

Article

Religious Education (RE) as a *Context*: The Subcultures That Shape Teacher's Work When Teaching This Subject in Australian Catholic Secondary Schools

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Abstract: Religious Education (RE) can be conceived of as a specific context within which secondary RE teachers from diverse backgrounds teach. This context gives rise to distinctive subject subcultures, characterised by a unique set of beliefs, norms, and practices that are shared by teachers who teach RE. Using micronarratives as a way to initiate further discussion and to distil some key points which can be elaborated upon, we illustrate some salient aspects of RE's subcultures. These include a subculture of ambiguity, boundary crossings and objects, and a confusion of purpose and terms. Knowledge of these may better assist schools—and Catholic Schools' Departments—to orient and support these teachers in their classroom practice.

Keywords: religious education (RE); school subjects as context; subject subcultures; RE teachers; Australian Catholic secondary schools



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1. Introduction

School subjects can be conceived of as specific contexts within which secondary teachers teach, and these contexts are socially constructed. In her work, Lave (1988) makes a useful distinction between arenas and settings in her description of context. Arenas are defined as the larger institutions, which, though socially constructed, possess a given set of features that both enable and constrain certain activities. A setting, on the other hand, is the individually constructed and represented version of the arena. The construct of setting enables an understanding as to why individuals can experience the same arena so differently. Teachers of a specific school subject, then, share a common arena for practice, though they may differ in the ways in which they interpret that subject.

In this paper, we argue that Religious Education (RE) can be conceived of as a specific context within which secondary RE teachers teach. We further contend that this context in which RE teachers teach gives rise to a number of distinctive subject subcultures, characterised by a unique set of beliefs, norms, and practices. Using micronarratives, we illustrate some salient aspects of RE's subcultures and make some provisional recommendations for practice. As far as we can discern, RE in Catholic secondary schools has not previously been explored as a context in which RE teachers teach, and the notion of subculture has not been applied to RE in Australian Catholic secondary schools.

1.1. Compelling Reasons for Exploring RE as a Context

The context of RE in Australian Catholic secondary schools warrants exploration due to its unique challenges and significance. RE exists at the intersection of pedagogy and faith formation, requiring teachers to navigate diverse student backgrounds, institutional expectations, and a secularised societal context. Rymarz and Cleary (2018) highlight the *Hymnus* 53. AHMA 1, 92. *Hymnus* 52. *Salutationes* BMV. AHMA 15, 71–72. critical role of RE in addressing shifts in societal religious identity and fostering critical religious literacy (see

also [Goldburg 2008](#)). However, little is known about how RE's subcultures shape teacher practices, particularly in Australian Catholic schools. This research addresses that gap by examining RE's context as a socially constructed arena where teachers' diverse beliefs, norms, and practices intersect.

1.2. Distinguishing Between Arena, Setting, and Context

Following [Lave \(1988\)](#), this study employs “arena”, “setting”, and “context” to conceptualise the RE teaching environment. The “arena” refers to the overarching framework of Catholic education in Australia, characterised by shared institutional goals and practices. The “setting” reflects the localised interpretations of these goals by individual schools, shaped by factors such as leadership and community demographics. The “context” encapsulates the interplay of these elements, focussing on how RE subcultures influence teacher identity and practice. For instance, RE's context in a metropolitan school may differ significantly from that in a rural school, given disparities in resources and staff expertise.

1.3. Subject Subcultures

From the perspective of teacher socialisation, school subjects are specific contexts within which secondary school teachers teach. These specific contexts can also be referred to as “arenas for practice” ([Grossman and Stodolsky 1995](#)), although, as noted above, individuals can experience the same arena in differently ways. Therefore, the features comprising various school subjects create particular implications for the nature of teaching within those subjects. School subjects possess different features, histories, and statuses that affect teachers' work ([Goodson 1985](#)) and result in the normative views of particular subjects that are shared by those teachers who teach them. The shared norms and beliefs about the subject matter that bind teachers together in terms of practice, curricular autonomy, and coordination may be characterised as subcultures ([Ball and Lacey 1984](#); [Stodolsky 1993](#); [Grossman and Stodolsky 1995](#)).

While the notion of subject subcultures emanates originally from the work of [Ball and Lacey \(1984\)](#) and has been expounded upon by [Grossman and Stodolsky \(1995\)](#), its application has been utilised more recently in relation to various subject that comprise the secondary school curriculum. For instance, [Baggott La Velle et al. \(2004\)](#) drew on science teacher interview data collected as a part of a wider project in an attempt to define and characterise the subculture of secondary school science. They found, for instance, that participants' discussion of “science as paradigm” included descriptions of biographical experiences that have shaped their views. The project also took into account those characteristics of science that participants considered important; how this was linked with school science, including perceived differences between professional/academic science and secondary school science; their own feelings towards science, including viewing themselves as scientists; and consideration of the contextualisation of their science—that is, its relevance to everyday life.

Likewise, [Erixon \(2010\)](#) investigated how school subject paradigms (that is, the established content of teaching and the way in which teaching is traditionally organised—the subject subcultures) are influenced when digital media are utilised in education contexts. Erixon found that the classification of school subjects and the framing of teaching is challenged when media and ICT are introduced into teaching. Content, working methods, and the role of the teacher in teaching particular subjects, such as science, English, and so on, are contested and altered when media and ICT are introduced into those subjects, impacting on the subject subcultures, usually for the better, and this can result in a change in attitudes to teaching in various subject areas.

Similarly, [McGarr and Lynch \(2017\)](#) used the notion of subject subcultures to examine the divergence in the treatment of STEM subjects within the Irish second-level context through the lenses of subject hierarchies. They found the subjects of science and mathematics have an advantage due to their power and privilege within the educational system over the subjects of technology and engineering. They maintain that “the subjects of Science

and Maths are populating the traditional space of Technology while preventing a similar encroachment from the historically vocationally based technology subjects into their space” (p. 60).

There is, however, a gap in the literature in terms of subject subcultures being applied to RE, and more particularly to RE in Australian Catholic secondary schools. Understanding RE’s subcultures would better enable teachers of this subject to be socialised into this arena of practice, especially those who find themselves teaching this as an out-of-field subject. Exploring how RE departments in schools socialise teachers into their arena may illuminate how beliefs about RE within a school are maintained over time. Understanding teachers’ perceptions of the features, histories, and status of RE is important as teachers bring different frames of reference to their teaching. A knowledge of these may better assist schools—and Catholic Schools’ Offices—to orient and support these teachers in their classroom practice.

1.4. Teaching RE in Australia—History and Status

RE in Australian Catholic primary and secondary schools is a subject with a formal curriculum for the classroom learning and teaching of religion ([National Catholic Education Commission \[NCEC\] 2018](#)). From an educational perspective, it is a scholastic discipline with the same educational demands and rigor as those of other subjects. Although there are a number of state-based courses in RE for senior secondary school students, meaning that these courses can be studied in both state and faith-based schools, it has largely been the Catholic system of schooling in Australia that has developed RE as a systematic subject in its curriculum ([Goldburg 2008](#); [Rossiter 2007](#)).

RE teachers face a complex role that involves contemporary pedagogies, institutional accountabilities, and the evangelising mission of Catholic schools ([Elliott et al. 2019](#)). This complexity demands a sophisticated approach to RE instruction, promoting a dialogical and dialectical method where students’ and teachers’ perspectives are openly exchanged, debated, and explored with mutual respect and honesty ([Barnes 2005](#)).

[Rymarz and Cleary \(2018\)](#) highlight that a crucial task for RE teachers is to base their teaching on a deep understanding of their students to effectively deliver content-driven education. They emphasise that both content mastery and effective pedagogy are essential and interdependent. The quality of classroom teaching is pivotal in meeting student needs, yet it has often been neglected in recent Catholic school history. Teaching in RE is far from straightforward; it demands substantial effort to engage students and make abstract concepts accessible and meaningful.

The requirements for gaining and maintaining accreditation to teach RE in Catholic schools in Australia are complex and can vary from state to state. For instance, in the state of Victoria, the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria (CECV) distinguishes between two categories of accreditation: (1) accreditation to teach in a Catholic school generally and (2) accreditation to teach RE or lead in a Catholic school. The latter requires formal and assessed study in RE, Theology, and Catholic Leadership, with the courses approved for such undertakings approved by the agreement of the diocesan heads of RE. [Figure 1](#) outlines these requirements, and as can be seen, gaining and maintaining such accreditation is a rigorous process culminating in both the acquisition of formal qualifications and maintenance via prescribed hours on ongoing professional learning and formation.

However, from an ecclesial perspective, RE teachers are expected not only to have formal qualifications and accreditation to teach this subject but are also expected to be witnesses of Christian life. The Congregation for Catholic Education ([Congregation for Catholic Education \[CCE\] 1988](#)) maintains that “the effectiveness of religious instruction is closely tied to the personal witness given by the teacher; this witness is what brings the content of the lessons to life” (n. 96). Such a notion is further supported by the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelisation ([Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelisation \[PCPNE\] 2020](#)) in its insistence that “it is required that teachers be

believers committed to personal growth in the faith [and] incorporated into a Christian community” (n. 318). Accordingly, the [National Catholic Education Commission \[NCEC\] \(2018\)](#) maintains that RE is rich and authentic when “the teacher witnesses to a living faith that invites students to discipleship and mission” (p. 15).

Requirements for gaining and maintaining accreditation

Level	Gaining	Maintaining
	Accreditation is gained by undertaking:	Accreditation is maintained by undertaking:
1. Accreditation to Teach in a Catholic School	25 hours of professional learning balanced across the three categories, within five years of being employed	25 hours of professional learning or formation balanced across the three categories, in each five-year period following the initial gaining of Level 1 accreditation
2. Accreditation to Teach Religious Education or Lead in a Catholic School	Formal, assessed study in Religious Education/Theology/Catholic Leadership within five years of being employed (courses are approved by agreement of the diocesan heads of Religious Education). A qualification in Catholic Leadership (e.g., a master's degree) must include four units of Religious Education or Theology (or equivalent)	50 hours of professional learning or formation balanced across the three categories, in each five-year period following the initial gaining of Level 2 accreditation

Accreditation categories

The following categories apply to gaining and maintaining Accreditation to Teach in a Catholic School, and maintaining Accreditation to Teach Religious Education or Lead in a Catholic School:

1. the aims and objectives of the Catholic school
2. Catholic curriculum, Religious Education and faith development
3. Catholic identity, culture, tradition and theology (including prayer, liturgy, Scripture and Catholic social teaching).

Figure 1. Requirements for gaining and maintaining accreditation in Victoria.

It follows, from this, that RE teachers must be thoroughly equipped for their roles, as “an unprepared teacher can do a great deal of harm” ([Congregation for Catholic Education \[CCE\] 1988](#), n. 97). This underscores the necessity of ensuring that Catholic schools have properly trained religion teachers. To address this, there is a need to “look to the future and promote the establishment of formation centres for these teachers; ecclesiastical universities and faculties should do what they can to develop appropriate programs so that the teachers of tomorrow will be able to carry out their task with the competence and efficacy that is expected of them” (n. 97).

It is clear, then, that RE teachers in Catholic schools have an indispensable role. As “the key and vital component” in achieving educational goals of the school, “teachers of religion, therefore, must be men and women endowed with many gifts, both natural and supernatural, who are also capable of giving witness to these gifts; they must have a thorough cultural, professional, and pedagogical training, and they must be capable of genuine dialogue” ([Congregation for Catholic Education \[CCE\] 1988](#), n. 96).

2. Methodology—Micronarratives

This paper draws on the notion of “micronarratives”, using these in an initial attempt to articulate the subculture of RE, that is, the beliefs, norms and practices that shape teachers’ work and professional identity when teaching this particular subject in Australian Catholic secondary schools.

[Higgins \(2007\)](#) maintains that micronarratives are a powerful way to initiate further discussion of complex topics by presenting vignettes that distil some key points which can then be elaborated upon. Similarly, [Devine et al. \(2014\)](#) indicate that micronarratives are

stories that are uniquely relevant to the members of a particular group. Micronarratives have been utilised in relation to many different topics in various disciplines to introduce and explore key ideas and themes, including social media (Venditti et al. 2017), law (Cotterill 2003), and early childhood education (Archer 2022). They have also been applied in RE (Rymarz 2023, 2024; Rymarz and Franchi 2018) to explore teachers' experiences in Catholic schools, understandings of religious diversity, and the implications of these for dialogical approaches to RE in Catholic schools.

Micronarratives were chosen for this study because they provide a unique lens to capture specific, illustrative vignettes of RE teachers' lived experiences. Unlike in-depth interviews, which aim for comprehensive probing, micronarratives distil key themes into concise, context-specific accounts. Higgins (2007) and Devine et al. (2014) suggest that micronarratives are particularly effective in exploring phenomena like subcultures as they reveal nuances that might otherwise remain hidden. For this study, micronarratives align well with the aim of uncovering the beliefs, norms, and practices shaping RE teachers' work.

Three micronarratives follow below—short vignettes derived from the first named author's interaction with Australian secondary school teachers teaching RE in Catholic schools over a number of years—and are originally from projects focusing on different issues. Each one attempts to explicate some key notions in relation to the features, histories, and status of RE in order to begin to describe this subject's subculture, and to provide an impetus for further discussion among both RE teachers and researchers. To do this, we have followed Rymarz's (2023, 2024) approach whereby the direct quotes of the RE teacher are embedded within our construction of the micronarrative, followed by a short interpretation that provides the impetus for the ensuing discussion. The names of the teachers in each micronarrative have been fictionalised.

While the three micronarratives provide valuable insight into the subcultures of RE, the limited scope of this study does not permit generalisations across all Australian Catholic secondary schools. The narratives were chosen to illustrate specific aspects of RE's subcultures and their impact on teacher identity and practice. Future research could expand upon this by adopting a larger-scale design, incorporating data from a broader range of schools and regions to explore the diversity of subcultures in RE across Australia.

3. Findings

3.1. Micronarrative 1: Malcolm

Malcolm is teaching RE as an out-of-field subject in Years 9 and 10. This means that he does not have any formal qualifications or accreditation to teach RE in Catholic school. Due to the current teacher workforce shortage, he was asked by his school Principal if he would be willing to take this on. Wanting to help out, he agreed. Malcolm has specialisation as a Mathematics teacher. "When agreeing to take on RE, I thought I would be able to draw on lots of the pedagogical practices I use in Mathematics. But this has proved challenging. In Mathematics, my orientation emanates from more of a 'transmission' perspective. In RE, I have discovered that more of an 'interpretation' perspective is required, and this is difficult". There is another out-of-field RE teacher in the school—Sally. This teacher comes from an English background, so her interpretive perspective seems to align better with what seems to be required in RE. Malcolm says, "I find it helpful in speaking with Sally, comparing elements of my own practice with hers. She has helped me to examine what I can 'bring' from Mathematics across to RE".

Malcolm's experience as an out-of-field teacher, that is, teaching a subject for which a teacher has inadequate training and qualification (Du Plessis 2020; Hobbs and Quinn 2021), highlights the organisational and socio-political factors influencing RE. The teacher shortage in Australia, particularly for specialised subjects like RE, forces schools to rely on out-of-field teaching. While this may provide opportunities for professional learning, it also exposes systemic gaps in teacher training and recruitment policies. Malcolm's struggle

to adapt his pedagogical practices further underscores the need for institutional support tailored for out-of-field teachers.

3.2. Micronarrative 2: Alice

Alice is an accredited RE teacher and has taught this subject for 20 years now across two different Catholic secondary schools. She was the School-Based Religious Education Leader but has relinquished this role as she enjoys teaching as opposed to the “administrative” tasks that come with leadership roles. But having previously taken a leadership role, she still enjoys the formative and faith-filled activities that form part of the religious life of the school, as opposed to the classroom teaching of religion, such as Liturgies, school retreats, and so on. Because of the highly secularised context of Catholic secondary schools, Alice places a high value on socialising students into the Catholic faith. As she says, “while learning about the Catholic faith is important, these kids live in a highly secularised world. For many, the Catholic school is the only experience of ‘Church’ they will receive. For me, RE includes education in faith, and socialisation”. Due to her extensive experience, she tends to use all of these terms interchangeably, even though they each mean different things.

Alice’s conflation of RE with the religious life of the school reflects the influence of secularisation on Catholic education. In an increasingly secularised society, RE teachers may feel pressured to integrate faith formation into their teaching to counteract the perceived erosion of religious values. However, this blending of ideas can dilute the academic rigor of RE and confuse its purpose. Alice’s narrative highlights the importance of distinguishing RE’s curriculum from the broader religious ethos of the school to preserve its academic integrity.

3.3. Micronarrative 3: Kirsty

Kirsty is a young early-career teacher who has accreditation to teach RE. She comes from a Catholic family background and her family are well known in the local community, especially her grandparents who are regarded as stalwarts of the Church.

She is well respected by her students, who see her as being able to listen and to engage them in their learning. Kirsty believes that RE is an important part of the curriculum, and that her school places a high value on this subject. But she has noticed that not all of the staff who teach RE are as “competent” as her. As she herself said, “At my school, RE is valued, but not all staff seem to share that commitment. Some prioritise their other subjects, and one colleague does not have accreditation to teach RE”. (cf. [Rymarz et al. 2021](#), p. 55)

Kirsty’s observation underscores a subculture of ambiguity within her school. While institutional rhetoric promotes RE’s high status, inconsistencies in teacher practices and support suggest a misalignment between ideals and lived experiences. Such discrepancies challenge the perceived value of RE and may influence both teacher morale and student engagement.

It may also reflect systemic challenges in balancing priorities across subjects. While her school places high importance on RE in principle, resource allocation and an emphasis on other curriculum priorities, such as STEM, may contribute to the undervaluing of RE in practice. This suggests that the subculture of ambiguity observed within Kirsty’s school is not just a local phenomenon but may also be symptomatic of broader organisational and systemic factors.

4. Discussion

The subcultures of RE observed in this study are deeply embedded within the broader political, socio-cultural, and institutional contexts of Catholic education in Australia. Mal-

colm's experience sheds light on the socio-political pressures created by teacher shortages, and the increasing reliance of out-of-field teaching, raising questions about the preparedness and support available to teachers navigating new pedagogical and content boundaries.

Alice's narrative exemplifies the influence of secularisation on Catholic education. As schools respond to societal shifts, RE teachers may inadvertently blur the lines between curriculum and faith formation, reflecting the broader struggle of Catholic schools in balancing religious identity with contemporary educational demands.

Kirsty's narrative illustrates the systemic challenges posed by resource constraints and the prioritisation of other curriculum priorities, such as STEM. This reflects a broader tension within Catholic schools, where RE's institutional importance is often undermined by practical limitations.

In synthesising the findings, there is not one but three key subcultures that seem to shape these particular teachers' work—boundary crossings (as the result of teaching out of field), confusion (of the religious life of the school with the aims of the RE curriculum), and ambiguity (institutional rhetoric promoting RE's high status while privileging other subjects). These subcultures reflect the political, social, and organisational/institutional factors that affect schooling more broadly.

4.1. Subculture of Boundary Crossings

As an out-of-field RE teacher, Malcome's predicament is symptomatic of the global teacher shortage, notably in countries like the UK, Netherlands, France, Japan, New Zealand, the USA, and Australia (McPherson and Lampert 2024). The reasons for this are complex but include teacher burn-out, the changing nature of teachers' work and workloads, teacher status and morale, and the teaching out-of-field phenomenon (Stacey Meghan and McGrath-Champ 2022; Thompson et al. 2023). Given the impacts of this on teaching more generally, it should come as no surprise that these factors have also impacted on RE, meaning that increasingly teachers of this subject may not be accredited and may not be witnesses to Christian life as school leaders struggle to fill RE teaching positions in their schools. Such an impact is felt especially strongly in "hard-to-staff schools" (p. 13) and, in particular, schools in regional and rural areas where attracting suitably qualified teachers has been a long-standing problem.

In teaching RE as an out-of-field subject, teachers like Malcolm need to rely on the notions of boundary crossings and boundary objects. Drawn from the work of Akkerman and Bakker (2011), a boundary crossing refers to a person's transitions and interactions across different sites. Applying this to education, a boundary crossing may refer to a teacher transitioning from one subject area in which they have demonstrated skills and competencies to another in which they have no formal qualification. The subject constitutes the boundary. Thus, for an out-of-field teacher, "a boundary exists when the differences between the practices and perspectives required to teach the subject are 'discontinuous'" (Hobbs 2013, p. 274).

A boundary object refers to an artefact that fulfils a bridging function, which in terms of education is something the teacher "brings" from one particular subject to another to enable the successful teaching of that subject. Boundary objects are not necessarily "physical" artefacts (although they could be, as in the case of a teacher portfolio, or a planning schema a teacher might find helpful in different school subjects). They could include teachers' non-tangible personal resources, such as adaptive strategies, dispositions, attitudes, and so on. They could also include a teacher's support mechanisms, such as collegial sharing of ideas, or professional learning.

For teachers like Malcolm, the boundary consists of the demarcation between their in-field teaching in, for instance, Mathematics and their out-of-field teaching in RE, in which the practices and perspectives required to teach the subject are "discontinuous". There were boundary objects that Malcolm was able to bring with him to facilitate his boundary crossing from Mathematics to RE, including some of his pedagogical practices from Mathematics and the collegial support from Sally. However, while the collegial

support offered by Sally has been valuable, the interpretation perspective of RE required has been more problematic, and he has found the transmission perspective from Mathematics to be less applicable to RE.

However, and importantly, just because a teacher is technically out of field does not necessarily mean that they are ill equipped to be an effective RE teacher. If handled well and with appropriate support structures in place, such a situation could potentially provide a valuable professional learning opportunity for the teacher and may provide a pathway for formal accreditation. But there are also implications here for school leadership, and a recognition of what is involved for teachers when teaching RE out of field in terms of the feelings of preparedness, competence, and confidence. It also means that there is a need for targeted professional development for teachers like Malcolm to assist in providing such preparedness, competence, and confidence in teaching RE.

4.2. Subculture of Confusion

Alice's narrative reveals the conflation of RE with the religious life of the school, suggesting a need for clearer professional guidelines to preserve the distinctiveness of RE.

Contemporary approaches to RE clearly distinguish between the classroom teaching and learning of religion, which aligns with the [National Catholic Education Commission \[NCEC\]'s \(2018\)](#) definition of RE, and the religious life and Catholic ethos of the school community. These are two important but quite distinct notions. RE has an educative focus and is a subject with a formal curriculum for the classroom learning and teaching of religion. Opportunities for faith formation (e.g., Liturgy, prayer, and so on) are provided by the religious life of the school, which aims to promote the Catholic ethos of the school as a whole ([Rymarz et al. 2021](#)). Alice sites the secularised context of the Catholic secondary school as her rationale for focusing on the religious life of the school in her RE teaching. True, this is an issue in contemporary Catholic education. RE in Catholic schools faces unique challenges influenced by global trends towards secularism ([Hall et al. 2024](#)). However, the religious life of the school is quite distinct from RE. To treat the two as synonymous is to confuse the purpose of RE, and to potentially run the risk of proselytising in the classroom. While complex, there are other ways to address the increasingly secularised context of Catholic secondary schools. Understanding RE as a subject with a formal curriculum for the classroom learning and teaching of religion goes some way towards addressing this phenomenon ([Hall et al. 2024](#)).

It is interesting to note that this tendency to confuse, and even to equate, the religious life of the school with the classroom religion program (RE) continues to cause some confusion, even among experienced and accredited teachers of RE, like Alice (e.g., [Rymarz 2006](#); [Rymarz et al. 2021](#)). While not all experienced RE do this, it remains nonetheless a perennial issue.

Associated with this is the tendency to use an array of different and often confusing terms to describe RE. Alice does this. Alice uses terms like “education in faith”, “religious education”, and “religious socialisation”, but terms such as “catechesis”, “faith formation”, and “evangelisation” could also be added to this list. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to define each of these terms, suffice to say, they all mean something different to RE, and some are beyond the scope and indeed the role of the secondary RE teacher.

Both confusing the religious life of the school with the classroom religion program and using different terms to describe RE may result in a subculture of confusion for both students and teachers. If Alice, as an experienced and accredited RE teacher, engages in such practices, albeit with the best of intentions, it serves to confuse less experienced RE teachers with whom she works, some of whom will be looking to Alice for her leadership in this subject. The risk too is that students may come to see RE not as a serious academic discipline with a formal curriculum, but rather as a “melting pot” containing a bit of content, a bit of prayer, and a bit of Liturgy—“a bit of this and a bit of that”—the result of which is that both RE and the religious life of the school are depreciated and diluted, and neither one is afforded the status they deserve.

4.3. A Subculture of Ambiguity

Kirsty's narrative highlights the gap between policy ideals and classroom realities. This has long been an issue in education in which governing policies can both afford and constrain teachers' alignment of their work with the realities of the schools and classrooms in which they operate (e.g., [Barak 2024](#); [Edwards 2016](#)). Such a gap calls for leadership strategies at the school level to align institutional practices with stated values.

In Kirsty's case, her school says that it places a high value on RE, aligning with the stated values of the [National Catholic Education Commission \[NCEC\] \(2018\)](#). Yet some of the practices occurring within the school (e.g., teachers, while accredited to teach RE, dedicating more time and energy to the other subjects they teach) suggest that there are competing values between RE and the prioritisation of other curriculum concerns. In Australia, there is a high priority placed on particular subjects and cross-curricular endeavours, such as STEM, in which the Australian government has urged the nation to become "STEM-ready" so that students are skilled for jobs that now require a much deeper understanding of science and technology than ever before ([Bentley et al. 2022](#)). Similarly, Australia's recent Teacher Education Expert Panel Discussion Paper ([Department of Education 2023](#)) places a high priority on, for instance, the explicit teaching of reading and writing, as well as culturally responsive teaching practices in relation to First Nations people and families. These priorities, while important, effectually compete with the value and importance of RE in the schools' curriculum. There is a limited number of hours in the school day with which to address all of these priorities, and it is inevitable that some are going to be placed above others.

All of this results in RE having what might be termed as a "subculture of ambiguity". Schools advocate one ideal (the high value and status of RE), while the lived practice of teachers teaching this subject reflects something quite different, and this can be seen by other teachers in the school, and possibly also by students. To be fair, it is quite possible that the school in Kirsty's narrative does aspire to place a high value on RE. But the practices of RE teachers that run contrary to this value need to be addressed, and the fact that they may not be currently addressed results in and reinforces a subculture of ambiguity.

This calls for leadership strategies at the school level to align institutional practices with stated values, even if there may be a number of such practices and values, acknowledging that at the same time these may compete with each other for space in the curriculum.

5. Conclusions

Through the use of micronarratives, this paper has highlighted the complex interplay between RE's subcultures and the broader socio-cultural and institutional environment. The context of RE as a school subject gives rise to not one, but to a number of different subcultures emanating from the different ways in which RE teachers experience and interpret this subject as an arena of practice. The boundary-crossing experiences of out-of-field teachers like Malcolm, the subculture of confusion illustrated by Alice, and the subculture of ambiguity observed by Kirsty all point to systemic challenges within Catholic education, including a degree of misalignment between policy and practice.

Addressing these issues requires coordinated efforts at multiple levels. School leaders must align institutional practice with the high status accorded to RE in policy documents, ensuring consistent support for teachers. At the same time, Catholic Schools' Offices need to prioritise the development of resources, mentoring, and professional learning programs tailored to the unique needs of RE teachers, including those teaching out of field. Schools need to become conversant with the subcultures of RE to better orient and support teachers, fostering a more cohesive and effective teaching environment.

Broader societal factors, such as secularisation and the current teacher workforce shortage, must also be acknowledged and addressed through systemic reforms in teacher recruitment, accreditation, and support.

While this particular study was limited in that it considered only three micronarratives to distil some key points on which to elaborate, future research could explore these

dynamics in more detail, over time, and across varied geographical locations (e.g., urban and rural locations) to deepen understanding of how RE subcultures evolve and influence teacher identity and practices.

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