

Survey on Religious Education (RE) in Catholic schools



Principal researcher: Professor Graham Rossiter

This project investigates two questions, seeking the views of religious educators and others involved or interested in Catholic schooling:-

1. **The language used for talking about classroom Religious Education.**

2. **The idea of giving more attention to a critical, evaluative approach, especially in the senior classes.**

While focused specifically on Australian Catholic schools, apart from a few questions that imply knowledge of this context, the survey is pertinent to Catholic schooling and Catholic RE in public schools in other countries.

Important Note: The survey focuses only on **language** used in the **discourse (or narrative) of classroom Religious Education – that is: key words, ideas and constructs used for describing purposes and practices.**

It is not concerned with other parts of the school's overall religious program like liturgy, retreats, school prayer, outreach, community service, school ethos, charism etc. It will not address details of students' spirituality/religious faith.

Background to the research questions

The **language** used in the discourse of Religious Education is important because it has a shaping influence on how religion teachers understand the place of Religious Education in the Catholic school curriculum, on how they see their role in the classroom, and on what impact they hope it will have on their students.

Participation in the survey

To participate, please type your responses in the appropriate boxes of the online questionnaire. All the information you provide will be both confidential and anonymous.

In honouring contributions to the survey, and in seeing it as important to give religious educators a significant voice in the discourse of RE, a research report will be made available to participants, as well as to schools where the survey is conducted by diocesan school system authorities. The project analysis will also be reported on the ASMRE website with the address given at the end of the questionnaire.

Thank you very much for participating in this survey. Your views are highly valued.

Professional experience in Religious Education

Questionnaire items	Response
1. I am involved (or have been involved) in teaching religion in Catholic schools (Enter 1 for Yes Enter 2 for No)	
2. Gender. Type your response in the box.	
3. Teaching level. I teach (or did teach) religion mainly at this level Enter 1 for Senior classes Y11-12; 2 for Junior/Middle secondary 3 for primary classes including K	
4. I have taught religion for this period of time	

1. Up to 2 years 2. 3-5 years 3. 6-10 years 4. 11 years or more	
5. Qualifications for teaching RE. Enter only one response 1. Classroom experience & PD programs only 2. Diocesan RE certificate 3. Religious Education/Theology in undergraduate program 4. Graduate Certificate or Diploma in Religious Education/Theology 5. Masters degree in Religious Education/Theology 6. Doctoral research degree in Religious Education	
6. Leadership role: 1. I have no leadership role 2. If you are serving (or have served) as the coordinator of the school religion curriculum 3. If you are coordinating RE at one or more year levels 4. If you have some other religious leadership role in the school or elsewhere 5. Diocesan consultant/adviser 6. Academic in Religious Education or Theology.	
7. Diocese of my present school (or diocese where you did most of your religion teaching), or country if outside Australia. Type your response in the box	
8. Religious identification: 1. Catholic 2. Other Christian denomination 3. Religion other than Christian 4. No religion	

Language used in the discourse of Religious Education – key words, ideas and constructs used for describing purposes and practices

The survey covers a number of terms or constructs that have been used, but not necessarily all. The terms are not always used exclusively and often a collection is used for explaining Religious Education.

Statement applied to each term:

The term xxx helps give an account of Religious Education that is appropriate and relevant for today's Catholic school students.

For the following, indicate your agreement/disagreement with the above statement applied to each term separately on a scale of 1-5

1 strongly disagree 2 disagree 3 not sure 4 agree 5 strongly agree

Terms/constructs used in the discourse of Religious Education	Response
Ecclesiastical / church terms	
9 Faith development	
10. Faith formation	
11 Catholic identity	
12 Evangelisation	
13 Catholic church mission	
14 Ministry	
15 Catechesis	
16 Christian witnessing	
16A Sharing personal faith	
17 Christian doctrine	
18 Sunday Mass attendance	
19 Christian outreach	
Generic educational terms	
20 Knowledge and understanding of Catholicism	
21 Some study of other religions represented in (Australian) society	
22 Religious literacy	
23 Critical thinking about religion	
24 Study of the contemporary search for meaning	
25 Skills in interpreting the shaping influence of culture on people	
26 Study of contemporary spiritual/moral issues	
27 Resourcing young people's spirituality whether they are religious or not	
28 A credible academic subject with the same study demands as regular subjects	
29 Important as the only spiritual/moral subject in the curriculum	
30 Important for the spiritual/moral education of young Australian citizens	

Narratives or scenarios for Religious Education

As above, for each of the following brief 'narratives' or accounts of Religious Education, indicate your level of agreement/disagreement about their **appropriateness and relevance** for today's students on the scale of 1-5.

1 strongly disagree 2 disagree 3 not sure 4 agree 5 strongly agree

The narrative xxx helps give an account of Religious Education that is appropriate and relevant for today's Catholic school students.

The narratives here are not exclusive and may overlap. Judge each just by what it says.

31 Narrative 1. The principal purpose of Catholic schools and Religious Education is to participate in the mission of the Catholic Church. Catholic schools are founded on the person of Jesus Christ and are centres of the new evangelisation. Religious education should imbue young people with a Catholic identity. It should develop their religious faith and deepen their personal relationship with God and Jesus Christ. In RE, students and teachers can share their personal faith. RE should enhance their religious practice and their engagement with the church – especially Sunday Mass.	Numerical response
32 Narrative 2 Religious education should enhance young people's religious literacy. This includes especially knowledge and understanding of Catholicism, its theology, scripture, traditions and religious practices. It should develop critical thinking about religion and religious issues. It will include evaluations from a Catholic perspective.	
33 Narrative 3 Young people are confronted by the complexities, dilemmas and conflicting interpretations of life's meaning and purpose. They require, more than ever, the skill of critical thinking in order to navigate an uncertain and pluralistic world. As there is no final answer to life's ultimate meaning and purpose in which intellectual certainty is possible, human knowledge is always partial and limited. Consequently, students are invited to explore within Religious Education the inexhaustible mystery of human existence, as glimpsed primarily through the lens of the Catholic Christian Tradition, as well as other religious traditions and help render this mystery meaningful in their lives.	
34 Narrative 4 In giving young people access to their religious heritage, Religious Education can enhance their knowledge and understanding of Catholic theology, Scripture and religious traditions. It should also give some attention to other religious traditions represented in Australia. In addition, it should help develop students' skills for analysing, interpreting and evaluating contemporary spiritual/moral issues, including scrutiny of the shaping influence that culture can have on people's thinking and on their values and lifestyle. In times of rapid social and cultural change, and even more so during a global pandemic, the presumptions people make about 'the good life' can appear shaky and contingent, creating uncertainty and anxiety about the future. RE is the subject that could give attention to the ways people are trying to find meaning and make sense of life in difficult times. And it can give students the opportunity to engage in some research on these questions.	
35 Narrative 5 Both philosophically and historically, Religious Education has been the most distinctively Catholic religious aspect of Catholic schooling in Australia. It testifies to the core principle that any school curriculum is deficient if it does not have a spiritual/moral subject like religion, ethics, philosophy, or personal development etc. RE, through educating young people in their own religious tradition, as well as some study of religion generally and of the contemporary search for meaning, makes a valuable contribution to the education of young Australians and enhances the nation's educational, social capital and contributes to the common good. In this way, Catholic schools could exercise a national leadership role as regards the importance of a spiritual/moral dimension to the Australian school curriculum.	

Comments about the use of Narratives 1 and 4 in diocesan accounts of Religious Education

Indicate your level of agreement/disagreement with the following statements on a scale of 1-5

1 Strongly disagree 2 Disagree 3 Not sure 4 Agree 5 Strongly agree

35A The language represented in Narrative 1 above is prominent in descriptions of Religious Education in Catholic diocesan literature and or websites.	Response
35B The language represented in Narrative 4 above is prominent in descriptions of Religious Education in Catholic diocesan literature and websites.	

Use of ecclesiastical language for religious education (see the ecclesiastical terms listed above).

Indicate your level of agreement/disagreement with the following statements on a scale of 1-5

1 Strongly disagree 2 Disagree 3 Not sure 4 Agree 5 Strongly agree

36 Ecclesiastical language (especially terms like faith formation and Catholic identity) is very prominent in the discourse (or narrative) of Catholic school religious education.	Response
37 Ecclesiastical language tends to predominate in professional development programs offered to new and continuing religion teachers.	
38 This ecclesiastical language helps teachers get a better understanding of religious education and clarity about its nature and purposes.	
39 Ecclesiastical language creates ambiguity and some confusion of purposes about Religious Education because it seems to have displaced educational words.	
40 Frequent use of ecclesiastical language for RE can make students/parents and teachers think of it more as like a church activity rather than a school/educational one.	

41	Frequent use of ecclesiastical language for RE can give the impression that it is mainly about recruiting young people to Catholic church parishes.	
42	Ecclesiastical expectations of Catholic RE and church terms are acceptable – but the problem is where they dominate the language of RE.	
43	I am aware of new religious leadership positions in Catholic schools and diocesan offices where the position names are worded with the ecclesiastical terms noted above.	
44	The ecclesiastical names of the new leadership positions create some ambiguity about the nature and role of RE in the school.	
45	What is needed in the discourse of RE is a balanced use of ecclesiastical terms along with educational terms.	
46	Frequent use of Catholic ecclesiastical language for RE inhibits its capacity to contribute to the national education discourse about the importance of a spiritual/moral dimension to the school curriculum.	

Specific ecclesiastical terms used for describing Religious Education

Faith formation

Indicate your level of agreement/disagreement with the following statements on a scale of 1-5

1 Strongly disagree 2 Disagree 3 Not sure 4 Agree 5 Strongly agree

47	The meaning of the term, faith formation is clear and unambiguous.	Response
48	Faith formation is not just about 'educating' students but about 'changing' them at a personal and spiritual level.	
49	Any observer could readily see the difference between a faith formation activity and an educational one.	
50	The term makes unrealistic presumptions about both the faith of students and about RE changing their personal faith.	
51	The etymology of the word 'formation', from seminaries and religious order novitiates at an earlier time (e.g. moulding, conforming, uniformity etc.), makes it a questionable term to use in association with a Christian understanding of faith.	

Catholic identity

Indicate your level of agreement/disagreement with the following statements on a scale of 1-5

1 Strongly disagree 2 Disagree 3 Not sure 4 Agree 5 Strongly agree

52	The meaning of the term, Catholic identity is clear and unambiguous.	Response
53	Catholic identity is about 'recontextualising' the Catholic school – that is critical dialogue with culture towards a renewed Christian theological presence in the community.	
54	The first thing that comes to mind when I see the term Catholic identity is recontextualising the Catholic school.	
54A	The first thing that comes to mind when I see the term Catholic identity is the school as a caring community with a safe and nurturing environment.	
54B	The first thing that comes to mind when I see the term Catholic identity are its Catholic faith-based and theological characteristics.	
55	The term seems to be 'inward-looking' at the Catholic church at the very time when RE needs to be more 'outwards-oriented' – as in critical evaluation of culture.	
56	Frequent use of the term would inevitably make students and teachers who were not Catholic feel somewhat uncomfortable.	
57	Frequent use of the term would inevitably make relatively non-religious Catholic students and teachers feel somewhat uncomfortable.	
58	The term feels like it is a Catholic slogan – E.g. 'Make the Catholic church great again'.	
59	The term gives the impression that RE should be concerned with getting more students back to regular weekly mass attendance.	

The need for giving more curriculum space to study of the search for meaning and the critical evaluation of culture (especially in the senior classes)

A number of items above have already addressed this question.

Indicate your level of agreement/disagreement with the following statements on a scale of 1-5

1 Strongly disagree 2 Disagree 3 Not sure 4 Agree 5 Strongly agree

60	The approach in Scenario 4 above affirms commitment to teaching about Catholicism while allowing more scope for the critical evaluation of culture and contemporary issues.	Response

61 Because Catholic school Y11-12 students can already study state ATAR courses like <i>Studies of Religion</i> and <i>Religion and Society</i> , and non-ATAR <i>Religion and ethics</i> , it is acceptable to have 'other-than-Catholic' content in RE programs at this level. (An Australian ATAR subject is one where its score counts towards an official national university entrance score).	
62 Having more critical evaluation of culture and contemporary issues would make RE more relevant to the lives of students.	

Some general observations about Religious Education in Catholic schools

Indicate your level of agreement/disagreement with the following statements on a scale of 1-5

1 Strongly disagree 2 Disagree 3 Not sure 4 Agree 5 Strongly agree

62A The perceived status of RE as a subject in the Catholic school curriculum is higher now than it was at any earlier time in my experience.	Response
62B Religion teachers in Catholic schools today are very comfortable with RE and have high morale.	
62C I think that RE curriculum and teaching are currently quite relevant to the lives of most pupils in Catholic schools.	

Any other comments or reflections related to items/issues that participants would like to contribute to the survey

63

* * * * *