

## BG Research Online

Stern, J. and Buchanan, M. (2020) *RE leader connectedness: a theology of the lived reality of Catholic education*. Journal of Beliefs & Values. ISSN 1361-7672

*This is an Accepted Manuscript published by Springer in its final form on 23<sup>th</sup> November 2020 at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2020.1850610>*

This version may differ slightly from the final published version.

Copyright is retained by the author/s and/or other copyright holders.

End users generally may reproduce, display or distribute single copies of content held within BG Research Online, in any format or medium, for personal research & study or for educational or other not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- The full bibliographic details and a hyperlink to (or the URL of) the item's record in BG Research Online are clearly displayed;
- No part of the content or metadata is further copied, reproduced, distributed, displayed or published, in any format or medium;
- The content and/or metadata is not used for commercial purposes;
- The content is not altered or adapted without written permission from the rights owner/s, unless expressly permitted by licence.

For other BG Research Online policies see <http://researchonline.bishopg.ac.uk/policies.html>.

For enquiries about BG Research Online email [bgro@bishopg.ac.uk](mailto:bgro@bishopg.ac.uk).

# **RE Leader Connectedness: A Theology of the Lived Reality of Catholic Education**

**Julian Stern and Michael T Buchanan**

## **Abstract**

### **Background**

The relationships between RE leaders in Catholic education and their schools and their religious communities may be ambiguous. RE leaders often appear disconnected from both 'ordinary' teacher issues and 'ordinary' leadership issues because of their religious responsibilities.

### **Purpose**

In this innovative research project, the authors have explored RE leader connectedness and disconnectedness in Catholic schools around the world.

### **Methodology**

Visual research methods are used, as respondents make use of artistic representations of both connectedness and disconnectedness, to describe (by explaining their choice of picture) the nature of their connectedness. Responses from Australia, Hong Kong in China, the USA, the UK and Germany are presented here, generating an initial account of the lived reality of RE leaders in Catholic schooling systems.

### **Findings**

Responses range from those who seem to integrate their accountabilities to school and church systems to those who seem more 'torn' between those systems and disconnected from one or both of school and church.

### **Originality and value**

The authors suggest this has implications for practical-empirical theology, and education more generally, based on the idea of the 'bi-dimensionality' of the RE leader role in Catholic schools, and on the role of the school in Catholic theology which, according to D'Souza, 'cannot help but be one of the intersecting points where the problems and challenges of society are encountered'.

**Keywords:** RE, leadership, loneliness, Catholic education, visual methods.

## **Introduction**

The authors of this article have, for a number of years, been researching leadership in Catholic schools, and in particular the leadership of religious education (RE), in part in order to see whether these leadership positions have a tendency to loneliness or other forms of isolation or disconnection (Buchanan 2013a, b, 2014, 2018, Stern 2013). In Catholic schools, RE leaders have a responsibility for the school subject RE and for the broader religious education that occurs throughout the school (i.e. the 'scholastic discipline' and 'present[ing] the Christian message and the Christian event', Congregation for the Clergy 1998, para 73), so these leaders typically hold more senior positions in schools than RE leaders in community schools who are only responsible for the school subject. (We use the term 'RE' when the context is clear that this refers to the school subject, but 'religious education' where the context encompasses broader education both within and beyond schools, although there is not always a clear distinction between the two uses.) The ambiguity of relationships between RE leaders and their schools and their church may – it is suggested – lead to a distinctive experience of leadership in these schools. RE leaders may be expected to bear the weight of moral and spiritual responsibilities (Tamm et al 2019) because of their positions, and yet may – because of this – appear disconnected from both 'ordinary' teacher issues and 'ordinary' leadership issues. However, RE leaders may also experience a greater degree of connectedness in their roles – through the religious

(and therefore personal) character of their responsibilities, and through the support of the Catholic church beyond the school. Are RE leaders connected or disconnected, socially engaged or lonely? ('Lonely', here, refers to a painful emotion involving a sense of separation, a sense of rejection, and a sense of guilt, shame, or self-rejection, Stern 2014, p 23-25.) What is their lived experience?

In this innovative research project, the authors have explored RE leader connectedness and disconnectedness in Catholic schooling systems around the world. Respondents made use of artistic representations of both connectedness and disconnectedness, to describe (by choice of picture and by explaining their choice) the nature of their situations. Responses from Australia, Hong Kong in China, the USA, the UK and Germany are presented here, in order to generate a picture of the lived reality (Ammerman 2016) of RE leaders in various countries where Catholic education finds expression. Respondents provide some positive descriptions of RE leadership as well as descriptions of problematic disconnection.

### **Religious Education in Catholic Schools**

The importance of Catholic religious education dates back many centuries prior to the universal movement towards compulsory schooling (van den Hoek 1997). For centuries, the nexus between teaching and the lived expression of Christian culture has shaped and challenged religious education learning (Markowski 2008, Buchanan and Gellel 2015). In the modern world the challenges of teaching and learning in religious education are well reflected in church documents which also strive to shed light on the distinctive nature of RE in Catholic schools. These documents distinguish between religious education and catechesis but also consider the interplay between these two paradigms which underpin learning and teaching in this space (Gellel and Buchanan 2015). The Congregation for Catholic Education (2009) has emphasised that the mission of the Catholic school is rooted in the formation of the young people and that religious education plays a central role in achieving the church's mission (Hermans 2017). RE in Catholic schools is not an optional extra but an integral part of the school curriculum because 'without religious education, pupils would be deprived of an essential element of their formation and personal development, which helps them attain a vital harmony between faith and culture' (Congregation for Catholic Education 2009, para 10), noting in that quotation that 'faith' and 'culture' are presented as potentially *not* in harmony. Religious education in general and RE in particular are therefore at the service of the church and aim to support young people who seek to develop 'a total commitment of one's being to the Person of Christ' (Congregation for Catholic Education 1977, para 50). This means that 'the school cannot help but be one of the intersecting points where the problems and challenges of society are encountered' (D'Souza 2016, p 147), as RE involves more than simply the transfer of knowledge. For D'Souza, 'Catholic education can offer a vision of ordering and unifying one's life, personally and communally' (D'Souza 2016, p 234). This article explores the practical theology – the lived reality – of Catholic RE leaders who may find such unification difficult, as the Catholic church puts teachers at the centre of its aims for schooling: '[t]he religion teacher is the key role, the vital component, if the educational goals of the school are to be achieved' (Congregation for Catholic Education 1990, p 96).

Those who lead the teaching of RE in Catholic schools and classrooms are expected to make significant contributions to education and to the Church (Buchanan 2020). A major study pertaining to the role of RE leaders in Catholic schools identified the role as *bi-dimensional*: the RE leader has a position within education as well a position within the church (Crotty 2005). A study undertaken by Liddy (1998) revealed that the bi-dimensional nature of the role imposed too many responsibilities for one

person to handle, thus contributing to a sense of failure for many RE leaders.

### Researching Bi-Dimensionality

The research question explored in this article was therefore ‘in what ways – especially in terms of connectedness and disconnectedness – do RE leaders in Catholic schools experience bi-dimensionality in their work?’

#### Characteristics of bi-dimensionality

The bi-dimensionality of the RE leader role, in its original description by Crotty (2005), exposes the two institutional accountabilities – to the educational authorities of the school and to the religious authorities of the (Catholic) church. However, bi-dimensionality is here somewhat broadened to refer to all aspects of the relationships of the RE leader to school and to church. It is part of what we would refer to as a practical-empirical theology in education, as promoted for example by Hull (1984). Bi-dimensionality is presented as referring to a person’s alignment with the school and/or church, implying not only accountability relationships but also perceived levels of support of and from school or church. We are not addressing the fundamental theology of what ‘living a Christian life’ might mean or the inherent tensions within such a life as expressed in ‘render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s’, but are exploring a practical-empirical theology related to the tensions that might arise from a bi-dimensional relationship to church (as institution) and school (as institution). An RE leader might experience being aligned with (connected to, supported by) or misaligned with (disconnected from, unsupported by) the school, and with the church. This leads to four possible broad outcomes, which are here labelled W, X, Y and Z. There are of course many more complex versions of any of these positions, and the categories do not have precisely-definable boundaries, but the simplicity of the four outcomes of bi-dimensionality is presented here as an initial analytical tool for our research.

These four possibilities are represented in figure 1.

	<b>Aligned with church</b>	<b>Misaligned with church</b>
<b>Aligned with school</b>	W	Y
<b>Misaligned with school</b>	Z	X

*Figure 1: Experiences of RE Leaders in Catholic schools*

Other school disciplines and other roles might be bi-dimensional. For example, we have argued ourselves that school leadership in general and the leadership of religious schools in particular are typically bi-dimensional (Stern 2018, chapter 6, Stern 2013, Buchanan 2013a). Teachers of other school subjects may have pressures from school and from academic disciplines (as science teachers may experience, Wellington et al 1984, chapter 3), or from school and home (as in some debates on education in sexuality<sup>1</sup>).

## Methodology and methods

We explored how RE leaders in Catholic schools experience the possible bi-dimensionality of their roles, using responses to a visual research method (Banks and Zeitlyn 2015, Rose 2016). Visual research methods are particularly suited to exploring complex and emotive topics as pictures can illustrate such topics quickly and with more subtlety than a short written description. Pictures 'evoke meanings and reflections as well as information and factual data', and are 'research-efficient' as they 'can convey far more in a single image than many pages of text' (Cohen et al 2011, p 530, referring to photographs but applicable to all pictures). The research followed a broadly a double-hermeneutic approach to the research, with the respondents themselves interpreting their own experiences and the researchers, in turn, interpreting the material generated in this way (Gadamer 1989, von der Lippe, and Veinguer and Rosón, in Avest et al 2009, p 33 and p 225). Digitised versions of works of art were used, with '[a]rtistic forms supporting qualitative inquiry' (Wang et al 2017, p 114). We therefore used 'picture-elicitation', to 'invoke, prompt and promote ... reflections, comments, observations and memories' (Cohen et al 2011, p 530) in ways that would have been difficult using only written questions.

An online questionnaire was made available for completion, with information about the questionnaire distributed through international RE networks and international Catholic education networks, and no attempt was made to achieve a balance of respondents from particular countries or any other identifying characteristic. All who responded were included in the data analysis. The questionnaire had four 'factual' questions (national context, occupation, gender, age), four open text questions about connectedness/disconnectedness of the respondents and their schools, followed by a single question using pictures. This article reports the responses to that final question. (Other publications will present analysis of the four open text questions.)

For the visual question, we created a 'gallery' of pictures that seemed to us (and to some of the public analysis available on those pictures) to explore connection and disconnection, with respondents as hermeneuticists/analysts of their own situation as related to their interpretation of the pictures. Four of the eight pictures (i.e. pictures 1, 2, 3, and 5), all chosen as broadly representing disconnection or loneliness, had previously been used in another project (reported in Stern 2014, 2015). The remaining pictures (4, 6, 7 and 8) were chosen as broadly representing connectedness or sociability<sup>ii</sup>. Our intention was to provide a range of richly ambiguous pictures, taken from 'fine art' pictures and one screenshot from a film (a highly-rated film, rated 90<sup>th</sup> by critics in a list of the greatest films ever made<sup>iii</sup>) – as such art might itself be defined by its rich ambiguity (Empson 1961). We invited respondents to visit our gallery (Rose 2016, p 228), a gallery with pictures but no names of artists or picture titles. Each character in each of the pictures was given a letter code, and respondents were asked 'as an RE leader, which character, if any, in the pictures below best represents how you feel as an RE leader, and why?' This method did not directly ask about bi-dimensionality, and respondents could have responded in ways that suggested no bi-dimensionality. Bi-dimensionality was one possible interpretation of their own situations that the respondents might have described.

The research is presented as a qualitative inquiry in which the respondents are each treated as 'singularities', in the sense of very small-scale case studies each of which is '[a]n example of a theory-seeking case study leading to fuzzy propositions' (Bassey 1999, p 14). We explored the data until we had reached 'theoretical saturation of each category' (Strauss and Corbin 1990, p 188) or 'data adequacy' (Vasileiou et al 2018, p 148). Notwithstanding the relatively low number of respondents (i.e. 62 RE leaders from

five countries), we are confident that the sample is sufficient for the claims made (see Slekar 2005).

## Responses and Analysis

There were 62 respondents (at the time of writing this paper), of which 26 were from Australia (henceforward abbreviated to AU), 16 from Hong Kong in China (HK), 12 from the USA (US), 5 from the UK, and 3 from Germany (GY). Of those who responded, 20 were RE leaders in primary schools (for children aged up to 11 or 12), 33 were RE leaders in secondary schools (for young people aged 11 or 12 and above), and 9 had other Catholic educator roles involving leadership. 39 respondents identified as female, 22 as male. 5 respondents were aged up to 29, 35 were aged 30-49, 21 were aged 50 or above. In this report, we do not identify the teachers' gender, age, or age-group taught, as we are focusing here only on the lived experience of bi-dimensionality, although we include their national context, and each is given a number representing the order in which responses were received (i.e. #1 indicates the first respondent).

Responses to the 'picture' question came from the following eight pictures (in which 21 characters are presented)<sup>iv</sup>. Although no interpretations of the pictures were given to respondents, some were chosen as more typically interpreted (by critics) as representing disconnectedness/loneliness, some as representing connectedness/sociability.

- Pablo Picasso's *Tragedia* (characters: woman A, man B, boy C, representing disconnectedness, although the boy can be seen as attempting sociability).
- Edgar Degas' *Dans un cafe - L'Absinthe*, 1875-6 (woman D, man E, disconnectedness).
- L S Lowry's *Three Men and a Cat* (man F, man G, man H, cat I, disconnectedness).
- A screenshot of stars Kim Hunter and David Niven from *A Matter of Life and Death* (Powell and Pressburger 1946) (woman J, man K, connectedness).
- Caspar David Friedrich's *Woman Before the Rising Sun* or *Woman Before the Setting Sun* (woman L, disconnectedness).
- Pablo Picasso's *Two Girls Reading* (younger girl M, older girl N, connectedness).
- Pablo Picasso's *Soup* (girl O, woman P, connectedness).
- Rembrandt van Rijn's *Child Learning to Walk* (woman Q, man R, woman S, girl T, woman U, connectedness).

Each response (presented in this paper with its original spelling) was coded according to which – if any – of the four positions seems to be described, from W (doubly aligned), X (doubly misaligned), Y (aligned only with school), or Z (aligned only with church), recognising that the 'fuzzy' boundaries of the categories and the potential for ambiguity in the responses meant that precise categorisation was not possible (Bassey 1999, p 3). The character that was most identified with was L, the Friedrich portrait (of his wife), with 16 choices. This is interesting in a number of ways. It is the only picture with just one person in it, and that person has her back to the viewer. Identifying with the person in the picture may therefore suggest a solitudinous experience of being an RE leader – whether positive or negative. And the intention of the artist might have been somewhat spiritual, as Cardinal notes in his account of Friedrich's paintings in this style that '[b]y inserting figures into his settings Friedrich seems ... intent upon ... directing the viewer's gaze towards their metaphysical dimension' (Cardinal, in Murray 2004, p 388). Other popular choices were more sociable, with the second most chosen character being N (the older of Picasso's two girls reading), with nine choices, then P (Picasso's adult giving or receiving soup) and U

(the woman on the right of the Rembrandt picture), each with eight choices, then C (the child in Picasso's *Tragedia*) and O (Picasso's girl receiving or giving soup) and R (the man squatting in Rembrandt's picture), with four choices each. The most popular picture (adding together choices of its five characters) was that of Rembrandt. In the following sections, responses suggesting each of the four possible types of alignment/misalignment are presented in turn. Of the 62 questionnaire respondents, 59 responded to this question by naming a character from one or more of the pictures, 13 of whom either gave no explanation or gave an explanation that we were unable to code<sup>v</sup>. Of the remaining three people, two gave no response, and a third provided his own picture to represent how he felt as an RE leader. That response is included in the fourth of the following four sub-sections.

### **RE leaders feel doubly aligned with school and church: 'I will listen to God and lead my school peers'**

A number of responses (31% of respondents) described experiences of RE leaders as aligned with both school and church, represented in figure 1 as 'W'. One response identifying with C (the child in Picasso's *Tragedia*), wrote 'Journeying and interacting with others' (AU #29). That person seems to be seeing the RE leader role as generally social, not naming school or church and therefore perhaps identifying support from both institutions. However, it is worth commenting that most critics, including a number of children engaged in research with the same picture reported in Stern (2015), see the child in this picture as oddly unconnected to the adults who may be the parents. According to one critic, 'Picasso chose to depict forms of human loss and suffering in this painting'<sup>vi</sup>. The title of the picture, *Tragedia* ('tragedy'), also suggests a negative intention of the artist. AU #29's response is therefore a good illustration of some of the advantages and disadvantages of the visual method: a complex and interesting response was elicited (identifying the RE leader as 'journeying and interacting'), and, through the use of other interpretations of the picture, might provide valuable insight into the respondent's perhaps unconscious troubles, but such complexity means that the congruence of this response with the double alignment (or any other) coding is uncertain. More clearly indicating double alignment are several of the responses identified with the Friedrich character (L) in ways that suggested a positive experience of support from both school and church. Comments such as the following seem comfortably (doubly) positive, notwithstanding the picture being of a single person:

Because I will listen to God and lead my school peers (HK #25)

I am in a school that values the faith identity of the students and staff. I feel free to express my faith fully and move others towards that freedom as well (AU #33)

One RE leader said 'I would probably align myself with J and K' (i.e. the Kim Hunter and David Niven characters), as:

They are both hopeful of a better future and seem to have trust in each other. That is how I feel about my RE team. (AU #49)

This seems an entirely positive picture of hope and trust suggesting a sense of complementary support from school and church. Similarly positive, choosing one of Picasso's two girls reading, one respondent said 'I feel the connectiveness is an essential component of my role as RE leader' (AU #52), going on to refer to 'the community' and not just the school, suggesting complementary support. A respondent who chose the adult in Picasso's soup picture said:

Character P represents how I feel as an RE leader because I believe that I give so much to the staff I work with - my time, my knowledge, my expertise, my compassion, my insights, my faith, my beliefs, my opinions - which most people are willing to receive. (AU #8)

This is broadly supportive, from school and church, notwithstanding the 'most people' indicating some challenge. Another respondent making the same choice said 'as we are serving others', which might suggest school and church support – as would the respondent who said 'I see myself as a servant leader, doing my best to serve the needs of others', as 'servant leadership' (Greenleaf 1977) is an educational approach explicitly derived from Christian models.

Continuing the servant leadership theme, from the Rembrandt picture, one respondent identified with 'R S & T' (two adults and the child in the picture), and said:

the community serving each other is also what I experience as a Leader where I am at for this moment. My role is one where we serve and support each other. (AU #52)

This seems to indicate complementary support within and beyond the school, as does another who refers to liking to 'grasp nettles' and to being 'a servant leader' (UK #59). However, that respondent also notes that 'It means a very isolated life at time when I give more of myself than I have time for, but I feel it is a benefit for the department' (UK #59). This and some other references to 'servant leadership' are interestingly ambiguous in combining a positive sense of the value of the work with a lingering sense of uncomfortable self-sacrifice. Servant leadership is popular within Christian groups and in many versions, including the first substantial account in Greenleaf (1977), references Jesus as a model of such leadership. As Northouse describes it, '[s]ervant leaders put followers *first*, empower them, and help them develop their full personal capacities' and 'lead in ways that serve the greater good of the organization, community, and society at large' (Northouse 2016, pp 225-226). That servant leadership might lead to being 'very isolated' is therefore not surprising. A more positive response (identifying with U, the woman at the right of the Rembrandt picture) was 'I try to lead by serving with a joyful heart' (UK #45), although the phrase 'try to' might indicate some tension.

### **RE leaders could feel doubly misaligned with school and church and therefore potentially lonely: 'burnt out and ... guilty'**

A very small proportion of respondents (3%) used the visual stimuli to describe experiences of RE leaders as possibly misaligned with both school and church, represented in figure 1 as 'X'. Identifying with Degas' portrait of the woman drinking absinth, one respondent said:

the woman sitting on the side watching everyone else - need more opportunities to connect with the students and teachers outside of Wednesday night youth group classes - but is hard to do when have clerical responsibilities as well. (US #39)

This seems to suggest the challenges from both school and church. Another, making the same choice, was even more forthright, albeit with a little hope towards the end of the response:

with increased demands on leaders, it is often an exhausting job. Once you have the chance to tick the boxes for usual duties, it is hard to be a great RE leader. The religious identity of the school is vital but often overlooked area. Staff are often



reported as saying they are burnt out and as a leader I feel guilty for asking anything more of them. I therefore take on a lot of the burden, but I am slowly building capacity in others to come on the journey with me. (AU #47)

The negative reference to ‘ticking boxes’ (as well as exhaustion) suggest misalignment with the school, while the religious identity being ‘overlooked’ and followed by a reference to staff being ‘burnt out’ suggest misalignment with the church. And the explicit reference to guilt in this response is particularly interesting, and a useful indicator of the possibility of loneliness – as guilt is itself seen by some as distinctive of loneliness in contrast to other solitudinous conditions (‘I would feel the guilt of loneliness’, quoted in Stern 2014, p 24).

### **RE leaders could feel aligned only with the school: ‘always trying to be there for everyone’**

The following responses described experiences of RE leaders as aligned with the school but misaligned with the church, represented in figure 1 as ‘Y’, with 19% of respondents coded in this way. These responses refer positively to school influences and either negatively or not at all to church influences – although the absence of mention of church or religiously-related materials in such brief responses is far from compelling evidence on its own. One respondent identified with the child in Picasso’s *Tragedia* ‘Because I am always learning new things and seeking advice and mentorship from those I respect the most’ (AU #44). That may be an example of Y coding – with the proviso of the more generally negative interpretations of this picture by critics. Another respondent chose the taller of Picasso’s two girls reading, saying ‘Sharing the feeling and concerns with ours’, and ‘Be connected’ (HK #18). This too looks like a positive school-based influence with an absence of any church influence. Similarly, with the same choice, ‘it’s because it’s the most important to be with others during ups and downs’ (HK #20), ‘(I want to be at the side of my students in all of their situations)’ (GY #62), and ‘RE leader as an understanding companion’ (GY #63). Two respondents who chose the girl in Picasso’s *Soup* said ‘because I feel like I really love the job and am always open to learn more [although] I do feel sometimes alone’ (AU #22), and ‘I have only recently taken on RE lead and feel like a child, always needing to ask question and get help from those I admire (who so graciously give it!)’ (UK #61). The former is loving the job but sometimes feeling alone, so may be an example of feeling lack of support from school or church, but the love of the job and openness to learning suggests at least some feeling of school support. The latter suggests more support – and that seems to be from the school. One respondent who chose the adult from Picasso’s *Soup*, said ‘always trying to be there for everyone’ (US #57) which may represent support from the school or, like the respondent who chose the child from the same picture who said they sometimes feel alone, it might also represent greater alienation – expressed by the word ‘trying’.

Choosing the squatting man in the Rembrandt picture, one respondent said ‘to humbly listen to the needs of others’ (HK #15), which seems school-oriented and positive. Three other respondents chose the woman at the right of the Rembrandt picture, and all seem school-oriented and positive:

The lady was helping the kids to develop. I feel my job as a RE leader is to lead my colleagues to develop my students (HK #14)

I like the gesture of this character as she seems like leaning down and listening to the children (HK #19)

This [is] me serving the students as a teacher, leader and carer as they are educated in school. (AU #28)

For these respondents the RE leader role within the context of school is the most salient aspect of the role. The nature of the role within the context of the church is not explicit in their responses.

**RE leaders could feel aligned only with the church: ‘opportunities to experience His greatness and His goodness’**

Some responses (21% of the respondents) described experiences of RE leaders as aligned with the church but not with the school, represented in figure 1 as ‘Z’. Two respondents who chose the boy in Picasso’s *Tragedia* said:

she [sic] looks the most happy and hopeful. Has her hand on a man that I could associate with Jesus, someone who is a support in the work that I do (US #41)

Try to stay connected to Abbe Father but too often in this culture I think and feel the audience is too influenced by forces besides me. (US #50)

The former is saying that support comes from Jesus, with no mention made of school (and therefore only tenuously attributed to the group *unsupported* by school), but the latter suggests positive support or attempted support by the church alongside negative influences from ‘this culture’, which we interpret to imply the school (along with other non-church culture).

Amongst those who chose the character in Friedrich’s picture (L), one gave considerable evidence of support from church, with no clear reference to the school at all:

the role is immense and often you feel as though you have a huge burden with many tasks to do on your own. On the other hand, the thing that draws me to identify with this picture is the wonderful opportunities to experience His greatness and His goodness through being an RE leader. My faith life is full and constantly enriched since I have been an REC [RE Coordinator]. I have been opened up to the wonder and awe of his love. Also, the pilgrimage walking ... gave me the opportunity to see the landscape of our incredibly beautiful country with new eyes and it ignited in me a desire to hike more. I love the land we live in and I want to encourage others to get out more and “pray” in different settings. (AU #2)

A briefer response that seems to be related to church rather than school is one saying ‘because [being an] RE leader [is] just like walking to the bright’ (HK #21). Another chose the same picture and said:

[it] inspires hope and I have a very positive view about how I see my role and how I want it to impact Catholic Education for future generations. I would love to see other people in that image with me though to make it more accurate but compared to the others it offers more of a hope filled image (AU #46)

Catholic education as hope-filled indicates alignment with the church (as hope is so central to Catholic teaching) while the absence of any clear reference to schooling suggests a tentative coding of singly-aligned to the church. (This is one of several examples of weaker evidence supporting a particular coding, and it is retained as an insightful response in its own right and as a boundary marker of the researchers’ coding

of responses.) Another Friedrich (L) respondent seemed clear on church support and significantly troubled in other ways:

because I know what the role entails and can see the bigger picture and keep working towards it. Sometimes I am with the pack and other times I am on my own leading which is why you can't see the face [in the painting]. The role can sometimes be a bit lonely and I am constantly trying to look for the sunrise and I am trying to find a better balance so I don't get lost in the 'work'. The open arms represent the openness to God and hope. (AU #51)

One respondent chose Kim Hunter (J), with implied church support and a lack of clear support from elsewhere, although 'others' might include school:

because I make concerted effort to connect with people every day whether through communication, prayer, or just being present to listen and support. The picture J gives me a warm feeling of security and that is how I feel in my relationships with God and others (US #48)

More explicitly finding school challenging but perhaps finding church more supportive is the respondent choosing the woman in Picasso's *Soup*, who said 'because I feel exhausted in my job, but make the experience, the students are searching for answers in their life, which I can give them in my class' (GY #4). The woman seen from behind in Rembrandt's picture was chosen by one person who said, 'because when we walk gently with another, we see God's loving presence' (AU #3), which implies church support and does not describe school support. Church support in the absence of school support is also implied by the respondent who provided a link to an online picture. The respondent said:

None of these best represents how I "feel" as an RE leader because none of them show the joy of love and service. Instead, the "character" that best represents how I feel is the picture of St. John Paul the Great at the following address:  
<https://www.wordonfire.org/resources/blog/why-pope-john-paul-ii-is-a-saint/2264/>.  
(US #55)

## Discussion

We explored the lived reality of RE leaders in Catholic schools, with the expectation from the church of such leaders to 'present the Christian message' (Congregation for Catholic Education 2009, para 18) alongside the expectation from schools that they meet the expectations of professional scholastic education. Clearly, the Catholic church expects Catholic schools to provide both the Christian message and scholastic education (as referenced above), but the Catholic Christian message is presented here as distinctive of the church (distinct from the expectations of other religious groups with interests in education), and scholastic education is presented here as distinctive of the school (distinct from the expectations of other social institutions, including non-education institutions associated with religious groups). 'Church' and 'school' are also presented as institutions, as Crotty presents them, with specific managerial interests in and responsibilities for RE leaders in Catholic schools. Some prior evidence suggested that these two sets of expectations might either act in different directions, leading to RE leaders being conflicted, or might simply be too much for the RE leaders, leading to a high-pressure role. That is the 'bi-dimensionality' to which Crotty refers. However, it might be that for some RE leaders, the church expectations, or the educational expectations, would be sufficient on their own to make the job entirely satisfactory, or the combined expectations would be positively experienced<sup>vii</sup>. The different positions

were described in four 'codes' in our analysis, although the degree of congruence with the codes varied between responses. Through responding to the picture-elicitation activity, complex accounts were given of the experiences of RE leaders. Many of the responses indicated positions that we had coded (albeit with different degrees of congruence), yet both within and beyond the coded positions additional ideas were expressed.

On balance, it could be said that there was more evidence of connectedness than of disconnectedness in these descriptions of the lived experience of RE leaders. 31% of responses were coded as doubly aligned, a further 40% as aligned with either church or school (in similar numbers), and only 3% as doubly mis-aligned. Although it might be said that 43% of responses represented some kind of misalignment, the 40% of responses described as singly-aligned included many that expressed alignment to either church or school but simply avoided any mention of alignment with the other institution. There was sufficient evidence of each of the four categories of response to suggest the categorisation of alignment/misalignment are helpful and informative with respect to the lived reality of the respondents. And there is, overall, a reasonably positive picture of RE leaders' experiences. Sources of positive connectedness described by respondents (alongside mention of connectedness itself, and community) included many items that were not explicitly religious in character, with references to nature, listening (to other colleagues, and to children), movement (or journeying, or walking), trust, hope (and openness to hope), giving, love, service, awe, wonder, security, joy, learning, children and young people searching for answers, sharing, and care. There was also a set of explicitly religious items such as grace, beliefs, faith, Jesus as support, openness to God, presence of God, and listening to God. However, there is not such a dominant influence of the church as was found in Elton-Chalcraft and Cammack (2019), even though that research did – like ours – provide significant evidence of what we (following Crotty) describe as bi-dimensionality. In our research, the mentions of lack of connectedness did not frame that in explicitly religious terms, and lack of connectedness was less frequently mentioned, too. Items included, alongside lack of connection itself, demands, exhaustion, burn-out, guilt, burdens, and uncertainty. Those are certainly significant, and it would be wise to explore further the risks inherent in such experiences. As Hermans says, Catholic schools 'need 'good teachers' in view of the contribution which education can make in the lives of young people ... because we need to educate our students in a practical art of living a good life' (Hermans 2017, p 87).

These descriptions provide rich accounts of RE leader experiences, with a somewhat positive balance of responses. However, it is also worth taking into account the popularity of the Friedrich picture (L) as largely positive and yet solitudinous. That character was the most chosen of all the characters, and the solitude of the character – it was the only picture of a single character, and it was one of only two people facing away from the viewer – suggests that even (or especially) when RE leaders see their role as positive and as aligned with, connected to, both school and church, the description was often one expressing a wish for or experience of solitude. Perhaps respondents were using the 'tactic' (de Certeau 1984) of solitude, in these examples, in order to provide an effective balance of their bi-dimensional working lives. And respondents who chose to identify with the boy (C) in *Tragedia* and the characters (O and P) in *Soup*, even as they treated that as largely positive, might also have been expressing a somewhat troubling experience, given the artist's (and many critics') accounts of these as a tragic or sombre situations<sup>viii</sup>.

## Conclusion

Our conclusion is that the bi-dimensionality of the RE leader role in Catholic schools often leads to a sense of separation or a wish/need for solitude, which may be a healthy solitude or a problematic disconnection. There are many references to feeling connected and disconnected in different ways. Several respondents seem to feel more alignment with one of church or school. It is when church and school are both experienced as working in alignment with the RE leader that there is less evidence of isolation, alienation or loneliness described by respondents. The role of RE leader in a Catholic school can, as one respondent noted, 'sometimes be a bit lonely' and, as another noted, it can mean 'a very isolated life', and yet bi-dimensionality does not on balance appear to be experienced as mostly problematic.

An appropriate practical-empirical theology of the lived reality of Catholic education is needed that recognises the teacher as an 'intersecting point' between church and society. Teachers are in *personal* positions that can be experienced positively but that will often need a healthy experience of solitude to allow the various pressures – from school and from church – to work in concert, to support the teachers themselves, and to support teachers' work with colleagues and with children and young people. With opportunities for existential reflection, it may be more possible for teachers to be enriched by the bi-dimensional connectedness of their roles, rather than being disconnected from the church, school, or both 'dimensions'.

## Bibliography

- Ammerman, N. (2016). "Lived Religion as an Emerging Field: An Assessment of its Contours and Frontiers." *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 29(2): 83-99.
- Avest, I. ter, Jozsa, D.-P., Knauth, T., Rosón, J. and Skeie, G. (eds). 2009. *Dialogue and Conflict on Religion: Studies of Classroom Interaction in European Countries*. Münster: Waxmann.
- Banks, M. and Zeitlyn, D. 2015. *Visual Methods in Social Research: 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*. London: SAGE.
- Bassey, M. 1999. *Case Study Research in Educational Settings*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Buchanan, M. T. 2013a. Learning for Leadership in Religious Education in Schools Through Continuing Education. *International Journal of Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning* 6(1): 119-135.
- Buchanan, M. T. (ed). 2013b. *Leadership and Religious Schools: International Perspectives and Challenges*. New York: Continuum.
- Buchanan, M. T. 2014. Religious Education Leadership and the 21st Century: Overcoming Disconnectedness. *eJournal of Catholic Education in Australasia* 1(1): article 5. Available at <http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/ecea/vol1/iss1/5>.
- Buchanan, M. T. 2018. "Sustaining School Based Religious Education Leadership." *Discourse and Communication for Sustainable Education* 9(2): 68-78.
- Buchanan, M. T. 2020. "Teacher Education: What Australian Christian Schools Need and What Higher Education Delivers." *International Journal of Christianity &*

- Buchanan, M. T. and Gellel, A. M. (eds). 2015. *Global Perspectives on Catholic Religious Education in Schools*. Netherlands: Springer Press.
- de Certeau, M. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. 2011. *Research Methods in Education: 7<sup>th</sup> Edition*. Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge.
- Congregation for Catholic Education 1977. *The Catholic School*. Homebush, NSW, Australia: St Paul's.
- Congregation for Catholic Education 1990. *The Religious Dimension of Catholic Education in School*. Homebush, NSW, Australia: St Paul's.
- Congregation for Catholic Education 2009. *Circular Letter to the Presidents of Bishops' Conferences on Religious Education in Schools*. Available online at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccatheduc\\_doc\\_20090505\\_circ-insegn-relig\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20090505_circ-insegn-relig_en.html).
- Congregation for the Clergy 1998. *General Directory for Catechesis*. Homebush, NSW, Australia: St Paul's.
- Crotty, L. T. 2005. "The REC and Religious Leadership." *Journal of Religious Education* 53(1): 48-59.
- D'Souza, M. O. 2016. *A Catholic Philosophy of Education: The Church and Two Philosophers*. Montreal, Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Elton-Chalcraft, S. and Cammack, P. J. 2019. "Christian Values in Education: Teachers in India Narrate the Impact of their Faith and Values on Practice." *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 1-21.
- Empson, W. 1961 [1930]. *Seven Types of Ambiguity: 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Gadamer, H.-G. 1989 [1960]. *Truth and Method*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Gellel, A. and Buchanan, M. T. 2015. "Contextualising the Catholic Religious Education Project", in M. T. Buchanan and A. M. Gellel (eds). 2015. *Global Perspectives on Catholic Religious Education in Schools*. Netherlands: Springer Press: 1-4.
- Greenleaf, R. K. 1977 *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press.
- Hermans, C. 2017. "Good Education, the Good Teacher, and a Practical Art of Living a Good Life: A Catholic Perspective." *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 38(1): 77-88.
- van den Hoek, A. 1997. "The 'Catechetical' School of Early Christian Alexandria and its Philonic Heritage." *Harvard Theological Review* 90(1): 59-87.
- Hull, J. M. 1984. *Studies in Religion and Education*. London: Falmer.

- Liddy, S. 1998. "Key issues for the REC." *Journal of Religious Education* 42(2): 27.
- Markowski, M. 2008. "Teachers in Early Christianity." *Journal of Research on Christian Education* 17(2): 136-152.
- Murray, C. J. (ed). 2004. *Encyclopedia of the Romantic Era, 1760–1850*. New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Northouse, P. G. 2016. *Leadership: Theory & Practice: International Student Edition: Seventh Edition*. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE.
- Powell, M. and Pressburger, E. (writers, directors). 1946. *A Matter of Life and Death*. Denham, Buckinghamshire: The Archers.
- Rose, G. 2016. *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials: 4<sup>th</sup> Edition*. London: SAGE.
- Slekar, T. D. 2005. "Without 1, Where Would We Begin?: Small Sample Research in Educational Settings." *Journal of Thought*, 40(1): 79-86.
- Stern, L. J. 2013. "Loneliness, Solitude and Inclusion for Leaders", chapter 7 in M. T. Buchanan (ed). 2013. *Leadership and Religious Schools: International Perspectives and Challenges*. New York: Bloomsbury: 109-126.
- Stern, L. J. 2014. *Loneliness and Solitude in Education: How to Value Individuality and Create an Enstatic School*. Oxford: Peter Lang.
- Stern, L. J. 2015. "Children's Voice or Children's Voices: How Educational Research Can be at the Heart of Schooling." *Forum: For Promoting 3-19 Comprehensive Education* 57(1): 75-90.
- Stern, L. J. 2018. *A Philosophy of Schooling: Care and Curiosity in Community*. London: Palgrave.
- Strauss, A. L. and Corbin, J. 1990. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. London: SAGE.
- Tamm, A., Tulviste, T. and Martinson, G. 2019. "Teachers' Personal Values, Age, and Educational Setting Shape Their Socialisation Values." *Journal of Beliefs & Values*: 1-9.
- Vasileiou, K., Barnett, J., Thorpe, S. and Young, T. 2018. "Characterising and Justifying Sample Size Sufficiency in Interview-Based Studies: Systematic Analysis of Qualitative Health Research over a 15-Year Period." *BMC Medical Research Methodology*: 148-155.
- Wang, Q., Coemans, S., Siegesmund, R. and Hanne, K. 2017. "Arts-Based Methods in Socially Engaged Research Practice: A Classification Framework." *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal* 2(2): 5-39.
- Wellington, J. with Henderson, J., Lally, V., Scaife, J., Knutton, S. and Nott, M. 1984. *Secondary Science: Contemporary Issues and Practical Approaches*. London: Routledge.

---

<sup>i</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/education-47647273/campaigners-say-they-want-birmingham-lgbt-teaching-abolished>.

<sup>ii</sup> Not all respondents interpreted the pictures as categorised by the researchers, as described below.

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.bfi.org.uk/films-tv-people/4ce2b6b0210f1>.

<sup>iv</sup> All the pictures are widely available online, including from generic image search engines such as <http://images.google.com>. We suggest readers find the relevant pictures online and consult them to give the article additional meaning. (It was not possible to include the pictures within the article, for copyright reasons.) The characters in each picture are 'lettered' from left to right unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>v</sup> Some of these respondents gave prose responses to other questions that would have allowed us to 'code' them, but we are limiting ourselves to responses to the visual question in this paper.

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.pablocicasso.net/tragedy/>.

<sup>vii</sup> Being 'satisfactory' does not, here, imply religiously or educationally appropriate. We are researching how teachers themselves describe their lived experience, rather than their fit with church or school policies or underlying values.

<sup>viii</sup> Both pictures are from Picasso's 'blue period', characterised by the use of blue colours, described as 'somber', with Picasso himself saying that this period of painting was initiated by the suicide of his friend: 'I started painting in blue when I learned of Casagemas's death' (<https://www.pablocicasso.org/blue-period.jsp>).