17	15	17	22	13	15	0	99 (41.6)

Note. Partial responses to Open-ended Item 81: What influence do you believe The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment has had in Religious Education? ($N = 238$)

*The total refers to the number of religious educators who perceived the BRLA has having a distinct role.

Table 5.11 lists examples of common expressions provided by the group. A total of 62 of the 99 respondents (26.1% of 238), explained the BRLA had ensured coverage of the content in the RE curriculum. A total of 27 of the 99 respondents (11.3% of 238) explained the BRLA had raised the profile of RE. The latter sub-group explained how the academic nature of the BRLA had elevated RE to a more academic status. They believed that the new status was consistent with the expected status of other learning areas implemented in Catholic schools in WA.

5.2.2.2.2 *A limited role.* Response pattern two identifies 105 of 238 respondents (44.1%) who explained the BRLA had a limited role to play in RE. This group offered five explanations for their perceptions. The most common of these explanations is from 44 of the 105 respondents who stated, "the BRLA is irrelevant to the RE curriculum". Table 5.12 lists the explanations and their frequency according to the respondents' role of employment in RE.

Table 5.11

Expressions of the Distinct Role of the BRLA

The BRLA: (role relevant to student learning)

- measures student knowledge in RE;
- is a snapshot of students' learning;
- provides available data about student learning in RE and helps teachers identify strengths, weaknesses and misconceptions in RE; and
- exposes students to large-scale testing.

The BRLA: (role relevant to teaching)

- measures the quality of teaching in RE in schools and across the CEOWA system;
- ensures RE content is being taught;
- ensures the essential content is being covered in RE;
- making teachers (“us”) accountable for what is being taught; and
- assists future planning in RE.

The BRLA: (role relevant to the building of teaching capacity at the whole system level)

- identifies RE as a learning area;
 - elevates the status of RE as a learning area;
 - assists the CEOWA to review and improve the RE curriculum;
 - effectively models assessment practice; and
 - helps develop in students and teachers an awareness of Catholic literacy and the Catholic Faith Tradition.
-

The group of 44 respondents (18.5% of 238) who believed the BRLA was irrelevant to the RE curriculum provided two reasons for their beliefs. They either explained that preparations for the administration of the BRLA involved “extra work outside regular classroom practices” in RE or stated that the results from the BRLA were received “far too late, after the event”. The group referred to the “huge amount of content” they were expected to “cover” with students prior to the administration of the BRLA. As one teacher wrote, “I find that unless the tested RE Units of Work have been covered, the children are at a loss to answer many of the questions”. As another teacher explained, “Once the BRLA is over, we resume regular RE lessons”. For these respondents, there was a “time lapse” between students completing the BRLA and teachers receiving the results”. One Year Nine teacher explained:

The BRLA is a test that happens in Year Nine. The teachers can be encouraged to prepare the students for the test, but the amount of material covered does not impress

staff or students. The teachers get the results but by the time they are received, there is usually little value in going over the test with the students. The test would better be marked in the school for the school to use the results but that defeats the purposes for which standardised tests are usually administered.

According to the religious educators, teachers are encouraged to prepare students for the BRLA by reviewing past BRLA papers, but the time spent preparing, takes away from time “better spent” engaging students in “meaningful RE learning experiences”.

Table 5.12

The Frequency of Expressions Regarding the Limited Role of the BRLA

	Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		Total (%)
	Yr 3 (n=55)	Yr 5 (n=40)	Yr 9 (n=55)	APRE (n=37)	REC (n=20)	CPP (n=26)	CSP (n=5)	
The BRLA is irrelevant to the RE curriculum.	7	7	14	2	5	4	5	44
Teachers “teach to the test” because the BRLA is too content driven.	5	4	3	1	1	0	0	14
The BRLA is damaging to students’ faith.	1	2	8	0	0	1	0	12
RE Units have not updated.	4	2	2	2	0	0	0	10
The BRLA causes stress.	2	1	0	0	1	3	0	7
The BRLA is too literacy based.	4	1	0	3	0	1	0	9
RE is not supported by parents, students and other teachers.	1	2	2	2	0	2	0	9
Total*	24	19	29	10	7	11	5	105 (44.1)

Note. Partial responses to Open-ended Item 81: What influence do you believe The Bishops’ Religious Literacy Assessment has had in Religious Education? (N = 238)

*The total refers to the number of religious educators who perceived the BRLA has having a limited role.

A second explanation provided by 14 respondents (5.9% of 238) is that the BRLA was perceived as “too content driven”. According to this group, teachers were forced to “teach to the test”. Similarly, nine respondents (3.8% of 238) suggested the BRLA was “too literacy based”. One principal gave this explanation:

The BRLA does provide some information on the knowledge component of our faith but it is not closely linked to the curriculum. It is yet another assessment where teachers teach to the test and try to anticipate the random selections that will be made, particularly in areas like the knowledge of Bible stories.

The principal seems to have perceived the BRLA as a LSA that is not linked to the curriculum and that there was far too wide a range of content to be covered in LSAs for students to perform well. The 14 respondents used words to express their enjoyment of teaching RE as an academic learning area but also argued against the formalities of teaching and assessing RE. As one teacher stated, “The BRLA pushes teachers to teach content and not understandings about how students can use RE to relate to their own lives”.

A third explanation provided by 12 respondents (5.0% of 238) is that RE as a learning area should “focus on faith” and not content. They suggested that the BRLA focused solely on content and had no place in RE. As one Year Five teacher explained, “I don’t believe testing in this area is necessary”. Furthermore, seven of these respondents suggested the BRLA caused stress to students; the type of pressure that is “not necessary in RE”. They recommended students would benefit more from opportunities to develop a personal relationship with God in RE classes “rather than learn about the Bible and church structure”.

The explanation provided by the group of 12 is consistent with the explanation offered by seven other respondents in their answers to Open-ended Item 12. These religious educators indicated that the BRLA is “emotionally damaging to students’ faith”. Of the 12 respondents, eight Year Nine teachers argued more than other sub-groups that “the BRLA did not provide students with opportunities to follow God’s teachings”. As one teacher wrote, “At times the preparation for the BRLA prevents broader exploration of faith issues in class”.

Five other comments from teachers and school leaders of RE about the damaging aspect of the BRLA on students’ faith are provided. One teacher wrote:

It takes a philosophical and theological learning environment and attempts to measure doctrine and Catechism teaching that may not always be relevant or helpful to developing a student’s spiritual or even faith life.

One teacher compared the BRLA to the RE curriculum:

Teaching Year Nine students, we have to follow the *Come Follow Me* books, which are more about the emotional and spiritual growth of the student. Whereas the BRLA focuses on what students know about church history and actually going to Mass.

Year Three and Year Five teachers compared the BRLA to the RE curriculum and suggested that the BRLA had a different focus to the curriculum. As one Year Three teacher wrote:

The BRLA makes a subject area that usually creates happiness and discussions about our religion into something that becomes stressful as the children and staff feel the pressure placed on them from standardised testing.

Also, one Year Five teacher wrote:

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

The perceptions of these teachers about the conflict they perceived between the BRLA and the RE curriculum is echoed in similar arguments presented by school leaders of RE, including principals. One school leader wrote:

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

The school leader indicated the BRLA is formal and has driven or "turned" students against the RE learning area. Similarly, one principal wrote, "The BRLA does not relate to what the students are specifically learning, so very 'left field' and therefore difficult for them to take seriously". According to the respondents, "The BRLA is contrary and counter cultural to RE, the teachings of faith, and the teaching of spirituality and life skills".

The group of 12 respondents argued against the possible role of the BRLA as well as the use of LSAs in RE. The comments of one school leader of RE reflects the apparent bias against LSAs:

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

The school leader explained that LSAs such as the BRLA are irrelevant to the teaching of RE because the “whole person” is not considered when using LSAs.

A fourth explanation provided by nine respondents (3.8% of 238) is that the BRLA is not supported by staff, students and their parents. The respondents perceived, “neither staff nor students take the BRLA seriously”. Their comments are similar to those of 15 other respondents (6.3% of 238) who in response to Open-ended Item 12 described how RE is not supported by staff, students or parents. One principal explained:

It is what it is. The BRLA deals with what RE content needs to be taught but doesn't allow for the fact that many children have little or no experience outside of the school.

The majority of parents do not rate RE as important in the academic sense.

The respondents suggested the BRLA takes a “back seat to NAPLAN” because “parents do not hold the importance of the BRLA as to tests like NAPLAN”. One teacher provides further clarity, “The BRLA underestimates the value of religion in the home”.

The religious educators in the groups who perceived the BRLA as having a limited role, explained how teachers who “didn't teach Religious Education” and teachers and students who “did not go to Mass” were “just simply not interested” in RE or the BRLA. As one Year Five Teacher recommended, “You need to survey teachers in regard to questions and time spent on Religion. I don't believe schools place importance on Religious Education anymore”. According to these groups, “the questions in the BRLA were directed at those students who only attend Mass regularly and have a strong Catholic background”.

Consequently, the perception appears that many students and their parents did not take the BRLA as a “form of assessment”. As one Year Nine teacher explained:

When curriculum matches student assessment, large-scale assessments are very useful. I do not believe this is the case with the BRLA. This assessment does not take into consideration student background, and an assessment in RE is something that should take this into consideration.

Furthermore, one school leader provides clarification:

I find the general level of indifference towards religion displayed by our students very worrying. Many of our students have little spiritual and more so religious awareness or language.

The perceived disengagement of the BRLA by students, in particular, suggests teachers and school leaders of RE were challenged by student disengagement in RE. As one Year Five teacher stated:

I understand the value of RE and support the curriculum strongly but, at the same time, am quite realistic of the Catholicity of the students and thus struggle to understand this test.

Similarly, one Year Nine teacher recommended, “There is a need to make RE more appealing” to students in terms of applying creative and experiential pedagogy. These religious educators questioned the purpose and role of the BRLA.

In addition to the arguments presented by the religious educators about the limited role of the BRLA in the RE curriculum, a fifth argument from another group of ten (4.2% of 238) relates to the perception that the BRLA had not brought about a change to the RE curriculum. The ten religious educators suggested that, “no change had occurred in RE since the introduction of the BRLA”. The group described how they had taught from the “same Units of Work” since the introduction of the BRLA. They explained how they believed that assessment practices were as much about identifying student learning as they were about reviewing pedagogy and content. As one school leader wrote, “At the school level, the BRLA has had a big influence but at the CEOWA level we have seen minimal change because the RE Units of Work are still in draft form”. Other teachers in the group explained, “Little information about the review of the RE curriculum is provided to us” and “The biggest change in RE has been the move of students in Year Seven into Catholic secondary schools and the Sacrament of Confirmation being moved to Year Six”. These explanations are further contextualised in the rationales presented by the respondents. The respondents’ contrasting rationales are discussed in the next sub-finding.

5.2.3 Sub-finding 1.3. The cross-referencing of response data previously analysed to address SRQ 1 led to the discovery that groups of religious educators provided contrasting rationales for their perceptions of the purpose and role of the BRLA. The processed data from Items 12 and 81 were cross-referenced with data from Open-ended Items 33 and 37. Response data to Open-ended Item 33 relates to the religious educators’ described experiences of teaching RE. Response data to Open-ended Item 37 is about the religious educators’ described experiences of using LSAs. Inferences are drawn from the cross-analysis that identify three distinct rationales provided by the religious educators in this study about the perceived purpose and role of the BRLA.

5.2.3.1 Rationale one. Firstly, when response data to Open-ended Items 12 and 81 were cross-referenced, the group of 99 of 238 respondents (41.6%) who suggested the BRLA

had a distinct role to play in RE were, in part, also the 79 of 238 respondents (33.2%) who described support for the BRLA. As a whole, these religious educators appear to have perceived the purpose of the BRLA as an appropriate “measure of accountability” that assisted teachers, whole schools and the CEOWA to improve student learning. They believed student learning has improved in RE since the arrival of the BRLA; citing changes to curriculum policies and teaching and assessment practices in RE. These respondents referred to the BRLA as a form of accountability that has held teachers, school and system leaders responsible for ensuring that the content in the RE curriculum is taught and the academic profile of the RE learning area is maintained.

Secondly, but in contrast to the above evidence, the 105 of 238 respondents (44.1%) who suggested the BRLA had a limited role to play in RE were, in part, also the 80 of 238 respondents (33.6%) who raised concerns about the BRLA and questioned its purpose. These religious educators perceived the BRLA as limited in its role, because they appear to have believed that the assessment was an imposed accountability measure. The reasons they provided for the limitations to the BRLA were based on common arguments such as the BRLA is irrelevant to the RE curriculum because it is “too content driven”, “too literacy based” and “emotionally” and “spiritually” damaging to students. The religious educators referred to the pressures associated with LSAs, and the challenges of teaching RE to students and their parents who were disengaged with the RE learning area.

Given the similarities in the response data to Open-ended Items 12 and 81, the response data to these items were also cross-referenced with Likert scale Items 33 and 37. Table 5.13 identifies the 105 respondents who in response to Open-ended Item 81 suggested the BRLA has a limited role to play in RE and compares the frequency of that written data with the frequency of written data to Open-ended Item 33 (experiences of teaching RE) and Open-ended Item 37 (experiences of using LSAs). From the cross-referencing exercise two other rationales are identified that explain how religious educators perceived the role of the BRLA.

5.2.3.2 Rationale two. The second rationale identifies a statistically significant number of religious educators who appear to have questioned the use of LSAs. For example, a total of 67 of the 105 respondents (63.8%) who believed the BRLA had a limited role to play in RE also argued against the use of LSAs. A total of 52 of the 67 respondents who argued against the use of LSAs were teachers of RE (77.6%). Relevant supporting evidence from those who answered Item 37, identifies 115 of 238 respondents (48.3%) raising

concerns about LSAs. Furthermore, 52 of the 238 religious educators in this study (21.8%) described LSAs as stressful to students and teachers. Of the 52 religious educators, 41 were teachers of RE [41 of 238 (17.2%)].

Table 5.13

Cross-referenced Expressions Challenging the Role of the BRLA

	Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		Total (%)
	Yr 3 (n=55)	Yr 5 (n=40)	Yr 9 (n=55)	APRE (n=37)	REC (n=20)	CPP (n=26)	CSP (n=5)	
The BRLA has a limited role to play in RE	24	19	29	10	7	11	5	105 (44.1)

Note. Partial responses to Open-ended Item 81: What influence do you believe the BRLA has had in RE? (N = 238)

1. Sub-set of the 105 respondents who argued against the use of LSAs

	Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		Total (%)
	Yr 3 (n=55)	Yr 5 (n=40)	Yr 9 (n=55)	APRE (n=37)	REC (n=20)	CPP (n=26)	CSP (n=5)	
*Arguments against the use of LSAs	18	13	21	5	4	2	4	67 (28.2)

Note. Partial responses to Open-ended Item 37: Describe your experience of LSAs other than the BRLA (N = 238).

*Of the 105 respondents 67 (63.8%) argued against the use of LSAs and 24 of 105 (22.9%) argued in support of LSAs, 14 (13.3%) described how they administer LSAs.

2. Sub-set of the 105 respondents who described their experiences of teaching RE

	Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 150)			School Leaders of RE (n = 57)		Principals (n = 31)		Total (%)
	Yr 3 (n=55)	Yr 5 (n=40)	Yr 9 (n=55)	APRE (n=37)	REC (n=20)	CPP (n=26)	CSP (n=5)	
*Teaching RE is challenging	8	5	16	1	3	0	3	36 (15.1)
*Descriptions of positive experiences of teaching RE	16	12	7	5	2	5	3	50 (21.0)

Note. Partial responses to Open-ended Item 33: Describe your experience of teaching Religious Education (N = 238).

*Of the 105 respondents, 50 described positive experiences of teaching RE and 36 described the experience of teaching RE challenging. 19 of 105 respondents (18.1%) described how they taught RE and are not included in the sub-set.

5.2.3.3 Rationale three. A total of 50 of the 105 religious educators (47.6%) who perceived the BRLA to have had a limited role in RE also expressed positive experiences of teaching RE. In contrast, a total of 36 of the 105 respondents (34.3%) experienced challenges associated with teaching RE. The largest number of respondents [16 of 36 (44.4%)] who suggested they experienced challenges teaching RE were Year Nine teachers. These teachers identified student engagement as their greatest challenge. Similarly, when the response data to Open-ended Item 33 were further analysed, 67 of the 238 religious educators in the study (28.2%) who described their experiences of teaching RE suggested teaching RE was challenging. Their greatest challenge was also student and parent disengagement in the RE learning area. The third rationale presents evidence suggesting that based on experience, religious educators may require particular support teaching RE to students.

The cross-referenced data from the various online questionnaire items suggest that groups of religious educators who perceived the BRLA as having little purpose and a limited role in RE also appeared to express concerns about teaching RE and questioned the use of LSAs in education. These groups of religious educators seem to have perceived the BRLA as an imposition. As one religious educator stated, “The BRLA is done within the schools as it is something imposed. I question the purpose, value and reason behind the role of the BRLA”. In contrast, groups of religious educators who perceived the BRLA as having a distinct purpose and role in RE also acknowledged whole school improvement approaches to student learning and the benefits of using LSAs to generate data about student’s learning. These groups appear to have perceived the BRLA as an “appropriate” and “necessary” measure of student learning that had raised the profile of the RE learning area and improved both the teaching of RE and students’ learning of the content in the RE curriculum.

5.3 Chapter Summary

Finding One was discussed in this chapter. A complete summary of the main features of the finding is provided in Figure 5.1. The key finding addresses SRQ 1 by identifying groups of religious educators who perceived the purpose and role of the BRLA in contrasting ways. Generally, religious educators agreed that the BRLA had a role to play in RE but disagreed about the BRLA’s purpose and type of role. Groups of teachers and school leaders of RE identified competing rationales for their perceptions. These rationales seem to be based on their personal and professional experiences of teaching RE and using LSAs. In turn, these experiences seem to have led to contrasting perceptions as to the effectiveness of the BRLA as a whole, as well as the specific test items and beliefs about people’s satisfaction with the

BRLA. The level of engagement by teachers, students and parents with the BRLA and RE in general was a growing concern for some. Differing views about the role of accountability in RE and assessment practices is also evident in the finding. The next chapter presents the key finding in the second phase of the study that also addresses SRQ 1 regarding the perceived purpose and role of the BRLA. The key finding in Chapter Six builds upon Finding One by providing supporting arguments for and against the purpose and role of the BRLA in RE.

Specific Research Question One

How do religious educators perceive the purpose and role of the BRLA as a LSA?

Contributing Questions

Describe your experience of the BRLA (Item 12).

Rate the effectiveness of the BRLA as a measure of student learning in RE (Item 39).

Teachers at my school feel that the test items in the 2013 BRLA effectively measured student learning in RE (Item 60).

I believe that the test items in the BRLA effectively measure student learning in RE (Item 61).

Over the years, the test items in the BRLA have not effectively measured student learning in RE (Item 65).

How satisfied do you believe people at your school are about the BRLA? (Item 40).

Do you perceive the BRLA to play a role in RE? (Item 11).

Describe the influence the BRLA has had in RE (Item 81).

Describe your experiences of teaching RE (Item 33).

Describe your experiences of using LSAs (Item 37).

Finding One from Phase One

Finding One: The religious educators differed in their perceptions of the purpose and role of the BRLA.

Sub-finding 1.1: Groups of religious educators perceived the purpose of the BRLA in different ways.

A total of 159 of 238 (66.8%) religious educators expressed their perceptions of the purpose of the BRLA as part of their described experiences of the assessment. They either raised concerns about the BRLA [80 of 238 (33.6%)] or expressed support for BRLA [79 of 238 (33.2%)].

The religious educators had differing perceptions about the effectiveness of the BRLA as a measure of student learning in RE.

120 of 234 (51.3%) rated the BRLA as ineffective compared to 114 of 234 (48.7%) who rated the BRLA as an effective measure.

The religious educators were divided in their perceptions of the effectiveness of the BRLA test items.

116 of 234 (49.6%) perceived school leaders were more satisfied with the BRLA compared to teachers [75 of 234 (32.1%)], parents [72 of 234 (30.8%)] and students [51 of 234 (21.8%)].

Sub-finding 1.2: The majority of religious educators believed [141 of 238 (59.2%)] the BRLA had a role to play in RE but disagreed about the type of role.

99 of 238 (41.6%) perceived the BRLA as having a distinct role whereas 105 of 238 (44.1%) perceived the BRLA as having a limited role in RE.

Sub-finding 1.3: Groups of religious educators provided contrasting rationales for their perceptions of the purpose and role of the BRLA. These rationales seem to have been based on their personal and professional experiences of teaching RE and using LSAs.

Figure 5.1. Summary of Finding One