Putting Textbooks to Work: Empowering religious education teachers.
Synopsis

In 2002 a paper entitled *Writing Church-sponsored Religious Education Textbooks* (Engebretson, 2002) was published in the *British Journal of Religious Education*. This paper reported on and analysed some aspects of the development, by the Catholic Archdiocese in Melbourne, Victoria, of a series of religious education textbooks to be used in all Catholic schools in the Archdiocese. The paper contextualised the series, entitled *To Know, Worship and Love*, in the field of literature on textbooks in the classroom. It discussed some local issues that had led to the decision to produce religious education textbooks, explained and justified the choice of content for the middle secondary books, and discussed the presentation of the books. In the final section of the paper, it was indicated that future papers would report on the evaluation of the series and its implementation, as a three-stage research project was completed.

The first stage of the research project collected responses from teachers and Religious Education Co-ordinators (RECs) to the Years seven and nine books, that is those books written for students of twelve and fourteen years respectively. This paper discusses a significant finding that emerged from this stage of the research, that is the relationship between textbook use and level of qualifications and experience in the teaching of religious education. This major finding is of interest in relation to a range of educational issues in religious education, including the role and use of resources, the mandation of resources by Church hierarchies, creativity and flexibility in teaching religious education, teacher confidence and experience and the important issue of content knowledge.

Further papers will explore evaluations of the Years eight and ten books, and overall issues that have emerged from this Archdiocesan curriculum project.

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Introduction

In 2002 a paper entitled *Writing Church-sponsored Religious Education Textbooks* (Engebretson, 2002) was published in the *British Journal of Religious Education*. This paper reported on and analysed some aspects of the development, by the Catholic Archdiocese in Melbourne, Victoria, of a series of religious education textbooks to be used in all Catholic schools in the Archdiocese. The paper contextualised the development of the series, entitled *To Know, Worship and Love*, in the field of research and literature on textbooks in the contemporary classroom. It discussed some local issues that had led to the decision to produce religious education textbooks, explained and justified the choice of content for the middle secondary books, and discussed some qualities of the presentation of the books. In the last section of the paper, it was indicated that future papers would report on the evaluation of the series and its implementation, as a three-stage research project was completed.

This paper discusses the findings from the first stage of the research project, reporting on the responses of teachers and Religious Education Co-ordinators (RECs) to the Years seven and nine books, that is those books written for students of twelve and fourteen years respectively. Further papers will report on the contribution of the Years eight and ten books, and overall issues that have emerged from this Archdiocesan curriculum project. The findings are of interest in relation to a range of educational issues in religious education, including the contribution made by these textbooks in the particular context of the secondary schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne, the potential contribution of textbook resources for teachers of religious education, the issues of empowerment and disempowerment (Apple 1993) of
teachers by the mandation of religious education textbooks and the important issue of teacher
competence and confidence.

The Context

The *To Know Worship and Love* series was implemented in all Catholic schools in the
Archdiocese of Melbourne during 2001 and 2002, and the implementation involved a body of
schools representing approximately 140,000 children in its primary and secondary sectors.
The writers of the primary books were Catholic Education Office staff, while the secondary
books were written by two academics in the School of Religious Education at Australian
Catholic University, who have both had extensive experience as teachers and leaders of
religious education in secondary schools. This paper concentrates on the research that has
been carried out in relationship to the *secondary* texts of Years seven and nine which were
introduced in 2001.

There are 72 Catholic secondary schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne, involving
almost 1,000 teachers and approximately 30,000 students. The size of this group alone makes
the project significant, and ensures that it will yield much data in the future about the role and
potential contribution of textbooks in religious education. It should also provide information
about the qualities of a good religious education textbook, its role in the work of the teacher
and the contribution it can make to curriculum development in religious education. In order
to elucidate the findings of this stage of the research, it is important to recall some aspects of
the context of this educational change.

This is a mandated series of textbooks, developed under the leadership of an Episcopal
Vicar for Religious Education who was appointed by the then Archbishop specifically to
develop religious education textbooks. Resistance to the change was compounded by its
mandation and by historical practice in religious education in the Archdiocese. This had been
characterised by an experiential or life centred approach to religious education, an approach which had for almost thirty years been enshrined in the Guidelines for Religious Education for Students in the Archdiocese of Melbourne (Catholic Education Office, 1973, 1984, 1995) the curriculum document which was superseded by the texts. Over time the emphasis on reflection on life experience, intentionally or otherwise, had diminished the importance of knowledge in and for itself, and not only as a direct means to faith. As demonstrated in the earlier paper, the pursuit of relevance in religious education meant that throughout the 1970s and 1980s, there was a dependence on contemporary magazines and pamphlets centred on themes, and drawing on aspects of youth culture. There was a general distrust among teachers of more permanent curriculum and the resources such as textbooks that would support them.

In time it became clear how little students really knew about their own religious tradition, or about any other. The emphasis on relevance, and tying content to the experience of the student had meant that key topics had been neglected, and there were large gaps in the students' basic knowledge about Christianity (Flynn, 1985; Constable, 1992). There followed a general questioning of an overtly catechetical approach to religious education and a realisation that among Australian Catholic youth, as elsewhere in the western world, there is a widespread rejection of institutional religion. The privatisation of belief and the individualism in religiosity and spirituality, upon which researchers have commented (Crawford & Rossiter: 1991, Engebretson, 2003) are readily recognisable among young Australians. Gradually more educationally focused approaches became more acceptable, through the influence of Australian scholarly writing and through the personal and professional reflection of teachers.

Despite these factors, and despite a general professionalisation of religious education curriculum, the mistrust of textbooks continued. There was a fear that these textbooks would impose a conservative theological agenda and an unhealthy uniformity, and would take away the right of the teacher to decide his or her curriculum or to negotiate it with students (Apple,
1993, p.53). However, the development of the textbooks continued and they were implemented, with the aims of giving students a basic knowledge of the story of the Catholic tradition within Christianity, in its many dimensions; helping students to develop skills in informed critical thinking about the tradition, about Church history and literature including the Scriptures; helping students to reflect on issues of relevance to their identity and development within a Christian framework.

As shown in the previous paper (Engebretson, 2002), the organising categories for content in the Melbourne Archdiocesan secondary textbooks are beliefs, worship and symbols, ethics and values, Church, human experience, and story and Scripture. The books do not assume understanding of religious or theological language, and the writers have recognised that many students are learning about the tradition from the outside, with most, at least, having only a basic knowledge of it. In the Years seven to ten textbooks there is a strong emphasis on history. Topics are often treated from an historical perspective and certain topics address specific periods within the history of the Church. Content is always presented factually and objectively and the students are given scope to interact critically with the material. The content is generally quite detailed, and this is linked to the expectation that the teacher will be selective about the content in light of the interests and ability of the class. There are many student activities, of many different types, a fact that once again relies on teacher selectivity. The narrative style is open rather than closed, and is intended to invite discussion. Factual material about the history, beliefs, rituals, social structure of the Catholic /Christian tradition is presented, but students are given the tools for appropriating this through questions and a range of imaginative activities. Content is often presented in its historical context so that the student is given the skills to evaluate what he or she reads and experiences, and no particular faith disposition is assumed.

The research
During 2002, the contribution of the Years seven and nine texts was the focus of the research, through questionnaires to Year seven and nine teachers who had used the books in the previous year, and to RECs who are the heads of department or curriculum leaders in religious education in Catholic secondary schools. In 2003, a similar process is being used to study the contribution of the Years eight and ten books, and in 2004, further information will be gathered through interviews and focus groups with Religious Education Coordinators and teachers. A total of 51 (77%) of the 66 secondary schools in the Archdiocese who have Years seven to ten classes, responded to the questionnaires. All Years seven and nine teachers at each school who had used the books, were asked to complete an anonymous, self-administering questionnaire, as were all RECs. The questionnaires for the Year seven and nine teachers were the same, and focused on the use of the books at the particular year level, while that of the RECs focused more on the effects of the books in the overall religious education curriculum.

The questionnaire for the Year seven and nine teachers began by asking about the years of experience and qualification of the particular teacher, and then asked the teachers to select responses in the areas of frequency of use of the books, the chapters most frequently used, the effects of the books on content, teaching/learning approaches, and assessment in religious education. The teachers were then asked to respond to questions regarding the effects on the book on their preparation time, on their teaching skills, and on student attitudes to religious education. Finally teachers were asked to comment on qualities of the books themselves, such as the level of language used, content, activities, and helpful or unhelpful characteristics of the texts.

The questionnaire for the RECs again sought information on the person’s experience both as a teacher of religious education and as a Religious Education Coordinator. The questions that followed concerned frequency of use of the books, the chapters most frequently used, the
usefulness of the books for planning and curriculum development, and for the professional
development of staff. The RECs were asked about the effects of the books on the overall
quality of the religious education curriculum, on the amount and quality of content in the
curriculum, and about their effects on teaching and learning activities and assessment. The
RECs were also asked to comment on whether or not the textbooks had improved the quality
of religious education in the schools, and their effects on student attitudes to religious
education. Finally, as for the Years seven and nine teachers, the RECs were asked to comment
on particular qualities of the books themselves. This paper does not attempt to give detailed
analysis of all the data, but emphasises the most significant finding, that is the role of the
textbooks in empowering less qualified and experienced teachers of religious education, and
the different patterns of use between these and more qualified and experienced teachers.

Discussion of findings from the Years seven and nine questionnaires

*Summary of overall impact on teaching*

The analysis of the questionnaires that were received from 157 Year seven teachers and
160 Year nine teachers, revealed that in the Archdiocese of Melbourne there are concerns
with the level of teachers' qualifications for religious education. In all 30% of the teachers
who responded had no formal training to teach the subject, and a further 34% had the minimal
training consisting of religious education as a teaching method within a general pre-service
course. Only 36% had a postgraduate qualifications or a tertiary degree in religious education
or a related field.

The Year seven and nine textbooks were frequently used, a fact, it became clear, that was
related to this low level of teacher qualifications. Between 60 and 65% of respondents in both
year levels reported daily or weekly use of the textbooks. They appeared to have had a
positive effect on the amount and depth of content in religious education curricula, with two-
thirds of respondents reporting an increase in the amount of content covered and an
improvement in the depth of this content since using the books. While the textbooks did not appear to have had an effect on the amount of assessment used, they had improved the quality of this assessment in just fewer than 30% of cases. The use of the textbooks had not added to teacher preparation time, since at both levels approximately 80% of respondents claimed that their preparation time had remained the same or had decreased. It is clear that the Years seven and nine textbooks have had a significant impact on the quality of religious education teaching, with over half and up two-thirds of the teachers saying that use of the textbooks had improved or greatly improved their teaching of religious education.

Link with qualifications and experience of the teachers.

The books appear to have been especially helpful for the 64% of teachers who responded, who had no formal or minimal qualifications to teach religious education. These teachers were more likely to report improvement in the depth of content of their religious education lessons (70%); improvement in the amount and quality of independent learning in the classroom (43%-44%); improvement in the amount and quality of the assessment they gave to students (27.6% and 32.7% respectively); decrease in their preparation time (46% of this group); improvement in their teaching of religious education (64.6% of this group) and improvement in students' attitudes to religious education (63.9% of this group).

In addition, the books appear to have been particularly helpful for those teachers of only one to three years experience of teaching religious education. These teachers were more likely to report improvement in the amount of content they taught (70%), and in the depth of this content (78%); improvement in the amount of collaborative learning they used (44%) and in the quality of this learning (48%); improvement in the amount of (50%) and quality of (51%) independent learning in the classroom and decrease in preparation time (71%). Seventy one percent of these less experienced teachers reported that their teaching of religious education had improved as a result of using the textbooks. This group was also more likely than more
experienced teachers to report improvement in the attitudes of students to religious education (65%).

These findings are not surprising. Apple (1993, p. 54) has noted that historically teachers have sought standardised texts that help them to cope with teaching they find difficult or demanding. This is even more to be expected in religious education where many teachers lack formal qualifications, a situation underlined in this research. Therefore, Apple (1993, p. 55) concludes, textbooks can both empower and "depower" the teacher. They "empower" in that they provide essential assistance and give younger, less experienced and less qualified teachers support in teaching. On the other hand, in their regulation of content they can disempower the teacher, a potential danger that is even more telling in a situation such as the one described in this paper where certain textbooks are mandated. The fear of this disempowerment had been expressed by teachers in the preparation phase of the project, and the results of this research certainly suggest that less qualified, experienced and confident teachers used the texts more than their more qualified and experienced colleagues. It is the contention of the researchers that while there may be some disadvantage in this, in that this situation may limit the authority of the teacher to develop curricula, the texts, in providing concrete assistance to teachers whose work in the classroom may otherwise have been marked by lack of confidence and content knowledge, are at this stage, and in this and similar situations, an empowering resource. The findings suggest that one effective way to support poorly qualified, inexperienced teachers of religious education is, at least in the early stages of their careers, to provide them with a textbook that they can use along with other resources, until their professional competence and confidence develops.

Findings from the RECs’ questionnaire in relation to those from the teachers
The findings from the responses of the RECs shed further light on this issue of those who are empowered and those who are disempowered in the teaching of religious education. The
RECs who responded reported a lower frequency of use of the textbooks, with 45.9% of
RECs using them in every lesson or once a week, where Year seven and nine teachers had
reported this frequency of use in 60-65% if cases. This discrepancy may be accounted for by
considering the greater level of qualifications, experience and therefore confidence of the
RECs in teaching religious education. The lower frequency of use among RECs may in fact
confirm a significant finding of the research, that such books are of particular use to less
qualified and less experienced religious education teachers, and that while they empower such
teachers to improve their practice, their regulation of content and activities is experienced as
disempowering by better qualified and more experienced, therefore more confident teachers.

The research of the Australian scholar, Horsley (2003) tends to confirm this. Horsley
studied the way in which an "expert" teacher, (that is one with a strong academic background
in the subject/s taught, a strong record of teaching practice in pre-service, solid experience in
more than one school and involvement in postgraduate study) used textbooks in the
classroom. He found that this teacher used textbooks creatively and flexibly, for pre-reading
of material, classroom reading, student comprehension and homework. She used textbooks in
the main for the presentation of content which she supplemented with a range of other
material, and relied on her own expertise for the development of student activities. In contrast,
less experienced and confident teachers in Horsley's study relied on the textbook as a central
resource for both content and student activities.

In other words, the more "expert" teachers in the study used the book as a flexible tool, not
as a substitute teacher. In this context the issue of teacher confidence, particularly that
confidence that flows from strong academic background, cannot be overestimated. Teacher
confidence is clearly related to content knowledge and ease in the discipline of religious
education, gained through postgraduate study and experience. As this research has shown, a
good religious education textbook can be of great assistance to the untrained or inexperienced
teacher of religious education, but further professional development and postgraduate study to increase overall expertise is essential if the text is to eventually be used creatively as a teaching tool not as a substitute teacher.

The research of Boostrom (2001) confirms the different approaches to the use of textbooks encountered in this study. He noted two different conceptions of textbook use, the first seeing the textbook not as a tool for education, but as the education itself. In this model the textbook is presented in such a way that the teacher seems to assume that he or she only has to put the book into the hands of students and the book will educate them. A second approach is to see the text as an aid in the hands of the teacher, who will use it to promote learning in ways that are particular to individual classrooms and schools. Any textbook in the hands of such a teacher is subject to his or her curriculum intention and is used effectively as one tool in the learning process. This study has shown that while a good religious education textbook can certainly help to improve the work of less qualified and experienced teachers, it cannot substitute for academic knowledge, experience and teaching expertise.

The contribution of the textbooks to elements of classroom teaching.

Apart from this major finding there were other findings, significant to a greater or lesser degree, which are of interest to the researchers and to the respondents. Ten percent fewer RECs than teachers reported an increase in the amount of content taught, but like the teachers, two-thirds (68%) reported an increase in the depth of the content. In regard to the use and quality of collaborative learning, educational technology, independent learning and assessment, the RECs' views paralleled those of the teachers. Up to 40% claimed an increase in the amount and quality of collaborative learning in the classroom as a result of the use of the textbooks. Most saw no effects on the use of educational technology (even though the textbooks include references to a large number of internet sites), and while most saw that teachers used the same amount of assessment, a significant percentage (47%) saw an
improvement in the quality of this assessment. This was a significantly higher response than those of the teachers, where just fewer than 30% saw an improvement in the quality of assessment. In regard to the use of independent learning, the views of the RECs paralleled those of the teachers, with approximately half seeing an improvement in the amount and quality of independent learning used as a result of the textbooks.

Significantly, the textbooks were perceived to be useful or very useful for curriculum planning by a large majority of the RECs. However, in contrast with the responses of the teachers who tended to see a significant reduction in workload as a result of the texts, the vast majority of RECs claimed that the textbooks had increased or greatly increased their workload. This is to be expected, since as curriculum leaders they would have had responsibility for the oversight of the implementation of the series. Approximately two-thirds (65%) of the RECs claimed that the quality of religious education teaching in the school had improved as a result of the textbooks, and this is approximately the same percentage as the Year seven and nine teachers who reported this improvement.

More RECs than teachers reported a positive effect on students’ attitudes to religious education as a result of the textbooks (32% of RECs and 25-30% of teachers). The figures for responses regarding suitability of language were similar for REC’s and teachers. In all, 48.8% of REC’s and 56.6% of teachers found the level of writing in the Year seven book suitable. At Year nine level there was a similar trend, although the figures were slightly higher, with 54.7% of REC’s and 58.7% of teachers finding the language suitable. Sixty four percent of the RECs saw the activities in the Year seven book as suitable, while 69% also claimed this for the Year nine book. These figures are similar to responses by teachers regarding the suitability of activities in the book. Between 70 and 80 percent of all teachers and REC’s surveyed endorsed the content of the books.
Positive and negative features of the textbooks

The teachers and RECs were asked to list what they considered to be the positive and negative features of the Year seven and nine textbooks. The four most appreciated qualities of the Year seven text were the range of activities and discussion tasks suggested, the language of the books which was perceived to be easy for the students to understand, and the detail of the content which was perceived to be clear and well explained, and of great assistance to the teacher. The layout, graphics and visual presentation also received endorsement. Year nine teachers most frequently noted the same four factors, a fact that gives an interesting insight into what religious education teachers seek in a textbook.

Negative evaluations were fewer than positive but they included, from the Year seven teachers, perceptions that there was a repetition of activities, dry and technical language, and too much content. Year nine teachers chose similar negative factors, and again it appeared that while certain teachers had endorsed particular factors such as the range of activities and the level of language, others saw these as negative. Some interesting comments related to this phenomenon were made by the RECs who also commented on the positive and negative features of the books. The following quotations from RECs reflect the issue of empowerment of less confident teachers by textbooks that is an important finding of this research.

I have been pleasantly surprised at how helpful they have been. Going on the teacher’s verbal responses there is a mixed feeling as to the suitability of material and content and I think this reflects the experience and knowledge of the teachers themselves. The books bring RE greater credibility in eyes of students who are used to having a textbook

Great resource for staff gives greater guidance and direction for staff and students. The
texts provide excellent background knowledge for teachers. Information is all in one place and they make it easy to leave work for students. The give the teacher a greater degree of confidence.

There were also negative comments from the RECs, some of which again criticised the level of language, argued that there was too much and too detailed content, and that some activities were unsuitable. In general, the fact that many teacher saw the level of language and amount and detail of content as positive, and others (a smaller group) saw the same factors as negative, can lead to the conclusion that the qualifications, experience and confidence of teachers (as the REC quoted above noted) has a bearing on their perceptions about the textbooks. The teachers’ reactions to the books reinforce the fact that a textbook is a tool to be used in a variety of ways, according to a variety of choices in each context, and that no textbook in any subject can meet the needs of all teachers and students.

General conclusions: the contribution of textbooks in religious education.
The fact that the textbooks were mandated by the Archbishops' representative was a potentially negative one for the project for, as other Australian researchers have observed, "mandation is not accepted by teachers as a preferred way of considering and planning for change, as they usually work from a collegial, sharing basis" (Braithwaite, 1993, p. 41).

Against the background of his summary of the elements that have been shown to be necessary for effective curriculum change (Fullan, 1991) Braithwaite points out that the appropriation of the meaning (as opposed to superficial implementation) of change by teachers is often limited when the change is mandated (1993, p.33). Further Crandall (1982) observes that one of the factors that determines the success of an implementation of change is the degree of "user effort" given to its implementation. In his study of mandated government change in selected high schools in Sydney, Braithwaite (1993) showed that "user effort" was low (p. 37)
and that the implementation of the change centred on daily management of curriculum rather than on broader issues of policy. This important element of user effort is directly related to teacher ownership of an educational change. Without an acknowledged series of implementation strategies and direct support from the agency mandating the change (Braithwaite, 1993, p. 33) user effort can be expected to be low. This is even more predictable in a mandated curriculum change as fraught with potential diversity of opinion as that of the mandation of religious education textbooks by an Archdiocese.

Aspects of this study suggest that “user effort” is in direct proportion to felt need for the change. The teachers who had taken up the new resources, it can be claimed through appraisal of their qualifications and experience, did so in direct relationship to their lack of confidence and need for resources to assist them in a difficult and demanding subject. More qualified and experienced teachers expended less "user effort" and took up the use of the resources in more flexible ways. Therefore, in this case it appears that rather than disempowering, the textbooks have empowered those teachers who are less confident to improve their practice in religious education. The evidence suggests that in different ways they have also been a helpful resource for more qualified and experienced teachers.

Research suggests that curriculum support materials are very influential in the effectiveness of curriculum change (Fullan, 1991). The findings from this research support this, showing that the Year seven and nine textbooks are being used widely with between 60 and 65% of respondents reporting daily or weekly use. This finding raises issues about the particular contribution of textbooks in religious education. The amount and level of content in the books, as well as the amount and style of student activities were endorsed by over 60% of respondents at both year levels, with up to 70% endorsing the amount and detail of the content. While the findings of this first stage of the evaluation emphasise the need for teachers of religious education to be encouraged to undertake postgraduate study in religious
education, concentrating on both content and methodology, they also underline the potential value of textbooks. Postgraduate study would have the advantage of helping teachers to become more confident with the content and language and in the textbooks and more able to adapt it for use in the classroom, thus using the textbooks as a teaching tool rather than as a rigid curriculum. However, it seems clear from this study that in the early stages of a religious education teacher’s career a textbook can give much needed curriculum support.

References


