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The Perceptions of Recently Assigned Secondary Religious Education Teachers

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Abstract

This article focuses on survey responses from newly appointed secondary Religious Education teachers from the first phase of a longitudinal study. The study was conducted in Catholic schools in three dioceses of Western Australia over two school years, from 1998 to 1999. The study focused on the teachers' perceptions of implementing the Perth Archdiocesan Religious Education Units of Work. The article outlines briefly the demographic and professional backgrounds of recently appointed RE (RARE) teachers. Next, it reports upon how these teachers perceived their use of the instructional resources and teaching approach in the RE Units. The article then describes what RARE teachers believed were the key underlying principles to be followed in implementing the RE Units. Finally, a synopsis summarises the key findings to emerge from the survey responses. The responses suggest that teaching experience and ongoing formation are required for successful curriculum implementation among recently assigned RE teachers.

The Perceptions of Recently Assigned Secondary Religious Education Teachers

Religious Education (RE) in Western Australia has been undergoing a process of reform over the past fifteen years. In the Archdiocese of Perth and the dioceses of Bunbury and Broome, Catholic secondary RE teachers have implemented units of work developed by the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia. The term-length units contain content, teaching programs and resources for the teachers to use. RE teachers are required to follow the sequence of the teaching programs while using their professional discretion in choice of strategies and resources. During the late 1990s, the units underwent a series of trials with a particular focus on catering for the needs of recently assigned RE teachers because of the significant link between quality teaching and student performance (Ladwig & Gore, 2005, p. 121). Concerns about how and why teachers use mandated curriculum materials in RE has been the subject of study over the past few years (Ivers, 2004). This article reports on a survey of the initial perceptions of recently assigned RE teachers about implementing these units of work into their classroom teaching.

Recently Assigned RE (RARE) Teachers

The term 'recently assigned' RE teachers includes teachers in their early teaching careers and teaching RE; and, teachers who were experienced in another specialist learning area but were novices in teaching RE. This group of teachers comprised a significant proportion (46%) of teachers teaching Religious Education in Catholic secondary schools (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 1997). However, for the purposes of the survey, teachers needed to have completed at least one year of RE teaching. The survey incorporated a model of curriculum implementation developed by Fullan (2001); namely, possible changes in the use of instructional resources, changes in the use of teaching approach, and the adoption of new beliefs about the curriculum. The survey relied upon teachers completing a series of Likert and ranking items along with open-ended questions. Letters of invitation to be a part of the survey were sent to schools that were fully implementing the Units. In response, 34 (89%) out of 38 Catholic secondary schools from the Archdiocese of Perth and the Dioceses of Bunbury and Geraldton agreed to be involved in the survey. Of the 168 surveys sent out to RARE teachers in their second to sixth year of teaching RE, 122 (73%) were returned. Table One identifies the key demographic and professional backgrounds of these teachers.

Table One Key Background Features of RARE Teachers

Demographic Background

- 69% of respondents were female lay teachers
 - Only one person from a religious congregation teaching RE involved in the survey
 - Range of age groups represented with most respondents (66%), between 21-30 years of age.
 - Male/female teacher ratio was consistent across the age groups.
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Training Background

- Very few (6%) RARE teachers taught RE as their main subject area.
 - RARE teachers trained initially within a specific learning area:
 - English (26%)
 - Society and Environment (14%)
 - Technology and Enterprise (13%)
 - Science (11%)
 - Health and Physical Education (9%)
 - The Arts (7%)
 - Maths (7%)
 - Languages Other Than English or LOTE (3%).
 - Cohort comprised a mixture of mostly recent graduates and some experienced teachers.
 - 89% of teachers were trained in tertiary institutions within Western Australia
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Accreditation to teach Religious Education in a Catholic School

- 77% of teachers responded that they did not have a tertiary qualification in RE:
 - 19% stated that it was incorporated within their undergraduate (Education) degree
 - 2% recorded that it was a part of their postgraduate degree in Education.
 - Teachers with tertiary RE qualifications came from:
 - The University of Notre Dame Australia (18%)
 - Edith Cowan University (4%) through the Catholic Institute of Western Australia (CIWA)
 - an Overseas Tertiary Institution (1%)
 - Study component of Accreditation to Teach RE:
 - 55% of teachers had completed tertiary studies
 - 38% were in the process of completing it
 - 7% had not begun the study component.
 - Inservice or teaching methods component of *Accreditation to Teach RE*:
 - 76% had completed this component
 - 9% were in the process of completing it
 - 13% had not begun the inservice component.
-

Teaching Experience in Religious Education

- Most (80%) teachers had between one and four years of teaching experience in Religious Education.
 - 31% were in the second year of teaching RE
 - 28% in their third year
 - 21% in their fourth year
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- 11% in their fifth year
 - 10% in their sixth year.
 - RE teaching experience as a proportion of teaching load:
 - 62% stated that teaching RE represented less than a quarter of their class contact time
 - 26% with RE representing between a quarter to a half of their teaching load
 - 5% with RE representing more than half to three quarters of their teaching load
 - 6% with RE representing more than three quarters of their teaching load.
-

Whether teachers were younger or older, accredited or not, the responses suggested that they seemed to share similar experiences. They were teaching a learning area with which they were unfamiliar and experienced challenges like beginning teachers in other fields (Bezzina, Stanyer, & Bezzina, 2005; Feiman-Nemser, 2003; McCormack & Thomas, 2003). Most teachers were female and in their early teaching career. The majority had trained locally in a specialist learning area but not in Religious Education. However, half of the RARE teachers had completed *Accreditation to teach Religious Education* (a mandatory professional requirement required by the WA Catholic Education Commission to teach RE in WA Catholic schools). The responses also indicated that the actual length of RE teaching experience for RARE teachers was considerably less than what they would experience in their own major learning area. Furthermore, these teachers seemed to teach predominantly lower secondary classes and had a class in more than one Year level. The implication here is that these teachers were stretching their preparation time over more than one RE Unit at a time. With almost two-thirds of the teachers having a reduced contact time with their RE classes, it was possible that the classroom experience of teaching RE took longer to develop. Such a feature about RE teaching has been commented also by Buchanan and Hyde (2006, pp. 24-25).

In the open-ended questions part of the survey, RARE teachers were asked what they considered to be of importance in acquiring sufficient professional background to teach RE confidently. The majority (51%) of 178 comments recommended that gaining professional qualifications in RE was important. Of this number, 30% advised that tertiary qualifications or its equivalent (such as the Content of RE Courses offered by the Catholic Education Office of WA) be gained as early as possible. These studies were to be done during either teacher training or the first years of teaching. Furthermore, 14% recommended the need to acquire *Accreditation to Teach RE* as a means of teaching RE confidently. The responses suggested that just over half of the RARE teachers recognised the professional status of Religious Education as a learning area. Nonetheless, the respondents saw themselves as professionally trained teachers of another major learning area and that teaching RE was an additional responsibility.

Use of Instructional Resources

In the survey, RARE teachers were asked about the use of instructional resources provided by the RE Units of Work. The survey explored three issues: the accessibility of the resources, the frequency of use of these resources and the attitudes of RARE teachers towards the use of these resources. Teachers were invited to consider their attitude towards the accessibility of the instructional resources in the RE Units (Table Two). A Likert scale with five levels of agreement was used: Strongly Agree, Agree, Uncertain, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. When the categories 'Strongly Agree' and 'Agree' were combined, the responses indicated

widespread agreement that the instructional resources were ‘easy to follow’ (86%), ‘useful in my classroom teaching’ (83%), ‘reduce lesson preparation time’ (82%), and provided ‘sufficient background material’ (63%). The skewed distribution towards the modal (most frequent) ‘Agree’ response in the Likert items and the small dispersion of scores from the mean indicated that RARE teachers generally held similar perceptions to one another about the accessibility of the instructional resources.

Table Two Accessibility of Instructional Resources

<i>As a RARE teacher, I tend to find...</i>	SA	A	U	D	SD	Omit	Total	Mean Value ¹	Stand. Dev. ²
1. RE Units are easy to follow.	27 (22)	78 (64)	7 (6)	8 (7)	2 (2)	0 (0)	122 (100)	2.02	0.83
2. RE Units are useful in my classroom teaching.	24 (20)	77 (63)	11 (9)	9 (7)	1 (1)	0 (0)	122 (100)	2.07	0.81
3. RE Units reduce lesson preparation time.	37 (30)	64 (52)	8 (7)	12 (10)	1 (1)	0 (0)	122 (100)	1.98	0.92
4. RE Units provide sufficient background material.	19 (16)	57 (47)	20 (16)	24 (20)	2 (2)	0 (0)	122 (100)	2.45	1.03

Note:

1. The Mean Value represents the average of numerical values scored after each category was given a numerical value. SA = Strongly Agree (1); A = Agree (2); U = uncertain (3); D = Disagree (4) and SD = Strongly Disagree (5). Omit indicates that no response was given.
2. Stand. Dev. = Standard Deviation.
3. Numbers in parentheses indicate percentages and rounded to the nearest whole numbers.
4. Shaded scores represent the Mode (most frequent response) for that item.

Teachers were asked to rank five stipulated instructional resources on a scale from (1) to (5), with (5) being least frequently used. The respondents had the flexibility to consider the merits of the five stipulated items and had the option to include another item (Volunteered Item) that they felt was important. A rank score was calculated from the rankings given by each teacher. The item with the lowest total rank score was considered to be the most frequently used and so forth for the other items. Volunteered items were counted then given a rank from (6) to (16), with (16) being the least frequent, to distinguish them from the previous five stipulated items. The highest ranked items are shown in Table Three.

Table Three Ranking of Frequency of Use of Instructional Resources

A. Stipulated Items

Rank	Item
1.	Mastersheets
2.	Student Books
3.	Resources created by the teachers
4.	Resources from the Coordinator of RE
5.	Texts cited in the RE Units

B. Volunteered Items

Rank	Item
6.	Videos
7.	Print materials from magazines and newspapers
8.	Own resources collected
9.	Applying ideas from the Teacher's Manual
10.	Using resources from the school's RE department

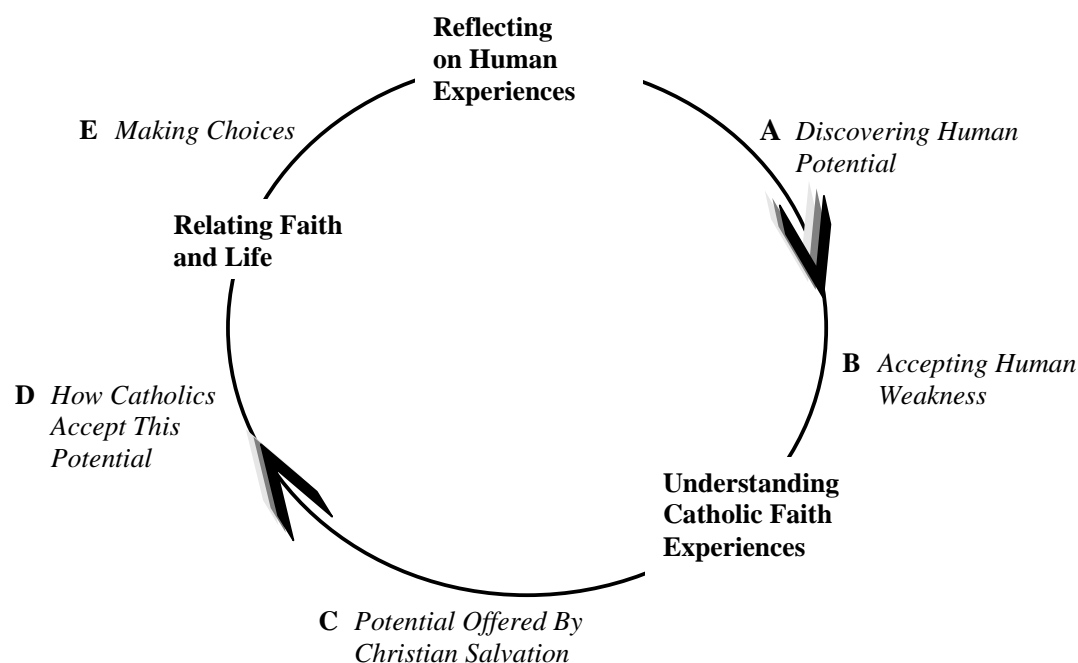
RARE teachers indicated that they used resources such as the Mastersheets from the Teacher's Manual and the Student Book the most frequently. These curriculum materials were supplemented by resources created by the teachers themselves or from the RE Coordinator. Teachers augmented these resources with their own or the resources of their school as well as using resources such as videos and print media materials.

Teachers were asked to give a comment about what best reflected their experience in using the Teacher's Manuals and Student Books. The advice from RARE teachers about using the instructional resources was consistent across the cohort and seemed to focus on using them as a mainstay for teaching. The advice included comments relating to 'planning for and reviewing the resources' (23%) and 'using the resources as a guide' (16%) and 'follow the teaching and learning program' (7%). These comments were juxtaposed with statements about drawing on other resources that were suited to the needs of students. The teachers made comments such as: 'be creative, explore alternatives, provide variety' (18%), 'match or modify curriculum materials to student needs' (13%) and 'supervise the use of Mastersheets and the Student Book because language is not readily accessible to the students' (8%).

Use of Teaching Approach

RARE teachers were asked about their experiences in using the teaching approach as recommended by the RE Units (Figure One). Three issues were explored: teaching process, preferred learning strategies and the attitudes of RARE teachers towards the prescribed teaching approach (Table Four). As was the case with the accessibility of resources, the data reflected a positively skewed distribution and narrow standard deviations suggesting widespread agreement on items about teaching approach. The exception to this trend was the Likert item dealing with organising liturgies in the classroom, which will be discussed later.

Figure One Steps of the Teaching Process



Source: Director of Religious Education, Archdiocese of Perth, 1996, p. 2.

A majority of RARE teachers (87%) agreed that it was useful to begin with student experiences about a topic. In addition, 80% of teachers indicated it was useful to use a process of sincere and patient dialogue with their students. The majority of teachers (71%) also indicated that journal work was easy to include as a part of their teaching. Also, 71% indicated it was useful to follow the sequence of objectives in the RE Units.

Table Four Experience of the RE Teaching Approach

<i>As a RARE teacher, I tend to find...</i>	SA	A	U	D	SD	Omit	Total	Mean Value ¹	Stand. Dev. ²
7. Presenting content as outcomes of learning useful.	4 (3)	54 (44)	52 (43)	9 (7)	1 (1)	2 (2)	122 (100)	2.53	0.78
8. Following the sequence of objectives in the RE Units useful.	15 (12)	72 (59)	17 (14)	15 (12)	1 (1)	2 (2)	122 (100)	2.25	0.91
9. Beginning with students' experiences about a topic useful.	59 (48)	47 (39)	9 (7)	4 (3)	0 (0)	3 (3)	122 (100)	1.61	0.80

10. A process of sincere and patient dialogue with students useful.	49 (40)	49 (40)	18 (15)	4 (3)	0 (0)	2 (2)	122 (100)	1.78	0.84
11. Linking students' experiences with the Gospels difficult.	13 (11)	50 (41)	15 (12)	28 (23)	13 (11)	3 (3)	122 (100)	2.75	1.29
12. Including learning strategies suited to the faith stances of all students difficult.	20 (16)	52 (43)	21 (17)	22 (18)	5 (4)	2 (2)	122 (100)	2.46	1.14
13. Organising class liturgies difficult.	10 (8)	37 (30)	19 (16)	43 (35)	9 (7)	4 (3)	122 (100)	2.93	1.26
14. Journal work is easy to include as part of my teaching.	42 (34)	45 (37)	14 (11)	16 (13)	3 (2)	2 (2)	122 (100)	2.07	1.13
15. Formal assessments are easy to include as part of my teaching.	33 (27)	63 (52)	9 (7)	12 (10)	2 (2)	3 (3)	122 (100)	2.00	1.00

Note:

1. The Mean Value represents the average of numerical values scored after each category was given a numerical value. SA = Strongly Agree (1); A = Agree (2); U = uncertain (3); D = Disagree (4) and SD = Strongly Disagree (5). Omit indicates that no response was given.
2. Stand. Dev. = Standard Deviation.
3. Numbers in parentheses indicate percentages and rounded to the nearest whole numbers.
4. Shaded scores represent the Mode (most frequent response) for that item.

Respondents agreed less strongly with each other on the difficulties they experienced with the teaching approach employed in the Units. Most teachers (59%) felt they had difficulty in including learning strategies suited to the faith stances of their students and 52% had difficulty with linking student experiences with the Gospels. Respondents also seemed divided about organising class liturgies with 38% agreeing they had difficulty doing so, 42% disagreeing they had difficulty and 16% indicating they were uncertain. One item in particular returned responses that suggested a range of perceptions about the educational focus of Religious Education. While 47% of teachers agreed that presenting content as outcomes of learning was useful, 43% were uncertain about this.

Teachers were asked to rank stipulated learning strategies (Table Five). The most preferred learning strategies were those that teachers felt 'stimulate active participation and creativity within students'. This preference suggested that RARE teachers were focused on student-centred learning. Teachers also seemed to prefer strategies that assisted in interpreting significant human experiences in the light of the Gospels. Interestingly, 'making links between experiences of the students and the Gospels' was a strategy teachers had difficulty in using.

Table Five **Ranking of Preferred Learning Strategies**

A. Stipulated Items

Rank	Item
1.	Stimulate active participation and creativity within students.
2.	Interpret significant human experiences in the light of the Gospels.
3.	Describe and explain information about Catholic beliefs and practices.
4.	Reinforce student understanding of Catholic beliefs and practices.
5.	Reveal the deeper religious meanings behind Catholic beliefs and practices.

B. Volunteered Items

Rank	Item
6.	Provide students with experiences of God.
7.	Promote personal development.
8.	Identify moral arguments.
9.	Promote prayer.
10.	Promote interconnectedness and group discussion.

Overall, the responses from the survey indicated that teachers were very much in tune with the advocated teaching approach. The volunteered items appear to highlight an emphasis on catechetical formation. The highest ranked volunteered item was ‘providing students with experiences of God’. Teachers who taught 51-75% of their teaching load in RE were the most inclined towards this item. Furthermore, teachers with a >75% teaching load in RE ranked promoting prayer experiences more highly than did teachers with a lower teaching load. The suggestion here reinforces the notion that teachers with more RE classes are more experienced and familiar with teaching approaches in tune with a catechetical rather than just an educational orientation towards Religious Education.

The most important advice RARE teachers gave others about applying the teaching approach was not limited to any one particular sub-group of teachers. The responses reinforced the view that teachers wanted to use a student-centred approach to their RE teaching. The highest response (27%) highlighted the need for teachers to be ‘student-centred, to suit the students, to work from student experiences and background’ or to ‘provide experiences or substance for students’. In addition, teachers believed they needed to ‘be dynamic and flexible, to encourage creativity and active participation’ (12%) and to ‘discuss views and content with students, have open dialogue with them, create an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect’ (9%). Perhaps RARE teachers were keen to engage their students in learning by providing meaningful and relevant lessons.

The role of facilitating learning was suggested further by comments about the need to ‘link students’ experiences with the teachings of Christ in the Gospels or to Catholic beliefs and practices’ (5%). The facilitating learning approach was supported by a perceived confidence

in using the Units as a foundation or springboard as evidenced by comments such as: ‘use the Unit as a guide; be selective of objectives, simplify or vary’ (13%) and, ‘become comfortable with the teaching approach, balance strategies between the “head” (cognitive) and the “heart” (affective)’ (5%). An important aspect to using the Units as a foundation seemed to be for teachers to ‘know and understand the Units, the background information and sequence of objectives’ (7%). The responses from the teachers suggested there was a tension between addressing the personal developmental needs of students and addressing their own professional needs. Recently assigned teachers wanted their students to be engaged in learning about RE but the teachers needed the reassurance of knowing how to manage the content presented in the RE Units.

Underlying Curriculum Principles

The teachers were asked about their understanding of the underlying principles in teaching RE, that is, their knowledge and understanding of the role of the RE teacher; the aims of Religious Education; and, about being involved in the religious dimension of a Catholic school (Table Six). Four key areas were available for comment: awareness raising activities of the Church’s missionary work, formal liturgies, formal prayers, and school retreats or RE seminar days. Again, the mean values, modes, and low standard deviations across the Likert items in the survey suggested a high degree of agreement among the teachers.

Table Six Participation in the Religious Dimension of a Catholic school

<i>As a RARE teacher, I want to assist in organising...</i>	SA	A	U	D	SD	Omit	Total	Mean Value ¹	Stand. Dev. ²
18.School or class Masses.	23 (19)	69 (57)	15 (12)	12 (10)	3 (3)	0 (0)	122 (100)	2.21	0.94
19.The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation at school.	14 (11)	60 (49)	24 (20)	19 (16)	5 (4)	0 (0)	122 (100)	2.52	1.02
20.School retreats or RE seminar days.	31 (25)	68 (56)	14 (12)	8 (7)	1 (1)	0 (0)	122 (100)	2.02	0.84
21.Celebrations for key feast days or liturgical seasons at school.	23 (19)	53 (43)	26 (21)	18 (15)	1 (1)	1 (1)	122 (100)	2.33	1.00
22.The inclusion of prayers at school assemblies or events.	24 (20)	73 (60)	18 (15)	5 (4)	1 (1)	1 (1)	122 (100)	2.04	0.79
23.Activities that raise awareness of the Church’s missionary work.	34 (28)	67 (55)	18 (15)	1 (1)	2 (2)	0 (0)	122 (100)	1.93	0.78

Note:

1. *The Mean Value represents the average of numerical values scored after each category was given a numerical value. SA = Strongly Agree (1); A = Agree (2); U = uncertain (3); D = Disagree (4) and SD = Strongly Disagree (5). Omit indicates that no response was given.*
2. *Stand. Dev. = Standard Deviation.*
3. *Numbers in parentheses indicate percentages and rounded to the nearest whole numbers.*
4. *Shaded scores represent the Mode (most frequent response) for that item.*

A large number of teachers (83%) responded that they would agree with assisting in the organisation of activities that ‘raise awareness of the Church’s missionary work’. RARE teachers also seemed eager to assist in organising the inclusion of prayers at school assemblies or events (80%) and to take part in assisting in the organisation of school retreats or seminar days (78%). It was in the area of assisting in organising formal liturgies that some reservations were expressed.

Teachers agreed with wanting to assist in organising school or class Masses (76%); celebrations for key feast days or liturgical seasons (62%); and, the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation at school (60%). However, some teachers expressed uncertainty or disagreement with involvement in the organisation of formal liturgies. For school or class Masses, 12% were uncertain about being involved and 12% disagreed with being involved. For celebrations for key feast days or liturgical seasons, 21% were uncertain about being involved and 16% disagreed with being involved. With the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation at school, 20% were uncertain about being involved and 20% disagreed with being involved. One wonders whether such responses might reflect the general Catholic lack of ease with Reconciliation and loss of connection with the liturgical year, especially feast days of saints.

Such nervousness among RARE teachers to be involved in organising liturgies may be related to a lack of professional confidence due to limited training and experience rather than only a lack of faith formation. Responses on an earlier item regarding the difficulty of organising class liturgies indicated that 38% agreed it was difficult and 16% were uncertain about this. In contrast, teachers ranked the stipulated item, ‘provide students with experiences of God’ as their highest preferred learning strategy.

RARE teachers were asked to indicate the category that best reflected their attitudes towards teaching RE. Again, there was a high degree of agreement among the respondents and notably, the dispersion of responses was narrow as indicated by the standard deviations. The overwhelming positive response by teachers was to the items, ‘foster an atmosphere of Christian love and respect’ (90%) and, ‘foster positive relationships with my students’ (95%). These responses seemed to re-emphasise earlier responses regarding the importance of being student-centred and the creation of a learning culture that exhibits and promotes the values of the RE Units. Other items indicated how in-tune recently assigned teachers were with the teaching process of the Units. In ‘presenting Catholic beliefs and practices’, 77% felt confident in doing so and 73% believed they were confident in being able to relate ‘students’ experiences to Catholic beliefs and practices’. As to issues relating to adequate faith formation, 74% of teachers in the survey agreed they felt confident enough in ‘managing the demands made on their own faith stance’. This response seemed to reinforce again the trend that RARE teachers mostly lacked sufficient professional training in organising liturgies and other religious opportunities for students.

Teachers were asked to rank stipulated aims of Religious Education (Table Seven). The highest priority for RARE teachers was to develop social justice and tolerance for others in the students. However, ‘Understand God’s intervention in human history’ was ranked last on the stipulated items list. The highest volunteered item response was to ‘integrate faith and life’. The rankings seemed to complement an approach with a ‘missionary or humanitarian nature’ (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, para. 185).

Table Seven Ranking of Aims of Religious Education

A. Stipulated Items

Rank	Item
1.	Develop social justice and tolerance for others.
2.	Develop a closer relationship with God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
3.	Relate the Gospel example of Jesus to their lives.
4.	Participate fully in formal prayers and liturgy.
5.	Understand God’s intervention in human history.

B. Volunteered Items

Rank	Item
6.	Integrate faith and life
7.	To be able to share their (students’) faith
8.	Learn about the history of the Church, its policies and Sacraments
8.	See self-worth in themselves (students)
9.	Understand and listen to their (students’) consciences

Teachers were asked also to rank stipulated emphases on the content of RE (Table Eight). Interestingly, the rankings on emphasis reflected closely the teaching process of the RE Units and reinforced this ‘humanitarian nature’ of faith development. Content that emphasised reaching ‘full human potential’, ‘actions for transforming society’ and ‘consequences on human nature’ seemed to be more desirable than emphasising how ‘Gospels relate to significant life experiences’ and ‘knowledge about Catholic beliefs and practices’.

Table Eight Ranking of emphasis on the Content of Religious Education

A. Stipulated Items

Rank	Item
1.	What helps a person to reach full human potential.
2.	Actions for transforming society for the common good.
3.	Consequences of social issues and trends on human nature .
4.	How the Gospels relate to significant life experiences.
5.	Knowledge about Catholic beliefs and practices.

B. Volunteered Items

Rank	Item
6.	Relationship with Jesus
7.	Focus on Church teachings, solid apologetics
8.	Relationship with God
9.	Practical ways to live like Christ
9.	Student relationships

RARE teachers did want to emphasise the faith aspects in their teaching. In the Volunteered Items, teachers felt an emphasis on content dealing with the faith formation of their students such as ‘the relationship with Jesus’, ‘apologetics’, ‘relationship with God’ and ‘practical ways to live like Christ’ were important. Overall, the findings suggested that teachers with a professional background in RE were more likely to emphasise the catechetical aspects of the Units rather than remain focused on secular humanist aspects (Benson and Guerra, 1985).

Teachers were asked to comment upon the most important advice they would give others about what was crucial for students to learn. Some teachers answered the question by giving advice to others about what they should do to help students learn (‘become very familiar with each Unit taught’, 11%). Nonetheless, a number of teachers (14%) believed it was crucial to ‘offer a vision of a positive self-image, self love and personal development’, to deepen the ‘understanding of Catholic beliefs and practices’ of students (12%) and to ‘link Catholic beliefs and practices to the daily challenges faced by students’ (9%). This deepening appreciation for integration of life and faith was complemented by comments that recommended promoting the love of God as part of their faith development (10%), the transformation of society (9%), the relationships between Gospels and real life, society and lives of the students (9%) and an understanding of Jesus as a perfect role model (7%).

Synopsis

The responses from RARE teachers were very positive and consistent towards the use of instructional resources in the RE Units. This positive response suggested that the Units satisfied one of the major concerns raised by Religious Educators about the implementation of RE curricula, the ease of access to resources for RARE teachers. The ease of accessibility of the instructional resources in the Units was indicated further by the high frequency of use of the Mastersheets and the Students Books. The notion of ‘hands on’ activities seemed to be very much the focus here. However, the lower response for ‘sufficient background material’ may warrant further investigation into links between these content materials and the extent of professional formation these teachers possessed. The differences between groups of teachers seemed to depend upon the familiarity and confidence of teachers in using materials other than the Mastersheets and Student Book. The responses indicated that RARE teachers used the materials as a foundation or as a ‘springboard’ for other activities to be used in their classroom teaching (Rymarz, & Engebretson, 2005).

RARE teachers seemed to interpret the teaching approach advocated in the RE Units from the perspective of their expertise as specialist subject teachers and their pre-conceived catechetical notions of Religious Education. Objectives and content in the Units were to be covered in ways they thought were interesting and relevant to their students. Their confidence in applying the teaching approach seemed to be linked to their perceived competence in using

student-centred approaches in their classroom teaching. However, while their confidence appeared to be tied closely to following the Unit Objectives, when they had to make links between the life experiences of students and the Gospels or other related themes, then there was some uncertainty and apprehension. The impression was that these teachers were responding to how they think they should use the teaching approach according to training in their own learning areas rather than readily indicate a deeper critical understanding of the pedagogy used in Religious Education. As a result, the religious dimensions of RE teaching seemed to be widely advocated but inadequately understood by these teachers (Engebretson, 1997). Furthermore, there seemed to be a tension between focusing on the personal developmental needs of students and their own needs to become familiar with the content and strategies presented in the RE Units. The confidence of RARE teachers also appeared to be related to what they were doing in the classroom rather than why they were teaching in a particular way. RARE teachers prided themselves upon being practitioners rather than manipulators or innovators in implementing the RE curriculum (Malone, 1997).

The depth of understanding about the principles and purposes of RE among recently assigned teachers was ambiguous but this is not surprising (Ivers, 2004, p. 29). At this stage, they seemed to recognise what they should understand but lacked the professional formation or experience to assimilate their understanding as a part of their teaching practice. As found by Buchanan (2006, p. 22), there were significant gaps of understanding in implementing a content focused curriculum. RARE teachers wanted to portray a commitment towards involvement in the religious dimensions of the school but were uncertain about how they should implement these dimensions themselves (such as, organising Masses and the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation). In many ways they seem to reflect novice teachers struggling for confidence in a climate of pressure and uncertainty (Onafowora, 2004). They expressed an agreeable attitude towards teaching RE but seemed divided as to what were the aims of Religious Education. Formation and experience seemed to be two important ingredients of how well RARE teachers understood the aims of RE and what content needed to be emphasised to students.

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