

**EARLY CHILDHOOD RELIGIOUS EDUCATION:
REALITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR CATHOLIC SCHOOL LEADERS**

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As the early childhood sector continues to grow and develop in Australia, increasing numbers of Catholic schools are introducing the non-compulsory preschool year to their primary schools. Whilst leaders in these schools face many exciting, new issues associated with such introductions, they also face significant, unfamiliar challenges. In addition to those issues common to all schools, Catholic schools have to consider the essential area of religious education in the early childhood setting. Both dimensions of religious education, the classroom religion program and the school's religious life, raise unique and specific issues for the early years. For a growing number of young families whose first child will be enrolled into the Catholic preschool or preparatory year, their familiarity with religion and religious education may be limited. Such realities raise significant challenges for both teachers and school leaders. What is appropriate for young students to learn in the classroom religion program? What is the school's position regarding young students' attendance at school liturgies? This presentation, which includes recent research in the area of early childhood religious education, considers implications for school leaders, and suggests recommendations that may assist in creating an enlivened, contemporary and inclusive vision for the future.

Introduction:

As the early childhood sector continues to grow and develop in Australia, increasing numbers of Catholic schools are introducing the non-compulsory pre-primary year to their schools. Leaders of all schools have had much to consider with the opening and operating of pre-primary classes. However, Catholic school leaders have an added layer of consideration, that being, their distinctive identity as religious schools. Both processes of religious education, the religious life of the school and the school religion programs, are the keystones of Catholic schools. The religious life of the school includes the school's religious identity in all its forms: liturgy and prayer, ethos, atmosphere, school policies, parish and community partnerships, mission and so on. The school's classroom religion programs make up the educational dimension of religious education. When considered within the contexts of the schools' preparatory or pre-primary years, both processes raise particular challenges for school leaders. Whilst such challenges can be traced to a number of factors, two critical factors are the nature of student populations and the level of religious education qualifications held by teachers.

As increasing numbers of students in Catholic schools come from families who are not members of the local faith community or who are not Catholic or who are not Christian (as is the case in our ever more diverse multi-cultural and multi-faith society), school leaders face significant challenges which raise a number of implications for religious education. In addition, as Catholic schools have been required to introduce pre-primary classes their ability to employ teachers who are both early childhood specialists and qualified religious educators has been limited. This paper examines such challenges in the light of a recent study (Grajczonek, 2006) which investigated the classroom teaching of religion in pre-primary classes and considers their implications for schools and their leaders. First, however, it is helpful to explore the nature and purpose of religious education within the specific context of Catholic schools.

Religious Education in the context of the Catholic school:

Catholic schools operate within the wider church, and along with the church are involved in religious education. The Church documents, *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, para. 68) and the *General Directory for Catechesis* (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, para. 73), clearly and explicitly state that religious education comprises two distinct dimensions: religious instruction and catechesis:

There is a close connection, and at the same time a clear distinction, between religious instruction and catechesis, or the handing on of the Gospel message. The close connection makes it possible for a school to remain a school and still integrate culture with the message of Christianity. (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, para. 68)

(The term *religious instruction* as used in Church documents refers specifically to the classroom religion program.)

Both documents make it quite clear that religious instruction is an academic pursuit. In other words, it is an educational process and therefore the work of the school. They do this by assigning educational activities and attributions to it. For example, in *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988), it is stated that religious instruction:

... should be integrated into the objectives and criteria which characterise a modern school.' School directors should keep this directive of the Magisterium in mind, and they should respect the distinctive characteristics of religious instruction. It should have a place in the weekly order alongside the other classes, for example: it should have its own syllabus, approved by those in authority; it should seek appropriate interdisciplinary links with other course material so that there is a coordination between human learning and religious awareness. Like other course work, it should promote culture, and it should make use of the best educational methods available to schools today. In some countries, the results of examinations in religious knowledge are included within the overall measure of student progress. (para. 70)

The nature of the classroom religion program then is not in itself a challenge. It is described in the documents that it be approached in the same way as other key learning areas.

The same document explicitly states that catechesis which, "takes place within a community living out its faith at a level of space and time not available to a school: a whole lifetime" (para. 68) belongs to the parish and family. This is because the aim of catechesis: "is maturity: spiritual, liturgical, sacramental and apostolic; this happens most especially in a local church community" (para. 68). However, it is also explicitly stated that the school, "can and must play its specific role in the work of catechesis" (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, para. 69). Catechesis is the process of faith sharing in which all parties are intentionally seeking faith development; it presumes all are faithful members of the church (English, 1991). The term was originally used to describe the oral instruction of early converts to

Christianity. Harris (1989) noted that three characteristics eventually became fixed within catechesis, "...it was doctrinal, centred on the Creed; it was moral, centred on the behaviours implied by the teaching; and it was set in the context of the liturgical, worship life of the church – not in classrooms" (p. 113). However, the nature of the school's role in catechesis is nowhere explicitly described in either document but it is essential that the work of the school complements that of the parish and families. Clearly, catechesis is not an academic pursuit. It is therefore not part of the school's religion program already acknowledged as an academic pursuit central to the school. Rather, catechesis falls within the school's religious life, but in a limited way as the parish as previously described, is the centre of the "spiritual, liturgical, sacramental and apostolic" (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, para. 68). A further factor contributing to this limitation is the nature of the student population, as not all of the school's population is seeking faith development. This is a real tension for schools: how to play their role in catechesis at the same time recognising the two factors limiting this role, that is nature of student population and school's role as being centrally educational unlike the parish which is centrally catechetical.

Realities and challenges for the religious life of the school:

Recognising the diverse and pluralistic nature of student populations is essential to both processes of religious education. This is especially urgent for the early years as those new students who are the oldest in their families and therefore the first to be enrolled into the Catholic school, come with limited or no prior experience of religion or things religious. It is not unusual for young Catholic students not to have been inside a church since they were baptised. Unlike students in higher grades who have acquired a certain amount of religious experience and knowledge over their time in the school, for these new students the religious life of the school and the classroom religion program can be unfamiliar and overwhelming. Teachers in the introductory year of school face a significant number of young students who have no idea about prayer, how to express themselves religiously, or how to enter a church.

Consider the following imagined scenario that takes place before the school year commences:

The annual school summer break is almost ended and the school year is about to commence. The school's administration team sits down to plan and organise this commencement to ensure its smooth operation. As always, the subject of the school's opening liturgy is raised and the religious education coordinator (henceforth, REC) or assistant principal religious education (henceforth, APRE) takes the lead. The focus of the celebration is discussed, the logistics in terms of date, time and whether the Parish Priest will be present and therefore whether it will be a Mass or a Liturgy of the Word, are also decided. This year is the first year that two new pre-primary classes totalling 50 students are part of the school. Of these, the majority are new families and many of these are not regular members of the local parish. A number are not Catholic and two families are from the Islamic faith. Much discussion centres on two issues:

- the inclusion of these classes in the liturgy; and if so
- whether or how these children will fit into the church.

In previous years, the year 1's have been part of this liturgy, which has always been a mass.

The first issue of whether these new students will be included in the liturgy is a difficult one for all school leaders. One of the dilemmas centres on the school's emphasis on community: it is the first public (parents are invited to be present) event for the school year and the first time the school has these new classes who are now part of this community. On the one hand, it is important that these new students and their families are welcomed and made to feel part of the community from the very beginning. On the other hand, they are quite young, a year younger than the year ones who in previous years became restless and distracted during this liturgical celebration thus requiring close supervision. Another dilemma is that many of these students are not regular members of the local parish community and some are not Catholic. Two new families to the school are from the Islamic faith. Some students may not know what to do. And so the discussion continues. The challenge may be resolved in the short-term with the solution that this year these classes will be exempt from the liturgy, as the two teachers concerned advised that the students should be settled for a longer period of approximately the first six weeks, before going to liturgies and whole school assemblies. However, the challenge will not dissipate, as there are other school liturgies throughout the year.

A further problem that came out of the previous discussion was that the teachers who had early childhood education qualifications were not familiar with Catholic schools. However, they were the only 'early childhood experts' in the school and were quite insistent that these students needed little disruption to their routines. They showed little, if any, consideration and appreciation of the significant place of liturgical celebrations within the life of a Catholic school. That consideration did not enter their arguments. Neither teacher has any formal qualifications in religious education. Given the limited numbers of formally qualified religion early childhood teachers, this is a significant and pressing challenge for school leaders.

Another aspect of the religious life of the school and classrooms is class prayer. To a certain extent, what goes on in classrooms is beyond the administration team's 'eye' and although the REC/APRE may emphasise the place of daily prayer in classroom routines, the regularity and nature of such prayer is within the classroom teacher's control. In an exploration of pre-primary teachers' approaches to religious education (Grajczonek, 2000) many teachers explained that they commenced their day with prayer and within this session they conducted their religion programs. The two processes are quite different: one sits within the religious life of the school while the other is an educational process. Consider the following classroom interaction (Grajczonek, 2006) between a pre-primary teacher and students at the end of a religion lesson that concluded with prayer in which most of the students elected not to say a prayer (this lesson was given on the first day back after the Easter break):

70. Teacher: °You've probably just forgotten how to pray. Did you remember to pray over Easter time too? °

71. Students: Na. Yes. No. Yes.

72. Teacher: Did you remember that? ↑It's not just at this time we pray.

In these turns, the teacher engaged in faith development or catechetical activities, such as telling students they should be praying during school vacations and divulged his/her own personal prayer life. These activities included explicitly being concerned for, and judgmental of, students' faith practices, and implicitly implied own "correct" prayer life. At turn 72, "It's not just at this time we pray", the lexical choice of "we" is hearable as the teacher including herself/himself as well as the students. During this exchange at the end of the lesson, students were held accountable for their own personal prayer life. They were not held accountable for their knowledge of prayer or of the events of Easter, which would be the expected practice within an lesson underpinned by an educational approach such as that outlined in the document, *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988).

Herein lies the dilemma for this particular teacher. S/he is trying to both educate and catechise. Moran (2007) argues against such practice. He contends that the role of the teacher in knowing which of the two processes s/he is engaged in any particular time and place, is a crucial one. Moran continues, "The tragedy would be that, for lack of clarity about this distinction, institutions end up doing neither: their academic inquiry is not challenging enough and their formation is not particular enough" (pp. 259-260). However, as displayed in the interaction of this lesson (see in following section), students had not only been left unclear about the religious concepts of new life and resurrection, which had been ambiguously dealt with, but also, they indicated (as displayed in the classroom interaction) that their personal attention to prayer outside of school was minimal. Neither of the dimensions, education nor catechesis, had been developed satisfactorily.

This problem can be exacerbated when teachers have no formal qualifications in religious education, as they can often tick the box that the religion program has been covered if prayer has been said for the day. There is an educational dimension within prayer. Young students need to be explicitly taught prayer: their words, their meanings, when particular prayers are prayed, and so on. This forms part of the classroom religion program and requires explicit teaching outside of prayer time. This specific intentional teaching is especially needed in reception years in primary schools when a significant number of students may have limited experience in prayer. It would also be appropriate, perhaps necessary, to explore how people of faiths other than Christianity, pray. Students from such traditions could be asked to share their ways of praying with the class.

Realities and challenges for the classroom religion program:

Similar to the religious life of the school, the classroom religion program also raises challenges peculiar to the early childhood years for school leaders. The analysis and findings of the study (Grajczonek, 2006) revealed three significant insights regarding the classroom teaching of religion in the early years: (1) the underpinning teaching approaches; (2) the nature of content; and (3) teaching practice.

(1) *The underpinning teaching approaches to the classroom teaching of religion:*

As previously discussed, Church documents outline the nature of the classroom religion program aligning it with the approach taken in all other curriculum areas. The documents differentiate religious instruction from catechesis as an educational pursuit in which students' knowledge and understanding of religion is developed. In other words it is underpinned by an educational approach. This approach has received much support from religious educators throughout Australia (Barry & Rush, 1998; Dwyer, 2001; Lovat, 2002; Rossiter, 1982; Rummery, 1975; Ryan, 2006; Welbourne, 2004) and a number of diocesan Catholic education offices have embraced the approach in their curriculum documents for religious education. However, even within such dioceses, some teachers continue to implement a catechetical approach. Consider the following classroom interaction, which occurred in a pre-primary religion lesson (Grajczonek, 2006):

42. Teacher: Remember the Easter Bunny brought you °chocolate eggs° ((whispered)) >°cause you can eat them° < and they will remind us of Jesus having new life.

In this above example, students were cohorted into a group (Austin, Dwyer, & Freebody, 2003; Freebody & Herschell, 2000) that includes the teacher, the school and the institution of the Church. This lesson concluded with class prayer focused on Easter. The teacher initiated the prayer session with her /his own prayer at turn 65:

65. Teacher: Dear God thank you for the special things that happened over Easter I want to thank you for the Easter Bunny coming to us and reminding us of the new life you had. Jesus please help us to be more like you in the special times after Easter.

In both turns 42 and 65, the teacher used lexical choice of the word "us", which constructed students as insiders in a particular group, in this case the institution of the Catholic Church. In constructing the students as insiders of the Church, the teacher has presumed that everyone present does indeed accept this understanding and that all share the same religious beliefs, that is, Catholic.

The use of such cohorting language indicates a *catechetical* approach underpins these particular interactional sequences. As previously described catechetical approach presumes that both the teacher and students have faith (English, 1991). Catechesis is a process of faith sharing in which all who participate are seeking faith development. Further, *The Religious Dimension of the Catholic School* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988) document explicitly states that catechesis is most appropriate in the context of the faith community, that is the parish. Given that these interactions are taking place in a Catholic pre-primary class, during the classroom teaching of the religion program, it may seem unproblematic that students are cohorted in such a way. However, students in Catholic schools are acknowledged as believers, non-believers or searchers (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, para. 75). Non-believers and searchers may not be at the Catholic school specifically seeking faith development and therefore a catechetical approach is inappropriate. This point is a particularly critical one for school leaders involved in the enrolment process for the school. The issue of enrolling students who are not Catholic or

who are not seeking faith development has direct implications for the classroom religion program. A classroom religion program underpinned by a catechetical approach, which seeks to develop students' Catholic faith and/or requires a particular religious way of living, is neither appropriate nor effective in contemporary Catholic pre-primary classrooms whose student populations are diverse, pluralistic and according to Warren (1989, p. 13) in the case of early childhood students, "those too young to resist" (p. 13). Warren (1989) cautions Catholic schoolteachers to remain within the educational dimension when teaching young students.

This problem is related to a previously raised one concerning teachers' qualifications in religious education. Teachers without formal qualifications in religious education may rely on their own memories of themselves as students in Catholic schools and resort to teaching in the same catechetical manner as they were taught. It is important that all teachers are aware of the approach that underpins the religion curriculum and understand the implications for their classroom religion programs. This responsibility lies with both Catholic education personnel including those who are responsible for curriculum design, as well as school leaders.

(2) The nature of content:

In addition, the content of the classroom religion program and its relevance to young students raise further challenges. It is important that school leaders both recognise and acknowledge these particular difficulties, which are exemplified in the following sequences of classroom interaction taken from the same study. The first sequence occurred at the beginning of a lesson about the religious significance of Easter and was held during Holy Week:

1. Teacher: Now Holy Week is a very spe::cial ti::me of the year °Nicholas you need to sit down keep your hands to your self please.° Holy Week is a very special time of the year for the school >and for the<↑church (0.4) because it's when we get rea::dy (0.3) ↑ for (0.7) ?
2. Students: EASTAA:::H
3. Teacher: Easter. We've talked about Easter before. Hands up if you can te:ll me (0.3) why Easter is so↑spe::cial? °Have a think. Hands up° if you can tell ↑me (0.1) why Easter is so spe:cial? (.) Yasmin?
4. Yasmin: Um (0.2) because you get ↑Easter ↓eggs.
5. Teacher: >Well that's one reason of course< isn't it? You get Easter eggs at Easter time. Hands up if you like Easter ↑eggs?
6. Students: ME. ME. ME.
7. Teacher: Just about everybody likes Easter eggs. Fantastic. Hands down for me. (0.2) There is another reason why Easter is special. Have a think about it. (1.0) Susan?
8. Susan: Because the Easter bunny ↑ comes.
9. Teacher: Yes. The Easter bunny comes. Just a sec there is another rea::son why Easter is very special. Alice?
10. Alice: Um because um it um, I don't know.
11. Teacher: >You don't know, can't remember.< ↑ Ann?

12. Ann: Um because we must go to the church.
13. Teacher: >We go to the church.< Yes a lot of people go to the church (0.1) during Holy Week and at Easter ti::me.
14. Student: () egg.
15. Teacher: >Yeah we've talked about the egg.< We talked about that. (0.2) Okay. (.) There is another reason why Easter is spe:cial. April?
16. April: Um because you have a (0.3) ne:w li:fe.
17. Teacher: You have a new life. Now what do you mean by that?
18. April: A new Easter
19. Teacher: [[Very tricky]] A new Easter. Okay. Yeah. Lots of people thinking ↑carefully about it. Ned do you know why Easter's special? No. (.) Reece?
20. Reece: Um (.) because (0.1) it's (0.1) when Jesus was ↑ bo::rn.
21. Teacher: Oh now other people have told me this before. They've said Easter is when Jesus is born (.) and that's very good thi::nking Reece (.) but actually Christmas is when Jesus was born. (.) Something else happened to Jesus at Easter time. He was born at Christmas time (.) then something else happened to him at Easter time (0.2) Thomas?
22. Thomas: He he died.
23. Teacher: He died. He did die at Easter time. Can you remember (0.1) how he died?

The first issue highlighted in this sequence of interaction is that of relevance, which is noticeable through the twenty-three turns that occurred between students and teacher before the teacher received the response for which s/he was looking. The fact that it took them so long to provide the *right* answer for the purposes of this lesson indicates that the orientation to a secular meaning of Easter is more readily available in their lives than the religious meaning. The interaction showed students orienting continually to Easter eggs and the Easter Bunny, and the teacher continually designing and redesigning questions to orient them to the religious significance of Easter. The difficulty is one of relevance. Within the reality of students' social and cultural contexts, the relevance of the religious significance of certain Church liturgical seasons, such as Easter, is negligible for many students who seemingly struggle to connect with the religious life of the church. Early years teachers have much foundational knowledge and understanding to introduce to young students who have limited and sometimes no previous religious experience with which to relate such religious concepts. Perhaps young students in early years' religion classrooms have not been at school long enough to have learnt teachers' intentions when a topic is introduced with a particular question, such as "Why Easter is so special?" Whereas a student in year 7 who has been at the Catholic school since preschool or year 1, might have been socialised in this context long enough to realise the purpose of a teacher's question regarding the significance of Easter.

A second matter concerns the complex nature of both content and religious concepts, which teachers routinely deal with when trying to explain theological concepts. This same lesson revealed

difficulties for teachers who faced such matters as: who were responsible for Jesus' death, the nature of Jesus' resurrection, and the concept of new life were often abstract for students. In an attempt to simplify and make such concepts more concrete for students, one of the teachers in the study explained Jesus' resurrection as being magical:

93. Teacher: Now Easter SU:NDA::Y is the last day of our holy ↑ week. (1) Something very special happened on Easter Sun↑day (1) and it (0.5) shows how magical and how ↑mi::ghty >just like in our song< how mighty Jesus was. (2) Hands up if you know what happened on Easter Sunday? He die:d on Good Fri↑day °on the cross° and then something magical happened on Easter Su:n↑day. (4) Somebody? Angela?
94. Angela: He (0.5) Umm (0.5) He
95. Teacher: (7) Can't remember? (0.2) Nicole, (.) can you remember?
96. Nicole: He was alive again.
97. Teacher: He was ALIVE AGAIN! EXCELLENT! (0.2) He ro::se from the dead. (0.3) And there's Mary when she ↑ reali::ses that Jesus had risen from the dead. How does her face look now?

Catholic teaching does not support the notion of Jesus being a magician. However, developmental psychology informs us that young children would find it difficult to fully appreciate the nature of Jesus, as they are unable to understand the full complexity of church teaching, which is reliant on abstract thinking processes. Young students are concrete thinkers and find abstract concepts difficult to comprehend. Speculatively, this teacher used the language to link Jesus to children's worlds. However, James Fowler's (1981) stages of faith development theory suggests that young children at this age have entered the *intuitive-projective* faith stage in which they find it difficult to differentiate between fact and fantasy. Fowler argues that images and stories provided by significant adults have powerful and permanent influence on young children. As such, using an image of "magical and mighty" to describe Jesus could have a potent and longlasting influence on impressionable minds. What language can describe such complex theology? Church teaching is that Jesus was not a magician; he was both fully human and divine (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1994, paras. 464 & 480). "Magical and mighty" then is a misrepresentation of Catholic understanding of the person of Jesus. However, as a Catholic, (or as a teacher accredited to teach in a Catholic school) the teacher *is* likely to be oriented to the theological complexity of the concept, and further, as a trained early years' teacher, to the age/developmental stage of the students. This then is a complex teaching site, but one which teachers routinely face and solve (albeit perhaps not in ways that are appropriate).

(3) Teaching practice:

A third difficulty faced by early childhood teachers of religion is concerned with appropriate early childhood pedagogy. Both teachers in the above study implemented a transmission curriculum which values content over process in a program (Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett, & Farmer, 2005; Lovat & Smith, 2003; MacNaughton & Williams, 2004). These lessons were teacher-directed with a specified amount of content

regarding religious significance of Easter imparted to the students. The students had little direct opportunity to initiate and construct their own learning. The interaction in both settings was typical of institutional interaction's asymmetrical structure, in that both teachers controlled the topics, when each topic would be introduced and satisfactorily concluded, and what the next topic would be (Drew & Heritage, 1992; Heritage, 2004). In both lessons, the teachers took dominating roles, typical of institutional interaction, controlling a significant part of the discussion. Their roles were interrogative and informative. The students' roles were restricted and constrained to producing knowledge previously acquired. Their engagement was neither lengthy nor insightful.

Early childhood educational research (Arthur et al., 2005; Fler et al., 2006; MacNaughton & Williams, 2004) suggests that students learn most effectively when they are involved, participative and socially constructing their own learning. Contemporary early childhood practice is influenced by social constructivism, an anti-bias curriculum, sociocultural theory, postmodernism and poststructuralism in which students' social and cultural contexts, as well as their current experiences and understandings, are acknowledged and considered (Arthur et al., 2005; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999; MacNaughton, 2003; MacNaughton & Williams, 2004). Early years' teachers in Catholic schools have a repertoire of teaching and learning strategies that support and facilitate student participation and ensure student learning. However, as this study revealed teachers may struggle to align contemporary early childhood practice with the introduction of complex religious topics that are quite abstract. If teachers are not qualified in the area of religious education, their confidence to implement appropriate and effective pedagogy to the classroom religion program can be somewhat intimidating for fear of doing something wrong.

Implications for school leaders:

School leaders in early childhood religious education face a number of challenges, as Catholic schools provide education to increasingly diverse and pluralistic student populations. Further, as greater numbers of Catholic schools provide pre-primary education classes, employment of specialised early childhood teachers with qualifications in religious education becomes more urgent and necessary. It is therefore important to consider the implications raised by such challenges for both the schools' religious life and classroom religion programs. Such challenges have implications for the following:

1. the nature of the school's religious life, particularly students' attendance at school liturgies and religious celebrations;
2. the nature of the classroom religion program, specifically with its approach, content and pedagogy; and
3. teachers' religious education qualifications.

(1) Young students attendance at school liturgies and religious celebrations:

This critical issue requires careful consideration by school administration teams and may be better discussed and decided by a wider group which could include the Parish Priest, a parent representative and one of the pre-primary teachers. It is helpful for school leaders that other stakeholders are made aware of these challenges and are part of the decision-making process. One of the solutions could be that the opening liturgy is a short and simple welcoming liturgy of the Word and that the pre-primary classes come in last and leave first. At other times when a whole school mass is celebrated, perhaps the pre-primary classes could leave immediately after the gospel reading. There is no one answer to this challenge. Including informed stakeholders in preparing appropriate policies and procedures regarding the ways young students can be involved in the religious life of the school, would assist the school to maintain its Catholic identity and at the same time remain inclusive of its diverse and pluralistic student population and sensitive to the age and circumstances of these young students.

(2) The nature of the classroom religion program, specifically with its approach, content and pedagogy:

Challenges regarding the nature of the classroom religion program have significant implications for curriculum leaders. An alignment between contemporary early childhood practice and the practice of teaching religion in Catholic early years' year settings is recommended. Teaching practice that involves all students as active and interactive participants, rather than passive recipients, is recommended. Models, which include social-constructivism, play, and transformational and authentic curriculum approaches, all of which are more appropriate to contemporary early childhood education (Arthur et al., 2005; Lambert & Clyde, 2000; MacNaughton, 2003; Millikin, 2003) need to be enacted in the early years' religion program.

Second, it would be helpful for curriculum leaders and teachers to recognise within teaching practice, the direct and critical relationship between classroom interaction and the teaching and learning process. As revealed in the study, cohorting language that constructs students as all practising members of the institution of the Catholic Church is inappropriate within an educational approach to the teaching of the classroom religion program. An academic language (Moran, 1989, 1997) that does not seek to persuade or preach or convert must be consciously and explicitly used in all classroom interaction. As in other areas, teaching practice needs to acknowledge and consider students' sociocultural contexts in the religion program.

Third, it is essential that teachers have a deep knowledge and understanding of all religious content and concepts that are included in the topics of the curriculum. Inservice education must recognise and respond to: first, the complex theological concepts within curriculum guidelines; and second the challenging nature such concepts present early years' teachers. This study recognises the complex and therefore challenging nature of some topics in early years' religion programs, and indeed advocates that some of these topics, (considered essential by some), be omitted from early years' religion programs. This

is a particularly salient point for curriculum leaders in Catholic education offices. It is important that school leaders and teachers are confident with the content. It is equally critical that they are able to question the appropriate or inappropriate nature of some of the content included in the programs and have the confidence to make decisions about the inclusion, or exclusion of such content and concepts from the curriculum.

(3) Teachers' religious education qualifications:

Some of the difficulties surrounding decisions of students' attendance at school liturgies and curriculum issues concerning the content and pedagogy of the classroom religion program are related to teachers' levels of religious education qualifications. The implication is that early childhood teachers in Catholic schools do need formal qualifications in religious education and given the increasing number of Catholic schools now offering the pre-primary year, this is a pressing need. Until the present time, Catholic universities offered limited places in early childhood education and most RECs / APREs are not early childhood education specialists. Each area, that is, religious education and early childhood education, has its specific underpinning theories and foundations. In a recent master's unit in early childhood religious education at a Catholic University in which 41 teachers participated, the majority were from studies other than religious education and this was their first religious education subject at the tertiary level. Many also expressed their concern that they had received little professional development in the area at both school and systemic levels. An immediate response for both school and systemic leaders could be to support early childhood teachers in gaining formal qualifications in religious education. Such support could be financial assisting teachers in pursuing tertiary studies, as well as making professional development in religious education mandatory.

Conclusion:

As Catholic education continues to grow and expand, challenges are inevitable but need not be debilitating. In the first instance, it is essential that such challenges are recognised and acknowledged by all leaders, not only in schools who are more than aware of their own realities, but also in the Catholic education offices and in the wider Australian church. Ignoring these challenges or pretending that they do not exist, risks the integrity of the school's religious education and may lead to an erosion of the school's identity as a Catholic school. Responding to the challenges can assist in ensuring a lively, inclusive and sustaining school religious life and classroom religion programs not only for early years students, but also for all students.

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