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RELIGIOUS LEADERS LEAD... OR DO THEY? AN EXAMINATION OF THE LEADERSHIP ROLE OF THE REC IN AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

Abstract

Leadership makes a difference to schools. Religious leadership in schools is exercised on different levels and through a variety of roles; however this paper argues that the Religious Education Coordinator (REC) has a key role in the delivery of quality Religious Education (RE) and consequently should have a significant educational leadership role in Catholic primary schools. This paper seeks to explore the changing perceptions around the leadership role of the REC. Drawing on contemporary literature and recent RE research, the author contends that the knowledge, skills and enactment of school leadership are fundamental for the effective implementation of the RECs responsibilities as a leader in RE. It identifies the supports necessary and challenges of the *leadership* dimension of the role. Finally it provides stimulus for Catholic primary school communities to critique their own leadership practices in order to raise the status and better support the dimensions of leadership required for the REC to succeed in their role.

Background to the role of the REC in Australia

In the Australian context the term REC is a title to signify those who have been designated to oversee RE in Catholic schools. Consequently the REC has key responsibilities to support and supervise all aspects of the day-to-day coordination of RE programs in church and school settings. Whilst RE is a shared enterprise of the whole school community, the REC must work in collaboration with the principal, leadership team, church leaders and school staff to promote the teaching of religious studies and foster the development of RE within a school/parish context. In this way they assist the principal to ensure that systematic, developmental and supportive processes are in place to bring about effective RE within the school.

RECs have been operating within Australia since the early 1970's under a variety of names and structures, and the role has evolved since its inception (Engebretson, 2006; Fleming, 2001). The implementation of the role has been guided by publications from Catholic Education Commissions and Catholic Education Offices (CEO). A recent review of these publications indicates that from an educational perspective the REC is delegated a *key responsibility* by the principal for teaching and learning in RE. Many dioceses have developed statements that unambiguously value the *leadership* contributions of the REC. This is interesting because the REC traditionally provides a wide range of advice and services for schools, teachers and members of the Catholic education community and has been called to demonstrate a commitment to quality RE. Contemporary discussion of the role now elevates this notion and suggests the REC must provide vision and leadership in RE too.

An analysis of the various diocesan documents provided by Fleming (2002) recognised that some of the role descriptions of RECs are very detailed. The benefit of this thorough and explicit documentation is that it clearly specifies the roles, responsibilities, employment and professional learning requirements of the REC and reflects their pivotal role in *leading* and supporting the school's RE program. By making the skills and knowledge expected of RECs transparent and accessible, RECs will be better placed to succeed in their leadership role. How the written requirements align with the reality at a local level, however, is another issue.

The author's recent review and analysis of official CEO documentation on the role of the REC in Australian Catholic primary schools illustrated variance in the ways in which RECs operate and are supported. Ambiguity and complexity associated with the role is reflected in the lack of consistency and agreement

with regard to clear expectations, responsibilities and priorities of the role. This finding concurs with Buchanan's (2005) study that there is "no clear uniform perception about the role" (p. 6). There is also a lack of clarity as to the scope and extent of leadership needed in this role. As religious learning in Catholic primary schools is arguably dependent upon the exercise of effective leadership, this apparent variation in system guidelines indicates that there needs to be more clarity about the specific leadership role of the REC. A paucity of documentation "fleshing out" the leadership dimensions of the role exacerbates the effectiveness with which the REC can fulfil the role and identifies a source of tension in determining the most appropriate ways of evaluating their performance. This lack of clarity and agreement by major stakeholders is a significant area of concern and invites further scrutiny as it is fundamental to any attempts by Catholic schools to create and define new understandings of the leadership role of the REC. Calls for lucidity in regard to this issue are not new. As far back as 1999, Bezzina and Wilson recommended a "greater commitment to religious leadership" (p. 39). They generated a number of options for religious leadership into the future   including: a) status quo; b) raising the status of the role; Assistant Assistant/Deputy principal RE c) raising the status of the role and sharing some responsibilities; a second Assistant Principal as well as REC; d) shared religious leadership; and e) thinking outside the square (1999). Since then, the ongoing discussion and research in this area (Crotty, 2005; Fleming, 2004) have yet to determine how to best achieve REC leadership success. The need for a clear sense of direction in which there are clearly identifiable leadership responsibilities has been recognised by scholars yet it appears that is not always supported in official documents.

As each Catholic diocese is autonomous in the management of its schools, a measure of leadership diversity is necessary and inevitable, as schools conform to the local challenges placed before them. Nonetheless, these varying perceptions have made it difficult to establish agreed expectations regarding the different dimensions of religious leadership required in this leadership role. Notwithstanding legitimate variations across different contexts, a commitment to and a priority to seek to deliver outstanding religious leadership particularly in designated areas like curriculum and professional learning, is necessary in order to ensure the continuing credibility of the subject. The challenge for each diocese is to make adequate provision for this leadership dimension and to specify what it may entail in practice.

Coordinator or leader?

Perhaps the ambiguity about the leadership role of the REC needs to be explained. Historically, the REC position has been labelled as a coordinator's role, as opposed to a leader's role. A coordinator brings together, makes links and establishes routines and common practices. In contrast a leader offers expertise and directs and guides the development of the subject to raise standards. The concept of religious leadership, therefore, offers a greater degree of responsibility, direction and accountability than the notion of coordination. A distinctive focus on the leadership dimension of the role has occurred in recent years. Table One illustrates the development of the REC's role and how, over time, it has been elevated to a more senior position in terms of title, status, responsibility and remuneration in three Australian archdioceses.

Table 1.: Upgrading of the role of the REC

Diocese	Year, Title & Responsibility	Year, Reviewed Title & Responsibility
Melbourne	1984, Coordinator Development, coordination and delivery of religious education curriculum	Draft 2005, REC- equivalent to DP A central leadership role with broad responsibilities for the learning programs and life of faith in the school
Sydney	1983, Coordinator Curriculum development and planning	2007, REC leadership in ensuring quality teaching and learning in religious education
Adelaide	2004, Coordinator Involved in leadership structures	2009, AP Religious Identity and Mission (Masters Degree)Work as part of leadership team and actively shape the religious identity

This table highlights that Catholic primary schools have been challenged to review the arrangements made to designate positions of religious leadership. As a result, the new title "Assistant Principal" used by the CEO's of Adelaide, Brisbane, Canberra and Darwin (CEOA, CEOB, CEOC, and CEOD) and the financial remuneration equivalent to a deputy position have given recognition to the increased professional status of the role. Further, the documents specify that leadership is required as opposed to simply coordination. Despite these positive leadership developments, anecdotal evidence from practising RECs suggests that greater promotion about the importance of the role is still required to raise the leadership status. Some current serving RECs report a disjunction between their actual work and what others perceive their work to be. This suggests that ambiguities about leadership that have evolved from the CEO documentation remain and need further attention (Crotty, 2002).

System support for RECs to promote the leadership dimension of the role

In order to meet the expectations of the aforementioned documentation and to assist the REC to effectively function in the role, various CEOs across Australia have made a commitment to raising the educational qualifications of the RECs through a broad range of initiatives. A rich tradition of professional associations for RECs in their role, stretching back some thirty years includes the provision of collegial support, guidance and resources. Like other leaders, RECs require vision, support, management skills, and an understanding of contemporary leadership, curriculum and pedagogy to succeed in their leadership role. More specifically, different dioceses have placed a high value on formal qualifications for the REC. This is evidenced in Melbourne's draft *Leadership in Catholic Schools: The Role of the Religious Education Coordinator policy* (CEOM, 2, 22) which moves beyond broad statements, and for the first time in the Melbourne context, spelt out a criteria for a substantive appointment with inclusion in the leadership team and remuneration equivalent to a Deputy Principal. Unlike preceding documents, it aimed to ensure that RECs were prepared and equipped to become competent members of school leadership teams and rewarded appropriately. To be eligible for such senior positions, RECs need to be experienced and appropriately qualified. This continuing commitment to strengthen religious leadership in Catholic educational communities is realised through other CEO incentives (study support, resources, funding, etc) to encourage primary schools to make these criteria a reality.

For those desirous of moving into this upgraded leadership position, in partnership with the CEO, the Australian Catholic University (ACU) has tailored a Master of Religious Education degree to acquire professional expertise in theology, religious and leadership education. This course aims to extend knowledge and expertise to inform and enrich the leadership component of the REC role. Sponsorship for further studies at university level means that aspiring RECs or current RECs can avail themselves of this opportunity to develop their leadership skills in the area of RE. Commitment to academic study at a system level has reinforced the belief that leading a school's RE program requires a high level of leadership, administrative and management skills. A REC must be adequately qualified and capable to best perform in his or her role. This view has been validated by Crotty (2002, p. 191) who claimed further study "resulted in the combined influence of curriculum leaders and informed religious educators on religious education in the classroom, and in education generally". Crotty also affirmed that further study for the REC has "increasingly been prized for its beneficial consequences" (p. 182).
Leadership or Management

Some scholars (Engebretson, 1998; Fleming, 2001) recognised the leadership and management aspects of the role of the REC. Distinctions made between leadership and management by these writers, while helpful in some respects, do not adequately reflect the complex nature of educational leadership and management in the current climate. Leadership and management are complementary, yet it is now well recognised that leadership goals cannot be achieved without sound management skills. D' Orsa (1998) affirmed that the REC needed "sound management techniques which characterise good leadership" (p. 34). In contrast, McCarthy (2004) probing the nexus between leadership and management, suggested "Administration, executive and management are... not necessarily connected with leaders and leadership" (p. 28).

Notwithstanding the aforementioned perceptions of the managerial role, a paradigm shift has occurred and disquiet about excessive managerialism has led to the appeal for transformation of managers and administrators into leaders. RECs need to be leaders who are not primarily administrators or managers. They must be more intentional about their leadership of learning. The "leadership" aspect of the role is expected at a deeper level, requiring more than just experience and competence in a series of administrative or management skills. Whilst leadership and management are both necessary, leadership has priority over management. The responsibilities of the REC therefore go beyond claims of simply management of the RE program and calls for a more expansive understanding of leadership. This contention echoes the CECV *Leadership in Catholic School Development Framework and Standards of Practice* (LSF, 2005) which promoted a strong focus on educational leadership within a Catholic school as distinct from leadership for management.

This nexus is complicated by the fact that the leadership role of the REC may also be perceived as middle leadership/management as the role is a strategic role and RECs use their position to increase organisational effectiveness. Traditionally, managers occupy the middle ground in organisations, however, the roles that managers play and the expectations that others have of them are evolving. The capacity of middle managers to lead towards school improvement is hindered by various limitations cited by Brown, Boyle, & Boyle, (2002) including, time, role ambiguity, exclusion from decision making and lack of communication. These inhibiting factors, identified in UK secondary schools, must likewise be overcome in Australian Catholic primary schools if a commitment to strengthen the leadership role of REC is to be achieved.

Recent research exploring the leadership dimension of the REC role.

Support for RECs and their capacity to engage with and enact leadership for learning is less well understood but critical to the promotion of quality RE. For this reason the leadership role of the REC in the Melbourne Archdiocese was investigated in more detail in 2005 in a joint research pilot project undertaken by the CEOM, in conjunction with the School of Educational Leadership, ACU. This two year pilot project tracked 13 RECs who had attained their Masters of Religious Education and were elevated to the position of Assistant principal with matching salary conditions, and inclusion in the leadership team. The Primary Religious Education Coordinators' Pilot Project (PRECPP) drew upon surveys, focus groups and in-depth interviews to map the leadership dimensions of eligible RECs. The findings and recommendations focused on the RECs in their school setting and sought to understand how they constructed meaning about their leadership role in Catholic schools. The final report (2007) illustrated that leadership team responsibilities were diverse and included: a) attending and participating in team meetings; b) ensuring the priority of the Catholic schools ethos; c) ensuring RE time is protected; d) preparation of and participation in selection interviews, e) meetings with the principal and parish priest (p. 21). This summary does not indicate the extent of leadership displayed by participating RECs unless there was awareness of their context before the study began however by the second year, findings indicated that almost eighty percent of participating RECs were exercising their responsibilities as members of school leadership teams. Further, some RECs were designated increasing responsibility in whole school leadership (2007, p. 41). Whilst we might celebrate the success in growth of leadership of the 13 RECs involved, it is also important to broaden support for the continuation and expansion of the leadership role for all in the role of REC. Though the role of the REC has been advocated as one of religious leadership within the school (D'Orsa, 1998; Engbretson, 1998; Crotty, 2005), the PRECPP report (2007) demonstrated that this is not necessarily the case in practice. Though the 13 RECs were elevated to more senior leadership positions, which included membership of school leadership teams, some respondents commented that there had been little or no change to the REC role (p. vii). In contrast, only one school indicated that the policy was "a matter of catching up with, and reflecting, good practice" (p. vii). This transition suggests that written aspirations do not transfer easily or automatically into action, and change in leadership practice will not occur quickly or spontaneously. Having positional leadership does not mean one has fully developed leadership capabilities. Whilst this research was particular to the Melbourne Archdiocese, the implications of the research for other dioceses are evident. It seems the existence of constraining factors beyond the control of RECs, means that the actual leadership work of RECs may differ from their desired roles. This lack of leadership growth over the two

year period warrants further investigation. Further, whilst much energy and substantial resources have been devoted to the REC, the long term success of CEO support initiatives to the leadership growth of RECs has yet to be measured.
Ideal v's reality

What has become increasingly evident is that there is a need to *deliberately* foster and support the leadership growth of RECs. The PRECPP final (2007) recommendations related directly to the leadership responsibilities of the REC and directed that to facilitate the transition of the REC to whole school leaders, the new leadership role be clearly defined, that there be common understandings of the key responsibilities of the role and that principals utilize opportunities to "grow" additional leadership capacity in their schools (pp. 46-47). The research demonstrated that the leadership dimension of the role is inextricably linked to factors within the school as the workplace of the teacher and is subject to pressure and support from outside the system.

The need for suitable status and the difference between the theoretical status in documentation and the real status, financial arrangements, time and school based professional development was forwarded by Brandon as far back as 1984 and it seems these tensions still exist. Organisational arrangements are required to support the REC in their leadership role. Different Australian research revealed that the REC is supported by a range of structures and services including time release, professional learning and influences by the principal and leadership teams' intent (Buchanan, 2005; Crotty, 2005; Fleming 2004). Fleming termed this support "symbolic" (p. 52). Both research and literature reinforced that RECs must be supported in a professional manner with the conditions that are necessary to enable the person to be most effective in the leadership role. Whilst different studies identified potential for and anomalies in the leadership role of the REC, it is clear that capacity building for REC in RE has been raised as a serious issue by various religious scholars. Further, the present leadership structure and organisation of some primary Catholic schools indicates that further improvements are necessary. The challenge remains to identify and to create the conditions for effective leadership so that RE is *led* by a recognised subject leader who makes best use of their *leadership* to ensure RE is acknowledged by virtually all learners and key stakeholders as being a priority in the life of the school.

Encouraging the leadership role of the REC

Whilst recognising the commitment, professionalism and dedication of many RECs any deficiencies in REC leadership must be addressed. In order to rectify this challenge, it is necessary that all Catholic primary schools be willing to confront the brutal facts of the current leadership reality in their schools. If RECs are to be encouraged and supported to grow in their leadership role, some key considerations are too important to be left to chance. Given that the work of the REC as an educational leader may be new, ambiguous and difficult, the following table (Table Two) is presented as a means of providing a framework for examining the leadership role of the REC and exploring ways to grow their leadership role. Whilst recognising that different school and parish contexts have implications regarding the leadership expectations for the role and responsibilities of RECs and the capacity of individuals to fulfil these expectations, the following considerations aim to proactively build the leadership capacity of REC's in order that they in turn can lead staff to effectively implement the RE curriculum.

If, as has been argued, RECs are to be viewed as leaders within a Catholic school, then they must be empowered to participate more fully and actively in their leadership role. As REC role descriptions are negotiated at the local school level, Table Two may provide stimulus to renew local support and encouragement for the leadership role of the REC. It may also provide a sound basis on which to clarify options for the leadership role of the REC in Catholic schools. It can help identify the perceptions of the leadership role of the REC and to elucidate the conceptual and practical issues relevant to their leadership responsibilities. It acknowledges that an infrastructure must be provided that will enable the REC to develop the attributes and capabilities needed to lead the RE program. In short it is hoped that through collaborative conversations, schools may be able to *reinvent* the leadership practice of the REC, in varying

degrees, to provide effective forms of educative leadership. However for positive change to occur, all key stakeholders with a vested interest in the quality of RE, must work collaboratively to better understand the potential of the leadership role of the REC. A commitment to support the leadership work of RECs must also be extended to aspiring RECs.

Table 2: Review of the Leadership role of the REC in the Catholic primary school

Topics for Review	Questions for discussion
Leadership role of REC	In order to meet the responsibilities of their position, clear and specific guidelines are needed. Does the role description explicitly state the dimensions of leadership required by the REC in their specific roles and responsibilities? Are all key stakeholders aware of the explicit and implicit leadership expectations? Is RE pro-actively led and managed? As a school leader can the REC clearly articulate how important RE is in the life of the school and how this is demonstrated?
Recruitment and Appointment of REC	Prospective RECs require vision, leadership and management skills, educational qualifications and teaching experience which will enable leadership to grow and develop. What succession/mentoring practices are in place to nurture future RECs? Are there appropriate time/funding and support to nurture this development in ongoing ways? Are prospective RECs provided with formal and informal opportunities to grow in wisdom and leadership experience in the area of RE?
Induction, Formation and Ongoing Professional learning of the REC	RECs are entitled to support in taking up their leadership role. Has appropriate and ongoing induction, information and advice/ mentoring been provided to assist new RECs? Are RECs encouraged to be active in their pursuit of further contemporary knowledge and qualifications to fulfil their leadership role in the school?
Performance Review of RECs	Regular performance reviews are a key ingredient to the ongoing process of professional learning for the REC and therefore it should be incorporated into professional practice both at the formal and informal level. Are regular reviews conducted to identify and prioritise the skills and attributes required by REC to lead RE? Are goals negotiated to promote their leadership as active members of the leadership team/executive? Is the capacity building of teachers part of the RECs performance review?

Any developments will only occur with the full cooperation by CEOs, diocesan RE support staff, local parish leaders, principals, RECs and RE teachers. Success will be more likely to result if all parties are collegial and consultative. If key stakeholders take the opportunity to research, dialogue and proactively explore the nature and exercise of the key leadership role of the REC it may be possible to reconceptualise the attributes, skills and dispositions needed to successfully lead RE in Catholic primary settings.

Future directions

School leadership is currently the object of almost unprecedented attention. In educational literature, findings from diverse countries draw similar conclusions about the centrality of leadership to school improvement and the role of head teachers in the creation, management and leadership of culture in schools (Bush, 2003; OECD 2008). RECs operate within the intersection of community, staff, clergy, employing authorities and students and consequently experience the dynamics of competing challenges, aspirations and understandings held by these key stakeholders. In the domain of RE, system official documentation provided recognition of the need for and value of leadership in the role of REC. The increasing demands and complexity of the REC's role, coupled with the increased span of what they are

expected to do signals a timely warning to re-imagine the role in ways which recognise and embrace their leadership potential. However, in RE, it appears this leadership theory, research and practice, needs to be more closely linked to research on effective teaching in RE, so that there is greater focus on what RECs as leaders need to know and do to best support RE teachers. In order to better understand and rectify this situation further research into the leadership role of the REC must be pursued. Whilst this review has identified some concerns about the capacity, credibility and responsibility of the REC in enacting the leadership required in their role, concern about the knowledge, time, energy, and skills required in leading RE, coupled with questions of modelling, infrastructure and other supports needed to actualise the leadership commitment may also serve as serious impediments to the leadership growth of RECs. Therefore it is necessary to further examine how RECs and key stakeholders in RE view the educational leadership responsibilities of the REC and better understand what strengthens their capacity to lead and what inhibits their capacity to lead.

The need to strengthen preparation and development for school leaders is recognised both nationally and internationally (Huber, 2004). Testament to the growing interest and investment in this field is the current OECD international activity *Improving School Leadership*. In the domain of RE this concern is further complicated by the changing context within which Australian RECs work. This context is characterised by increasing complexity in expectations of REC as leaders and greater demands for student accountability in RE. Perhaps the most visible form of accountability is the systemic requirements from CEOs like the reporting to standards (CEOM) and a Year 6 RE test (Catholic Education Office Sydney [CEOS], 2010) which compels leaders of RE to reflect on their role of educational leadership and its impact on student learning in RE. As schools and parish communities review and define the role of the REC in the light of their needs, expectations and profile, perhaps the significance and importance of the leadership role of the REC may emerge.

Key researchers (Bezzina, & Burford, 2010; Robinson & Timperley, 2007), policy makers and educationalists from a variety of educational contexts continue to make a major contribution to the national and international literature and debate on effective school leadership. This provides ample evidence of how critical the presence of effective and capable leaders is to workplace productivity, morale and student learning. In seeking to improve both learning and leadership in RE the intention of this paper is to help better understand the changing nature of REC school leadership in Catholic schools. It is clear that further research and more evidence are needed to explore how RECs as leaders lead in high stakes accountability environments. Mirroring the international OECD (2006) project which explored key leadership questions, those responsible for RE at both a system and local level should investigate how effective REC leadership can best be developed and supported. Likewise consideration must be given to what policies and practices would be most conducive to these ends. Such questions are not new, but what is new is the increased pressure to address them; pressures built up by the combined impact of ambiguity around the agreed roles and responsibilities of the REC; increased options and support for leadership development; the continued pressures of improved student learning; and the need to focus on a deeper understanding of the process and the role of REC leadership in cultivating and promoting the core work of the school- teaching and learning.

Conclusion

An understanding of leadership for learning is a valuable asset for all who work in Catholic schools, but more so for those who lead them. The REC can and should make an important and specific contribution to the leadership of RE learning. But attaining this goal may require that key stakeholders give REC as leaders, more possibilities in taking the lead. In the efforts to achieve high quality RE, RE but must be led—and deftly. In order to reflect the importance, status and complexity of leadership of RE, it has been argued that RECs leaders need to actively and confidently demonstrate educative leadership. In addition, a commitment to leadership training and support is necessary in order to enhance and develop the REC in their leadership role. In fact the development of leadership capabilities is an ongoing process for all aspiring and experienced RECs. The seriousness and complexity of this task cannot be overstated. Central to this

vision is recognition that, as leaders, RECs need to update their leadership skills and knowledge continuously, not only in response to a changing world but in response to new research and emerging knowledge about leadership learning and teaching. Hopefully over time, all stakeholders in RE will examine and intensify the *leadership* dimensions of the REC role and continue their commitment to ensure that the *REC is a leader of RE.* Realising the opportunities and meeting the responsibilities of leadership in RE may require continual questioning and courageous action. Success will depend on a shared clear and unequivocal vision of leadership in RE what its expectations are and how they can be supported and achieved.

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