

When I was at School: A preliminary report investigating the secondary school Religious Education (RE) experiences of Catholic secondary school RE teachers aged 25 to 40 years.

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This paper is a preliminary report on research conducted with secondary school RE teachers working in Catholic secondary schools. The research has focussed on investigating teachers' experiences of their own secondary school RE. Understanding the educational background of teachers aged 25 to 40 years has important implications for professional development as well as documenting an important recent period in the history of Catholic education. Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured technique and a number of key response categories established. Teachers identified a lack of academic focus as one of their key recollections of secondary school RE. Responses to this lack of focus were classified as negative or ambivalent. School retreats were identified as a positive experiences and the school culture was recognised by participants as playing an important role in how RE was experienced.

This paper is a preliminary report on research conducted at the Australian Catholic University investigating current and intending RE teachers in Catholic secondary schools. The research endeavours to expand our understanding of RE in three ways. Firstly, by documenting the secondary school experiences of RE teachers' aged between 25 and 40 with special reference to the RE they received. Secondly, using this information to better understand the educational needs of a large and important group of teachers. Thirdly, by examining what happened in the RE classroom in Catholic secondary schools in the period under study a better understanding is gained of what is was like to grow up Catholic in an era that was markedly different from that which preceded it.

Despite the tumultuous events of the twentieth century the internal cohesion of the Catholic Church for much of this period was remarkable. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), however, was a watershed in the history of Catholicism (Rummery, 1975). Amongst other things the Council marked the beginning of an era where Catholics openly questioned the beliefs and practises of the Church. Powerful descriptions of either the preconciliar period or the era characterised by the transition

between pre and post conciliar practises form an important part of the history of Catholic education in this country as well as in other Western societies (Massam, 1996). Being part of a wider all-embracing social network was a characteristic feature of Catholic life in the pre conciliar period (Campion, 1982). A critical aspect of passing on Catholic identity in this era was the Catholic secondary school and the sense of religious certainty that this conveyed. Here is how one prominent Catholic writer expresses it:

I had been brought up a practising Catholic and the social and cultural setting of my life was steady as a rock. There was no need for the Bible, as I had the Pope, the Bishop, the Priest and weekly Mass. *My belief system came from the family and a Catholic schooling.* (my italics) (Moloney, 1998:168)

Pivotal in this inculturation process was RE, which was catechetical, strongly didactic and laid great importance on familiarity with the content of locally produced catechisms (Hamilton, 1981). The catechetical methodology had been a feature of RE in Catholic schools since their inception in the nineteenth century. The transition from catechetical styles of instruction to kerygmatic and life centred approaches was a characteristic of religious education in Catholic secondary schools in the 70's and 80's (Ayel, 1981:110-120; Ryan, 1997). The kerygmatic movement with its emphasis on Scripture as a means to proclaim the "Good News" and the far greater importance given to the life experience of students as an integral part of RE effected major changes in classroom practise in Catholic secondary schools. What effect these paradigmatic changes had on students has not been systematically reported. Preliminary work conducted as part of this research project indicated that many post-conciliar teachers, that is those who attended Catholic schools after the Second Vatican Council, did not have strong recollections or experiences of their own secondary school RE. This was significant simply because it made such a strong contrast with teachers who are only, relatively speaking a little older. The lack of research data on teachers under 40 years of age indicates a significant gap in the history of Catholic education in this country. As well as historical significance this research has important implications for future planning and policy implementation. The post-conciliar generations will be significant figures not just in Catholic education in the third millennium but in all aspects of Church life. A better understanding of some of their formative experiences will assist those involved in providing training and support to this group and also provide a better understanding of their interests and concerns about RE.

Method

Participants in this study are either working in Catholic secondary schools teaching RE or completing a graduate diploma in education including a RE method. The selection criteria for participants included the following:

- Catholics aged between 25 and 40 years
- have taught or intend to teach RE in a Catholic secondary school
- attended a Catholic secondary school
- willing to talk about their experiences of secondary school RE

The principal research tool is the semi-structured interview which utilises a series of focus questions to keep the interview centred around a number of thematic areas (Minichiello, et al, 1992). This interview also style allows for response freedom from participants which is important in an underresearched area (Stewart and Cash, 1988). The semi-structured interview is especially well suited in this research because many participants initial recall was poor and the focus question were able to initiate a discussion (Dey, 1993). All interviews were taped and transcribed. At the conclusion of the interview participants completed a short questionnaire. Fifty interviews are planned and this paper reports on responses from thirty-one participants.

Results and discussion: a preliminary analysis

Interviews were analysed and the manifest content identified using common thematic response clustering (Berg, 1989; Ackroyd and Hughes, 1992). Descriptive expressions and responses were categorised into thematic groups (Crotty, 1996). This task was facilitated by use of focus questions which directed interviews. Major response categories were identified and will be discussed in turn along with a series of indicative quotes.

1. Lack of Academic Focus

One of the strongest response clusters in the data so far is the indication that participants viewed RE as lacking an academic focus, certainly in comparison with other subjects. In junior and middle secondary levels this was compounded by the compulsory nature of RE. Indeed RE was often described as non-academic.

I can't remember a lot of what I did because it didn't seem like there was anything concrete. If you asked me what did in what I consider academic subjects, I could tell you from way back in Year 7 to year 12, but RE is a bit hazy. NW 3

I can't say I learnt a lot in religion and about other religions....I have no recollection of actual work for RE sort of suggests it was mainly reflective, it wasn't a lot of intellectual development as far as the school went. KC 2

I don't think academically I learnt very much. MM 2

No-one seriously thought about it [RE] in terms of academic endeavour. If you won the RE prize, well you know. SB 4

Other responses also gave support to the notion that RE lacked academic focus. A number of respondents reported that they could not recall doing RE at all or did it in a highly ameliorated way at senior secondary level.

In Year 12 I was doing my Business subjects at another school and in the morning I had Accounting then RE in the middle and then Economics and I never went to that RE class and my teacher was the Principal who was a nun. When she did not notice or follow up it was like alright a nun, she was the principal she teaches RE if she doesn't care then nobody cares. NW 4, graduated in 1989

At senior school RE was very issue based. We got articles from the newspapers and discussed them. There was lots of discussion but not much framework or proper analysis. SB 5, graduated in 1979

I do not remember doing it [RE] at all in Years 10, 11 and 12. JD 6, graduated in 1981

In years 11 and 12 attendance was optional and it was a one-hour lesson of RE per week. DW 9, graduated in 1981

We received not a lot of RE classes or instruction for the first four years, but I do remember that in years 11 and 12 there were no RE classes at all. TA 5, graduated in 1978

2. Reactions to Lack of Academic Focus

It is important to emphasise that there were a number of different reactions to what was generally perceived as a lack of depth and sequence in RE. These can be grouped into two categories.

2.1 Negative reactions

Some participants commented on the lack of academic focus with a sense of loss or wasted opportunity.

RE was a bludge subject. It was always a bludge subject. People didn't mind RE because they didn't have to focus. AS 2

RE was regarded as a bludge. A period when you could just go in and relax. Don't worry about it, fall asleep type of thing. CVD 2

I mean it would have been good to look at the philosophical underpinnings of

the Church and the role of the Greeks and St Augustine, who he was and thing's like that. We didn't and I think that was a real lost opportunity. SB 6

I did feel as though I and the group were being a bit ripped off in that sense. RE wasn't being treated as seriously as it should have been EF 1

2.2 Ambivalent reactions

A number of participants whilst agreeing that RE lacked academic focus commented that this had some benefit that it made RE a different subject that allowed them to feel less pressured and speak openly.

RE was talking more about how we were getting along together and becoming a member of the community. For me that was reassuring and I think it grouped everybody closer together NW 6

I found RE enjoyable. It was not as onerous as maths and science. At times it was relaxing. SB 10

RE was different but I felt it was a good difference. It wasn't 'oh this isn't as worthwhile" it was more "this is something special so we treat it differently" PS 7

The distinction between negative and ambivalent reactions to the lack of academic focus in RE arises from different expectations of the academic standing of the discipline. Those who regarded their secondary school RE as a time of wasted opportunity tended to see RE as a subject with academic credentials and were disappointed by the quality of teaching and learning that they received. Those who did not have academic expectations of RE were more ambivalent in their responses but were unable to articulate a clear rationale for RE aside from the fact that it was different from other subjects and this difference was, on the whole, a good thing.

3. Themes in RE

RE was generally regard as a subject that lacked academic depth and focus. However, a number of specific comments were made about the content of secondary school RE. These can be grouped into five areas: personal development, justice, scripture, teaching of Catholic belief and practise and lastly, sexuality. Each area includes a range of responses, some of which were characterised by difficulties in immediate recall by the participants.

3.1 Personal development

A large amount of the content that participants recalled could be classed as personal development type material. This is a broad characterisation and includes

areas such personal values and self-esteem, health issues and developing good relationships.

There was a lot of focus on discussing issues. We didn't have a textbook; we didn't look at the bible. RE was based on your own personal development. What you want to do when you leave school. How are your relationships? Are you acting like a Christian person. It was values based. EC 2

I don't really remember a lot about the RE classes. Like I can remember liking probably mid-secondary school the RE classes, but they weren't really in RE it was more development as to the type of person you are. We didn't really discuss religious issues, it was more life issues and was based on that. AS 3

3.2 Justice

Social justice was often identified as a topic that was studied at secondary level. Within this category I have included a large number of responses that could be labelled as issue based, such as a schools response to topical issues. Some participants had strong recollections of the justice material they covered in secondary school RE and this was often due to the influence of a teacher.

I did peace and justice which was relatively a new thing. Certainly the first year our school did it...but we had a very good teacher and it is obvious – I can see it now- the stream of my interest in social justice EF 3

We did Social Justice issues. We looked at, particularly in years 10 and 11, our role in the world... I don't think we had the education or the analytical ability to really make any decisions, but the teachers were stressing that there were some real moral issues here DB 4

Participants were often unable, however, to be specific about what actual issues or topics were discussed.

3.3 Scripture

Teaching approaches to Scripture seemed to be inconsistent. Many respondents commented on the lack of emphasis on Scripture in their secondary schooling.

There was no depth in Scripture study. There was no biblical training that was part of RE. EF 2

Other participants had more favourable experiences of scripture and this was often linked to formal Biblical Studies which from the mid 1980s was available as an option for study at senior level, as a "group 2 subject", in Victorian schools.

Biblical Studies didn't seem so touchy feely lovely dovey stuff... It was far

more concrete and actually explained some of the things about faith which didn't always come through in RE. Like RE tended to be more decision making, whereas Biblical Studies is more, "here are the first 11 verses of John's gospel, why are they there, etc". It was far more concrete and analytical. CF 4

3.4 Teaching of Catholic Belief and Practice

One area where there was a very strong convergence of opinion was the lack of emphasis on teaching what one participant described as Catholic belief and practise in classroom RE. This covered a range of content areas that could be described as theological or philosophical.

Responding to a question on how her school experience has effected the way she intends to teach RE one participant responded

I would have liked teach them what I didn't learn, which is what we believe as Catholics. Why we do some of the things we do? Just black and white stuff, instead of all this lets all be happy and love God because God loves us. Something concrete. NW

In a similar vein here are two responses to a question about what was lacking from the RE they received.

I think the area that I'm pointing to is actually a comprehensive area which is tradition and knowledge of the Faith. I really thought could've been stronger EF

Scripture and Church teaching. Because I think students are quick to criticise and I was probably the same. You know why doesn't the Church do this? But we tend to do this without knowing enough history. Without knowing enough just information full stop. MM 4

These ideas were expressed most often as a missing aspect of RE not a substitute course. The key to a successful program was a balance in presentation.

Looking back ...I suppose it would have been better for me to do more of the Bible and Church beliefs but it is also I suppose the presentation that would be a concern for me...you don't want it to be dry and boring...NC 4

I think as long as we can present a course that balances those things, so they experience the sacraments, they experience the word, they experience the history of the church...also moral decision making.. Questions about sexuality, about the changing world and where they stand in it CS 5

3.5 Sexuality

The final content area identified were issues clustered around sexuality. These

tended to be approached in an ad hoc manner and not unsurprisingly the context of the material varied in quality. Given the interest of students in this topic area it is not surprising that it was recalled by some of the participants but the area was not covered systematically.

In year 7 they split the boys and girls up for term 4 and we did sex education and I remember colouring in pictures of the Virgin Mary followed by colouring in pictures of the reproductive organs. DB 1.

I think in year 9 ... I can vaguely remember we did some ethical morality stuff around sexuality education. In classes of 44 co-ed though with 1 teacher who felt pretty uncomfortable it wasn't well covered. JD 4.

4. Retreats

One very positive aspect of RE in the period under study was the reaction to retreats. These had become a feature of both the formal and informal curriculum in Catholic secondary schools in the 1980's. Many participants commented on how they found the retreat experience valuable and rewarding.

I think retreats for schools are a major thing. I think they're great. Being there and doing it made a huge impact on my life. KC 4

Retreat was excellent. They generally got an outside group in and I don't know who they were, but they had young people that seemed almost hippie like that were working with us in small groups. MM 5

The retreat for many students was the highlight of secondary school RE, although it is often not a part of the formal RE curriculum. A number of participants, nonetheless, identified retreats with RE and this may be a reflection on the disparity between the quality of classroom teaching and the retreat experience.

5. Importance of School Culture

Many respondents linked the formal RE program with other aspects of the school culture. School culture can be understood as all the activities that the school promotes both inside and outside the classroom as well as the core values that are articulated by the school community. The perception that many students had of RE was influenced by other aspects of the school culture. Compare these accounts of how the chapel at the school contributed to the life of the college.

I think RE was quite important for a number of reasons. Like there were Masses there that took place not only during school time, but outside school time. The chapel on campus was important...students tended to come from surrounding primary school areas, and there would be marriages that would take place there.

BB 2

At secondary school we never had a school mass. We had a chapel that was very small that I remember going into perhaps once or twice. EF 4

The culture of the school had a very spiritual aspect to it. Just the whole set up of the school. Like the areas to go and pray by yourself. It has a little chapel the girls can go to and pray at any time of the day. MM 1

Conclusion

On the basis of the results so far it is clear that a number of important issues are emerging. By far the most dominant finding is the lack of academic focus associated with RE in Catholic secondary schools in the period under review. This has important implications for how teachers from this age group are in-serviced and their special needs. Given RE teachers lack of relevant undergraduate degrees this lack of background may be compounded by a weak educational experience of RE in secondary school. It is important in this regard not to make assumptions about the level of content knowledge that RE teachers bring to specialised in-service training in RE. A lack of understanding of theological and other technical language may be one manifestation of inadequate secondary education coupled with absence of formal undergraduate study.

One important question springing from this lack of academic focus in secondary school RE in the period under study is what conditions allowed it to occur? I think two elements are crucial. Firstly, the transition from didactic instructional styles of teaching to life experiences models was well under way in the period under investigation. This transition could have brought with it a level of confusion about what should be taught and how it should be taught in Catholic secondary schools at an organisational level. The lack of a clear educational rationale for RE in Catholic secondary schools could have effected teaching and learning in Catholic secondary classrooms. Secondly the lack of content material is indicative of a teacher body that was lacking in the necessary preparation to teach RE well (Rymarz, 1997:43-47). A key aspect of this is familiarity with content material. If teachers lack background and confidence they tend to avoid certain areas and are attracted to others (Rymarz, 1999:48-52). The content areas identified in this study that were approached in Catholic secondary schools in the 1970's and 1980's: personal development, scripture and social justice are areas were RE teachers, even relatively untrained ones, have some affinity. However, in order to cover these topics thoroughly requires content background. If we consider how the study of scripture was reported in this study we can see a lack of depth which is indicative of teachers not being sufficiently well versed to extend students even though they are prepared to introduce the topic. The

same cannot be said for what has been loosely described as Catholic belief and practise. Teachers' lacking background and confidence are unlikely to venture into this area, especially at senior secondary level which may explain why some schools in this era did not offer RE at this level in an academic fashion.

The lack of academic focus also has important implications for the change in enculturation of young Catholics that can be traced back to the 1970's. The lack of impact that RE had on students from this era is a strong indicator of the collapse of an all-embracing Catholic culture. If we regard the Catholic school in general and the RE curriculum in particular as indicators of wider social forces we can see a culture and a way of belonging in profound transition. What was happening in the RE classroom had parallels in the parish, in the home and in many institutional aspects of Church life. This transition was not marked by a strong reaction but rather a more pervasive falling away which did not provoke strong responses. One can speak here of an evolution rather than a revolution. This change in identity and lack of strong response to it can be seen in the image of the Catholic school in the period under study that is beginning to emerge here.

The sense of Catholic schools in this research is a not one where students feel threatened or uncomfortable. This is indicated by the positive responses of participants when noting the culture of the school and the overwhelmingly endorsement of school retreats. It is important to note, also, that the recollections of RE are not hostile or reactive. This sentiment was cogently captured in the following quote.

Well if I hated the stuff I'd remember it. Also if I really loved it I'd remember it. So obviously the stuff in Year 12 I loved. [In the other years] there's nothing in RE for me that sticks out apart from learning hymns. That's a memory of junior high school CF 6

For the participant quoted above recollections of RE were mixed. On the one hand, Year 12 was remembered with great fondness. The remaining, five years, however, did not leave, hymns aside, any lasting impression. This lack of impact that RE had for many students is well summarised by the following quote which labels the secondary RE experience as neutral.

My experience of Religious Education in secondary school was neutral. I had a pretty neutral feeling towards it because I don't remember a heap from it. NC 6

This idea of RE as neutral has implication for the whole experience of growing up Catholic in 1970's and 1980's. What may distinguishes the post-conciliar Catholic from the generations before the Council and those effected by the transition from one era to another is their inability to engage the tradition even to the extent of reacting against it. The image of a generation not in rebellion or in conflict with an institutional Church but rather one that has not been sufficiently connected is a powerful one and certainly worthy of further investigation.

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