

**Title:** System Leaders as Learners: Action Research into Leading Learning for a Recontextualising Approach in Religious Education

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**Abstract:**

A hermeneutic approach to religious education has radically changed the focus of the teacher's role from one of knowledge transmission, to one which recontextualises - enabling meaning-making and critical thinking, facilitating and provoking dialogue and accompanying students as they construct their identity. This research project seeks to understand how teachers of religious education can best learn about and implement a recontextualising approach. The project illuminates the description of recontextualisation in five criteria as proposed by Leuven Professor Pollefeyt (2017) by situating them in the practical context of professional learning in schools. It is the first study to focus on the interconnections of the processes and understandings of recontextualisation in RE between system leaders, teachers and students. This interconnectedness is shown to be a reciprocal learning relationship. Using an Action Research methodology, the project engaged system leaders and teachers in Catholic schools in cycles of collegial dialogue and reflection on practice and theory to develop and refine understandings and practice of recontextualisation. The findings challenge a system to consider how it intentionally positions itself in relation to the schools it serves. It has become evident that not only is it important to engage in recontextualising dialogue at the level of system leader and teacher, but at the executive level of the Catholic Education Offices if system-wide pedagogical change is to occur. This project gives insight into the processes and skills of dialogue to be embedded at all levels of the system.

**Introduction and context**

Today's cultural context has a complex and dynamic mixture of individualising, pluralising and secularising influences (Boeve, 2003) which calls for new ways of understanding and interpreting the Catholic tradition and its place and influence in society. The Second Vatican Council (1963-65) began a process of renewal and re-framing for the Catholic Church in light of the changing context and this process continues today. Catholic education too is called to respond in a new way to the Council's vision of the Church in the world and with this in view the Enhancing Catholic School Identity Project (ECSI) was initiated in 2006. Conducted under the auspices of the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria (CECV), ECSI is a collaboration with Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KUL) (Pollefeyt and Bouwens, 2014) and Catholic Education Melbourne. The research suite of survey instruments developed in this initiative enables Catholic schools to understand themselves and their context by supporting them with data, new concepts and new language to revitalise their Catholic identity in theologically sound and culturally plausible ways. Professor Didier Pollefeyt together with Dr Jan Bouwens from KUL have been the drivers

of the ECSI project in Melbourne and now nationally and internationally. Professor Pollefeyt's work is instrumental in this paper.

The Melbourne Scale is one of the survey instruments of the ECSI project which measures Catholic school identity options from a missiological perspective: how a school engages and communicates the faith tradition in a changing cultural context (Pollefeyt & Richards, 2020). Based on the work of systematic theologian Lieven Boeve (2006), it describes five different ways of engaging culture and faith in a historical timeline which shows the increasing divergence between faith and culture over the past eighty years. It begins with a traditional 'Confessional Identity' which was undisputed in the 1950's, then moves to an approach which was popular until the 90's and still holds sway: 'Christian Values Education.' In this approach to Religious Education (RE) in Catholic primary and secondary schools, mono-correlations between culture and faith are made to demonstrate the faith as culturally plausible. Options for Catholic schools more recently are apparent between 'Secularisation' which lets go of Catholic identity by aligning unreflexively with contemporary culture and Reconfessionalisation which harks back to a confessional identity without reference to the changing cultural context. The fifth and preferred option is 'Recontextualisation' which places both the tradition and the contemporary context in dialogue with each other to create a new understanding and new expression of the faith tradition. In Catholic schooling, recontextualisation is both theological - arising from understandings of revelation, scripture and tradition, and pedagogical - engaging a constructivist understanding of learning (Jonassen & Rohr-Murphy, 1999) as a meaning-enhancing activity of human subjects in relation with communities of meaning. This calls for a multi-correlational, dialogical and process oriented approach in RE (Pollefeyt, 2008). Recontextualisation (Pollefeyt & Bouwens, 2014) is an educational method that is person-centred and developmental. It invites learners to be active and intentional in the learning process, and to deepen their critical awareness of their personal worldview, including their own religious experience and knowledge, through engaging in structured interactions of personal dialogue with other students, as well as with the texts and traditions of the Catholic faith tradition and the cultural issues of the day. These structured interactions of dialogue are understood as transformative and recontextualising, not only of the learners in the dialogue, but also of the understandings and concepts used within the dialogue, including the religious and nonreligious traditions themselves.

Each of the four dioceses of Victoria: Melbourne, Ballarat, Sale, Sandhurst, has responded to the changing context and identity research since the ECSI project's inception, undertaking to develop and embed a model of learning in RE reflecting the theological understanding of recontextualisation as an approach which is valid for students of all religious and non-religious affiliations or worldviews. These have been described in a variety of ways by each of the four diocesan education offices in their RE curriculum statements and policies:

- Catholic Education Melbourne released the draft statement of its RE Curriculum 'Encounter' in 2018. It presents a curriculum aligned with contemporary theological and pedagogical understandings. The curriculum draws on features of the Enhancing Catholic School Identity (ECSI) project, the Victorian Curriculum (F-10) and the P-12 RE text "To Know Worship and Love"
- Diocese of Ballarat Catholic Education Limited (DOBCEL) released its curriculum document 'Awakenings' in 2018 which captures the distinctive vision and mission of Catholic schools as

they embody and relate to the plurality of religious and nonreligious worldviews in Australia today. This revised version of the Awakenings Core Document and Curriculum Framework aims to strengthen the alignment of previous resources with the ECSI frameworks and the Victorian Curriculum F- 10 (2015).

- Catholic Education Sandhurst: The 'Source of Life' Core document articulates the vision, not only for RE in the schools of the Diocese of Sandhurst, but for the Catholic Identity of its schools. It guides schools in the distinctive Domain of RE and situates RE within the context of the school and the Sandhurst documents.
- Diocese of Sale Catholic Education Limited (DOSCEL): The curriculum 'To Live in Christ Jesus' invites students to deepen their understanding of the Christian story and Catholic Tradition by providing opportunities for recontextualisation through dialogue. The pedagogy reflects a dialogical approach and supports the development of post critical belief.

Catholic Theological College Melbourne, University of Divinity (CTC), in discussion with the CECV ECSI Steering Committee, sponsored research into Recontextualising Pedagogy in RE through a series of seminars (2016-17) which invited interest from Victorian higher education providers, Catholic Education Offices and school leaders to identify key research directions to support the ECSI implementation in Victoria, in particular to explore more deeply the work of Didier Pollefeyt and Jan Bouwens around Recontextualising Pedagogy for the Australian context. This led to the formation of a research committee with representatives from the four dioceses of Victoria, from the Education Offices of Sandhurst, Ballarat, Sale and Melbourne. The research team steering committee comprised Dr. Rina Madden (CTC Project Officer), Dr. Gina Bernasconi (Ballarat Education Officer: ECSI), Bernadette Tolan (Ballarat Education Officer: Secondary Religious Education), Dr. Geraldine Larkins rsj (Sandhurst Deputy Director: Catholic Mission and Identity), Anne Taylor (Sale Education Officer: Catholic Identity and Religious Education F-12), Paul Fumei (Melbourne Education Officer: Catholic Identity), Dr. Jim D'Orsa (Broken Bay Institute, Consultant). In choosing a particular research project, the research team wished to explore the Victorian ECSI data (Pollefeyt and Bouwens, 2014 p. 103-269 and Aggregated ECSI data 2011-2018) which indicated that Catholic schools had difficulty making the shift from the predominant Christian Values Education approaches to a recontextualising approach in RE (Pollefeyt & Bouwens 2014 p. 190). This project sheds light on some of the factors that impact making that shift, in particular the importance of a system approach to expertly facilitating ongoing collegial dialogue with teachers that engages them in theological and pedagogical recontextualisation.

The report which follows begins by exploring some current research around recontextualisation in the field of education and religion. The project methodology is then presented and the data discussed.

### **Recontextualisation, constructivism and hermeneutics**

This project explores recontextualisation in its theological and psychological dimensions as they pertain to RE and touches on epistemological and sociological dimensions. The project design is grounded in 3 assumptions about learning that are common in a constructivist approach to learning and teaching: knowledge is contextual; understanding is constructed through interpreting multiple perspectives - most

often in dialogue; making meaning is a process of returning to a new sense of self in light of new understanding. These assumptions are explored below.

British sociologist and educationalist Basil Bernstein is a primary source in the literature around recontextualisation in an educational context. In his work on the structuring of pedagogical discourse, he finds that pedagogic discourse is a “recontextualizing principle which selectively appropriates, relocates, refocuses, and relates other discourses to constitute its own order and orderings” (Bernstein, 1990 p. 184). Bernstein focuses attention on knowledge and its interrelationship with context in making meaning. In a recent article, Michael Krzyzanowski analyses Bernstein’s concept of recontextualisation noting that Bernstein distinguishes between three types of related contexts of recontextualisation: “the primary one (the source context of production of discourse), secondary one (the target context of reproduction of discourse) and the recontextualising context (the context encompassing the process between the source production and target reproduction, the context through which the relocation and reordering of discourse take place).” (2016 p. 314). In this understanding, recontextualisation is a dialogical process that appropriates knowledge from one context by relating it to another context for the purpose of learning and understanding, making meaning in a very personal way.

Since the advent of Vygotsky’s research in the 1930’s (1978), educational reforms show a gradual shift from transmission to constructivist approaches in teaching and learning (Jonassen & Rohr-Murphy, 1999). Constructivist approaches place teachers in a new educational context that is more dynamic and engages learners as active agents in conscious processes of meaning making. This asks them to reevaluate their role from curriculum implementers which can focus mainly on the reproduction phase of pedagogical discourse as described by Bernstein to curriculum designers which asks teachers to engage in recontextualising processes. Macdonald, Hunter and Tinning in a Brisbane research project in 2007 explored teacher curriculum design through the lens of Bernsteins’ three phases of pedagogical discourse. They found that when teachers were asked to create rich tasks which required them to engage in the process of recontextualising primary knowledge, “the knowledge construction process of teachers in their curriculum-making most likely will not engage with the primary field but rather draw upon popular knowledge, resulting in misinformed or 'incorrect' content and concepts being taught.” (Macdonald, Hunter & Tinning, 2007 p. 123). In the field of religious education a similar experience of teacher curriculum making is evidenced by the ECSI data around the popularity of the Christian Values Education approach in RE (Pollefeyt & Bouwens, 2014 ) which eschews deep engagement with the primary fields of scripture and theology to draw on general knowledge and values to correlate the Christian Tradition with contemporary culture. In our research we wanted to investigate how to structure and facilitate dialogue processes that would engage teachers in recontextualising - supporting them to reach into the primary field of knowledge of religious traditions as well as engaging them in the present day pluralised context through which the primary text or concept is re-ordered and relocated. However, such a dialogue process is not simply about knowledge and its recontextualisation. The work of Professor Pollefeyt indicates this clearly as demonstrated below.

Didier Pollefeyt at a public lecture in Melbourne in 2017, described five complex criteria to recognise genuine recontextualisation:

1. Formal movement: text placed in a new context receives new plausibility and meaning
2. There is a Catholic religious component
3. There is a contextual component, referring to present-day culture
4. There is an interaction resulting in a fusion of Catholic and contextual components
5. It evokes existential transformation that invites revelation

These criteria describe a theological, psychological dimension to the recontextualising process as it pertains to RE. Pollefeyt's criteria are descriptive and interconnected rather than an ordered set of steps. Criteria 2 and 3 can both relate to Bernstein's production phase, while Criterion 1 is more loosely associated with Bernstein's reproduction phase. Criteria 4 and 5 describe in theological language Bernstein's recontextualising phase taking it into the space of identity formation. In particular the fifth movement is reflective of the transformative power of dialogue which, from a faith perspective, speaks into an understanding of the human person as a "fragile hermeneutic space" (Pollefeyt, 2008) that is uniquely open to the Transcendent. These criteria personalise the recontextualising process, changing the focus from knowledge and its production, appropriation and reproduction to the person of the learner as undergoing recontextualisation within themselves as a member of a living faith tradition. Criterion 5 describes a revelatory process where both the knowledge understood and the learner as a self-aware meaning-maker and narrative subject (Ricouer, 1998) are transformed and opened to God's in-breaking in the recontextualising process. Hence an interconnection between knowledge formation and identity formation is critical to the process of recontextualisation. How Pollefeyt's complex five criteria are interpreted and developed in practice in the Catholic school context is illuminated by the research data.

A focus on identity formation as integral to RE calls for a shift in RE and faith formation from a pedagogy of *transmission* to a pedagogy of *appropriation* (Lombaerts, 2000). A hermeneutics of appropriation brings together a commitment to student agency in learning and a post-critical, hermeneutical approach in religious learning in the contemporary context. In the words of Leuven academic Annemie Dillen: "The hermeneutical approach gives attention to the gap as well as the bridge between experience and tradition and it focuses on the multidimensional ways in which both experience and tradition may be interpreted" (2008 p. 377). This approach to religious education has radically changed the focus of the teacher's role from one of knowledge transmission, to one which recontextualises - enabling meaning-making and critical thinking, facilitating and provoking dialogue and accompanying students as they construct their identity. For Pollefeyt the role of a recontextualising teacher is described as witness, specialist and moderator (WSM) (Pollefeyt, 2008). The teacher is critical in creating the conditions for learning in the classroom (Loughran, 2010) (Hattie & Yates, 2014) and this is recognised in Pollefeyt's threefold WSM model. However, this model asks Catholic Education Offices to move beyond a focus on renewing the RE curriculum and resources which may still position teachers as curriculum and resource implementers. It raises a question which this research project begins to illuminate: How might a system best support teachers to understand their role as facilitators of recontextualising dialogue in religious

education? The project demonstrates that there is a connection between system leader reflexive praxis and understanding of recontextualisation and teacher learning around recontextualisation.

### **Systemness**

This project aims to explore recontextualisation as a process of pedagogical discourse. This is a discourse or dialogue that engages the learner in an act of recontextualising that evokes transformation, the creation of something new, in terms of knowledge and personal identity and faith. The learner in this project is not only the student, but also the teacher who interfaces with students and the system leader who facilitates the dialogue. It is the relationship between the three types of learner that this project examines in the recontextualisation process and understands as systemness. Such an understanding of systemness grows out of the complexity described by Lemke & Sabelli (2008):

... any focal pedagogical 'innovation' introduced into a tightly constrained school system is in fact a series of embedded innovations at levels above and below the focal intervention, and strategies for all levels have to be considered coherently (p. 122).

Indeed, in this perspective there are no independent interventions: proposed changes at the classroom level have implications at school and district levels (e.g. for teacher development, parental expectations, school resources, accountability, and so on) and need to be supported by related interventions across multiple levels (p. 128).

Any initiative must take into account the interconnected and complex nature of system change and allow a clear and long term intervention across all levels of learning at the same time. The research team believes that Catholic education systems have an urgent need to better understand how they might facilitate teacher learning around recontextualisation and has a firm belief that the complexity of recontextualisation can best be understood through being engaged in the process. The interlinked nature of the learner and the thing learned in the process of recontextualisation means that learning about recontextualisation can best be done in the doing, with an openness to learning concurrently about the interconnected nature of leader learning, teacher learning and student learning. It was important as researchers to acknowledge this belief and allow it to be bracketed (Bednall, 2006) while also acknowledging that the design of the project intentionally presented an opportunity to observe the interconnected nature of system learning. A focus on system leader learning is a challenge in itself as system leaders are rarely positioned as learners. The methodology described below challenged the Catholic Education Offices involved to consider different ways of working with schools. One of the research team members reflected:

The system was challenged by the way this project described how the Office was to engage with teachers. Prior to this project, working with teachers in RE involved either the Office having something 'done' for them or the meeting resulted in something being 'produced' that could be used in the class. This project required a way of working with teachers which was an ongoing process that required time and commitment from both the teachers and the school leadership.

## Methodology

This research project inquires into:

- System leadership practices that enhance teacher self-understanding around personal and professional identity formation and recontextualisation in RE
- Teacher practices that enhance student agency, meaning making and critical thinking within classroom-based RE (as indicators of a recontextualising approach)
- Practices, dispositions and conditions that illuminate the 5 movements of recontextualisation as put forward by Professor Didier Pollefeyt (2017)

The project received HREC approval (2018) from the University of Divinity for a qualitative research approach which used teacher, leader and student questionnaires to elicit teacher understandings around recontextualisation and descriptions of teacher practice as well as student learning experiences in RE. These questionnaires were re-issued at the end of the 18 month period to enable reflection on any changes in practice.

The project used an Action Research Cycle (ARC) (Timperley, 2007). ARC methodology follows a cycle of collegially reflecting on evidence, designing action, taking action and reflecting on data from the new action taken. This cycle is repeated and ongoing, creating deeper self-awareness in reflection and more targeted action as the cycles continue. In this project the initial evidence for reflection was student data from questionnaires which asked students open-ended questions about their learning in RE such as “What’s learning like in RE around here?” and “How does RE help you make sense of the world?”

In accordance with an ARC approach, termly meetings with teachers in the project were facilitated by system leaders. In these meetings they together reflected on and analysed student questionnaires and learning evidence in light of understandings of recontextualisation and collaboratively designed student learning opportunities that refined and extended their practice in RE. Understanding student identity formation as the locus and focus of learning in RE is an important shift to a hermeneutical recontextualising approach and the project design ensured that this was the first step in setting up dialogue with teachers. Teacher professional dialogue at its most powerful includes the voices of the teacher’s own experience, that of colleagues, that of students and a theoretical perspective (Brookfield, 2017). After the initial reflection on student questionnaire responses, it was decided in all of the research sites to use Pollefeyt’s five criteria for recontextualisation (above) as the theoretical perspective in the dialogue. In four sites, examples of provocations or images which demonstrated theological recontextualisation particularly using artworks were also given, although this was not part of the original methodology intended in ARC. The role of the system leader was to negotiate, structure and facilitate the dialogue sessions and observe and analyse teacher practice, thinking and language around recontextualisation. In practice the system leaders in the project were of varying levels of leadership and were not all able to devote the time required to the school face to face interaction. In one diocese this role was delegated to religious education school officers which meant that they were not engaged in self-reflection and reflecting on data with the project team in the connected learning approach built into the project design. This team reflection and dialogue proved to be a vital element of the project.

Each diocesan leader invited a primary and secondary school to participate in the project with eight schools initially invited. Only one secondary school remained in the project for the duration, while another two remained without fully committing to the research. The other secondary school declined the invitation. The minimal involvement of secondary schools raises questions and concerns, however at this stage we can only suggest it bears further investigation. The data therefore reflects the experiences of four primary schools and one secondary school. The school leaders asked for teacher volunteers who were interested in contributing to the research. In all, 5 schools, 6 system leaders and 19 teachers were involved. While the student questionnaire data was the initial basis for opening an evidence-based discussion around learning in RE at each school site, the student data and student learning artefacts did not form part of the final data analysis in the project. Due to the challenge of different students engaging for different lengths of time over the 18 - 24 months of the project and the advent of COVID lockdown restrictions, some research sites did not gather final student questionnaire data. There was little significant movement noted from the student exit questionnaires that were collected. This may indicate the need for a recontextualising approach to be embedded over time in a systematic way that impacts the culture of a whole school for it to make a difference for students.

### **Data analysis**

The data analysis was aligned with an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach which seeks to make sense of the experiences of a small sample of participants (Smith 2008; Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009). IPA also recognises the situated and contextualised nature of data gathering and analysis and the role of the researcher as implicit in the research, which the research team paid attention to in termly meetings. These sessions included the use of self-reflective processes and dialogue to become more aware of our own stances as leaders of learning and the differences between our systems and their approaches to recontextualisation. Towards the end of the project all the teachers were asked to reflect on their learning throughout the project using a 'bridge exercise': "I used to think...now I think." Together with the data from the exit questionnaires and the observational data from each of the teacher dialogue sessions, we were able to identify themes through using both a descriptive and an interpretative approach to create an integration of those contents that were apparent - such as clear changes in teacher language and use of new concepts and those that were latent in the dialogue hinting at meanings that were reflective of core transformations - such as changes in dispositions or changes in what teachers were noticing about themselves or students. The data also included the team members' reflections on the role of system leader and the variety of stances and self-understandings that had functioned in the project, some of which indicated a hesitation to move into the space of 'leader as learner.'

### **The Contextual nature of dialogue**

This project understands dialogue as a process which reveals and enables transformation. In this it builds not only on a theological understanding of dialogue which grows out of the Second Vatican Council and the understanding of the dialogical nature of the Christian God (Dei Verbum 2, 8), but also further explores the pedagogical nature of dialogue in the process of recontextualisation. The very



contextual nature of dialogue means that each instance of dialogue cannot be scripted, nor the outcome predicted. As a research team, we became aware over time that this project's outcomes would be conditional on the contexts of each school setting: the personalities, experiences and school cultures of each research site. Each system leader needed to be responsive to these different contexts and facilitate the dialogue as generated by the teachers and by the student learning that teachers were bringing to the table. One system leader reflected on the importance of context:

A key to the success of this project was the desire to journey with the school, teachers and leaders. One of the five steps of recontextualising is addressing the context and this is what we had to do here. We had to address the context of the schools, teachers and leaders and work from that point. We had to 'do' what we wanted the teachers to 'do'. My learning is that this is a process to be experienced rather than something 'taught'.

The authenticity of the recontextualising dialogue was found to be dependent on the ability of the system leader to be self-reflective and attentive to their own stance, holding at the forefront an agenda of being at the service of the learning of the teachers. Teachers were able to respond to system leaders as authentic and credible when leaders engaged them in dialogue that developed and deepened theological understandings and supported them to realise their WSM role in RE. The themes identified reflect the diverse foci of the dialogue that emerged from the diverse system leader stances and teacher experiences in each of the research sites. These themes were evident across all the research sites to some extent and each theme presents only one aspect of the total story in each research site. The themes emerged from the language used in the teacher reflections and system leader observations, which noted the frequency of use of phrases and their ascribed meanings in the context, and identified new concepts named. The results are presented in the following 5 themes which identify essential conditions for professional learning around recontextualisation:

1. Collaboration in openness and trust for personal and professional transformation
2. Positioning teachers and students as researchers and dialogue partners: exploring the primary context
3. Creating time for dialogue to address the 'fear factor'
4. Focusing on learner agency
5. Grappling with big ideas in a 'safe space'

## **Discussion of Results**

Aware that this qualitative research project depends largely on the research team's interpretations of teacher reflections and observations, our research aims served as a guiding principle to decide on how to organise the results. In each research site, teacher and system leader reflections and observations were highlighted that illuminated: a) system leadership practices and understandings that enhance teacher self-understanding; b) teacher practices and understandings that enhance student agency, meaning making and critical thinking; and c) understandings, practices, dispositions and conditions that illuminate the 5 criteria of recontextualisation. Each of the themes below are discussed in that order.

## **Theme 1: Collaboration in openness and trust for personal and professional transformation**

In this research site, two system leaders were involved in facilitating the project and were engaged in the dialogue sessions with two teams of teachers from different levels - a team of four and a team of three over two years, meeting once a term. The system leaders intentionally focused on building relationships of trust with the teams and made time outside of the set meetings to make contact through email and phone conversations. The system leader understanding of recontextualisation that explicitly made a difference here related to Criterion 5.

An important finding of the project was the critical role of school leadership in creating the conditions for teacher learning to occur. A system leader reflected:

...it's important to have the support of school Leadership for the research, including: organisational adjustments to provide regular facilitation time for the learning and teaching - if only in small blocks with small steps; to dialogue about their learning with the teachers involved; to be genuinely interested and engaged; to co-partner a plan for continuing and developing the learning across the school.

Having negotiated the time and space to work into, in this setting the team allowed the student questionnaire data to raise questions for the teachers about the experience of learning in religious education in their classes. This opened dialogue that went to the heart of the big questions around pedagogy: why do we do what we do in religious education? The system leader reflected: "teams needed time and trust to volunteer that they didn't always understand what they were supposed to be teaching." Creating conditions of trust and openness that allow teachers to be honest is vital for entering into dialogue. The system leaders intentionally started from a disposition of respect for teachers' diverse faith experiences and a non-judgmental attitude. Through modelling vulnerability, system leaders demonstrated they were in the learning with the teachers: "We deliberately did not step in, dictate, judge or correct but rather we worked hard to create trust within the teams so that the teachers could be honest and open about their own classroom practice and their own personal journey." System leaders were aware of being responsive to both the personal faith dimension and the professional dimensions of the teachers which were being challenged and explored within the same dialogue. It required listening and questioning skills on the part of leaders to maintain the focus on teacher self-understanding, noting that: "teams required deeper questioning to bring them to a more informed level of self-awareness both personally and professionally." The system leader stance was one that kept dialogue open and explorative: "We didn't 'correct' teachers when they were sharing but rather, we asked clarifying questions. We kept reinforcing that we were on this journey with the teachers and we had no 'right answer' which teachers had to work towards." This approach invited teachers to focus on personal transformation with the result that in one case a teacher who prior to involvement in the project was only marginally involved in religious education, confidently declared: "I am a leader of the future, I see what I can do in this (religious) space."

The focus on building relationships of trust through respecting teacher contributions, deep listening and using open-ended questions to seek clarity led to system leaders being genuine contributors and collaborators in the dialogue. System leaders took on the role of noticing new language and concepts emerging in the dialogue and through affirmations highlighting new learning. They provided a theoretical perspective through insightful questioning that enabled the teachers to realise their potential as witnesses, moderators and experts. Through experiencing these conditions, teacher shifts in self-understanding indicated a move towards a more open and responsive approach in the classroom which also opened up the space for students: "I used to think that I had to have all of the answers, and now I think it's okay to question, wonder, ponder, challenge together as a community of inquirers." This indicates a shift away from the traditional approach of teaching as knowledge transmission to understanding of self as learner and colleagues as contributors to my learning. The following teacher reflection indicates new skills have been learned that enable teacher confidence in stepping into a more dialogical space and an appreciation of the student as a hermeneutical being: "I used to think that kids just had to learn about the tradition and happily accept what it says. I now feel more comfortable to open up discussion and reflection about what it means to them or what further questions it raises for them. This is a work in progress." This teacher quote also reflects new-found confidence to break open the particularity of the tradition with students and is impressed by their insights: "I used to think some theological concepts like trinity and communion of saints were too big and hard for students to engage in and tricky to unpack and now I think students will unpack them at their own level - obviously to a great depth." A greater appreciation of students' ability is also reflected in a new approach to learning: "The starting point to learning is now through the child's eyes."

The understanding of recontextualisation as a concept also grew through the experience of dialogue as indicated in this teacher quote: "I used to think that recontextualisation was just about how the tradition can speak to the context, I now think it is also important to focus on how the context can speak to the tradition." This quote also relates strongly to Criterion 4 and Pollefeyt's reference to a "fusion of Catholic and contextual components." The reciprocal nature of this fusion is not often remarked on, but is evident in this teachers' understanding.

This theme illuminates Criterion 5 which talks about existential transformation, inviting revelation. In this context, conditions were created that allowed a safe space to open existential questions around: why we do what we do, how and what students learn and should learn, what's important about faith, and what do I believe. Increased self awareness is evident in the teacher quotes resulting in increased confidence to enter a dynamic dialogue space with students, a preparedness to embark on learning that engages critical thinking or problematises both the Catholic tradition and today's culture to raise big questions that go to the heart of life and faith and invite revelation. The system leader reflected: "It was wonderful to see that revelatory moment - where some permanent penny drops in their lives and to experience the joyful ripples for the whole school." This school has opted to continue learning with the system leaders and to expand the dialogical professional learning approach across all levels.

## **Theme 2: Positioning teachers and students as researchers and dialogue partners: exploring the primary context**

In this school context one system leader, supported by two others, worked with two teachers and the Religious Education Leader (REL). Though the staff involved were very keen, this was a disrupted experience with a shorter time frame due to the delay in completing the initial surveys, moving classrooms due to building works, changes of staff towards the end of the project, and the difficulty of maintaining momentum with the small team involved. However, despite these hurdles, system leader and teacher reflections indicated shifts in approaches in religious education. The system leader understanding of recontextualisation that explicitly made a difference here related to Criterion 2: There is a Catholic religious component.

The system leader indicated her belief that: “the discussion itself is worthy of the time.” She noted: “A big learning for me was the enthusiasm and excitement that I saw grow in the teachers as they saw themselves as co-learners in this space and invited their students to have an authentic voice in their own learning; to not be fearful of making a mistake or not knowing the ‘right’ answer but to be comfortable in that ‘liminal space’.” After analysing teachers’ questionnaires she commented: “Initially, recontextualisation was seen as a product, something that the teacher had to do for the students in order to connect the present to the past... That is certainly true, but what is missing is providing the opportunity for students to make their own meaning from the experiences they have had and for the teacher to be comfortable that they aren’t in control of whether recontextualisation will, or won’t, happen.” Through the experience of dialogue focused on designing rich learning to meet students’ needs in religious education and through the impact of regional off-site professional learning around interpreting scripture, teachers took on the role of learner, questioner and researcher, inspired by the students, as indicated in this teacher reflection: “Students started taking initiative in finding out. Teachers were learning with and through the kids. Teachers would do their own research so they could assist students.” And again: “Importance of teachers having to research adds more to their repertoire and develops confidence.” The system leader also reflected on the importance of seeking greater knowledge of not only the field of theology but also “...of knowing the students - and the focus on pre-assessment became more important. Rather than having the pre-assessment at the start of the learning sequence, it is more relevant to pre-assess before planning so the learning can target the needs of the students.”

Teachers recognised the importance of giving students agency in their own learning and opportunity to research deeply into the primary field of knowledge in order to be able to recontextualise. Recognition that through dialogue such recontextualisation occurs was noted by one teacher:

Having broader inquiry questions increased opportunities for discussion. Stimulated more questioning from the students. Investigation = engagement. Provide time for students to discuss and engage with the Inquiry question. That was the shift. Instead of giving time to write – that’s not important – so I typed up and *gave the students time to talk instead of wasting that time writing.*

The italicized is a remarkable phrase which indicates a radical shift in pedagogy. The recognition that the learning happens in the talking is one that was experienced in the dialogue sessions with the system

leader. The system leader initiated dialogue that raised awareness of teachers' world-views and the world views of the students from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds present in the school. The impact of this dialogue is reflected in this teacher comment: "We spoke about the pedagogy of RE. What was it? Previously, all was given to you - units of work - now questioning is encouraged and the presumption of 'we' has shifted." Another teacher comment indicated the positive effect of providing opportunity for professional dialogue:

We were given the opportunity to discuss our thinking and devote time to analysing the way we teach and the intentions of our teaching. Having 2 teachers working together to support and grow ideas (worked well). EBI (even better if) the whole level was involved.

Another comment indicates the power of student feedback for teachers as a source of professional reflection and dialogue: "Compared initial to final student surveys. This provided powerful information in moving forward. Made us more aware of what we do...which previously could be described as indoctrinating. Now it's more open and dialogical." Overall in this research site there was a strong movement towards teachers understanding themselves as learners who can learn with and from their students: "With support from the REL, the other teacher in the project and the students, I have come to love teaching RE. I'm not afraid of asking questions anymore. Nothing is a dumb question. We're learning together." They were impressed by the power of professional dialogue to open a hermeneutical space which explored questions of religious understanding alongside approaches to student learning needs and this resulted in the group recommending the school adopt a commitment to collaborative planning that included the voice of the student. The reciprocity of student and teacher learning is again highlighted in this teacher comment: "Student responses and engagement gave me a purpose to continue my inquiry." When asked if anything surprised them coming out of this project one of the teachers responded: "...how interested I became in teaching Religion and furthering my own knowledge; how the students became more engaged and sought to research; that students were asking more thought provoking, in depth questions – more mature."

These reflections indicate that the teachers have moved into a space of recontextualisation with students, where they are aware of the need to engage authentically and in a researchful way with the field of knowledge - the primary sources such as scripture - in order to engage it in a new context that raises deep questions with students and piques curiosity and further research. They are also recognising that these religious questions are raised by the students themselves and that students are energised by engaging with the primary sources of theology and scripture. It indicates that teachers are beginning to more fully understand the implications of Criterion 2: 'There is a Catholic religious component.' If there is to be a truly recontextualising movement as described in Criterion 1 that allows the religious content to be placed in a new context to receive new plausibility and meaning with students, then the original context of the Catholic component must be explored deeply so it can be placed authentically in a new context.

### **Theme 3: Creating time for dialogue to address the 'fear factor'**

In this research site one system leader worked with 2 teachers over the course of one year. The approach taken was to begin with discussion of student and teacher surveys, looking at what they were already doing in Religious Education and unpacking an understanding of recontextualisation based on the regions' approach to professional learning in religious education, as articulated by the system leader involved:

Approaches to creating space of recontextualisation begin with an understanding of what it is and why it's important. Examples, pictures and stories really help. There are lots of examples of art, however this is not always easily connectable with everyone and whilst I have used these I have found other examples work very well. In working with the group last year, we found looking at approaches or strategies that didn't work or land just as helpful as working with examples that did. In terms of a school setting, staff do have fears of getting it wrong, so walking with staff, sharing stories and allowing them to see changes in students responses is very powerful.

By beginning at the conceptual or theoretical level, the focus of the professional learning in this research site may have positioned recontextualisation as a product, with particular properties that rule it in or out as 'a recontextualisation'. Through engaging with this project, the system leader has made a shift in understanding:

Reflecting on this project, I was always aware that recontextualisation was a concept that was heavily connected to data and understanding and interpreting this data. My biggest takeaway from this work has been that whilst I still hold these beliefs as true, Recontextualisation is most effective when created and formed in a community where all members or participants are engaged in the process.

Here we can see the language move towards a process orientation that the leader goes on to connect with other sound pedagogical approaches that "motivate communities to learn, think, engage and implement processes that allow recontextualisation to emerge." A teacher response reflecting on project learning indicated qualified value in the approach: "Throughout the year I have wondered whether staff think that recontextualisation means looking at pictures and relating them to our own lives. These pictures are amazing and truly get you thinking but it seems that we haven't dug any deeper into what it actually means." Such a reflection confirms the importance of making the immediate school context, particularly student voice, the starting point of dialogue. Reflection from the system leader echoes this learning. 'We need to be mindful of allowing the participants to question, wonder and experience the content in connection with their own context.' If recontextualising dialogue is not embedded in the local context and invites analysis of that context and its issues, it may miss the mark and make no connection. This research site highlights the importance of Criterion 3: "There is a contextual component."

By the end of the project teachers named a variety of learning and teaching strategies, among them offering ways for students to "respond" and "teacher led discussion," indicating a small movement away from the Christian Values Education approach (Pollefeyt & Bouwens, 2014) which had been taking place prior. The teacher participants in the project shared the learning journey with their colleagues who

didn't nominate to be in the research project and the wider staff. One reflection from a teacher in the project indicated insight into a fearful attitude amongst non-participating staff which commonly leads to a Christian Values Education approach:

I still believe that some staff (not in the project) are frightened that they are going to teach the wrong thing or that children are going to ask tricky questions that they can't answer. It's safer for some to only teach the 'surface stuff' rather than risk getting into deep discussions that we may not (and don't) have all the answers to.

As the project progressed teachers indicated they valued the creation of dialogue processes. A teacher response reflecting on the project learning noted the change in students: "As the year goes on our students become better at forming their own wonderings, contributing to discussions and questioning. They are interested in finding the relevance of the messages for today." The teachers were able to see the value in collaborative planning in the course of the project, making it a recommendation to school leadership that it be implemented across the school. One of the teachers observed in students more depth in discussions and more curiosity: "It has been good to watch students grow in terms of their wonderings and the questions they have been posing. The discussions have been more challenging, yet richer and more exciting." From the way this is expressed the challenge is one felt by the teacher and indicates that a greater responsiveness to students as learners has mitigated the 'fear factor' and opened up new possibilities for this teacher in religious education. This is an important insight that can become a catalyst in this research site for continued learning around recontextualisation.

In relation to the 5 criteria, this experience offers up a question around how literally we understand the first criterion: "Formal movement: text placed in a new context receives new plausibility and meaning." This criterion begs the questions: Who chooses the text? Who does the work of recontextualisation? and How is the local context acknowledged and situated in the dialogue? It is important that this criterion is interpreted within a relational and dynamic context (Criterion 3) where each is invited into the recontextualising process and feels empowered to have, in the words of the teacher above, 'challenging, exciting' discussions with peers and students overcoming fears of 'tricky questions.'

#### **Theme 4: Focusing on learner agency**

In this research site the system leader worked with a team of 4 teachers over eighteen months, meeting regularly and conversing (by phone and email) often. This was however interrupted for a semester. Final teacher questionnaire data was not collected, but the 'bridge reflection' exercise provided insights into teacher thinking. The system leader began the project by presenting to staff around the theory and concepts of recontextualisation and the regional pedagogical approach. The system leader was positioned as giving advice, articulating core principles and providing examples of 'recontextualising questions' or recontextualisation in artwork, reflecting an understanding of recontextualisation related to Criterion 1, as a formal movement of text in a new context.

The project methodology of unpacking student data with teachers was also attended to and provided an impetus for change as indicated by this reflection from the school leader:

Firstly the opportunity to get some evidence of where students, teachers and leaders are at regarding pedagogy was brilliant...The surveys with students encouraged listening more and the courage to change. The project provided an excuse and the impetus to do something different.

The frequent opportunities to engage in critical dialogue around pedagogy and planning for a recontextualising approach allowed teachers to refine their thinking around the pedagogical choices they make in the classroom, giving school leaders incentive to continue to structure opportunities for collegial planning and dialogue. The system leader observed: "Most of them reviewed their teaching practice including their questioning techniques. The emphasis on content diminished in favour of a focus on creating dialogical forums in which all students could contribute....data clearly shows that student engagement...improved significantly."

In their bridge reflections all four teachers noted a shift in thinking towards being more open, flexible and responsive to students through dialogue. The following quote indicates recognition and appreciation of the diversity that is present in the classroom and a more open ended approach that engaging in dialogue invites:

The outcome of a recontextualising moment will vary greatly depending on the worldview of the student and how they interpret the language, meaning and context. Initially, it felt like a failure when students came to a different understanding than the one I was expecting, but in time I have come to celebrate that. It leads to great dialogue in the classroom and a sharing of perspectives.

This calls for a teacher to be comfortable to sit with complexity, leave questions open and invite multiple perspectives as indicated in the following teacher reflection:

I used to think that as teachers we would have to find the ways to connect the learning focus directly with students' lives. Now I think that if a learning focus is unpacked in a generally relatable way...then the students themselves can recontextualise it in a way that is deeply personal to themselves...This really places the teacher in a position that guides and facilitates, but does not give the answer.

Both of these quotes demonstrate the teachers are giving students greater voice and responsibility in their learning. They are understanding more deeply the need for the work of recontextualisation to be located in the personal process of grappling with knowledge placed in a new context to achieve relevance, as in Criterion 1: 'text placed in a new context receives new plausibility and meaning.' They are also coming to terms with what this demands of them in their role, to step away from making meaning for students and to involve students in the meaning making process themselves.

In this research site the system leader has described teacher dialogue sessions as affording, amongst other things, "the opportunity to clarify Church teaching and to agree on the core doctrinal elements which are to be the focus of the unit." This approach acknowledges in the leaders' words that "the original context of the Catholic component must be understood before it can be placed in the new context." It is evident however, that the teachers' focus has been a pedagogical one, to make religious education relevant and engaging for students. The evidence indicates they have experienced success in this area by listening and responding to students and giving them opportunities for questioning and



dialogue. We would argue that teacher professional dialogue which aims to evoke existential transformation should intentionally raise awareness of this purpose and support a fusion of text and new context, empowering both students and teachers to create new meaning and new expressions of the faith tradition.

### **Theme 5: Grappling with big ideas in a 'safe space'**

In this research site one system leader facilitated learning with a team of 4 teachers. They met each term over two years in alignment with the ARC methodology. In addition, the system leader was given the opportunity to facilitate whole staff learning three times a year. The focus of the staff learning was to introduce and then to expand on an understanding of provocations as the means by which learners, both teachers and students, might engage with the big ideas of an inquiry. The use of many and diverse provocations (film, the written word, art, music and so on) were recognised as powerful entry points for inquiry. Provocations were used to present multiple interpretations of the same reality, of the big ideas, and open up for meaning making as a crucial step towards recontextualisation. With this focus on professional learning, the research cohort in their sessions with the system leader continued grappling with provocations. It was only through their own grappling with big ideas that they were able to present the same or different provocations to students in ways that opened up further inquiry and student dialogue in a 'safe place'.

The long established school professional learning culture regularly made time for teacher substantive collegial dialogue and critical self-reflection in ways that were invitational, built trusted 'safe' places and were conducted as intrinsic to professional growth. Teachers were attuned to unpacking conditions for learning as an ongoing intentional development of a constructivist/ hermeneutical learning culture and this research was able to build on these conditions.

The system leader believed strongly that "provocations are fundamental to the process of recontextualisation, moving learners from exploring perspectives to making meaning and forming new understandings." The leader observed that through the use of provocations the teachers and subsequently the students "opened themselves to interruption and disruption made possible by the different perspectives presented." This indicated that the provocations themselves were chosen for their openness to multiple interpretations which invited dialogue and were aimed at transformation, reflecting an understanding of recontextualisation related to all criteria, but particularly highlighting Criterion 5. Starting from a well developed school based professional learning culture enabled the system leader to quickly engage teachers beyond reproduction of examples of recontextualisation into the challenging work of recontextualisation: "The use of provocations was expanded and most powerful when learners offered their own provocations for their peers' consideration."

Teacher reflections indicate a shift from 'teacher led discussion' in the classroom which only gave a few students a voice, to being more open ended as indicated in this teacher comment: "the use of provocations as 'hermeneutical knots' are essential for children to enhance/ challenge their faith understandings, rather than imparting beliefs or knowledge." This coincides with a new found

appreciation for student's ability to engage cognitively with profound concepts and deep questions revealed in this teacher reflection: "... now I think that it (the big question, concept) engages students to a much deeper level giving them the option to dissect their thinking." Another reflects: "...so it has been about trying to challenge myself in becoming and creating ways that engage the students without dumbing it down." And again: "We looked at a few (sample provocations) and we all had that initial, 'are we aiming too high! Are we challenging them too much? Evidence for this study shows ...that realistically, if we don't challenge them, am I doing enough?" Teachers indicate that their learning has also shed light on important conditions for learning: "Students need time to think about and reflect on deep questions and then need a safe space to share their thinking no matter what that might be." And: "they may need different conditions to fully flourish in this area (a new safe space)"

Teachers reflected on what enabled their shifts and identified two factors: Being involved in rich dialogue which challenged understanding and secondly reflecting on practice and experimenting with new ways to get students actively thinking and learning. Two of the fifteen teacher comments indicated that "being shown" or "providing real examples" enabled learning about recontextualisation. This would indicate that the use of examples were powerful only insofar as they provided the stimulus for dialogue, as evidenced in this research site, rather than simply being shown as a template to follow.

The evidence from this research site illuminates the first three criteria, highlighting the need to deeply engage with the historical context of the Catholic religious component. Teachers may be invited to deconstruct the formal movement of Criterion 1 as a provocation to promote powerful professional learning dialogue. However, it is evident that when teachers begin to involve themselves in exploring Criteria 2 and 3 in dialogue with students they begin to fully explore the formal movement: 'text placed in a new context receives new plausibility and meaning.' Evident in the teacher data is their awareness that the new plausibility and meaning must be constructed by the students for recontextualisation to have its most powerful transformative effect.

### **Summary of findings and recommendations in relation to the three aims:**

#### *System leader learning:*

In order to lead professional learning dialogue around recontextualisation at the local school context, system leaders need collegial dialogue experience at a system level to keep learning and upskilling in leading dialogue and self-reflection using such strategies as: paraphrasing, affirmations, noticing and naming new learning, asking clarifying questions, asking probing questions, asking open-ended questions, using dialogue protocols to set up conditions that elicit responses, invite engagement and develop new practice. This list names strategies that were found to be of most value in the project, however it should not be taken as definitive.

Most significantly the research found that system leader learning mirrors teacher learning and involves a shift in leader stance or disposition from rescuer or problem solver to one of co-learner. System leaders are rarely positioned as learners in their leadership role and may need support to shift to a new self-understanding and different ways of engaging with schools. A shift in system leader stance also involves

a shift in system thinking and practice from a focus on providing resources that are already 'recontextualised' such as RE curriculum documents and programs, to accompanying schools and teachers on a journey of ongoing learning into theological recontextualisation and dialogical pedagogy.

#### *Teacher learning:*

Using an ARC methodology, the project intentionally facilitated teacher self reflection on professional practice and dialogue about student learning in religious education in relation to the concept of recontextualisation. Reflecting on student responses to such questions as 'What's learning in RE like around here?' and 'What would you like to do more of in RE?' proved to be a catalyst for change as teachers began to engage with student voice in their context. In all research sites the concept of recontextualisation was explored in this way, while in others more explicit examples of recontextualisation were also provided for teachers. The evidence suggests that a focus on student learning experience in relation to the 5 criteria invited powerful professional dialogue that supported teachers to:

- become more attentive to knowledge as contextual, especially the Catholic religious component in the formal movement of recontextualisation
- notice and articulate their own attitudes, beliefs and questions about religion and faith, overcoming the 'fear factor'
- appreciate their students as contextual, hermeneutical beings and as agents of recontextualisation in their own right
- acknowledge the reciprocity of learning from and with students and their colleagues and the transformative impact this has

These understandings were reflected in their classroom teaching designs which used dialogue strategies, gave more time for student reflection and research and asked open-ended questions. Student data collected at the end of the research project did not indicate major shifts in their engagement in RE. The project team identified the need for a longer time frame to enable a whole school culture to embrace a recontextualising pedagogy approach involving teacher professional dialogue and collaborative planning across all levels of learning in order for it to impact student learning.

#### *The 5 criteria:*

The five criteria find their roots in Gadamer's philosophical work *Truth and Method* (1989), a study in the role of dialogue and interpretation in hermeneutics and human understanding. Our research has illuminated the 5 criteria in practice, identifying the first three criteria as the essential ingredients of recontextualisation, while the last two criteria describe the results. It was found that the first three criteria are performative and are able to be planned for and researched; intentionally engaging teachers in uncovering their own context, the context of the original text and becoming aware of themselves as actively recontextualising to make meaning. The final two criteria describe the hope and the aims of recontextualisation. They involve a focus on nurturing a stance of openness and self awareness. These

criteria cannot be planned for and involve a sense of 'letting go' and a willingness to step into the unknown. The following discusses each criteria in light of our research.

1. *Formal movement: text placed in a new context receives new plausibility and meaning.* This criterion takes seriously the nature of our own historical contingency (Owens 2014) and the call to move beyond it. The research team found this was most easily interpreted as a formula by teachers. In this description the passive voice describes an outcome which focuses attention on the product - a new plausibility for the text. In our research the role of the learner as active agent of recontextualisation has come to the fore and suggests a new emphasis. This formal movement might read: text (or concept, artwork, music etc.) as contextually situated is interpreted through dialogue to uncover the self in making new meaning and plausibility. In this description the attention is immediately drawn to the agency of the learner in recontextualisation and the importance of "finding the right approach to *both* texts and persons." (Owens 2014 p. 181).

2. *There is a Catholic religious component.* This criterion requires teachers to actively research the contextual nature of Church teaching, ritual, scripture and tradition. In our project, teachers discovered a new enjoyment and appreciation of the tradition as they researched more deeply and their learning provoked new ideas and questions, evoking recontextualisation. Through collegial discussion around the religious content of the lessons they were designing for students, they became more open in exploring their faith understandings. They also developed greater confidence to engage with the questions emerging from students and to explore with them the particularity of the Catholic tradition.

3. *There is a contextual component.* In our research it has been demonstrated that the contextual component can be both global and local. It is important to understand the cultural and school context as well as exploring the self understanding of the learner as a being in context. When teachers are offered time to examine their worldview it impacts how they apprehend and appropriate the theological concepts being explored and the pedagogical choices they make in the classroom. An important learning of this project is the power of dialogue to enable system leaders, teachers and students to recognise that it is within the lived experience of each in concrete time and space, and in community, that the context or horizon is identified. Uncovering the background beliefs which form the horizon is an important condition for understanding speech in dialogue (Vessey 2009). By locating recontextualisation within the local and personal, teachers became more confident to offer and name their beliefs, understanding and experience, mitigating the fear to engage in theological recontextualisation.

4. *There is an interaction resulting in a fusion of Catholic and contextual components.* In this project such a fusion was rarely identified and remains elusive; contributing factors can however be identified.

A fusion of horizons as referred to by German philosopher Gadamer (1989) entails two different world views coming together to create a new understanding or interpretation of the other. For Gadamer, "A horizon is not a rigid boundary but something that moves with one and invites one to advance further." (p. 245). Understanding one's own horizon, as discussed in Criterion 3, is an essential insight that comes with engaging in dialogue and the process of making meaning of text in a new context or of the other

dialogue partner. In this process we are “challenged ... to a process of growth to let ourselves be taken beyond our own particular starting-point.” (Owens 2014 p. 183). This process understands the person as already in a horizon or relationship with the field of knowledge. The relationship teachers have with the Church impacts their ability to actively engage in a dialogue which results in a fusion of Catholic and textual components. This relationship was revealed in the course of the research as mixed. Many of the teachers involved identified their uncertainty about what the Church actually teaches; some understood the tradition as an immutable repository of dogma, evidenced by comments such as: "I didn't know I was allowed to think that... interpret in that way..."; others had no historical perspective that enabled them to recognise the Church as an ongoing, living and changing tradition they belonged to; some saw the Church as external or irrelevant to themselves either as a faith tradition or an institution. Finally, the authenticity of the work of recontextualisation relies on genuine openness to calling our current interpretation into question (Owens 2014), a disposition that entails a willingness to examine our own relationship with and understanding of the mission of the Church. Theological recontextualisation is a future oriented process that expands the tradition as well as enriching the community that engages in it and has implications for a decentralised, listening Church called for by Pope Francis (Evangelii Gaudium 31).

Promoting a culture of dialogue that leads to a fusion of Catholic and contextual components takes dedicated time. The research at the various sites happened across 12 -18 months and in this time new understandings and self awareness emerged only gradually. System leaders noted that with more time evidence of a fusion of horizons may have been more pronounced.

5. *It evokes existential transformation that invites revelation.* As system leaders leading teacher dialogue, it was important to keep returning to this criterion in our self-reflections and discussions as the lens through which all the other criteria must be interpreted. This criterion goes to the heart of RE for our teachers and students, indeed for a Catholic education system. Without an explicit grappling with what it means to be part of a “living tradition of the whole Church” (Dei Verbum, 12) where revelation is alive and ongoing, the work of recontextualisation can be over-simplified and reduced to a focus on a product as in Criterion 1. Teacher conversations provided evidence of transformed self-understanding and in some cases, new appreciation for their faith. This in turn had implications for classroom pedagogy. An insight gained by teachers was that they could not manipulate Criterion 5 and cause it to happen for every or even any student. They found they had to become attuned to observing it in classroom dialogue opportunities and student reflections, writing or artworks. They had to accept that sometimes it would be hidden or absent. Teachers demonstrated a new respect for dialogue in the classroom as a process for profound learning and revelation for students, with all teachers in the research adapting their pedagogical decision-making in RE to reflect this.

## **Limitations**

There were three main limitations to this project:

The project design intentionally factored in self-reflection and dialogue opportunities for both system leaders and teachers. It was a challenge to negotiate adequate and consistent time for these processes at both the system and school levels.

Secondary schools are underrepresented in the data. This raises a question around secondary school involvement and how best the system may engage them in RE initiatives.

Student evidence reflected only a small shift towards engaging in recontextualisation. It would need a much longer project timeline and whole school approach to see the effects on students of teacher learning.

### **Conclusion and future research:**

In light of this research, recontextualisation can be described as communally seeking a way of thinking about, talking about and experiencing God in a context where certainties about God are broken apart and language about faith may be alien. Through building trust and welcoming all into respectful dialogue new meanings can be forged from the traditions of the past to explore a mature and complex faith and notice God in the world. It is above all dialogue that supports recontextualisation as a process of personal and professional transformation. Taking up a dialogue approach to professional learning in RE to enable recontextualisation challenges a system to consider how it intentionally positions itself in relation to the schools it serves. It has become evident that not only is it important to engage in recontextualising dialogue at the level of system leader and teacher, but at the executive level of the Catholic Education Offices if system-wide pedagogical change is to occur. This project has given insight into the importance of a hermeneutical approach to learning and the processes and skills of dialogue to be embedded at all levels of the system. The ECSI project has indicated the importance of moving away from a Christian Values Education approach in favour of a recontextualising approach. This project has given some insight into how that might be undertaken.

This research project is the first to explore Pollefeyt's 5 criteria for recontextualisation by situating them in the practical context of professional learning in schools. It is also the first study to focus on the interconnections of the processes and understandings of recontextualisation in RE between system leaders, teachers and students. This interconnectedness is shown to be a reciprocal learning relationship. Throughout the project, teacher reflections demonstrated the importance of listening to students and creating conditions that invite them to grapple with the big questions raised in a recontextualising approach. We have shown that when system leaders responded to teachers in the same way - inviting them to grapple with the big questions of faith and life, teachers were transformed and felt renewed energy in and appreciation of their religious understanding and professional practice and more confident to enter into theological recontextualising with students. We have identified that conditions for recontextualisation include: creating spaces of openness and trust for personal and professional transformation; positioning teachers and students as researchers and dialogue partners, creating time for dialogue to address the 'fear factor', focusing on learner agency, grappling with big ideas in a 'safe space'. However, a broader scale implementation of dialogic, recontextualising practices including greater secondary representation is needed to validate these findings. A longer term time line

and whole school uptake may be necessary to see the impact of recontextualising approaches in student learning.

Further questions opened by this research are:

- What might a system look like when it adopts a dialogue approach to connect learning across all levels?
- What are some new ways of thinking about system and school learning partnerships in RE, in particular with secondary schools?
- What challenges do students face when engaging in recontextualising dialogue?
- What role do school leaders play in creating conditions for recontextualising pedagogies?

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