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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 SIX

FINDING TWO

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents Finding Two, a key finding from Phase Two of the study. The finding affirms and builds upon Finding One by also addressing SRQ 1: How do religious educators perceive the purpose and role of the BRLA as a large-scale, standardised assessment in Religious Education? Finding Two provides further insights about the interpretations and rationales that appear to have formed the religious educators' perceptions of the meaning of the BRLA and, in turn, the purpose and role of the assessment within the context of the RE curriculum implemented in Catholic schools in WA.

Forty-three of the 238 religious educators in the study: 21 teachers of RE [Year Three (n = 5), Year Five (n = 5) and Year Nine (n = 11)] and 22 school leaders of RE [APREs (n = 8), RECs (n = 6) and principals of primary schools (n = 8)] participated in Phase Two. These religious educators were involved in one of eight individual, or thirteen group interviews. The religious educators' responses to the following interview questions with associated contributing questions led to Finding Two:

1. Explain what the BRLA means and represents for you.
2. What do you understand to be the intended purpose and role of the BRLA?

As participants in Phase Two, the 43 religious educators represent a skewed sub-sample of the 238 religious educators involved in the study. This is because no Catholic secondary school principal volunteered to participate in Phase Two. Also, these religious educators mostly belonged to groups in Phase One who expressed support for the use of the BRLA. These limitations are addressed in Chapter One.

6.2 The Presentation of Finding Two

The structure of the chapter will follow the order of the two sub-findings listed in Table 6.1. The sub-findings are elaborations of Finding Two and suggest that the majority of the 43 religious educators in Phase Two perceived the BRLA as having a distinctive purpose and role. The religious educators outlined the benefits of using LSAs and, as such, expressed an appreciation for exercising educational accountability in RE. The focus of their discussions was on student learning. Finding Two also encapsulates the contrasting interpretations of the purpose and role of the BRLA by minority groups.

Table 6.1

Overview of Chapter Six: Finding Two

6.2	Finding Two: The religious educators provided mostly positive interpretations of the purpose and role of the BRLA.
6.2.1	Sub-finding 2.1: The religious educators perceived the BRLA as having a distinct purpose.
6.2.2	Sub-finding 2.2: The religious educators perceived the BRLA as having a role to play in Religious Education.
6.3	Chapter Summary

6.2.1 Sub-finding 2.1. The religious educators in Phase Two perceived the BRLA as having a distinct purpose. Their perceptions seem to reflect their support of the BRLA and its relevance to the RE curriculum. The level of support for the BRLA was consistent with their level of support for NAPLAN (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2014).

6.2.1.1 Compared benefits. A total of 40 of the 43 religious educators (93.0%) drew many parallels between the BRLA and NAPLAN and made constant comparisons between the benefits of using the BRLA and NAPLAN. Table 6.2 presents the frequency of comparisons made between the BRLA and NAPLAN. The table is categorised according to the religious educators' employment role of responsibility. The teachers and school leaders of RE who compared the BRLA to NAPLAN explained how they were familiar with NAPLAN because they were involved with preparing students for the assessment program. They explained how the BRLA was a LSA like NAPLAN that was produced "externally to the classroom" by system administrators. In the case of the BRLA, the WA Bishops and CEOWA were identified as the system administrators.

The religious educators described the BRLA as a "pen and paper" LSA and compared it to NAPLAN in terms of process, design and structure. They used phrases such as "The BRLA is like NAPLAN", "The BRLA is a type of NAPLAN", a "snapshot of" and "benchmark for student learning just like NAPLAN". As one school leader of RE stated, "I liken the BRLA a bit to NAPLAN but it's not NAPLAN. You know, that's how the test is formatted". According to these religious educators the instructions for administering the

BRLA and NAPLAN to students were “similar” and the processes were “familiar”. Given the expressed similarity between the BRLA and NAPLAN, these participants also suggested they treated the BRLA with the same respect as NAPLAN. As one teacher of RE said, “I take the assessment as seriously as NAPLAN”.

Table 6.2

The Frequency of Expressions Comparing the BRLA to NAPLAN

Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 21)			School Leaders of RE (n = 14)		Principals (n = 8)		Total (%)
Year 3 (n = 5)	Year 5 (n = 5)	Year 9 (n = 11)	APRE (n = 8)	REC (n = 6)	CPP (n = 8)	CSP NA	
5	5	9	8	6	7	0	40 (93.0)

Note. Partial response data to Interview Question 1: Explain what the BRLA means and represents for you? (n = 43)

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.

Three teachers of RE [3 of 43 (7.0%)] compared the BRLA to NAPLAN and WAMSE (Department of Education, 2011). These teachers explained how they were responsible, for preparing students in Years Three, Five and Nine for all three assessments. At the time of the study (2013), WAMSE was a state-wide standardised assessment program that measured student learning in Science and Society and Environment. With the introduction of NAPLAN in 2008, the WAMSE assessments were phased out and discontinued after 2013 (School Curriculum and Standards Authority, 2016a).

The expressed similarities between the BRLA and NAPLAN extended to conversations about the perceived high degree of competency students were required to have in literacy in order to complete “these types of assessments”. As one school leader of RE explained, “There is a strong correlation between the results from the BRLA and NAPLAN English literacy levels”.

Seven participants [7 of 43 (16.3%)] suggested that although the BRLA was like NAPLAN, it was also quite different in many ways. As one teacher suggested, “The BRLA is like NAPLAN but not NAPLAN, a valid test but not like NAPLAN”. The reason given was

based on what the teacher referred to as the “less unintended consequences” of the BRLA compared to NAPLAN.

Three explanations were provided by the seven participants about what they meant by the unintended consequences of NAPLAN. Firstly, they explained the BRLA did not use league tables to “judge the performance” of one school against another. As one principal clarified, the BRLA is what NAPLAN used to be like before the results became the “focus for public school rankings”. Secondly, the BRLA was considered “less intense” compared to NAPLAN and did not present the associated pressures from system administrators, school leaders, parents and the media. For one principal, the BRLA did not cause the school to “beat themselves up” when the results came back:

The BRLA is something that is going on quietly under the surface and the people are not stressed about it. Which is good. Once, you got a truer reading of the NAPLAN, before everybody started practising and cramming. Today children get stressed and parents put pressure on their children. Schools feel it’s going to make them look bad if they don’t get good results. NAPLAN seems to have got out of whack and I think that the BRLA being at a lower level is probably a truer reading of the results than, if it also was being hyped up.

The participants expressed appreciation for the perceived “lower intensity” of pressure felt by teachers and students about the BRLA.

Thirdly, the religious educators argued the BRLA was not perceived as important as NAPLAN because they believed RE was not treated in the same way as other learning areas. They made comments such as, “the BRLA is another NAPLAN but not taken seriously”. The religious educators explained how they believed that parents demonstrated little support for RE compared to other learning areas and little support for the BRLA compared to NAPLAN.

The religious educators seemed to be fully aware of the processes involved with NAPLAN but less aware of the processes involved with the BRLA. As one principal explained:

The BRLA is very similar to NAPLAN but you wouldn’t know it? With NAPLAN they do “little tests” on target schools to trial certain questions. Now, I am not certain that the test items in the BRLA have ever been trialled over a large number of schools to test their validity.

The principal wanted clarification about the use of pilot studies in the BRLA. Similarly, five teachers of RE questioned the release of student performance data from the BRLA. Two of the teachers were from Catholic secondary schools in regional WA. They said that they were

unaware of the students’ performance data from the BRLA and made comments such as, “I’ve never seen the student performance data nor analysed the data with my students”, yet they explained how they were always exposed to the NAPLAN results. An inference from these discussions is a perceived lack of communication about the BRLA from system and or school leaders.

6.2.1.2 Expressions of support. A total of 36 of the 43 religious educators (83.7%) expressed support for the BRLA as a LSA “like NAPLAN”. As the religious educators made comparisons between the BRLA and NAPLAN, they also expressed their support of both the BRLA and NAPLAN as LSAs used to measure student learning. They explained how the BRLA represented a valid LSA used in RE. The statement of one teacher reflects the supportive use of language by the group:

To me it looks like the BRLA is a NAPLAN for RE. I guess, I mean, from, our perspective I think it’s a great thing to have a standardised test for religious content, that for us is meant to be covered.

Similarly, one principal described the BRLA as a LSA like NAPLAN that had “merit”. The principal said that the BRLA was “just like NAPLAN” in terms of providing schools with “valuable” information about student learning in RE.

Table 6.3 shows the frequency of expressed support for the BRLA by the group according to their employment role of responsibility in RE. The religious educators used a variety of expressions of support; the most commonly used expressions are listed in Table 6.4. The language used by the religious educators seems to suggest they valued the BRLA and were appreciative of its use in RE.

Table 6.3
The Frequency of Expressed Support for the BRLA as a LSA

Classroom Teachers of RE (n = 21)			School Leaders of RE (n = 14)		Principals (n = 8)		Total (%)
Year 3 (n = 5)	Year 5 (n = 5)	Year 9 (n = 11)	AP (n = 8)	REC (n = 6)	SPP (n = 8)	SPS NA	
2	4	9	8	6	7	0	36 (83.7)

Note. Partial response data to Interview Question 1: Explain what the BRLA means and represents for you? (n = 43)

Table 6.4

Expressions of Support for the BRLA

-
- I actually like the BRLA.
 - It is great as an assessment.
 - It is fantastic.
 - I'm glad it is in the system.
 - It is a positive move and influence in Religious Education.
 - It is straight forward; black and white.
 - A good and valuable measurement tool.
 - It has merit as an assessment.
 - Deals with a wide coverage of RE content.
 - It isn't a problem for us.
 - It is improving each year.
-

6.2.1.3 Perceived measure of accountability. A total of 31 of the 43 religious educators (72.1%) indicated that the purpose of the BRLA was to measure student learning in RE across the Catholic education system in WA. They considered NAPLAN as a measure of accountability for student learning in literacy and numeracy and suggested that the BRLA established a similar form of accountability for student learning in RE.

The BRLA was recognised by the group as a measure that gathered and reported evidence of student learning in RE. The religious educators explained how the BRLA was an appropriate and beneficial measure of accountability. As one school leader of RE in the group explained:

Accountability is what is needed in RE. It helps students learn about their faith. We need to change the way we teach Religious Education. We need to improve student learning in RE. Teachers cannot test faith but at least teachers, in Catholic schools can impart the knowledge of our faith tradition. Content is important to learn. Students need content of the faith tradition in order to make better connections in the world.

The school leader emphasised the need for greater accountability measures in RE and further explained how the BRLA has contributed to this outcome. Three other religious educators presented similar arguments. One teacher of RE who supported the need for measures of accountability in RE posed the question, "Why we are teaching RE?". One school leader of RE stated:

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

One principal explained:

I see the BRLA having a similar purpose as NAPLAN and that is to gauge the success of the teaching of RE in Catholic schools. You can get comparative data from it and so get an idea of how the students are going in relation to the RE content.

These religious educators identified accountability in RE as necessary for raising the standards in teaching, learning and assessment.

Of the 31 religious educators, 14 (32.6% of 43) used language to suggest that there were “positive outcomes” from the use of the BRLA as a measure of accountability in RE. Table 6.5 lists the common expressions of language used by the group.

Table 6.5

Expressions of the BRLA as a Measure of Accountability

The Bishops’ Religious Literacy Assessment

- puts RE “up there” like NAPLAN.
 - is academic in nature.
 - is rigorous as an assessment.
 - is in the system and I am glad it is.
 - gives rigour to the learning area of Religious Education.
 - “keeps us on our toes”.
 - is a good tool that affirms our teaching.
 - is a role model of good assessment practice.
 - is a diagnostic measurement tool.
 - has been a positive influence.
 - has “put RE on the table”.
 - is a “form of advertising” to show what we value and give back to our students.
 - has given us a “sniff” towards a more academic or more rigorous direction.
 - has “heightened our awareness” of our Religious Education curriculum.
-

Although the 31 religious educators referred to the BRLA as a measure of accountability, their use of the phrase varied, suggesting that perhaps they interpreted the role of accountability differently from each other. For example, 24 religious educators explained that the BRLA informs a broad audience consisting of teachers and school leaders within the

Catholic education system about student learning in RE. An inclusive and broad responsibility for student learning appears evident. In contrast, 12 religious educators explained that the BRLA informs a smaller and limited audience consisting of school and system leaders. This interpretation seems exclusive of classroom teachers and their responsibility for student learning in RE.

6.2.1.3.1 Inclusive responsibility. A total of 24 of 43 (55.8%) religious educators suggested that the BRLA informed a broad audience about student learning in RE. These religious educators perceived the purpose of the BRLA was to inform classroom teachers, leaders in schools, the CEOWA and the WA Bishops about student learning in RE. The implications for the group's understanding of the role of accountability appears to embrace a whole system approach to addressing student learning in RE. This group argued that the BRLA had improved student learning by assisting teachers to focus on the "essential" content in the RE curriculum. They insisted that there was content in the RE curriculum that both teachers and students "needed to know" and the purpose of the BRLA was assisting schools to focus on giving students the knowledge and understanding of the Catholic Faith Tradition. As one teacher stated, "The BRLA helps us measure how Catholic we are!"

6.2.1.3.2 Exclusive responsibility. A total of 12 of 43 (27.9%) religious educators explained how the BRLA informed school leaders about student learning in RE. This group perceived that the purpose of the BRLA was specifically to inform school and system leaders about student learning in RE. The 12 religious educators suggested there was value in school and system leaders gaining information about student learning in RE but not necessarily classroom teachers. As one teacher of RE explained:

At least the Bishops know the basics are being taught. The Bishops want to know or want some reassurance that RE content and knowledge is being taught. You can't test faith but at least you can impart the knowledge of our religion that students need to know. The BRLA is a reminder to us all that these are the basics we need to cover. The religious educators identified the purpose of the BRLA as a measure of how effective teachers were at teaching the knowledge and understandings of the Catholic Faith Tradition. They seem to have interpreted the role of accountability as a means for monitoring "teacher effectiveness" of student learning.

School leaders of RE and principals, in particular, expressed how they valued the data generated from the BRLA about student learning in RE. They explained how the BRLA

provided them with information that reflected the knowledge their teachers had about the RE curriculum. As one principal stated, “The BRLA confirms that we are on the right track and helps focus the Year Three and Five teachers”.

For the 12 religious educators, the BRLA provided the WA Bishops and other system leaders in the CEOWA with a “bird’s eye view”, “eye on the schools” and “tabs on schools” so as to “stay in touch” with teacher effectiveness and student learning in RE. As one school leader explained, “Historically, Archbishop Hickey was instrumental in introducing the BRLA at a time when LSAs were gaining traction throughout educational systems”. This school leader suggested that the introduction of the BRLA was an attempt by the WA Bishops to monitor RE activity in schools at a time when other LSAs were also being introduced nationally through the NAPLAN program. According to the school leader, the aim of NAPLAN was to monitor teacher effectiveness in literacy and numeracy and similarly, the aim of the BRLA was to monitor teacher effectiveness in RE.

The 12 religious educators presented arguments suggesting the BRLA was “exclusive to classroom practices” and an opportunity “mainly” for system authorities and school leaders to engage in assessing student learning at the broader levels outside RE classrooms. As one teacher explained:

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

Similarly, one primary school leader explained:

I think the Bishops just want to see how we are actually going with Religion, and Gospel values and the responses in Mass, and how well, students know about the traditions of the Catholic Church. I suppose just for them really to gather information. Because you know, we’ve got all our Units of Work. Are we teaching them properly? Are the students actually understanding what was taught?

One principal further elaborated about the perceived value of the WA Bishops gaining information about student learning in RE:

I think the Bishops probably wanted to know how much students know in RE. Really you can gloss over things and think children remember facts, but they don’t. And then especially, I think, Catholics generally didn’t study Scripture much in the old days and we couldn’t draw on our facts. You know, you meet up with people from other Christian churches and they are able to quote the Bible. So, I suppose the BRLA is

helping us to become a bit more articulate about our faith and to make an effort to remember facts and people and events, parts of the Gospel and Church history and so on.

The group indicated that the BRLA was for the “system to gauge student learning in RE” so as to improve the “status quo” at the CEOWA system and school levels. They perceived the purpose of the BRLA as being a measure of accountability in the interest of educational leaders but also seem to have agreed it was necessary for leaders to receive “feedback” about how “teachers teach” and “student learn” the content in the RE curriculum. As one school leader of RE explained, “The purpose of the BRLA is to see where schools are at in terms of student learning and to be better able to resource and support them rather than schools worrying about those issues”.

This group of 12 religious educators suggested that the information gathered from the BRLA enabled system administrators to not only monitor teacher efficacy but also to review professional training in RE and update the RE curriculum. As one teacher explained, “The BRLA provides an opportunity for the CEOWA to offer guidance and professional development in Religious Education.” Similarly, another teacher explained, “The BRLA allows the RE Team in the Catholic Education Office to ‘find holes’ in the curriculum content that show which concepts are not being covered and to determine why”. These religious educators considered the BRLA to be a measure that provided the CEOWA a better understanding of what was being taught from the RE curriculum and what was required for reviewing the future RE curricula resource materials.

6.2.1.4 Expressions of concern. Seven of the 43 religious educators (16.3%) in Phase Two identified the BRLA as an unnecessary measure of student learning used in RE. This group believed the BRLA had a limited purpose. They identified the BRLA as a measure of accountability but disapproved of it as a measure to be used in RE. They used language suggesting measures of accountability such as LSAs are “unnecessary”, “counter-productive in education”, “a costly waste of time and money”, “damaging to students’ morals and faith” and “taking away from valuable classroom teaching experiences”.

The seven religious educators argued the BRLA was designed “just as a ploy by the Bishops” to monitor, “check-up on” school performance in RE and “simply rank students and schools according to the levels of student attainment in RE”. As one teacher explained:

They [the WA Bishops] want to make us [teachers in Catholic schools] more accountable. This is why it is called, *The Bishops’ Religious Literacy Assessment*. It is

the first thing for me, that, it's called the Bishops' Literacy test I think really, it's a test of how much students know. So, it tends to reflect back on the school, the students and obviously, the teachers.

Similarly, one secondary school leader explained:

The BRLA is far removed from the classroom. We do not teach to it or even talk about it. This test is for the Bishops to find out how teachers are teaching and how students are learning in RE.

According to these religious educators, it was “only” the job of classroom teachers to “ensure that the scores in the BRLA were maintained in the average to above average ranking”. They perceived school and system leaders were only interested in the students' scores and if the scores were below expected achievement in RE, they believed teachers were “questioned”, “scrutinised” and “reprimanded”. Furthermore, the group suggested that the BRLA was a tool that “system authorities” used to better resource schools if the level of student learning became inappropriate.

Like the group of 12, the seven religious educators identified the BRLA as outside the scope of classroom work and “just another LSA” similar to NAPLAN. They argued that the BRLA was a measure of accountability to “satisfy” the WA Bishops, but saw the information from the BRLA as irrelevant to them and their classroom practices in RE. They indicated, that “like NAPLAN”, the BRLA did not really concern them. However, unlike the group of twelve, the seven religious educators said they were “expected to be involved in” the BRLA without any “real purpose” for them or their students.

The seven religious educators considered LSAs as “questionable” measures of student learning that were imposed by politicians and authorities of education systems. As one principal suggested, the WA Bishops should concentrate their efforts on training priests for contemporary circumstances rather than the development of a LSA in RE:

I think the Bishops should be concentrating more on looking at why our schools are full, but our churches are empty. I feel that if they looked more at teaching their priests how to engage with young families we would be better off. I know that it is really hard to do. I absolutely agree that it is the Bishops' right to set the BRLA and I know they have had assistance from the RE Team in the Catholic Education Office.

These participants also recommended clearer communication, guidance and direction from the CEOWA about the purpose of the BRLA as a LSA. As one school leader explained:

Is it worth reviewing on an annual basis so that it is clear. Are schools really clear on what the Bishops and the CEOWA are, actually designing? When was the last time

they called everyone together to let us know what to do with the BRLA or is it just this great knowledge that we have always used. I think there is a challenge here for our Bishops and the CEOWA. I don't think there is common knowledge of the BRLA across WA.

The explanations from the seven participants suggest that unless the purpose of the BRLA was better articulated to them, the BRLA will continue to be identified as outside the scope of classroom practices in RE, and as an “unjustifiable” measure of the professional quality of religious educators. This evidence provides one possible reason why religious educators in Phase One of the study [116 of 234 (49.6%)] perceived school leaders as more satisfied with the BRLA compared to classroom teachers [75 of 234 (32.1%)].

6.2.2 Sub-finding 2.2. The majority of religious educators [36 of 43 (83.7%)] involved in Phase Two perceived the BRLA as having a role to play in RE. They provided two distinct roles. The first role considers the academic profile of RE [15 of 43 (34.9%)]. The second role [11 of 43 (25.6%)] ensures coverage of the content taught in the RE curriculum. The comment of one principal reflects the collective perceptions of the group about the perceived importance of the BRLA's role in RE. The principal said, “Religious Education as a learning area is now mirroring the humanities subjects if it is taught right”. Table 6.6 lists common expressions in the form of metaphors and similes used by the rest of the group to describe the distinct role they perceived the BRLA had in RE. The metaphors and similes are emphasised in bold within the table.

Table 6.6

Perceived Role of the BRLA in Religious Education

Fifteen religious educators [15 of 43 (34.9%)] suggested the BRLA had enhanced the profile of Religious Education and promoted an academic focus.

The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment

- gives “**rigour**” to the learning area of Religious Education.
- gives RE “**status**”.
- “**lifts the profile**” of Religious Education.
- gives “**credibility to RE**” as an academic learning area.
- “**keeps the profile alive**” for Religious Education.
- has “**put RE on the table**”.
- “puts RE up there” like NAPLAN.
- is a “**form of advertising**” to show what we value and give back to our students.
- has given us a “**sniff**” towards a more academic or more rigorous direction.
- has “**heightened our awareness**” of our R curriculum.
- [provides] ... student performance data results and the assessment itself has helped me to go more vigorously over the RE content and not just to “**gloss over it**”.
- has ensured that we do not “**fluff around anymore**”.
- has ensured “**more of an urgency**” to cover the content. Before the BRLA we in the primary school probably spent too much time on activities like making posters or “**doing the filler stuff**”.

Eleven religious educators [11 of 43 (25.6%)] suggested the BRLA had ensured the teaching of content in the RE curriculum.

The Bishops' Religious Literacy Assessment

- has given us more of a sense of “**direction**” in the teaching of RE.
- in my opinion does not have any disadvantages. “**It keeps us on our toes**”. It tells us what is important in the content, the essential content and models assessment practice.
- is not the “**be all and end all**” I understand its place and I see it as a tool that validates my teaching.
- “**affirms what we do**”.
- is “**pressured work**” but a “good thing” as it is an opportunity to go back through some things to find out and remind students what they have done in terms of the basics and what they should know.
- is “**here to stay**”. Testing and assessment is not going away. The BRLA has given us an opportunity to “**grapple with**” the language behind our faith.
- helps us concentrate on “**covering the mandated RE content**”.

6.2.2.1 Enhanced academic profile. Fifteen religious educators [15 of 43 (34.9%)] suggested the BRLA has enhanced the academic profile of RE. These religious educators indicated that the role of the BRLA had “given RE a place on the table”, with other learning priorities, such as literacy and numeracy. They argued the BRLA had improved the profile of

RE and given it the status of other academic learning areas. The group used phrases such as, the BRLA has “enhanced”, “lifted” and “kept the profile of Religious Education as an academic learning area alive”. One principal identified the role of the BRLA as, “giving teaching in RE the same rigour and ‘kudos’ as other learning areas”. The principal also said:

The BRLA “keeps us on our toes”. Honestly, I can’t see there’s any disadvantage to it. I think there’s only advantages in being reflective and in wanting to do RE better. I think in an era of testing, does legitimatise RE as a subject rather than just something that we do casually or not take seriously in Catholic schools. I think now with Religion and Life, the BRLA has a place. I take the BRLA very seriously. You can actually see its place, from a community point of view, of our need to be informed Catholics rather than uninformed Catholics; if you know what I mean.

The principal suggested there was an expectation by the WA Bishops that “RE be considered and treated as the first learning area”.

The group of 15 referred to RE as the “first learning area” and suggested that “students needed to know” the specific vocabulary used as part of the Catholic Faith Tradition and that students needed to be taught about “their religion”. They indicated that the “transmission of knowledge” in RE was important. For these participants, the BRLA meets the expectations of the WA Bishops. Teachers teach, and students learn about the religious content of the Catholic faith. In so doing, the participants felt that students were capable then of applying their knowledge to a wider context.

Ten religious educators [10 of 43 (23.3%)] within the group of 15 indicated that the BRLA had encouraged a whole system approach to RE. They said the BRLA had provided evidence of student learning, complementary to evidence gained by classroom assessments in RE. These religious educators used language suggesting they valued the collection of student learning data from a range of assessments, developed by classroom teachers and externally produced by system administrators. They belonged to the same group who demonstrated an inclusive responsibility for student learning.

These religious educators explained that the BRLA had provided opportunities for teachers and school leaders and for the CEOWA to focus and respond as a whole system to student learning in RE. They said, “The BRLA is about system level thinking”. Three of the ten religious educators described the necessity for whole system thinking in RE. As one teacher explained:

I think, the BRLA reaffirms that we are doing the right thing; doing the best for our students and that as students at our school, they can be competitive against all other students in other schools.

Similarly, a secondary school leader explained:

Often when I look at the results I will see where our school is, how well we are doing and what our average is ... just to know that we're doing the right thing in comparison to the bigger picture ... well that's what I think.

Another school leader explained the need for teachers and school leaders to work together to understand student learning in RE:

It's about establishing, "systemness"; how the whole system is going, rather than just individual schools and individual children. So, it's a "good health check" for the system, a bit of accountability. Is what we're doing in Catholic schools working?

[How is it] working in Religious Education? If not, why not and how we can fix it?

These participants perceived the underlying role of the BRLA was to track student learning in RE so as to ensure continued and sustained progress of that learning. The explanation by one Year Nine teacher reflects the comments presented by the overall group of ten:

The BRLA gauges across the State, the strengths and weaknesses of children's knowledge and I suppose it then helps to draw the bow to how teachers should focus on aspects of the RE curriculum. For us, the BRLA results show that our students are weak in the section on Church. So, to improve the situation for our school we are providing more experiences to our children to know more about the structures of Church life.

The group explained how educators who work collaboratively can better identify strengths, weaknesses and misconceptions in student learning. For these religious educators, the BRLA was a measure of accountability used in RE to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

6.2.2.2 Content coverage. Eleven religious educators [11 of 43 (25.6%)] suggested the BRLA had ensured that teachers taught students the content in the RE curriculum. They explained how the BRLA had achieved this outcome. Firstly, the group seem to have believed that the BRLA had restored balance to the teaching of RE, which included the teaching of the essential content in the RE curriculum. As one teacher explained, "The RE content is a valuable tool that helps us find out about our religion and the other religions of the world". Secondly, the BRLA had improved the quality of assessment practices in RE because the teaching focus was on the content in the RE curriculum.

The 11 religious educators perceived the role of the BRLA as a measure “guiding teachers through the RE content”. The explanations provided by five of them reflect how the group perceived the role that the BRLA played within the RE curriculum. One teacher stated, “The BRLA makes my teaching more explicit in terms of content, knowledge and understanding”. Another teacher explained:

The purpose of the BRLA is to determine if we are “all” doing the right thing in RE. The CEOWA also looks at the results to see if, for example, we actually are covering what we’re saying we’re covering.

One school leader of RE explained:

When there is a standardised test like the BRLA, the RE learning area is treated more seriously and it confirms what is being taught in RE across the system. There is an opportunity for applying continuity to teaching the RE content.

Similarly, another school leader suggested, “The more we engage with the BRLA, the more we get to know the content in the RE curriculum”. As one principal stated, “Things are out of our control like literacy levels and Church attendance, but we have to try to improve things and the BRLA has helped us to do so”. The 11 religious educators indicated that change was necessary in RE. They felt there was a need for changes to how RE was being taught, and how the quality of student learning in RE was dependent upon being the central focus for all teachers and school leaders.

Of the group of 11, four religious educators [4 of 43 (9.3%)] as teachers of RE, responsible for students in Year Three and Year Five suggested the BRLA had restored balance and order to the teaching of RE and had “finally” closed the “gap” in their understanding about the content in the RE curriculum. They suggest that for “far too long” they had focused on “experiential” and “faith” based activities in RE rather than trying to cover the content in the RE curriculum. They argued that as a result of their experiences, they did not believe that the expected outcomes of the “mandated” RE curriculum were being addressed.

One teacher explained, “We used to fluff around before the BRLA. Now we have to focus because the BRLA has made teachers teach the content knowledge in Religious Education”. Similarly, another teacher suggested:

The BRLA gives a focus to the teachers, as well as the students, about as to what kind of things they should be making sure they have covered. I think there were all those years as we said before, where it was. You would ask children questions and be staggered at how they can’t answer the questions, really basic things.

These teachers of RE felt that the RE curriculum resource material such as the “Units of Work” in Catholic primary schools were “full of ‘wonder’ questions”, “airy-fairy” concepts about human emotions and did not “contain many facts”. They recommended the RE curriculum be updated to address and align with the academic rigour they perceived was adopted by the BRLA. One of the Year Five teachers was also a school leader. As a school leader of RE they stated, “our focus on feelings is a thing of the past in RE and we need to focus now on facts”. The school leader elaborated by explaining:

A little bit too much was thrown out the window. Until now, RE was all about exploring one’s feelings; “touchy feely” emotions driven, teaching styles were being used. Now I think we are getting more balance coming in through the use of the BRLA. There is more focus on knowledge, knowledge about the history of the Church, knowledge about events, knowledge about Scripture and parts of the Mass and all that sort of language. The BRLA gives us more of a framework. It gives you purpose to teach RE.

For these religious educators, the BRLA had ensured that students learnt the language of the Catholic faith that encompassed the historical and scriptural structures of the Church.

Of the eleven, six religious educators [6 of 43 (14.0%)] indicated the BRLA has improved assessment practices in RE. They described the BRLA as having motivated “effective assessment practices” in RE. They explained how the BRLA provided exemplars of academically focused assessment techniques in RE that were similar to other learning areas. As one teacher of RE said, “We used to make up our own assessments but now we have a set structure from the BRLA for more formal assessment types that the whole school follows”. Similarly, another teacher explained:

The BRLA has an important role. It is a good thing. The BRLA has helped us understand that the rigour of assessment practice in RE should be the same as other learning areas and we should be trying to improve the situation at our school. If you compare the BRLA to NAPLAN some of the questions make you say, “Oh wow, I didn’t even think of that type of questioning to assess that particular area”. With the Bishops’ test, the questions make me think why I didn’t cover the content as well as I should have. So, teachers learn about assessment at the same time as they are preparing students and reviewing results. It’s just like we do for NAPLAN.

These religious educators seem to have appreciated the review and improvement of assessment practices in RE as important for progress in student learning in RE.

Besides driving assessment practice, the group of six also indicated the BRLA was a source of student performance data in RE that was tracked and aligned with student performance data from classroom assessments in RE. As one secondary school leader of RE stated, “The results from the BRLA keep me on track and directed me more to core teaching in RE”. These religious educators seem to have perceived that the BRLA data were helping them understand how to better improve student learning in RE. As one principal suggested, “Unlike for NAPLAN, the results from the BRLA are different to the results in classroom assessments. Perhaps we need to attend to the teaching of content in RE”. The principal perceived the role of the BRLA as a means for aligning assessment practices in RE to other learning areas and ensuring that better alignment of assessment, pedagogy and content in RE is considered into the future.

Sub-finding 2.2 supports the evidence in Phase One. Firstly, the finding supports the 141 of the total number of 238 religious educators in the study (59.2%) who perceived the BRLA as having a role to play in RE. Secondly, the finding supports the 62 of 99 religious educators (26.1% of 238) who described the role of the BRLA has having ensured coverage of the content in the RE curriculum. Thirdly, the finding supports the 27 of 99 religious educators (11.3% of 238) who described how the BRLA has raised the profile of the RE curriculum. These perceived intended aspects of the BRLA seem to also reflect the local Religious Education Policy, version 2-B5 (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2013b) regarding the expected treatment of RE as an academic learning area.

6.2.2.3 Perceived limitations. The group of seven (16.3% of 43) who questioned the purpose of the BRLA and said that the assessment was an unnecessary measure of accountability in RE also appear to have perceived the BRLA as having a limited role to play in RE. The group used metaphors and analogies to express their perceptions of the meaning and value of the BRLA. Table 6.7 lists the common expressions used by the group. The metaphors and analogies are highlighted within the table.

This group described in detail how they disapproved of the BRLA by raising concerns and issues about the academic focus of RE and suggested the BRLA had not improved the faith of students. The group made comments such as, “I am not convinced the BRLA is a good thing” and “It is not important to use, we don’t put much credence on it”. The reasons provided by the group identifying why they disapproved of the BRLA are categorised in two ways.

Table 6.7

Perceived Limitations of the Role of the BRLA

Category One: The BRLA is irrelevant and inappropriate in RE.

- The BRLA is only for the Bishops. However, the BRLA probably doesn't do what the Bishops want because "**students don't care, and parents too don't treat it like NAPLAN**".
- It is not valued by parents because they "**do not appear to be interested**".
- The BRLA is "**used by the CEOWA**" and does not really concern us.
- The BRLA is not valued by "other teachers who are not involved". "Other teachers are not interested".
- The test does not make you a "**better Catholic**".
- It is "only for kids that are interested in RE".
- What is the point of the test when the staff are not Catholic in secondary schools?
- Student performance is a result of "**poor church attendance**".
- The BRLA is "more knowledge based rather than how we teach".
- The BRLA does not allow for teachers "to make judgements about students' faith".
- The test items are "not about students' lives".
- The BRLA is "not doing enough to engage the students with their faith".
- Learning in RE needs to be assessed using more than just pen and paper tests. Faith cannot be judged by a test.
- It is stressful because there is "**too much content**" to cover.
- The BRLA leaves us "**all in the dark**" about how to interpret the results and "**where to go to next**".

Category Two: Large-scale, standardised assessments are inappropriate and unnecessary.

- It's not just the BRLA, I'm against all these, standardised type of tests.
- As other tests like this, the BRLA is "**an interruption**" to everyday teaching.
- It is just "another thing we have to do" and so "I glance over the results and get on with my job".
- Standardised testing like the BRLA do not tell the "**full story**".
- Our students "**either sink or swim**" during the BRLA. That is normal for these types of tests.
- The BRLA is "**a brick wall, for students**" who have poor literacy.
- The BRLA is highly valued as an English test.
- Students at my school with poor English skills are not catered for and are damaged by these tests.
- Schools with students who have poor literacy levels are dealing with a "**double edged sword**". How do we help students break open standardised assessment items without compromising the integrity of the results?
- The BRLA as a large-scale, standardised assessment is designed for "**the bright kids**" with "**good memories**" and those who can "**rote learn**".

Category one identifies how the religious educators perceived the BRLA as irrelevant and inappropriate in RE. The religious educators explained how the BRLA was irrelevant to their classroom practices in RE and, also to the RE curriculum because the assessment was designed for use by system leaders. They said that teachers, students and their parents were

not interested in the assessment nor in RE generally. Only students who attended Church were considered interested in the BRLA because they performed well.

Category two identifies how the religious educators perceived the BRLA as a LSA to be irrelevant and inappropriate in RE. They indicated that the use of LSAs were inappropriate in education and unnecessary for classroom use. They also believed LSAs had a limited capacity to measure the knowledge and understanding of students, especially those students with poor literacy skills. The religious educators considered LSAs as only for students who were proficient in reading and writing. Their comments provided clarity about why they disapproved of the BRLA as a LSA and for why they considered the purpose and role of the BRLA to be limited.

For the group of seven, there was “no point to the test”. As one principal who appears to have disapproved of the BRLA explained, “The BRLA is a misguided attempt to pretend that it is an effective test like NAPLAN. And I’m not ‘anti-standardised testing’, just anti-something that tries to be like one”. The principal further indicated the BRLA represents, “a lack of clarity in terms of what the WA Bishops and the CEOWA want to achieve in RE”.

The arguments presented by the group of seven align with the evidence in Phase One that identifies larger groups of religious educators who appear to have raised concerns about the BRLA and LSAs generally. For example, 80 of 238 religious educators (33.6%) raised concerns about the use of the BRLA and 41 of the 80 (17.2% of 238) described the BRLA as challenging based on issues associated with students’ literacy. Similarly, 105 of 238 religious educators (44.1%) suggested the BRLA has a limited role to play in RE and 44 of the 105 (18.5% of 238) described the BRLA as irrelevant to the RE curriculum. They suggested that the BRLA was irrelevant because the vocabulary of the test items was difficulty for students and teachers and that the students’ faith was being confronted.

6.3 Chapter Summary

Finding Two from Phase Two was presented in this chapter. A summary of the finding and associated sub-findings based on the analysis of response data from 43 religious educators is provided in Figure 6.1. Finding Two provides clarity and depth to Finding One regarding the religious educators’ contrasting perceptions of the purpose and role of the BRLA. As a sub-sample of the 238 religious educators in the study, these 43 religious educators generally perceived the BRLA as a positive initiative with a distinct purpose and role in RE. The religious educators made constant comparisons between the BRLA and NAPLAN and appear to have demonstrated support for LSAs. The majority of the religious

educators highlighted what they perceived as the two distinct roles that the BRLA had played as a LSA in RE. That is, to enhance the academic profile of RE and ensure the teaching of content from the RE curriculum. The finding suggests that groups of religious educators perceived the BRLA as having encouraged a whole system focus on student learning in RE, restored balance to a learning area that may have in the past been treated more as a faith-based activity rather than an educational activity, and promoted improved assessment practices in RE.

However, Finding Two also identifies the perceptions of minority groups who disapproved of the BRLA and felt that the assessment had a limited purpose and role in RE. The minority groups provided a number of reasons for their perceptions that align with the reasons provided by groups of religious educators in Phase One. They raised concerns about the BRLA and considered the BRLA and LSAs generally as irrelevant to classroom curriculum practices. The religious educators' perceptions seem to reflect their teaching experiences in RE and experiences of using LSAs. How they interpreted the role of accountability based on their experiences is also evident.

The religious educators' perceptions of the purpose and role of the BRLA will be further discussed in Chapters Nine and Ten to highlight the influence that their perceptions had on their teaching and assessment practices. In the next chapter the religious educators' response to the administration and implementation of the BRLA is discussed.

Specific Research Question One

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

Contributing Questions

Explain what the BRLA means and represents to you.

What do you understand to be the intended purpose and role of the BRLA?

Finding Two from Phase Two

Finding Two: The religious educators provided mostly positive interpretations of the purpose and role of the BRLA.

Sub-finding 2.1: The religious educators perceived the BRLA as having a distinct purpose.

40 of 43 (93.0%) compared the BRLA to NAPLAN.

36 of 43 (83.7%) expressed support for the BRLA as a LSA.

31 of 43 (72.1%) identified the BRLA as a measure of accountability used in RE.

24 of 43 (55.8%) suggested the BRLA informs a broad audience about student learning in RE.

12 of 43 (27.9%) suggested the BRLA informs educational leaders about student learning in RE.

Seven religious educators [7 of 43 (16.3%)] identified the BRLA as an unnecessary measure of accountability used in RE.

Sub-finding 2.2: The religious educators perceived the BRLA as having a role to play in RE.

36 of 43 (83.7%) identified two distinct roles the BRLA plays in RE.

15 of 43 (34.9%) suggested the BRLA had enhanced the academic profile of RE. Ten [10 of 43 (23.3%)] suggested the BRLA had encouraged a whole system approach to RE.

11 of 43 (25.6%) suggested the BRLA had ensured teachers taught students the content in the RE curriculum. 4 of 43 (9.3%) suggested the BRLA has restored balance to the teaching of RE. 6 of 43 (14.0%) suggested the BRLA had improved assessment practices in RE.

7 religious educators [7 of 43 (16.3%)] indicated the BRLA had a limited role to play in RE.

Figure 6.1. Summary of Finding Two