BUILDING CAPACITY AND SELF-EFFICACY IN TEACHING SCRIPTURE TO EARLY YEARS LEARNERS

A Thesis submitted by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis reports on a major and minor study involving a team of religious education leaders and teachers of preparatory to year three learners from Catholic schools in southeast Queensland. This inquiry used the approach of design-based research to collaboratively work with practitioners to discover what learning environments support the meaningful teaching of Scripture to young children. This inquiry also explored factors, processes, and strategies that enabled professional learning about Scripture with the goal to transform professional practice. Both teams met multiple times over a year to investigate needs and design interventions for teachers to trial and provide feedback for analysis and explore the research questions. Thematic analysis supported the identification of key themes and findings from the data, with multiple insights discovered. Two precursors emerged of teachers needing to achieve *readiness to teach the text* and build skills for *informed pedagogical decision-making* before teaching Scripture. Twelve pedagogies and seven teacher capacities emerged to create meaningful Scripture learning environments. The data also revealed that teachers value professional learning that responds to three core needs, as well as identifying that building social capital, creating a strong culture for learning and embedding effective monitoring practices all significantly contribute to enabling professional learning to transform practice. Due to the limited research in this area, the findings have relevance for all early years teachers and religious education leaders in Catholic schools, universities, or education systems who seek to build capacity for the meaningful teaching of Scripture to early years learners and the broader application of these insights. This research resulted in the construction of several seminal models and frameworks for others working in similar contexts. The major contribution is a multi-layered framework constructed from theory and practice insights, for building capacity to teach Scripture.

CERTIFICATION OF THESIS

I, Elizabeth Nolen, declare that the PhD Thesis entitled Building capacity and self-efficacy in teaching Scripture to early years learners is not more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references, and footnotes. The thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Date: 19th February, 2023

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ABBREVIATIONS

APRE	Assistant Principal Religious Education
BCE	Brisbane Catholic Education
DBR	Design-based research
EORE	Education Officer Religious Education
PCB	Post Critical Belief
Prep	Preparatory students (in their first year of official schooling)
RE	Religious education
TA	Thematic analysis

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 2019 I entered into an inquiry relationship with early years teachers and religious education leaders from multiple schools to explore how early years teachers can build capacity and self-efficacy for teaching Scripture in Catholic schools. Chapter One provides an overview of the study, its relevance and factors contributing to a theory-practice gap, the background context, and my personal and professional experiences that motivated this research. An overview of the ecclesial, educational and societal contexts for this research follows to bring deeper insights into the study's challenges and need for this research. Finally, the research questions and goals are outlined, revealing the intent of the inquiry and framing the journey for this investigation.

1.1. The Relevance of the Research

The Bible is an ancient, sacred, authoritative text (Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, section I, A, para. 1), used by Christian faith communities for thousands of years. The Old Testament conveys the overarching narrative of God in a relationship with humans (Harrington, 2016). The New Testament's four Gospels are the primary source for Jesus' life and teaching (Second Vatican Council, 1965, 18 November, para. 18). The narratives and letters of faith written after the death and resurrection of Jesus provide insights into a movement from Judaism to Christianity and highlight the challenges, beliefs, and practices of Christian communities' earliest manifestations (Harrington, 2016). The Catholic Church recognises that although the biblical text is bound by time, expressing the author's cultural and theological beliefs, the text is also timeless and authentic interpretation needs to apply academic and theological knowledge (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1997, paras. 109, 110, 111).

On average, there are twenty million copies of the Bible sold each year (Rizzo, February, 2022). Radosh (2006, para. 3) remarks, "The

familiar observation that the Bible is the best-selling book of all time obscures a more startling fact: the Bible is the best-selling book of the year, every year". John Barton (2020), Anglican Professor of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture at the University of Oxford, notes that sales of the Bible went up after the tragedy of the events the world knows as *9/11*. Furthermore, sales of the Bible rose rapidly during the world fight against the coronavirus in 2020 (Barton, 2020). Barton remarks that the reasons for an increase in readership are unknown, as it is possible to find whatever one wants to find in the Bible, which highlights the issue of interpretation.

Reading both the Old and New Testaments can provide readers with reassurance, as stories of tragedy and hardship also reveal unexpected promises of hope and transformation (Barton, 2020). While there is no disputing the prominence of the Bible in the world, the issue of how the Bible is interpreted is critical (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1997, paras. 111, 112, 113, 114). For this study, the issue of the competence and confidence of teachers in Catholic schools to interpret the Bible appropriately with early years learners is a key focus.

The teaching of Scripture is imperative for religious education in Catholic schools in Australia and throughout the world (National Catholic Education Commission, 2017; Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, paras. 54, 55; Second Vatican Council, 1965, 18 November, para. 24). However, the Bible is complex as it is a compilation of books written in different cultures, various languages, and by multiple authors over centuries (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1997, para. 110). Consequently, biblical interpretation can be a sophisticated skill. Furthermore, religious education teachers are required to interpret the text in ways that reflect Catholic Church teaching (National Catholic Education Commission, 2017).

Surprisingly, given the centrality of Scripture to Catholic schools and religious education, the literature review in Chapter Two reveals that practice has had low inclusion in the theoretical knowledge about teaching

Scripture. Therefore, the research design for this study aimed to capture practitioner wisdom and experience to investigate how early years teachers can build capacity and self-efficacy and make a knowledge contribution to others grappling with the same challenge in similar contexts. Teachers, schools, Catholic education systems, and universities need this knowledge to facilitate decision-making about teacher professional needs, while also creating environments that afford learners to discover relevant, appropriate, rich meaning from the text.

1.2. A Synopsis of the Research

Participants in this study all taught in Catholic primary schools in the Archdiocese of Brisbane, Australia. In this educational context, the religious education curriculum outlines mandated Scripture texts for each year level (*Religious Education Curriculum P-12*, 2020). These texts support approximately eighty per cent of the religious education curriculum for each year level.

The research included a major study that involved working collaboratively with early years teachers and their religious education leaders from four different schools over a year. The research explored what teachers needed to teach Scripture meaningfully with early years learners in their classroom environments. The research also included a minor study investigating what teachers required for professional learning to translate to improved teacher practice. The inclusion of the minor study was feasible because there was already an established professional learning project in place, allowing the research to draw on another natural learning environment that was not contrived for the study (which is important for design-based research).

The approach of design-based research (DBR) guided the study through four phases (McKenney & Reeves, 2013). The process of conducting DBR reflected a dual intent, the first of which was to obtain relevant data from natural learning environments to answer the research questions; the second being to enable participants to reduce the theory-

practice gap (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Barab & Squire, 2004; McKenney & Reeves, 2019; Ormel et al., 2012). Phase one involved analysis and exploration of the problem, which included conducting an initial literature review to ascertain insights provided by existing theory into the research focus.

Phase two involved designing and constructing the data collection processes with participants, building in cycles of iteration to explore the research problem, trialling potential solutions, and analysing the impact. Phase three entered into evaluation and reflection, whereby initial analysis, ongoing analysis, and then retrospective analysis of the data (Feng & Hannafin, 2005) enabled more in-depth insights into the challenges of building capacity and self-efficacy for teaching Scripture. Reflection on the meaning of the data enabled the development of significant artefacts that could, at a future date, be used by others in similar contexts (McKenney & Reeves, 2013). The final phase of the study involved researcher reflection on the implementation of the research design and knowledge obtained through the cycles of intervention, to build theoretical understandings for disseminating new knowledge (McKenney & Reeves, 2019; O'Neill, 2012). The aim of the study is to reduce current gaps in practice that led to the research development (Vanderhoven et al., 2016).

1.2.1. Situating the research terminology in context

Multiple academic fields of study provide insights for this research, and differing terminology for the same or similar concepts are sometimes used within this literature. Setting this research within an educational context influences the terminology and definitions used throughout this thesis. Therefore, this thesis will prioritise, but not exclusively use, educational terms as this work has the most application for educators, educational policy and curriculum writers, yet needs to show clear connections to multiple academic areas. Some examples include the term *genre* (used in biblical studies) or text types (used in the religious education curriculum of the Archdiocese of Brisbane, reflecting

consistency with teaching English and literacy). As a further example, the term *exegesis* is not used extensively throughout this thesis as it is used in the academic field of biblical scholarship, and is not a term that primary teachers frequently use.

The pivotal term that requires clarification is *early years* as varying definitions are used nationally and internationally. For the purpose of this research the Australian and Queensland definition of *early years* encompasses the phase from birth to age eight. In Queensland, Australia children are required to start primary school from the age of four and a half to six, depending on the child's readiness, and the first year of formal schooling is the preparatory year (Prep). Therefore, when referring to the study of early years teachers and learning environments as the explicit focus of this research, the term *early years* refers to children aged four through to children aged eight.

However, this study draws on literature that reflects a holistic overview of the early years phase from birth to age eight, as studies have shown that the first eight years of a child's life are a foundational time of rapid development that profoundly affect future learning, health and wellbeing (Calder, 2014; Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [DEER], 2019). Determining what school aged early years learners need requires building a picture of what learners may be capable of by the time they reach primary school, and primary sources and theories provide this evidence.

Understanding early years holistically from birth to age eight empowers primary teachers of children in years Prep, one, two and three to identify strengths, needs and gaps in children's learning, development and skills. It assists in identifying opportunities to close existing gaps that can negatively impact future education, health and wellbeing after age eight. Furthermore, at least one of the schools in this research now includes on their planning documents the question of what comes before and after each year level, driving teacher attention to focus on what learning and developmental milestones have already been achieved and

what has enabled children to be successful learners for many years prior to starting school.

Clarification is also warranted for the terms literal belief, surface learning, deep learning and meaningful teaching of Scripture. In this thesis, *literal belief* refers to understanding the text as literally meaning what it states. *Literal belief* can also represent an initial stage of understanding a text and may link closely to surface learning, where the text is only explored as factual information or surface knowledge.

An example of *surface learning* is being able to name all the characters in the story and describe what happens in the story but give no consideration to why the author wrote the text or what metaphors, or symbolism may exist in the text. *Surface learning* is necessary for moving to the next stage of deep learning. Evidence of skills that reflect *deep learning* includes an ability to communicate meaning that the text may hold for the intended audience as well as a contemporary audience. To move beyond *surface learning* to *deep learning* requires spending time considering the implications of significant words in the text, or concepts such as the cultural, social, political and theological insights arising from the text.

Scripture learning becomes *meaningful* when learners can transfer or apply their insights from deep learning to new contexts and communicate the relevance of multiple themes or insights from a text for particular faith communities. An example is the story of 'The ten lepers' (Luke 17:11-18). *Surface level learning* of this text results in learners being able to retell the story and talk about the importance of giving thanks. *Deep level learning* of this text leads to learners being able to recognise that the one person who came back to say thank you was a Samaritan, which would have shocked a Jewish audience. *Deep level learning* of the story of the ten lepers could involve exploring multiple themes and concepts in the text such as racism and expectations (do we ever hold stereotypes about people that prevent us from expecting they will behave honourably?) and journey, mission and ministry (why does

the text state that Jesus was on a journey?). Further themes and concepts that could be explored include belief, faith and trust (why do the lepers do what Jesus asks them to do?), prayer (what do the words of the lepers teach us about prayer?), and healing and living authentically (while all the ten lepers were healed of their skin disease how many showed they knew how to act responsibly?).

The ability to deeply consider the insights that can arise from the story leads to the ability to transfer appropriate meaning for today. When learners can communicate how the text might challenge people to look at stereotypes held in our community today, or inform people about ways they can participate in the mission of Jesus by being people who choose to live responsibly, be a person of prayer, faith or gratitude, then teaching leads to *transformative learning*. The degree to which learning becomes truly transformative can never be assessed as the positive influence of meaningful Scripture learning can arise at any point throughout life.

Therefore, *meaningful teaching* of Scripture takes learners on an intentional journey of discovering new layers of meaning in the text, beyond surface level, to consider how the mystery of God may be revealed at a personal or communal level. *Meaningful Scripture teaching* invites learners to think deeply, engages learners and skillfully assists learners to uncover the treasures in the text that are not apparent through an initial reading. In essence, *meaningful Scripture teaching* enables the Word of God to become "spiritual nourishment" and "the source…of a life of faith, of hope and of love--and indeed a light for all humanity" (Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, Introduction, B).

Finally, *Scripture storytelling* is a term that refers to the use of storytelling as a pedagogy, where biblical texts can be presented accurately but draw listeners into the story in various ways. This could be through a visual or physical retelling of the story, through storytelling from an insider's perspective (where listeners imagine themselves as a character in the story, hearing the story or in the context of the story), or

through textscapes or storyscapes that listeners create after hearing the story.

Scripture storytelling acknowledges that all texts have a context (even texts such as laws in the book of Leviticus have a story about how and why they developed). Behind every text is a story of an author who sought to bring insights about God to people in another place and time. Through Scripture storytelling listeners are invited to actively participate in entering into the story in multiple, creative ways to discover deeper meaning from the story. Jesus tells stories as a pedagogy for teaching and challenging core beliefs. The stories Jesus tells are not for promoting literal belief or surface level understandings – but discovering rich, deep meaning that listeners can apply to their lives. Drawing on this analogy assists to highlight the intent of meaningful learning through Scripture storytelling, which is a pedagogy that therefore invites God's self-disclosure.

1.3. The Impact of the Historical Context

Online websites of various Christian faith communities reveal that although the Bible is a shared sacred text, there are significant differences in the way the Bible is interpreted. For some Christian communities, biblical interpretation is a complex task to discover metaphorical and relevant meaning for today (Chilstrom, 2019). However, biblical interpretation of fundamentalist church communities is about a literal understanding of the Bible as infallible, without error (Christian Reform Community Church, n.d.).

Research shows that a more literal interpretative stance to the Bible can colour individual beliefs such as the role of women, power and gender hierarchy (Orme et al., 2017). Some interpretations of the Bible have given rise to antisemitism, apartheid, and women's subjugation (Jasper, 2004; Wainwright, 2015). Interpretation of the biblical text can profoundly influence how people choose to live, driving attitudes, beliefs,

and actions to have a monumental impact (Jasper, 2004; Wainwright, 2015).

History has played a prominent role in the capacity of Catholics to read and interpret the Bible (Kutys, n.d.). In 2017 the Lutheran and Catholic communities commemorated five hundred years since the start of the Reformation, where Martin Luther's belief that Vatican teachings did not always represent biblical understandings was instrumental in Luther's expulsion from the Catholic Church (Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity, 2017). Luther's journey for reform set a course of history that subsequently led to the development of the Lutheran Church (Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity, 2017).

Luther translated the Bible into German, so people in his context could read and interpret the Bible for themselves (Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity, 2017). The reform movement resulted in the rise of Protestant faith communities and fierce debate about how to live faith, leading to the Council of Trent (1545 – 1563). Here, Catholic Church authorities ruled, among other things, that the authority and teachings of the Church determine how Scripture is interpreted (Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity, 2017). It was not until 1943 when Pope Pius XII released the encyclical Divino Afflante Spiritu (Kutys, n.d.) that allowed Catholic scholars to use the same methods for biblical interpretation as Protestant scholars. Then Vatican II (1962-1965), a watershed moment in history (Attridge, 2013), allowed Catholic priests to celebrate the Mass in English rather than Latin. It was only through Vatican II that members of the Catholic Church community were finally encouraged to read and study the Bible (Kutys, n.d.; Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity, 2017). Madigan (2016, RG. 85) presents a common perception of academic progress since this time, "The efflorescence of Catholic biblical scholarship in the fifty years since the council is so great as to defeat any attempt to summarize it easily".

This historical backdrop paints an essential picture for understanding the significance and context of this research. The Catholic

Church now has clear documentation about how to interpret Scripture (Attridge, 2013; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1997). The approach of design-based research is only appropriate when gaps exist between theory and practice, and provides a vehicle for minimising those gaps (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Barab & Squire, 2004; McKenney & Reeves, 2019). In a context where teachers in a Catholic school may have grown up in a Catholic family without talking about interpreting the Bible beyond a literal understanding or found themselves teaching with little background into how to interpret the text, theory-practice gaps can readily exist.

1.4. The Impact of the Educational Context

The past ten years in Australia brought about significant disconnects between curriculum expectation of what teachers need to teach and how teachers need to teach the curriculum (Barblett et al., 2016). The 2008 introduction of the National Assessment Program for Numeracy and Literacy (NAPLAN) for year three learners has unintentionally impacted well-being and pedagogy, with research showing there can be a narrow focus on teaching literacy and numeracy at the expense of other curriculum areas (Roberts et al., 2019).

This challenge of *what to teach* (curriculum) versus *how to teach* (pedagogy) is also present in religious education. For example, the Archdiocese of Brisbane published a series of booklets (Brisbane Catholic Education, 2007) from 2007 to 2010 titled Religious Education: Curriculum guidelines for the early years. The guidelines utilised the five contexts for learning: investigation, focused teaching and learning, play, real-life and routines and transitions, drawn from the Early Years Curriculum Guidelines (Queensland Studies Authority, 2006) and were written in response to the Preparatory (prep) Year, introduced to Queensland in 2007. By 2011 schools in the Archdiocese of Brisbane implemented a national curriculum, outlining the academic entitlement for learners in each year level (Australian Curriculum Assessment and

Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2014a). Now, prep teachers were responsible for ensuring learners reached national curriculum expectations, placing the spotlight directly on *what learners needed to understand* (Barblett et al., 2016).

However, the Australian Curriculum was silent on early years pedagogy, noting that the curriculum's role was to clarify what to teach and that schools could determine "how best to deliver the curriculum" (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2014a, p. 13, para. 25). As a result, divided professional opinions arose over the place and value of play-based learning in early years education in primary schools. Early years teachers recounted experiences of being told to put away the *playthings* as the emphasis of child-centred pedagogy shifted to educational achievement (Breathnach et al., 2017; Broadbent, 2015).

In 2012 the first version of the Religious Education Curriculum launched for schools in the Archdiocese of Brisbane, followed by a revised edition eight years later (*Religious Education Curriculum P-12*, 2020). Both documents aligned with the Australian Curriculum (using achievement standards and content descriptions) and were also silent on pedagogy for the same reason as the Australian Curriculum. However, as the new Religious Education Curriculum P-12 emerged, primary schools in the Archdiocese of Brisbane generally put aside the multiple booklets that comprised the guidelines for religious education that presented early years pedagogies.

Anecdotally, teachers spoke about finding no alignment between the guidelines for early years and the new curriculum. Professionally, I recall working with a colleague in a school in 2011, asking where these booklets were and discovering that early years teachers had not seen these guidelines. Eventually, they were spotted as a bundle, still in their clear packaging to hold all booklets together for delivery, utilised as a doorstop in the room where we worked. Consequently, most teachers ceased to use the guidelines and often abandoned early years pedagogies, such as

play and investigation. Subsequently, a widening gap occurred between theory and practice.

The model of pedagogy (Brisbane Catholic Education, n.d.) used by all Brisbane Catholic Education schools identifies five elements to focus on learners and their learning. The elements are to establish clear learning intentions and success criteria, activate multiple opportunities, respond with feedback that moves learning forward, and evaluate the impact of teaching. A challenge teachers face is that the model does not reveal how to activate learning for early years children.

1.5. The Changing Landscape of Catholic Spirituality

Along with these educational changes, the landscape of Catholic spirituality in Australia is changing significantly and rapidly (McCrindle & Wherrett, 2020). Rossiter (2013) argues that the spirituality of young people has changed substantially over the last fifty years and religious education programs need to adapt accordingly. Australian Catholic spirituality has primarily moved on from unquestioningly following doctrines and literal interpretations of sacred texts (McCrindle & Wherrett, 2020; Rossiter, 2013). Additionally, the number of people identifying as Christian in Australia has decreased from sixty-four percent to fifty-two percent from 2006 to 2016, while the number of Australians identifying as having no religion has risen from nineteen percent in 2006 to thirty one percent in 2016 (McCrindle & Wherrett, 2020). The current context reflects changes in sociological constructs evident through practices such as less affiliation with the regular rituals of the church community and less emphasis on community, resulting in a growing focus on individual rights and beliefs (Rossiter, 2013).

Such changes raise questions about the purpose and accessibility of religious education. Questions such as: To what degree does the language of religious education curriculum documents presume that teachers have a significant understanding of what they are required to teach?; To what degree are religious education teachers confident and competent in

interpreting biblical texts?; To what degree are religious education teachers supported in essential processes for engaging learners in biblical stories from the Jewish and Christian traditions, promoting dialogue, extending thinking and making connections between religion, faith and life?

The decline in religious affiliation (McCrindle & Wherrett, 2020) and understanding of the Christian faith community's sacred stories, rituals and practices provide a double-edged challenge. At the teacher level, it raises the challenge of how equipped beginning teachers are, or need to be, to educate about Scripture. In this context, sometimes teachers may identify as Catholic yet have limited experience or knowledge of the practices and rituals of the faith community. Alternatively, sometimes teachers may strongly identify as Catholic and have lived their whole lives regularly engaging in the practices and rituals of the faith community but with limited opportunities to develop their understanding of faith, Scripture and religious education.

The second side of the challenge relates to how religious educators in Catholic schools engage learners in religious education when there is increasingly less interest in religion. The Church recognises this challenge, noting, "A growing number of young people are drifting away from the institutional Church. Religious ignorance or illiteracy are rising. Catholic education is an unglamorous mission" (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2014, section III, no. 1, para. g.). This context paints a picture of the significant challenges religious education teachers in Catholic schools need to navigate to believe they can competently and confidently engage children in Scripture learning.

1.6. The Ecclesial, Educational and Societal Contexts

Catholic schools exist as part of the missionary work of the Catholic Church for education in faith (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 9). Therefore, Catholic schools:

Are a place of testimony and acceptance, where faith and spiritual accompaniment can be provided to young people who ask for it; they open their doors to all and uphold both human dignity, as well as the dissemination of knowledge, to the whole of society, irrespective of merit (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2014, section III, para 2).

Consequently, it is necessary to situate this study within the relevant ecclesial, societal and educational contexts. The following information on diocesan structures, religious education approaches and Australian societal challenges all contribute to the context for this research. They shape the boundaries for this study, illuminate some of the research's needs, considerations and insights and are foundational for understanding some perspectives presented in Chapter Two's Literature Review.

1.6.1.   The Ecclesial Context

The geographical context for the study requires an understanding of Catholic Church structures in Australia. There are 21 dioceses and 7 Archdioceses across the geographic territory of Australia, along with eight other administrative divisions, such as five Eastern Rite dioceses. The Archdioceses have the largest populations and come under the leadership of an Archbishop (Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide, Hobart and Perth). Where a diocese has an education ministry, the local bishop approves the religious education curriculum for use in the diocese. Currently, all Queensland dioceses use the Religion Curriculum written by Brisbane Catholic Education.

The Archdiocese of Brisbane is under the leadership of Archbishop Mark Coleridge. Brisbane Catholic Education is an organisation within the Archdiocese of Brisbane, with 146 (primary and secondary) in 2022 (Brisbane Catholic Education, 2022). Brisbane Catholic Education employs over 12500 people and is the second largest non-Government employer in Queensland (Brisbane Catholic Education, n.d.). The Archdiocese of

Brisbane geographically covers the southeast corner of Queensland, starting at the border of New South Wales and Queensland and including the Gold Coast, Brisbane, and the Sunshine Coast, continuing north to Hervey Bay and Childers. The western boundary includes Ipswich, Gatton, Kingaroy and Gayndah. Geographical areas within the diocese constitute parishes, and parishes include multiple church centres and usually have one or more Catholic schools. It is noteworthy that Archbishop Mark Coleridge is a Scripture scholar, which affords Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Brisbane access to a Church leader who consistently models high expertise in interpreting the biblical text and promotes learning about Scripture as an educational necessity.

With fifty-two per cent of Australians identified as Christian in 2016 and twenty-two per cent identified as Catholic (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017), an increasing number of students identify as belonging to other faith communities or not having a religious affiliation (*Religious Education Curriculum P-12*, 2020, p. 15). However, this does not correlate with a decline in spirituality or interest in religious education. Rather, it means that many students enter Catholic schools with limited or no understanding of the language and culture of the Catholic faith community (*Religious Education Curriculum P-12*, 2020).

1.6.2.   The Aim of Religious Education

Multiple tensions exist across the landscape of religious education in Catholic schools in Australia. There is no national program or approach to religious education in Australia. However, a framing paper for religious education published by the National Catholic Education Commission (National Catholic Education Commission, 2018, p. 7) states the following aim of religious education in Australia:

> Religious Education in Australian Catholic schools develops students' knowledge and understandings of Christianity in the light of Jesus and the Gospel, and its unfolding story and diversity within contemporary Australian and global society. It

expands students' spiritual awareness and religious identity, fostering their capacities and skills of discerning, interpreting, thinking critically, seeking truth and making meaning. It challenges and inspires their service to others and engagement in the Church and the world.

The national aim for religious education reflects the centrality of Scripture and the importance of presenting the Christian story of faith as one that requires investigation to interpret meaning for today. The aim also reflects faith being invitational as opposed to being the goal of religious education. Of crucial relevance is that the aim presents spiritual awareness as an aspect of religious education and considers that religious education is influential for how learners choose to live, regardless of whether they come to those decisions from a position of faith or not.

Inherent in this understanding is recognising that stories of faith found in the Bible and the Tradition are stories that can have meaning at both a universal level and through the lens of faith. The cognitive processes required for this view of religious education expose learners to stories that raise deep and critical questions about living in the world, regardless of faith. The vision also implies that for learners who are believers or who freely choose to become a believer, the cognitive processes of religious education may also nurture and shape faith.

1.6.3.   *The Educational Context*

Defining the purpose of religious education on a national level is significant due to the diversity of approaches to religious education existing across different dioceses throughout Australia. Differences include the degree to which religious education is an academic learning area with the same rigour as other learning areas (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, para. 223). For example, while some dioceses support the inclusion of catechesis as part of religious education, the Archdiocese of Brisbane does not.

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The Vision for religious education in the Archdiocese of Brisbane. The schools and colleges of the Archdiocese of Brisbane aspire to educate and form students who are challenged to live the gospel of Jesus Christ and who are literate in the Catholic and broader Christian tradition so that they might participate critically and authentically in faith contexts and wider society (Religious Education Curriculum P-12, 2020, p. 10).

Both the national vision, and Archdiocese of Brisbane vision, promote the concept of cognitive learning about Christianity. Both provide a purpose for religious education to challenge learners to critique the Christian story and live this story authentically in the world. Note that there is no expectation that one needs to be Catholic or Christian to live the biblical vision of God's dream for the world. The national vision does not define the content of learning as specifically Catholic. This means someone outside Catholic education may erroneously assume there is a shared ecumenical Christian curriculum in Catholic schools. While the Gospels "are the heart of all the Scriptures" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1997, para. 125), this research raises a question about how teachers in Catholic schools would interpret this text. As the Catholic Church teaches that the whole Bible is the source and inspiration for Christian life (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1997, paras. 103, 121, 124), Catholic schools must teach Scripture well and ensure meaningful biblical learning.

A Reconceptualist Approach to Religious Education. The Religious Education Curriculum for the Archdiocese of Brisbane outlines a reconceptualist approach, based on the work of Gabriel Moran (*Religious Education Curriculum P-12*, 2020). This approach places religious education within an educational framework, clearly distinguishing between teaching people religion and teaching people to be religious. Figure 1 below highlights the distinctive yet complementary nature of each and shows that the central interlocking components remain officially unnamed in this depiction of the model in the Religious Education Curriculum.

Figure 1

The Model for Religious Education
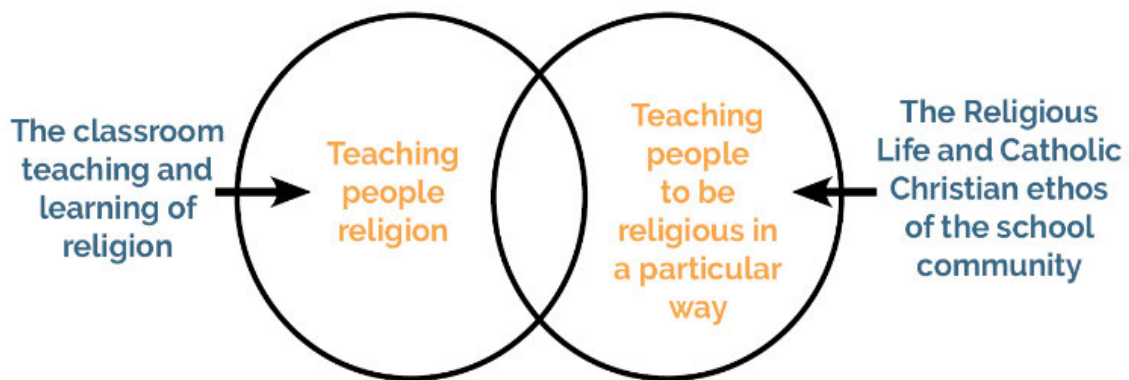
Note. A model showing the distinct and complementary nature of both dimensions of religious education. From *Religious Education Curriculum P-12* (p. 12), by Brisbane Catholic Education, 2020.

A reconceptualist approach includes the avoidance of "presumptive language" (*Religious Education Curriculum P-12*, 2020, p. 24) that presumes learners are actively engaged in the faith life of the Catholic community and that they are people of faith. Learners may experience presumptive language as "alienating and judgemental" (*Religious Education Curriculum P-12*, 2020, p. 24). Conscious that not all learners are Catholic or people of faith, the term *believers* replaces the catechetical term *we* when referring to people's religious actions.

The second characteristic of a reconceptualist approach is that teaching about religious education "requires a critical appreciation of one's religious tradition and an empathetic understanding of the religious beliefs and practices of others" (*Religious Education Curriculum P-12*, 2020, p. 25). Therefore, religious education is open to dialogue with others instead of presenting a fixed set of beliefs for all learners to support. Additionally, authentic religious education means teachers give witness to who they are as genuine people of faith and present the Catholic Christian tradition in powerfully engaging ways.

The third characteristic of "powerful pedagogies" (*Religious Education Curriculum P-12*, 2020, p. 26) requires teachers to use the same strategies employed for other curriculum areas. Powerful pedagogies call teachers to engage and extend learners, open their minds to questioning, dialogue and the possibility of God as sacred mystery. Moran (1991, as cited in*Religious Education Curriculum P-12*, 2020, p. 12) emphasises that "endless talk about Christianity is not religious education. What deserves that title is teaching people religion with all the breadth and depth of intellectual excitement one is capable of". Brisbane Catholic Education takes a strong stance on this approach, with clear expectations that this is how religious education is taught every year of primary and secondary schooling.

As a curriculum area, the teaching time requirement for religious education is two and a half hours per week. This time does not include teaching learners to be religious (social justice activities, class prayer or liturgies, which all fall into the Religious Life of the School) (*Religious Education Curriculum P-12*, 2020). The religious education curriculum follows the same format as the National Curriculum, and the Achievement Standard identifies what to assess. Assessment of personal faith or attitudes has no place in a reconceptualist approach to religious education, as these draw from the affective domains rather than the cognitive domain.

1.6.4.   *The Societal Context*

Australia reflects a landscape of growing religious diversity. Almost ten per cent of the population identifies as belonging to Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Judaism (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Growing numbers of Australians view religion as optional, questioning the relevance of religious beliefs and practices (*Religious Education Curriculum P-12*, 2020). The societal context presents the challenge of religious education needing to meet learners in their own space, recognising and valuing their belief systems, while presenting a vision of how they could participate respectfully and hopefully in the world.

The varied contexts outlined above situate this research within the Australian religious context and the religious education context that shapes the work of teachers in Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Brisbane. Each of these contexts impacts decision-making and teacher practice within the research. The following section introduces the context of the researcher, outlining how working and living in this Australian setting influenced a commitment to this study.

1.7.   Teaching Scripture in the Archdiocese of Brisbane

Moving to Brisbane in 2011, another colleague and I observed that early years teachers often found Scripture teaching challenging. In 2012 we established a steering committee with religious education leaders, teachers, education officers and people from Australian Catholic University with expertise in teaching Scripture. The group's wisdom led to the start of what is now called the *Scripture twilights*, providing professional learning opportunities for teachers to learn about Scripture for two hours after school once per term. From this work, we heard constant feedback from teachers saying they did not know what Scripture texts to select to support their teaching of religious education and did not have the time to go and find appropriate texts. Consequently, the curriculum writers decided to write the new Religion Curriculum naming Scripture texts to support the teaching of religious education. They worked with people from

Australian Catholic University who taught Scripture, recognising that Scripture selection for religious education curriculum requires specialist knowledge (Stead, 1996). Furthermore, the Religion Curriculum pioneered the Three Worlds of the Text approach in Catholic schools in Australia, which many other Catholic dioceses in Australia have since introduced (McGrath, 2020).

The three worlds of the text is the work of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur and is a heuristic tool for interpreting a text (McGrath, 2020; Osbourne, 1991). The Religion Curriculum states that students need to "critically and creatively engage" (*Religious Education Curriculum P-12*, 2020p, 239) in a study of the world behind the text (a window to the past), the world of the text (which presents a picture) and the world in front of the text (which is like a mirror) (National Catholic Education Commission, 2023b). This framework considers two elements for the world behind the text, exploring both the historical context of the authors and their communities to consider why the text arose (the meaning the text seems to hold for the intended audience), as well as investigating the time depicted in the text such as the social, religious, historical, geographical, political and cultural setting the text is communicating. Exploring the world of the text includes the way the writing is structured (the genre or text type of the text), and the use of language and characterisation. To engage in the world in front of the text the reader considers how faith communities have found meaning from the text over time, and the relevance the text may hold for people today.

The application of the worlds of the text increased the focus on teaching Scripture critically, but also highlighted the need for teacher knowledge about the text (Carroll & Collins, 2014). The three worlds of the text approach heightens the need for the historical accuracy of biblical teaching. One example is distinguishing between the historical details of Jesus as a Middle-Eastern Jewish male, as opposed to images of Jesus through artwork that conveys the faith perspective of an artist in a different culture and time (Ryan, 2021).

A survey of teachers occurred to inform the second edition of the Religion Curriculum. Analysis of the data revealed that while there was an increased focus on teaching Scripture, sometimes teachers used the three worlds of the text approach as a pedagogy rather than a tool for interpretation (Nolen, 2019). Also, teachers did not always understand the purpose of teaching each biblical text. In response to these findings, the religious education team created a new overview document to include core texts to support relevant parts of the curriculum, the purpose of teaching the text and critical questions to support the teaching of the biblical texts. Teachers and religious education leaders frequently report that this supporting resource is a *game changer*, highlighting the importance of monitoring and responding to what teachers need to teach Scripture well. The second edition of the Religion Curriculum also stated that teachers need to begin each unit of work by teaching Scripture, "allowing the insights from the text to enrich understanding of the curriculum" (*Religious Education Curriculum P-12*, 2020, p. 238). In consultation with people who worked in universities as Scripture and religious education scholars, the review of Scripture in the curriculum determined that when taught as intended, biblical interpretation was not limited to intended meaning from the curriculum.

1.8. Literal Belief, Relativism, Disbelief, Post-Critical Belief

Catholic schools in many Australian dioceses, including some schools in this research, have engaged in the Catholic dialogue schools survey through the University of Leuven in Belgium. Participation involves distributing a questionnaire from the University of Leuven to teachers, year six learners, and a cohort of parents to ascertain the impact of different religious beliefs and understandings on their school community. Each participating school receives a report containing the survey results across the four scales and recommendations. This work with theologians from the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium has been underpinning the approach to Catholic Identity in many Australian Catholic schools for

over a decade (Pollefeyt & Bouwens, 2010). A brief overview of this work follows, detailing the language and concepts that many leadership teams now reflect on with staff and providing some new terminology for understanding how people interpret Scripture.

The researchers have identified four different scales, providing a new empirical methodology to measure and build the Catholic Identity of schools. The Post-Critical Belief (PCB) scale determines where a person's faith lies, from belief to disbelief, and whether people think of their faith beliefs in literal or symbolic ways (Pollefeyt & Bouwens, 2010). The PCB scale seeks to determine the degree to which a person holds belief (or disbelief) in a transcendent God and whether they interpret religion through literal or symbolic belief. The PCB scale, therefore, identifies four positions: literal belief, relativism, external critique and post-critical belief.

The concept of literal faith as the first naiveté reflects the work of Paul Riccour (Osbourne, 1991; Pollefeyt & Bouwens, 2009), suggesting that a person who processes their faith experiences through a literal understanding, seeking black-and-white answers that provide certainty, demonstrates *literal belief*. Some studies have shown an alignment between literal belief and cognitive processing that shows a preference for rigidity and lower-order thinking levels on topics such as morality (Grove et al., 2019). A person of literal belief may also decide that a literal interpretation of texts, rites and doctrines is not plausible and therefore moves to a position of disbelief, rejecting faith (Pollefeyt & Bouwens, 2010). Consequently, the contradictory texts in the Bible are perceived to be irrelevant and point to the need to reject religion. The PCB scale identifies this position as one of external *critique*.

The third position is *relativity*, typified by belief in a symbolic approach to religion and obtaining meaning in life that is individual and subjective (Pollefeyt & Bouwens, 2010). Relativity reflects the rejection of alignment to one religion due to a perception that all religious meaning transpires at an individual level (Pollefeyt & Bouwens, 2010). An ongoing search for meaning characterises *Post-critical* (or symbolic) *belief* through

critical reason and the renewed interpretation of symbols and texts, which leads to faith (Pollefeyt & Bouwens, 2010). However, post-critical belief represents a second naiveté where literal belief is deconstructed and perceived in symbolic ways, where an encounter with the transcendent occurs indirectly through story, ritual, community and tradition (Pollefeyt & Bouwens, 2009).

Leuven's researchers outline that the four positions of faith and belief are intertwined, with people reflecting different degrees of each element rather than people aligning with one component only (Pollefeyt & Bouwens, 2010). The reports received from Leuven usually include a recommendation to build the capacity of teachers and students to interpret Scripture beyond literal belief to a recontextualised understanding, and one religious education leader participated in this research due to her school receiving such a recommendation. Significantly, data analysis from primary and secondary Australian Catholic schools has shown students demonstrate strong literal belief, with secondary students more likely to move to a position of faith rejection (Carswell, 2018b).

The Melbourne Scale provides five types of identity. The first is *secularisation* (a movement away from a religious perspective). The second is *reconfessionalisation* (identifying with the traditional ways of living as Catholic). The third is *Christian values* (a movement towards common values shared for a good life), and the fourth is *recontextualisation* (mindful of tradition but attempting to reinterpret meaning relevant today). The PCB scale links closely with recontextualisation in the Melbourne Scale, where the aim is to interpret the text in meaningful ways for today. Recontextualisation calls the reader to imagine how the author might write that story today with language and imagery from one's local context to find appropriate and relevant meaning. Recontextualisation aligns closely with mimetic hermeneutics (Zimmermann & Zimmermann, 2015) as the art of

reimagining the text in a contemporary context, ensuring the original meaning remains.

1.9.   A Personal-Professional Journey

The motivation for this research emerges from an entire adult life of wondering, questioning and grappling with interpretation and educational challenges related to understanding and teaching Scripture. Some poignant memories return when contemplating how I arrived at this research, having completed one year of religious education in secondary school and not undertaking any religious education studies through my teaching degree as I chose not to attend a Catholic university (or College at that point in time), instead, to be surrounded by people with a broad range of beliefs. Strangely, the diversity of beliefs contributed to how I found my place.

I recall finishing year twelve and asking my parents whether the biblical story of God creating the world in seven days was literal. They did not know, and I wrote a letter to a national Catholic magazine to ask the question, which resulted in a published response I did not fully understand due to my unfamiliarity with theological, academic language. I continued to wonder about how to interpret this text for years. This experience reflects how historical factors impacted Catholic families and highlights that while Catholic and ecumenical biblical scholarship flourished since Vatican II (Attridge, 2013), the same growth in understanding was not necessarily occurring outside the academic world.

A pivotal moment came as a student teacher in a government school, teaching about Christmas without being able to teach about the religious meaning of Christmas for Christians when I realised, I wanted to teach in a Catholic school. Against the odds, I found employment in a Catholic school in Victoria, teaching religion without qualifications in theology or religious education. I experienced first-hand that a low capacity to interpret Scripture could make planning religious education

feel like rowing at sea in the dark, longing for any navigational assistance or beam from a lighthouse to steer the journey safely.

After two years of teaching, I was fortunate to be offered a place on a Holy Land study tour, providing an experience of standing at the intersection of history, faith, belief, and spirituality, compelled to make sense of what I witnessed through each of these lenses. As I watched people photograph what appeared to be a relatively young bush labelled as the *burning bush of Moses*, a hermeneutics of suspicion arose between the text and the encounter. How could this bush be five thousand years old? Did this Scripture story need to be interpreted literally or metaphorically? Does this story hold any meaning today if it was not a historical event? Listening to academic dialogue, which I was ill-equipped to engage in, piqued my appetite for learning about sacred stories that had profound meaning for people of faith over thousands of years.

When I moved into the role of Education Officer in Religious Education across the dioceses of Ballarat, Darwin and Brisbane, I witnessed teachers grappling with how to interpret and teach Scripture. I observed colleagues studying in Religious Education grappling to understand the resurrection stories, miracle stories and most Old Testament stories. The most frequently asked question was, *What really happened?* Pulling apart threads of faith and history proved challenging.

As an early career teacher, I recall completing a survey for Barbara Stead's (1996) ground-breaking doctoral research about my teaching of Scripture. I thought my coverage was inadequate, so I added whatever texts came to mind first. Later, Stead's analysis revealed a list of the ten most taught texts in Catholic primary schools in Victoria, all likely to be texts more commonly known by most people with any biblical knowledge. This experience directly impacted my decision-making about this research's methodological approach.

First, I wanted to ensure I could gain trustworthy insights from teacher practice and about teacher practice. Second, I hoped that the research could make a difference to the participants, so they were not

merely contributors to the study but were actively building, utilising and benefiting from the research processes. Finally, as I read through Stead's thesis in preparation for my doctoral journey, it was a relief to find that she had also interviewed participants and examined the data thoroughly through multiple lenses, ensuring the high reliability of the findings. Of all the literature explored for my thesis, Stead's work is the closest research to this study, almost thirty years later.

As I completed further studies, I realised that growing knowledge of Scripture could further erode confidence. It can be shocking to discover that the birth of Jesus is not one but two different biblical stories (Matthew 2:1-12 and Luke 2:1-38). I vividly remember a lady in my infancy narratives workshop one day who looked at me aghast and exclaimed, "My son was the donkey in our parish Christmas play! Well, if there was no donkey in the story, where does that leave my whole family?" I observed that some knowledge of a biblical story did not guarantee understanding the story, but the text impacted identity and faith.

Across three decades, I observed that uncertainty about teaching Scripture could readily translate into avoidance of teaching Scripture, minimal teaching of Scripture or even erroneous teaching of Scripture. I realised that the same challenges I had experienced still face many teachers today. I wanted to find a methodology that would enable me to explore, trial and find solutions to the same educational challenges experienced by others working in similar contexts. This journey led me to the approach of design-based research.

I greatly benefited from Stead's (1996) and Carswell's work (1995) on teaching Scripture. These were the only two pieces of research in Australia I encountered that provided approaches and processes for teaching Scripture, and enabled me to gain new clarity into what I needed to do as a teacher. However, the gap remained. There is a great need to hear the voices of teachers and discover the challenges, successes, and insights that one's approach to teaching Scripture has on student

learning. Monitoring how teachers can teach Scripture meaningfully will reveal a great deal about how to build teacher capacity and self-efficacy. After having a private conversation with Professor Didier Pollefeyt (2020b, 2021; 2005; 2010) at the end of an address to principals in the Archdiocese of Brisbane, it became clear that little research in Scripture has taken place since the 1970s era, and further research in this area is therefore greatly needed.

1.10. Identification of the Problem

Due to enormous changes in the Catholic Church and, subsequently, Catholic education over the past sixty years and the complexity of teaching Scripture, early years teachers in Catholic schools may lack the confidence and competence to know how to teach Scripture. McGrath (2020) notes that the Broken Bay Catholic school system identified concerns about teacher confidence to teach Scripture, and as a result, they established a new initiative for teaching Scripture. A review of the existing literature highlights a paucity of research about teaching Scripture, especially research that includes the experiences and perceptions of teachers.

In Australia, where there is no national agreement on how to teach religious education in Catholic schools, there is insufficient information about what teachers need to build capacity and self-efficacy for teaching Scripture. Research is required to address this problem for early years teachers and educators working in Catholic education systems and universities to gain increased theoretical and practical knowledge in this area. Decision-making at a system and school level about what teachers require to build capacity and self-efficacy to teach Scripture needs to draw from evidence-based practices, theories that advantage practice, and knowledge of high-impact pedagogies and learning environments.

1.10.1.   Research Goals and Questions

Goal 1. To collaboratively work with early years teachers to explore and develop strategies, processes and early learning environments that draw together theory and practice, to build usable knowledge for teaching meaningful Scripture to young children. Throughout the research, developing a conceptual framework will show knowledge gained through each inquiry phase. Goal one supports McKenney and Reeves' (2013) notion of educational design research, where the intent is to use sound reasoning and interventions to create usable knowledge, culminating in the rewarding experience of problem-solving for others.

Goal 2. To engage in DBR to develop insights into effective professional learning strategies and processes which support innovative professional learning that translates into professional practice. This goal directly addresses the feedback from early years teachers who frequently see little value in professional learning that does not improve professional practice or build confidence. Goal two aims to ascertain what teachers need for effective professional learning that builds capacity and self-efficacy for teaching Scripture.

Research Questions. The following questions addressed the problem and goals identified as the focus of this study:

Question One - What pedagogical strategies and learning environments support the meaningful teaching of Scripture for young children in the first four years of school (Prep to Year Three)?

Question Two – What factors, processes and strategies enable professional learning to be transformed into professional practice?

1.10.2.   The Significance of This Research

This thesis makes an original contribution to the field of Scripture education by examining what teachers need to teach the Bible confidently and competently to early years learners. Therefore, early years teachers and learners stand to benefit from the research. Furthermore, due to limited research focused on what teachers need to teach Scripture in

meaningful ways, this study holds significance for all Catholic schools as an ability to interpret Scripture appropriately is central to religious education, prayer, liturgy and the Catholic identity of schools.

The increasing number of Catholic dioceses across Australia engaging in the Enhancing Catholic Identity Project through Leuven University (Pollefeyt, 2021) testifies to the search of many people to find ways of responding to the challenge of interpreting religious traditions, texts and symbols in authentic ways for contemporary times. This study contributes significantly to this discourse, identifying some challenges that need addressing and providing possible ways forward to assist teachers and learners in moving beyond literal belief to deeper, richer understandings of biblical texts. The findings and recommendations from this research can provide critical insights for Catholic education systems, policymakers, religious education curriculum writers, education officers in religious education and school leaders. Furthermore, the knowledge from this study can help ensure that Scripture learning in the early years provides a solid foundation for critical biblical literacy and meaningful learning.

1.10.3.   *The Outline of the Thesis*

This thesis investigates what teachers need to build capacity and self-efficacy for the meaningful teaching of Scripture. Chapter One presents the need for this study, the context and the goals and research questions for the study. Chapter Two reviews the literature that impacted this research and provided the foundations for identifying existing theories and knowledge. Chapter Three outlines the methodology used for this research, presents the participants in this study, the processes employed for obtaining ethical permission for the study, and the research limitations. Chapter Four provides an overview of the major study undertaken, which involved working closely with religious education leaders and some early years teachers from four schools over a year. Chapter Five delivers an overview of the minor study undertaken, which

involved working with a group of teachers, religious education leaders and education officers to review an existing professional learning project for building teaching knowledge about Scripture. Chapter Six focuses on retrospective analysis to ascertain what new knowledge emerged by looking back over all the data from the study and provides a deeper discussion of the emerging issues. Chapter Seven presents the development of a conceptual framework and some models that emerged from thematic analysis throughout the research. Finally, Chapter Eight presents the study's findings, implications and recommendations and concludes the investigation by answering the research questions.

1.11. Summary of the Chapter

Chapter One has provided an overview of the research problem and situated the study within the national and local context. Scripture provides the foundations for religious education and liturgy and shapes the core identity of all Catholic schools (National Catholic Education Commission, 2021). However, there are numerous complexities to consider in interpreting and teaching Scripture (Carswell, 2018b; Grajczonek & Truasheim, 2017; Osbourne, 1991; Pollefeyt & Bieringer, 2005; Stead, 1996; Wainwright, 2015). Due to historical factors that have led to Catholics having low-level Scripture education and a lack of research about what teachers need to confidently and competently teach Scripture, there is a high need for investigating how to build capacity and self-efficacy for teaching Scripture. Research from Leuven University suggests there is a growing need across Australia to find how to present Scripture in ways that enable learners to find relevance and meaning for their lives (Pollefeyt, 2021).

Finally, as the Bible is a sacred book written for adults, it is understandably challenging to know how to approach Scripture teaching in ways that lead to meaningful teaching for early years learners. Therefore, this research seeks to use DBR to collaborate with early years teachers and religious education leaders to investigate what is needed to

build teachers' capacity and self-efficacy for teaching Scripture to early years learners. In addition, the study seeks to identify pedagogies and learning environments that enable meaningful Scripture learning, and to discover how professional learning can lead to transforming practice. The findings from this study hold significance for many people as few studies have investigated what teachers need to teach Scripture in meaningful ways to early years learners. In essence, Chapter One begins the story of this research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter One established the context for this research, including identifying the importance of this study. The second chapter now reveals existing research and knowledge pertaining to this study. Examining the research questions led to discerning dominant themes to investigate through the literature, including the teaching of Scripture, children's spirituality, early childhood pedagogy and early years learning environments. Other critical themes explored from the research questions included building capacity and self-efficacy in educational environments, and exploring the conditions required for professional learning to lead to school improvement. Significant literature functions independently for each academic field of early childhood, religious education and pedagogy, while also having interconnection points. This review also includes literature about the fields of Scripture interpretation, professional learning and school improvement, leading to an extensive literature review that also reveals many points of intersection between these independent areas.

In design-based inquiry, the role of the literature is multi-faceted (Herrington et al., 2007). Initially, for this research, in line with expectations for DBR, the literature review identified existing theories and insights that revealed current knowledge (O'Neill, 2012; Ormel et al., 2012) and helped build a conceptual understanding of the problem under investigation to provide a theoretical framework for constructing the research design for this study. As the investigation progressed, the research process applied this knowledge by drawing on conceptual understandings from the literature to inform and predict potential solutions to address identified challenges (McKenney & Reeves, 2019).

Therefore, the literature review continually expanded as new themes arose during data collection and analysis, serving to show how practice aligns with theory or could drive the discovery of new theory (O'Neill, 2012). A retrospective analysis of the data involved returning to

the literature to ensure that the research findings helped bridge the gap between theory and practice and create new knowledge that others can use in similar contexts (McKenney & Reeves, 2019). To complete this cycle, publication of this new knowledge then contributing to growing the literature (Mertens, 2019). Accordingly, during each phase of design-based research, the literature review was informative, ongoing, and essential for constructing knowledge and design (McKenney & Reeves, 2019), as evidenced by the scope of the included literature.

The literature review presents five crucial areas of significance for this study: Scripture, spirituality, religious education, early years education and capacity building in education. Each focus area contains multiple theories and insights from research that contribute to this study. While the literature review provides summaries of the overall relevance of the literature for the study, later chapters of the thesis continue the discussion of the impact of theory and insights from the literature for teaching meaningful Scripture to early years learners.

2.

2.1. Scripture in Catholic Schools

Chapter One highlighted that teaching Scripture competently and confidently in a Catholic school is impossible without some understanding of hermeneutical approaches to interpreting sacred texts. Therefore, this literature review commences by exploring what Church documents reveal about the place of Scripture in Catholic life, and the complexities and expectations for interpreting and teaching Scripture in Catholic schools. This knowledge is essential for this study as it indicates the understanding and capacities teachers require for teaching Scripture in a Catholic school. Furthermore, the insights from this literature review section inform the development of principles for teaching Scripture, presented later in the thesis.

Following on from the historical overview in Chapter One, since the fracturing of the Christian community during the Reformation (Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity, 2017), the Catholic Church now

holds that sacred theology arises from sacred Scripture. Furthermore, the Catholic Church teaches that Scripture and Sacred Tradition provide the primary and ongoing foundation for the life of the Catholic Church (Second Vatican Council, 1965, 18 November, para. 24). The following sections all offer critical insights to inform this study, including the significance of Scripture for Catholic education, the purpose of teaching Scripture, and different approaches to interpreting and teaching Scripture in Catholic schools.

2.1.1.   The Significance of Scripture

Authoritative Church documents state that Scripture nourishes and regulates how Christianity is lived and preached (Second Vatican Council, 1965, 18 November, para. 21). The Bible is proclaimed as the Word of God and is the foundation for the life of the Catholic Church community (National Catholic Education Commission, 2021). Every liturgical action, Catholic prayer and sacramental celebration flows from sacred Scripture (Benedict XVI, 2010, paras. 52, 53; Harrington, 2016), along with the faith community's pastoral work, outreach and social justice activity (Benedict XVI, 2010, paras. 73, 99,100).

Sacred Scripture also drives the faith community to seek reconciliation and peace in their lives and the community, driving a vision for living justly (Benedict XVI, 2010, para. 102). Protecting the environment (Benedict XVI, 2010, para 108) and the credibility of the Bible depends upon people of faith translating the Word of God into actions and works of love. Life inspired by the Bible must reflect that "Love of neighbour, rooted in the love of God, ought to see us constantly committed as individuals and as an ecclesial community, both local and universal" (Benedict XVI, 2010, para 103). As such, the Bible needs to have increased priority in the lives of believers (Synod of Bishops XII Ordinary General Assembly, 2008, para. 3).

The seminal Vatican II document '*Dei Verbum*' (Second Vatican Council, 1965, 18 November, preface) outlines that by "hearing the

message of salvation the whole world may believe, by believing it may hope, and by hoping it may love". This single sentence is immensely significant as it places the purpose of biblical interpretation on a positive axis, announcing that the value of hearing Scripture (which occurs through proclaiming, reading and teaching) is for people to have faith and hope, to bring love into the world. Likewise, the Synod of Bishops XII Ordinary General Assembly (2008, para. 4) quotes from the Bible to outline how "the invisible God (cf. Col 1:15, 1 Tim 1:17)", out of love, speaks and lives among people today. Furthermore, the same paragraph asserts that God calls people who hear God's Word to apply it to their everyday lives and bring this gift to others.

2.1.2. *The Purpose of Teaching Scripture*

The Bible is an "inexhaustible treasure" (Pontifical Biblical Commission, 2014, preface). This sacred book reveals what it means to live authentically with a commitment to justice and protection of the vulnerable (Second Vatican Council, 1965, 18 November, section 11). However, to find the *treasures* requires reading and interpreting Scripture to find meaning below an initial, surface reading of the text (Osborne, 2017). These *treasures* reveal God to each generation and each individual (Second Vatican Council, 1965, 18 November, para. 26).

Interpreting the Bible links closely with understanding the purpose of teaching Scripture. Today's readers face the challenges of understanding biblical language, imagery of warfare, oppression, beliefs and expressions from ancient cultures. "As a result the biblical text becomes indecipherable, as if it were written in an unknown alphabet and an esoteric tongue" (Francis, 2020, para 32). Yet, teachers need to see how the text reveals an overall story of love to enable learners to arrive at the intended purpose of teaching Scripture. Bishop Robert Barron acknowledges, "If you read the Bible and you end up feeling desperate, you've misread it" (Barron, 2018, January 14, 9:34). Thus, interpretation

of the Bible is a critical but complex task for teachers, intended to lead to positive insights about how to live well in the world.

Catholic biblical scholarship uses multiple interpretative approaches and new approaches to biblical scholarship are continually emerging. However, there are key characteristics that are indispensable to Catholic biblical interpretation, as the historical-critical method is essential (Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, section 1, A). Catholic Church documents state that the Bible is a book written by human authors, inspired by the Holy Spirit (Benedict XVI, 2010, paras. 19, 74; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1997, paras. 105,106; Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, section: II, B, 3). Therefore, the historical-critical method is identified as indispensable, as it requires careful investigation into the world of the author to determine what meaning the text held for the intended audience.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church draws attention to three elements required for biblical interpretation put forward in Vatican II documents. They are: being attentive to the unity of the Bible as one whole story; reading Scripture within the context of the academic, spiritual and theological Tradition within the Church; and, focusing on Scripture as a document of faith written with communities of faith to nourish and illuminate faith (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1997, paras. 111–114; Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, section C, B, 2). In addition, consideration of intertextual relationships between Old and New Testament texts reflects the New Testament as written in light of the Old Testament. Finally, a holistic investigation of the text as one canon (one story) aids biblical interpretation, finding meaning in the text appropriate for our world today (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1997, para. 108; Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, section: I, C). In summary, Scripture without authentic interpretation is a "dead letter" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1997, para. 111), as the sacred text needs to function as a light for Christian life for each generation (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1997, para. 141).

For teachers in the Archdiocese of Brisbane, the religion curriculum states that the three worlds of the text approach must be used for an in-depth study of Scripture (*Religious Education Curriculum P-12*, 2020, p. 232). The three worlds of the text is an historical-critical approach to biblical interpretation. Therefore, there is recognition that the writings of biblical authors reflect the culture of their own time (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1997, para. 106; Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, section: I, 2). Consequently, interpretation of the Bible needs to consider the intention of the human authors, their cultural contexts, and the text's genre (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1997, section 110).

2.1.3.   Christian Perspectives on Fundamentalism

The literature reveals that the Church does not dictate how to interpret specific Scripture texts, but does provide guidelines and boundaries for how to interpret biblical texts appropropriately. The literature is also clear that a fundamentalist interpretation is never appropriate (*Religious Education Curriculum P-12*, 2020). Therefore, this section explores issues related to a fundamentalist approach to interpreting Scripture.

Fundamentalist interpretation sprang from the Reformation due to a concern with adherence to the literal meaning of the biblical text (Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity, 2017). A fundamentalist interpretation comes from the premise that the Bible is error-free and therefore means what is stated, with no interpretation required other than literal (Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, section: I, F). An example from a Christian Reformation Community Church in Brisbane espouses a fundamentalist approach by declaring that the Bible as the Word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit, "is infallible (completely trustworthy), inerrant (without error)" and "authoritative" (Christian Reform Community Church, n.d., para. 1). In contrast, the following quote displays the strength of the position that the Catholic Church takes on a fundamentalist approach to interpreting the Bible:

Without saying as much in so many words, fundamentalism actually invites people to a kind of intellectual suicide. It injects into life a false certitude, for it unwittingly confuses the divine substance of the biblical message with what are in fact its human limitations (Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, section: I, F).

Both Christian faith communities profess the belief that the Bible is the Word of God, yet this statement itself is interpreted radically differently in each church community. A person's interpretation of the biblical text impacts personal and organisational decisions about how God calls Christians to live (Christian Reform Community Church, n.d., para. 1; Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, section: Preface). Uninformed interpretation of sacred texts can drive extreme, radical, violent behaviours or promote peaceful, tolerant living. For example, currently under challenge in the Catholic Church is the *Just War Theory*, which espouses war is justified when the conditions of having a just cause, the right intentions, legitimate authority, proportionality and probability of success are met (Justice and Peace Office, 2022). At the heart of this challenge is a call to recognise the Christian belief that Jesus, the central person of the New Testament whose life reflected the human face of God by authentically living love in the world, was a person of non-violence (Justice and Peace Office, 2022).

The above example demonstrates the impact of interpreting and teaching Scripture, and the importance of teaching critical thinking skills. Each generation needs to discern how to live in morally responsible ways, guided by theological reflection on the riches of the biblical texts in the Judeo-Christian tradition and never on one's own (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 30 June, 2015; Second Vatican Council, 1965, 18 November, paras. 29, 30). This example highlights the importance of determining the Christian Church community's positioning of the Bible's authoritative nature.

The Catholic Church cautions that sacred Tradition (doctrines, liturgical practices, Church teaching, creeds) and sacred Scripture demand the same loyalty (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1997, para. 81; Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, section:I, F; Second Vatican Council, 1965, 18 November, paras. 29, 30). The Bible itself is "theological interpretation of, and reflection on, historical realities and faith experiences" (*Religious Education Curriculum P-12*, 2020, p. 29). As this groundbreaking work from the Pontifical Biblical Commission states, Scripture learning is inviting people to discover "a profound appreciation of sacred Scripture" (Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, section: III, C, 3) because the meaning one can obtain from Scripture is "inexhaustible" (Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, section:III, B, 2). Therefore, teachers in Catholic school need to assist learners in interpreting the text beyond a literal or fundamentalist approach, to engage learners to critically think about the text, and search for diverse, appropriate, rich meaning.

2.1.4.   Hermeneutics

Osbourne (1991) theorises that hermeneutics is a spiral process that moves from text to context. Osbourne believes that the hermeneutical spiral process involves work (discovering the deeper, intended meaning of the author is usually not immediately clear to the reader), and after obtaining insights about the text in context the reader can then ponder the appropriate personal relevance of the text for life today. Osbourne's theory of the hermeneutical spiral can be reflected in the three worlds of the text approach which teachers in the Archdiocese of Brisbane are required to implement for teaching Scripture (*Religious Education Curriculum P-12*, 2020).

While recognising that no scientific study of the Bible will ever reveal the text's complete meaning (Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, section B), multiple approaches contribute to the interpretation of Scripture. However, examining the world of the text can involve

investigating the text through different lenses such as the genre and the symbolism and words in the text. Each form of biblical criticism aims to understand how the text communicated to its intended audience historically and today (Harrington, 2016; Second Vatican Council, 1965, 18 November, section 12).

The literature shows that scholars debate the merits of different approaches to biblical hermeneutics. The Catholic Church teaches that academic insights need to inform an investigation of biblical texts to reinterpret Scripture in light of contemporary knowledge and experience (Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, section: A, 1). The historical-critical method (also known as scientific biblical criticism) (Harrington, 2016) is a scientific study of the text, investigating knowledge of the authorship's circumstances and sources (Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, section A, 1). Pope Benedict XVI cautions that the historical-critical method has significant limitations as interpretation needs to include a hermeneutic of faith, or interpretation from a historical perspective alone may cast doubt on the historicity of some texts (Benedict XVI, 2010, section 35). Pollefeyt (2020a, p. 1) argues that teachers must engage in a triple hermeneutic task of interpreting the tradition, involving "interpretation of text, context and the biography of the student".

Reading the Bible also needs to take into account the structure and composition of the Bible, as the canonical approach observes the unity of the Bible as one complete work. Over time, each faith community has determined which books must be part of the Bible for each religious denomination (Harrington, 2016). The term *canon* describes this process, resulting in the Jewish and Protestant Christian canon for the Old Testament / Hebrew Scriptures, including thirty-nine books. The canon for Catholic and Othodox Christians includes forty-six books (Harrington, 2016). Each text viewed as a part of the whole canon helps identify the unity of God's plan for the world (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1997, para. 112; Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, section: C, 1).

2.1.5.   *Interpretation Leading to a Plurality of Meaning*

The whole faith community plays a role in interpreting the text (Benedict XVI, 2010, para. 30; Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, section C: 3). The Bible has a universal dimension because it communicates a God available to all people (Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, section III: C, 1), acknowledging other religions also express the dreams and fears of the world (Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, section III: C, 1). Pollefeyt and Bieringer (2005) reinforce that the Bible remains a mystery until each generation interprets it. "Written texts are open to a plurality of meaning" (Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, section B, 1) as opposed to only one right, accepted meaning to be obtained from the text. Therefore, Catholics today need to take an intelligent, spiritual approach to reading and interpreting the Bible (Sperry, n.d.).

Theological and spiritual approaches to biblical hermeneutics are growing, with each providing significant insights (de Villiers, 2019). Some scholars identify a need to ensure that the approaches used to interpret the Bible do not limit interpretation to an academic endeavour, advocating for a movement away from the poststructuralist era of teaching the Bible purely as a cognitive exercise (Plate et al., 2016). Instead, pedagogies need to enable embodied learning, including using the senses to discover rich meaning from the text (Plate et al., 2016). The process of interpreting Scripture (hermeneutics) is similar to knowing there are treasures buried in a backyard, which motivates one to keep digging and searching until the treasures are found (Osborne, 2017).

The literature reveals some criticisms of Scripture selection, placement and teaching within religious education in Catholic schools (Carswell, 2018a, 2018b; Pollefeyt, 2021; Stead, 1996). Some scholars argue that religious education curriculum designed around topics can limit students' ability to discover a plurality of meaning in Scripture because a theme predefines the meaning, and the content of the curriculum becomes the context for interpretation (Carswell, 2018b; Stead, 1996).

Ignoring a Scripture text's genre and biblical context can give rise to *proof texting*, where the text (often a fragment) becomes proof of a theological insight . Proof texting can limit the meaning one can obtain from the text and potentially miss the author's intended meaning (Bowie & Coles, 2018; Carswell, 2018b; Stead, 1996). Some religious educators argue that pedagogy and employing a heuristic tool such as The Three Worlds of the Text approach can assist in overcoming curriculum challenges, by ensuring Scripture teaching holds a lens to the historical, literary and contemporary worlds of the text and life today (McGrath, 2020). Stead (1996) also highlights the need for presenting accurate translations of biblical texts to children, drawing attention to the author and illustrator bias that can occur in Children's Bibles and biblical texts rewritten for children, which can miss the intended meaning.

Scripture teaching must allow for an open interpretation rather than viewing the text through a narrow lens (such as a single curriculum theme), which reduces the abilility to discover a multiplicity of rich meaning in the text (Carswell, 2018b; Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, section 4: A, 3; Stead, 1996). Therefore, it is critical not to use Scripture for a predetermined meaning. Carswell's analysis of the Brisbane Religion Curriculum identified this as an issue in the way that Scripture presents in the curriculum (Carswell, 2018b), as the inclusion of prescribed biblical texts mandated within the curriculum is to support the teaching of the curriculum. The concern and risk is that learners will only obtain meaning from the text related to the curriculum theme rather than the biblical text. Therefore, teaching a text such as the creation stories from Genesis 1 or 2 can lead to learners finding meaning from the text only concerning the curriculum theme of creation and stewardship. A deeper reading of the text would illicit insights such as the dignity of all people; the creative, ongoing power and love of God; the life-giving breath of the spirit of God, the complementarity of male and female relationships, the need to work as co-creators with God, the need to protect the voice of those silenced and the parallels with other creation

myths from different cultures (*The Catholic Study Bible*, 2016, RG 121-124).

Therefore, the literature suggests important implications and considerations for interpreting Scripture that apply to this study. First, scholars such as Carswell and Stead present a case that how Scripture is studied, presented or taught has ramifications for interpretation. Second, approaches to teaching and interpreting Scripture need to recognise distinct but interrelated differences between knowing *about* the text, understanding the meaning *within* the text and interpreting the text *for* contemporary meaning. Third, beyond approaches for interpretation, the literature suggests that text accuracy, pedagogy and resources can play a critical role in ensuring that Scripture teaching leads to a plurality of meaning.

2.1.6.   *Research on Teaching the Bible*

Stead (1996) conducted groundbreaking research (Carswell, 2018a) into the use of Scripture in Catholic primary schools in Victoria. Stead found that many teachers did not feel confident interpreting Scripture and turned to Children's Bibles rather than teaching from the adult text. Stead's research also identified the ten most frequently taught Scripture texts, reflecting ten well-known Scripture stories. Stead presents eight principles for teaching Scripture (p. 83), and some of these reflect growing awarenesses at the time, such as the need to teach about Jesus within his Jewish context.

The current edition of the Brisbane Catholic Education Religion curriculum (*Religious Education Curriculum P-12*, 2020) explicitly addresses most of Stead's principles (such as teaching accurate information about Judaism and Jesus as a Jew, text genres in Scripture, and the significance of the Bible for faith communities). However, the success of implementing some other principles requires more than an analysis of the curriculum itself, such as ensuring that teachers use an adult Bible rather than Children's Bible or picture story books. Stead

developed the KITE method (Know the text; Inspire the imagination; Translate to life and Express the heart) to teach Scripture. Stead believed that if teachers understood the text, they would know how to teach Scripture (Jones, 1999).

Carswell (1995), as a student of Stead's, completed her Master's thesis by investigating the strengths and limitations of five methods for teaching Scripture, including Godly Play and the KITE method. Carswell's analysis concluded that some approaches lacked academic rigour for classroom application, while some methods used engaging pedagogical strategies such as dialogue, poetry and drama to enable children to *play* with Scripture (Carswell, 1995). Carswell draws on the strengths of the methods investigated to develop her approach called *The Composite Model*, where learners Prepare to Hear the Word, Encounter the Word and Respond to the Word. Carswell notes that each method for teaching Scripture requires teachers to understand the text before teaching the text (Carswell, 1995). Stead (Stead, 1996) and Carswell's work has contributed significantly to the teaching of Scripture in Australian Catholic schools. However, absent from the literature is any follow-up research showing the impact of the KITE process or The Composite Model on practice and whether either process requires further development or what teachers need to implement either process effectively.

Following on from the work of Stead, Jones (1999) used a modified version of Stead's survey to investigate the teaching of Scripture to upper primary students in Catholic schools in South Australia. The research of both Stead (1996) and Jones (1999) found a correlation between higher levels of teacher study and higher levels of teacher confidence. Jones noted that a few participants taught texts from the Old Testament or about Judaism. Both studies also found that participants taught texts in isolation from their context, drawing on the thematic approach to teaching embedded in the religious education *Guidelines* from the Melbourne Archdiocese. Upper primary teachers identified challenges relating to students' literal understanding of the text and difficulties

relating Scripture to life. Recommendations included further teacher education in interpreting and teaching Scripture to avoid students receiving a "fundamentalist or minimalist education in Scripture" (Jones, 1999, p.8).

Internationally and nationally, there appears to have been little further research conducted on teaching Scripture in the past twenty-five years, especially empirical studies about primary or early years teachers' experiences of teaching Scripture and students' experiences of learning Scripture. While such research may exist, it may be published locally rather than widely dispersed in national and international journals. As a result, it is more common to find literature evaluating or critiquing the placement or approach to teaching Scripture outlined in religious education curriculum documents (Carswell, 2018a), with limited research about teacher practice, and teacher or learner perceptions of teaching and learning Scripture. The approaches to teaching Scripture named in this literature review provide a learning process for teaching Scripture, and these processes rely on teacher's having significant knowledge, understanding and interpretation of the text. Absent from the literature is a discourse about how teachers effectively build Scripture understanding, learners' abilities to transfer meaning from the text at various age levels, and levels of thinking that learners can reach when engaging in biblical education.

2.1.7. The Relevance for This Research

The literature review establishes that the Bible is a rich, literary work and extensive scholarship exists within the academic field of biblical studies (Chilstrom, 2019; Madigan, 2016) that teachers need to draw on to teach biblical literacy appropriately in Catholic schools (Stead, 1996). Teaching biblical literacy requires knowledge about the context, authorship and genre of biblical texts, along with skills to use different hermeneutical approaches to discern the intended meaning for the original audience and the potential meaning for one's contemporary time

and culture (Carroll & Collins, 2014; Harrington, 2016; Osbourne, 1991). Therefore, interpreting and teaching the Bible in Catholic schools can be complex.

Biblical interpretation must enable learners to draw meaning from the text rather than result in adults imposing meaning (National Catholic Education Commission, 2021). As religious education is an academic area like other learning areas, teachers must also be able to challenge inappropriate interpretations of the text (Grajczonek & Truasheim, 2017). Osbourne's seminal work (1991) asserts that interpreting Scripture is always ongoing, characterised as a spiral process, which suggests that teaching Scripture is an endless, lifelong search for meaning rather than a process completed by studying and teaching a biblical text in one year level. Therefore, Scripture learning in religious education is not a search for *the right answer*. Instead, the meaning discovered must guide building a world where the dignity of all matters, as the Bible needs to inspire people with *good news* about the unconditional love of God (Second Vatican Council, 1965, 18 November, para. 23).

The literature shows that biblical scholarship and exegesis derive from knowledge about the Bible's structure, purpose and composition and skills for interpreting the Bible, suggesting that teachers and children need to build *knowledge about the Bible* and *skills for interpreting the Bible*. For this study, it is necessary to consider that when teachers understand the complexities of interpreting the text, it may lead to concern about their ability to interpret the text appropriately as a teacher in a Catholic school (Law-Davis et al., 2019). Fear of interpreting the text could block capacity building and self-efficacy for teaching Scripture.

2.2. Teaching Scripture Within Religious Education

Different Catholic dioceses in Australia have different approaches to religious education (National Catholic Education Commission, 2018). However, a national framework represents the core components of religious education curriculum (National Catholic Education Commission,

2018). This framework identifies twelve broad areas of learning within religious education and demonstrates that all areas are interconnected, with Scripture represented as one of these areas. The representation outlines broad areas of interconnected knowledge and understanding, together with skills and dispositions that enable enduring learning in Religious Education. All elements shown in Figure 2 are covered in religious education curricula in Australia. However, the diagram in Figure 2 may create an impression that Scripture is one of twelve areas of equal importance.

Figure 2

Broad Areas of Learning in Religious Education

Note. Figure 2 is from *Religious education in Australian Catholic schools* (p. 17), National Catholic Education Commission, 2018, used with permission.

In contrast, the National Catholic Education Commission website expresses that Scripture is "the driving force of Religious Education" as Scripture "infuses each area of study in Religious Education" (National Catholic Education Commission, 2021, para. 1). This discrepancy picks up a core tension in the literature about the place of Scripture in religious education. It is a critical distinction that may readily impact judgements about the placement and degree of Scripture in religious education curricula and system and school-based decisions about how to teach Scripture.

Within the Archdiocese of Brisbane, religious education is a distinct key learning area as an academic subject, with no catechetical component and taught with the same rigour and engagement expected in every other learning area (*Religious Education Curriculum P-12*, 2020). As Scripture teaching is a component of religious education, curriculum writers exercise a high degree of influence in determining the approach to Scripture teaching in each diocese. The following examples show that the literature presents some challenges concerning how religious education needs to do justice to the teaching of Scripture.

Pollefeyt (2021) and Stead (1996) raise the issue of poor selection of Scripture texts within religious education, limiting learners' ability to engage in theological dialogue and interpret biblical texts for rich meaning. Pollefeyt argues that it is not beneficial only to offer learners a positive framework that avoids negative associations. Avoidance of texts that deal with vulnerability and life's challenges can lead to shallow teaching and understandings about God, which can move learners from literal belief to no belief, leaving learners with the idea that "Religious faith is something naive and sweet for children" (Pollefeyt, 2021, p. 11). Instead, Pollefeyt proposes presenting a theology of vulnerability and responsibility where God interrupts our human experiences and comfortability. God is represented as unpredictable, calling for change to bring about justice and is beyond human comprehension, especially in times of pain and unexplainable suffering (Pollefeyt, 2021). Carswell's

(2006) research concurs and highlights the risks of not presenting a wide diversity of biblical metaphors for God, as limiting understanding of God can lead to limited understandings of the nature of God and the way that God can work in the world.

2.2.1.   *Surface Learning, Deep Learning, Transfer Learning*

As an academic learning area, religious education needs to use teaching practices that reflect the same academic rigour and powerful pedagogies required for every other key learning area (*Religious Education Curriculum P-12*, 2020). The recent work of researchers such as John Hattie plays a role in considering how to teach religious education. The following section outlines how religious education (including the teaching of Scripture) can benefit from distinguishing between different types of learning, which holds relevance for building the capacity and self-efficacy of teachers to facilitate meaningful learning.

Hattie (2021) illustrates that learning occurs at different levels of meaning, which matters for Australia's educational health. The literature highlights differences between surface learning (learning facts as knowledge), deep learning (relating knowledge to lead to conceptual understandings), and transfer learning (application of learning to a new situation) (Hattie & Donoghue, 2016). Hattie (2019, para. 2) remarks that he has "continued to be concerned about the grammar of surface learning that has spread like a virus across our schools", as Australia finds itself falling short of national goals and slipping in international educational rankings. Debate rages on how to improve education nationally (Hunter, October 17, 2022).

While having its origins in adult learning, another paradigm arising is transformative learning that can take place from a young age. Transformative learning arises from Mezirow's (2003) work on understanding how adults learn most profoundly, at a cognitive level, where learners find their existing frameworks of reference change due to learning new perspectives (Dirkx et al., 2006). Yet transformative

learning can also change attitudes, views, and tolerance levels as soul or inner work (Dirkx et al., 2006), where the experience of the outer world transforms the interior self. Transformative learning occurs when learning impacts so deeply that it informs and transforms the decisions we freely make about how to live in the world and empowers people to live ethically and change the status quo (Alexander, 2018).

The notion of transformative learning aligns closely with the purpose of teaching Scripture. The literature suggests that educators can make a positive difference for a lifetime by ensuring that learning opportunities extend beyond surface learning to deep learning and transformative learning (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018). In religious education, surface learning leads only to the knowledge of biblical stories. Deep learning leads to discovering meaning from biblical stories. However, transformative learning leads to learners applying their profound insights from biblical learning to their lives, cognisant of how they can choose to play their part in championing hope, authentic love and justice that respects the dignity of all. Deep learning also enables learners to realise that some people will choose to do this through being part of a faith community and others will not, as religious identity and community is an individual choice.

2.2.2.   The Concept of a Hermeneutical Space

Pollefeyt (2020b) draws from his research across multiple continents to put forward the idea that all humans possess a continually *fragile hermeneutical space*, which has an inbuilt capacity for making meaning. This hermeneutical space is an inner space that is vulnerable, discovered through experiences of pain, suffering, empathy, wonder, symbols, rituals and stories. This description seeks to explain that during life challenges, highlights and some everyday moments, the inner space of meaning-making can become exposed, requiring great sensitivity and careful attention because this is one's spiritual centre. In this space, people can experience God (Pollefeyt, 2020b). Pollefeyt (2020b) writes

that the religious educators' role is to enable learners to open their fragile hermeneutical spaces. Through this journey, learners discover how to listen respectfully to many voices in the world, pondering experiences that illuminate meaning in their lives and provide greater clarity about what is sacred. Such a space is also vulnerable to manipulation, disruption and rejection, necessitating that religious education teachers are authentic witnesses of faith, capable of walking the journey with learners (Pollefeyt, 2020a, 2020b).

Pollefeyt (2020a, 2021) argues that religious educators need to have the role of moderating and guiding rather than presenting narrow perspectives that remove the complexities of life. Pollefeyt warns that faith holds no explanations for some life experiences. Therefore, if religious educators offer simplistic ways of viewing the world, it will not equip learners to consider and dialogue about how challenging times also bring opportunities, as can be identified through the positive and negative impacts of living through a pandemic. Furthermore, providing learners with opportunities to grapple with and find spiritual meaning within experiences is necessary because people readily reject faith or turn to literal belief if religious education only presents shallow or literal understandings (Pollefeyt, 2020a).

Self-understanding, engaging with the Christian story in contexts that recognise and dialogue with diversity, and growing more sensitive to questions that can uncover meaning, are key hallmarks of the hermeneutical-communicative model of religious education (Pollefeyt, 2020b). Pollefeyt's theory of the hermeneutical-communicative space also represents an intersection between spirituality and religious education, suggesting that the two are inextricably linked. The way that biblical texts are selected and taught can impact one's spirituality, and presenting texts that expose learners to theologies of vulnerability and responsibility can deepen awareness of navigating life challenges (Pollefeyt, 2021).

2.2.3. *The Spirituality of Children*

Research into young children's spirituality is an independent and growing academic area that some people link to religion and others see as a component of child development or integral to the rights of a child (Allana et al., 2017). Therefore, exploring spirituality separately from religious education is helpful for this study to discern the issues and insights pertinent to this topic. Three major themes seem to run throughout the literature on children's spirituality. First, spirituality is an activity of making meaning (Sagberg, 2017). Second, spirituality is a fundamental right of every child (United Nations, 1989, Article 17). Third, a holistic view of child development recognises that children need to develop socially, emotionally, physically, cognitively and spiritually (Watson, 2017). DeSouza, Watson and Bone (2016, p. 346) put forward an understanding of spirituality as a way that "frameworks of meaning" are created by individuals that shape their way of living in the world, influencing decisions, actions and promoting a way of interpreting experiences to find purpose and meaning.

Defining spirituality within religious traditions is a task that has taken place over thousands of years. However, defining spirituality within a universal framework has been more challenging, with a common theme in the literature reflecting a lack of an agreed definition of spirituality (Adams et al., 2016; Bryant et al., 2020; Grajczonek, 2010; Watson, 2017) or spiritual development (Haugen, 2018). However, a common understanding among scholars is that spirituality emerges in childhood as a natural part of human nature (Bryant et al., 2020), and the early years are the most formative for spirituality (Haugen, 2018). Watson (2017) argues that the success of holistic and interdisciplinary approaches to spirituality will not be successful until people reach a shared understanding about what they mean by spirituality.

Education documents have long included the term *spirituality,* without providing parameters for understanding or deepening spirituality (Nye, 1998). Those who argue a case for spirituality suggest that every

human possesses innate wiring to experience glimpses of "the infinite absolute" (Bryant et al., 2020, p. 305), which occur most readily in meditative silence (as retold in stories of Jesus, Buddha, Moses and Mohammed). When humans attempt to put this experience into words, it becomes religion, framed with a set of beliefs and practices (Bryant et al., 2020), with spirituality reflecting one's personal experience and religion reflecting a community understanding of how to give expression to faith. Placing more attention on the *words* (dogmas and adherence to creeds) than the *silence* experience can lead to a disconnect between spirituality and religion (Bryant et al., 2020).

Researchers have found a link between spirituality and one's sense of meaning and purpose in life (Coles, 1991; Hyde, 2020) and that this notion of spirituality can emanate from a profound childhood experience (Bryant et al., 2020). From a research and academic perspective concerning children's spirituality, Nye (1998) names the period between 1944 to 1977 as one of "deafening silence" (p. 8). However, in this same period, the work of practitioners such as Maria Montessori exemplified many characteristics that contemporary scholarship reveals can develop and deepen children's spirituality (Nye, 1998).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (United Nations, 1989, Article 17, Article 27) outlines that all children have a right to spiritual development and appropriate resources to nurture spiritual growth. The spirituality of children needs to be protected (United Nations, 1989, Article 32), marking a move towards viewing children's development in a holistic manner (Adams et al., 2016) and highlighting how the right to spiritual development has had little coverage in educational policies (Sagberg, 2017). There is a growing theory that the spirituality of children is integral to well-being and just as essential as every other area of children's development (Cervantes & Arczynski, 2015; Grajczonek, 2010; Haugen, 2018). Reflecting this movement, the Australian Government produced a national framework for young children's learning that includes the spiritual dimension of children's lives

(Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [DEER], 2019). The document defines spirituality as a range of human experiences, such as wonder and awe, with an exploration of being and knowing (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [DEER], 2019).

Research by Coles (1991) and Nye (1998) found that all children have individual spirituality and may have active spiritual lives from a very young age, even if they are not part of a religious tradition. What sets their work apart is that the research focus was on spirituality alone rather than spirituality through the lens of religious education or adult agendas (Nye, 1998). Nye's work remains the most prominent theory in the spirituality of children (Minor & Grant, 2014).

2.2.4.   Spirituality, Religiosity and Religion

For centuries the focus on spirituality has also been linked with religiosity (spirituality within religion) (Adams et al., 2016; Grajczonek, 2010), and religion (Grajczonek, 2012). Only in recent years has research into the spirituality of children focused on spirituality alone, without religiosity (Adams et al., 2016; Grajczonek, 2010), although religious affiliation is not essential for deepening spirituality (Hyde, 2020). As not all children would identify as being religious when they arrive at school (and may never do so), spirituality may be an appropriate starting point or a necessary addition to the religion curriculum (Grajczonek, 2010; Hay & Nye, 1996; Rossiter, 2013).

There is diversity in how spirituality is defined and promoted within educational systems. In Australia, the definition of *spiritual* provided in the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [DEER], 2019, p. 49) is "a range of human experiences including a sense of awe and wonder, and an exploration of being and knowing". In contrast, the definition of Christian spirituality provided for schools in the Archdiocese of Brisbane comes from McBrien (1981):

Christian spirituality is (grounded) in the life of the Triune God, focused on Jesus Christ, situated in the Church, and ever responsive to the Holy Spirit. It is also visionary, sacramental, relational and transformational (as quoted in the *Religious Education Curriculum P-12*, 2020, p. 214).

An examination of the above curriculum document (*Religious Education Curriculum P-12*, 2020) reveals that spirituality is mentioned only within the context of religion. Grajczonek (2010) highlights that it can help to think of a continuum for spirituality with religion at one end of the spectrum and no religion at the other end. Studies show teachers connect spirituality with values education (Pandya, 2017) and highlight the need for teachers in Catholic schools to clearly understand how to enable learners to nurture spirituality across the entire continuum of spirituality and the learning process for religious education (Madden, 2021). Otherwise, Catholic schools risk becoming *Values schools* (Pollefeyt & Bouwens, 2010) which moves the school away from a core Catholic identity that recontextualises the faith story appropriately to bring meaning to the community today.

After reviewing the literature on spirituality for her doctoral thesis, Madden (2021, p. 35) provides the following definition:

> Spirituality is the human experience of living in the relationship between the divine and the human: between ultimate concerns and the here and now, between call and response, between belonging and distantiation, between unknowing and knowing.

Madden (2021) identifies four quadrants of spirituality through her research: Vulnerability (a focus on mystery, truth-seeking and trust); Responsibility (a focus on responding to the needs of the other); Fulfilment (a focus on the joy of discovering meaning and purpose in life); and Commitment (a focus on the human need for belonging). The four quadrants exist within a spirituality framework designed as a heuristic for teachers. This Two Dimensional Framework of Spirituality incorporates the

possibilities of spirituality inside or outside a religious framework.

2.2.5.   *Research Insights Into the Spirituality of Children*

Despite significant development in this area, research exploring the spirituality of early years children is limited (Adams et al., 2016). Although curriculums or national frameworks of countries such as Australia, England and Northern Ireland include spirituality, it remains the least understood component of early childhood development (Adams et al., 2016). Research studies have shown that children can build spiritual understandings by engaging in processes for story-telling (Huth et al., 2021; Hyde, 2019; Mata-McMahon, 2017), expressing humour, symbolism, and imagination.

Nye (1998) found that children have an innate capacity for spirituality, which she describes as relational consciousness, characterised by an inner awareness of being able to relate to others, creation, God, and a deeper sense of themselves (Hay & Nye, 1996; 2006 revised). Nye and Hay's research leads them to conclude that "spirituality is the bedrock on which rests the welfare not only of the individual but also of society, and indeed the health of our entire planetary environment" (2006, p. 141). In addition, other researchers are increasingly finding a link between spirituality and well-being (Doyle Fosco, 2022; Kor et al., 2019; Makanui et al., 2019).

Nye and Hay (2006) found that both children and adults require the six conditions of (a) space (the environmental conditions that nurture awareness of relationships), (b) process (spirituality reflects a life-long journey), (c) imagination, (d) relationship, (e) intimacy and, (f) trust to develop spirituality. This quest for meaning situates spirituality firmly within the theoretical and philosophical study of ontology (Hay & Nye, 1996; Hyde, 2020). For developing spirituality, trust is imperative, as the adult needs to believe that each learner is capable of developing spirituality, and that this journey involves uncertainties and mystery rather than coming to a place of absolute truths with all answers

uncompromisingly supported by tangible evidence (Minor & Grant, 2014; Nye, 1998; Stockinger, 2019).

Relational spirituality is another theoretical underpinning of research that spans psychology and religion, exploring how people connect spiritually (Chapman et al., 2021). The quest for authentic ways of living, working and being with one another, and building a relationship with the sacred and others are vital aspects of relational spirituality, and are closely related to Nye and Hay's theory of relational consciousness (Hay & Nye, 1996). Further developing insights into different aspects of spirituality, a contemporary perspective increasingly links spirituality with non-cognitive ways of knowing (Hyde, 2018). While cognitive ways of *knowing* have been privileged historically, Hyde (2018) presents four ways of developing spirituality: actional knowing, situational knowing, relational knowing and corporeal (bodily) knowing. One of the challenges is ensuring that children have access to adults and increasing vocabulary that provides them with a language and a safe person to share their inner ways of knowing (Hay & Nye, 2006).

The literature presents a body of work about spirituality distinct from religious education, yet has the potential to link to religious education. While cognitive ways of *knowing* are central to religious education, the literature suggests that if the purpose of teaching Scripture is to illuminate how to live, hope, and love in the world, then religious education can impact beyond a cognitive level for both learners and teachers. The following section provides further connections between spirituality and religious education, raising the question of whether Catholic schools need to consider how Scripture learning can facilitate spirituality in all learners, regardless of whether people identify as a person of faith. Given the increasing association of spirituality with well-being, this question needs serious consideration, especially when spirituality is increasingly a focus of early childhood curriculum frameworks. Potentially, this situation may expose another theory-practice gap.

2.2.6. The Relevance for This Research

The literature on spirituality is significant for this study, as it raises critical challenges for early years religious education teachers. The first is whether the teaching of Scripture (religious education) recognises that all children have a capacity for spirituality. Nye's findings challenge religious education teachers to be mindful that children are not starting from a position of emptiness, no matter their religious background. Therefore, in a country where people increasingly prefer no religion (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017), children can still deepen their spirituality in their early years.

The second challenge is how to provide the six conditions required to develop spirituality in an educational setting. A third challenge is whether all early years teachers believe that young children can find meaning in biblical stories. Nye's research suggests that young children have this capability, regardless of whether they identify as people of faith or belong to a religious tradition. The fourth challenge for early years teachers is to distinguish between the child's spirituality and religious knowledge and understanding of the child. For example, a whole class of early years learners in a Catholic school may have virtually no experience in the Catholic rituals and experiences of the faith tradition, even if enrolment forms identify children as belonging to the Catholic faith tradition. The literature suggests that such a class group would still have an innate capacity for spirituality.

The literature suggests that young children may experience a range of emotions at a physical level when listening to biblical stories. Therefore, early years teachers need to know strategies to respond respectfully to children's spiritual experiences, dialogue with learners about questions that relate to the mysteries of life, and process life events with learners in a safe environment where not all answers are known. Hyde's research challenges early years teachers to create learning environments where *knowing* is valued beyond a cognitive level.

In summary, this literature review section has exposed a gap between theory and practice. While spirituality is a growing area for holistic education in the early years, spirituality outside of religion and religiosity remains unmentioned in the curriculum documents used by teachers in this research. Grajczonek (2010) names spirituality as a fundamental component of early years learning. However, only religious spirituality will be the focus if teachers adhere to the religious education curriculum documents used for this research (*Religious Education Curriculum P-12*, 2020).

2.3. The Importance of Early Years Education

A growing body of evidence shows that the impact of early childhood education and learning environments can last over a lifetime (Elango et al., 2015). Deficits in development in the early years (cognitive, physical, psychological and socioemotional) increase the risks of poor social, economic and health outcomes for individuals and can become challenging to reverse beyond early childhood (Beckmann, 2017). Currently, early childhood education is changing rapidly from both positive and negative forces, including research advances, accountability demands and a movement towards increased academic skill acquisition and less emphasis on pedagogy or learning through the arts (Haslip & Gullo, 2018).

A review of the literature across states and territories in Australia reveals considerable diversity in current documentation for early years education and the degree to which the documentation draws upon early childhood theories and provides pedagogical knowledge to support teachers. This literature review section aims to identify implications from science, theory and the Australian context that build an understanding of early years learning and can influence pedagogical decision-making. In addition, the information gleaned from this review will contribute to identifying and designing interventions that might have the most potential to build better practice through the data collection stage of this inquiry.

A report commissioned by the Australian Government (Gonski et al., 2018) highlights both the importance of early years education and significant challenges that need urgent attention. Diversity in early childhood learning starting points links directly to the substantial slippage in fifteen-year-old Australian students' results on the international PISA test (Gonski et al., 2018). The report revealed that a child in year three from a disadvantaged background is ten months behind the educational achievement levels of their peers from an advantaged background. By the time the child reaches year nine the gap has grown to around two and a half years, necessitating calls for investing in early childhood education to create a level playing field for all learners (Gonski et al., 2018).

A report by Pascoe and Brennan (2018) into early childhood education calls for the Australian Government to view early years education holistically, rather than dividing policies, frameworks and language used for pre-school settings and primary school settings. This report revealed that early childhood educators (of children below school age) can lack qualifications and skills suitable for working with young children (Pascoe & Brennan, 2018), resulting in low experience and lack of knowledge of childhood development. However, children who access high-quality early education are more likely to achieve high academic results, show school readiness, complete year twelve and university education, and attain higher income levels (Australian Institute of Health Welfare, 2015; Office Depot, 2022; Pascoe & Brennan, 2018). Pascoe and Brennan's report shines a spotlight on the urgency of change in early childhood education in Australia, as the authors state:

> Australia is below the OECD average in terms of investment in early childhood education and participation in early childhood education. It is not surprising that Australia's school outcomes are of concern – Australia fails to invest early, and pays for it later. Australia can and should do more for its children (Pascoe & Brennan, 2018, p. 7).

The highest factor determining the quality of early childhood education is the relationship between the child and the educator (Pascoe & Brennan, 2018; Shonkoff, 2017). Even when a child has experienced hardships and trauma, the common factor between children who still do well and those who struggle is that they all have at least one positive, stable relationship with a parent, teacher or another adult (Shonkoff, 2017). In addition, respectful relationships that promote dialogue also nurture creativity and ongoing learning engagement (Davies et al., 2013; Diamond & Whitington, 2015).

2.3.1. Early Years Learning Environments

Research increasingly recognises the environment's influence on learning (Davies et al., 2013; Green & Turner, 2017; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018; Shonkoff, 2017). Early years learning environments are no longer seen as the teacher's sole responsibility as learners need a voice in shaping their places for effective learning (Davies et al., 2013; Green & Turner, 2017; Hayes & O'Neill, 2019). One internationally acclaimed example is the Reggio Emilia approach in Italy, where teachers perceive the environment as so powerful it needs to be known as the *third teacher* (Westerberg & Vandermaas-Peeler, 2021).

In addition, research shows that the environment provides a powerful insight into pedagogy (Hayes & O'Neill, 2019; Huth et al., 2021). The inclusion of areas for play spaces is one obvious visual evaluation of expectations for how learners will learn and changes to the learning environment can have a positive, immediate impact on learning (Hayes & O'Neill, 2019). Curriculum and pedagogy are the driving forces underpinning good practice in early learning environments (Huth et al., 2021), indicating that multiple factors determine the strength of learning environments.

A systematic literature review on learning environments found that flexibility assisted in promoting creativity, collaboration, respectful

relationships, building partnerships with external personnel and agencies, and insights into learner needs (Davies et al., 2013). Additionally, time for open-ended planning also made a major contribution to the learning environment (Davies et al., 2013). These findings link to the vision espoused in the frameworks published by the Australian Government: *My Time, Our Place* (Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2011) and the *Early Years Learning Framework* [EYLF] (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [DEER], 2019), where the principles of respectful, reciprocal relationships and partnerships are at the heart of a vision for early years learning. There is evidence that the quality of the environment in which children spend their early years greatly influences their learning and emotional regulation capacity in later years (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018; Shonkoff, 2017).

2.3.2.   *Understanding how Young Children Learn*

This literature review provides an overview of research that can assist early years educators in understanding what learners need for high-impact learning. Key areas include understanding the development of young children's minds, providing clues for how to support learning, and understanding early years learning theories that can promote high-impact pedagogies. These areas all provide invaluable information for early years teachers and educational leaders wanting to grow and support evidence-based practices. This section of the literature review needs to point the research in the direction of highly effective pedagogies because they provide what theorists demonstrate early years learners need for effective learning. The ability to identify interventions with high potential to make a difference in the data collection phase of the research depends upon what the following sections reveal.

Teaching Scripture requires understanding of the major considerations for pedagogical decision-making, which Grajczonek states needs to include both how to teach and how children learn. Knowledge

from science about how young children learn must play a major part in deciding how to teach young children (OECD, 2018; Ostroff, 2012), ensuring that teaching "activates, responds to, promotes and extends children's learning" (Grajczonek, 2013, p. 13). Evidence-based practices that draw on knowledge of how young children learn may differ from traditional teaching practices (Cantor et al., 2019; Ostroff, 2012).

Brain Development. Over recent decades a significant body of research has identified the importance of the early years of a child's development being a critical time in which the architecture of the brain profoundly develops (Calder, 2014; Cao et al., 2017; Long et al., 2017; Shonkoff, 2019). Medical research shows that the body structures of a foetus change in response to the mother's bodily and mental states (Moore et al., 2017). The first thousand days of foetal and infant development can have a life-long impact on brain development, biological and developmental functioning, including being linked to adult chronic diseases such as cancer, stroke and diabetes (Moore et al., 2017). In the first few years of life "more than 1 million new synapses (connections between neurons) form every second" (Shonkoff, 2019).

After this astonishingly rapid development, the brain enters a new stage described as pruning, where the refinement of synapses strengthens the synapses used and those not used are discarded (Ostroff, 2012; Shonkoff, 2019). Medical imaging shows that the neural networks in a brain are as unique as fingerprints (Ostroff, 2012), and early identification of a child's brain *fingerprints* can predict child development and education needs (Cao et al., 2017). The experience of stress or trauma early in life builds neural pathways for rapid response and reduces brain development for planning and impulse control (Shonkoff, 2019; Wenger & Lövdén, 2016).

Research reinforces the critical role of significant adults, quality relationships and environments in supporting brain development (Archer & Siraj, 2015; Arthur et al., 2020; Long et al., 2017). Medical imaging

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indicates that before children can talk, their brains appear to engage in rehearsing how to speak (Galinsky, 2018). Research has found that healthy brain architecture develops when children experience language-rich environments, indicating that conversations with adults assist children in developing greater verbal skills (Galinsky, 2018; Shonkoff, 2017).

Galinsky (2018) refers to early years educators as brain-builders because they assist children in developing language and literacy. Research also shows that younger children have lower academic performance overall than older children in the same class, correlating with research that the brain develops more connections as children physically grow (Wenger & Lövdén, 2016). Therefore, the cognitive ability of one learner compared to another may have less to do with genetic ability and more to do with the child's stage of development.

Early childhood educators can significantly increase their knowledge of planning for effective early years education by learning about brain development in the early years (Diamond & Whitington, 2015). In addition, understanding the critical role that supportive relationships with adults play in building trust, language acquisition, and learning environments that promote brain development for early years learners advantages pedagogical decision-making (Cantor et al., 2019; Diamond & Whitington, 2015). So, too, does an understanding of the plasticity of brain networks in the early years (Cao et al., 2017) and epigenetics, where science shows that genes can essentially be switched on or off by environmental factors (Shonkoff, 2019).

Knowledge about brain development in early childhood can drive pedagogical decision-making. Teacher understanding about *why* some teaching strategies (such as repetition), pedagogies and learning environments can advantage or disadvantage early years learners. Knowledge of brain development in the early years also spotlights the incredible importance of providing learners with what they need for effective education and development in the first eight years of life.

2.3.3.   *Early Years Learning Theories*

The literature on early years pedagogy reflects a diverse landscape, emanating from multiple and historical philosophies about children and how children learn (Arthur et al., 2020; Breathnach et al., 2017; Grajczonek, 2010). The work of Erikson (psychosocial theory to understand how identities develop), Skinner (behavioural theory to understand what drives behaviour), Bronfenbrenner (bioecological theory to understand how the environment interacts with the child), and Parten (theories of social play) reveal some of the theories that have impacted early childhood (Arthur et al., 2020; Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY), 2016). The EYLF (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [DEER], 2009) document states that multiple theories must drive early childhood education.

Vygotsky and Piaget are two cognitive theorists whose work has impacted early childhood (Arthur et al., 2020; McLeod, 2020; Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY), 2016). Vygotsky's sociocultural theory deems that learning occurs through social interaction (Moore, 2011). There is a point of learning readiness that Vygotsky names the Zone of Proximal Development (ZDP) of being cognitively capable but not yet able to show this independently, but they can with assistance (Grajczonek, 2013; Moore, 2011). Vygotsky coined the term *knowledgeable other* for the adult who provides support to scaffold learning, then gradually decreases support as the learner builds skill acquisition (McLeod, 2020). While Vygotsky did not use the term *scaffolding*, pedagogical approaches and educational frameworks now frequently align the need for scaffolding with Vygotsky's learning theory (Moore, 2011).

Vygotsky's theory presents language and thinking as interdependent, as language development aids higher-order thinking progression (McLeod, 2020; Moore, 2011). Vygotsky also outlined that children actively learn through play, drawing on accepted rules from real-

life situations to use fantasy and imagination to recreate contexts where these rules are enacted (Nicolopoulou et al., 2009). Children develop language and social abilities through play and readily enjoy learning (Broadbent, 2015; Fleer, 2015; Nicolopoulou et al., 2009; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Sproule et al., 2019).

Piaget's work has primarily focused on the individual rather than the individual learning within a social context (Arthur et al., 2020; McLeod, 2020) and has been a significant driver behind theories of play (Fleer, 2021). However, the four stages of cognitive development outlined by Piaget are evolving into new theories, as researchers discover that young children are even more capable than Piaget believed (Arthur et al., 2020; Babakr et al., 2019; Nicolopoulou et al., 2009). Vygotsky and Piaget also presented opposing beliefs, with Vygotsky positing that learning leads development and Piaget believing that development leads learning (Arthur et al., 2020; Huang, 2021; Veraksa et al., 2022).

Vygotsky and Piaget's cognitive theories emphasise that children can construct meaning themselves (Nicolopoulou et al., 2009). These insights drive constructivism as a philosophy about how children learn, as participants actively engaged in learning, with ideas that need to contribute to the learning process, rather than being passive recipients of learning (Grajczonek, 2013; United Nations, 1989). Constructivism is about learners constructing conceptual understandings through their experiences to problem solve and discover meaning (Breathnach et al., 2017).

Rogoff (2003) builds on Vygotskian theory to highlight the role culture plays in influencing development and learning through the rituals, practices, ideas and beliefs presented in children's cultural contexts (Arthur et al., 2020). Linking closely with constructivism is the notion of agency, reflecting increasing recognition of the rights of the child and emanating from a belief that children are highly capable learners whose views, experiences, and decision-making can enrich learning (Arthur et

al., 2020; Fluckiger et al., 2017, August 27; Grajczonek, 2013; Pascoe & Brennan, 2018; Rintakorpi, 2016; United Nations, 1989).

2.3.4.   *Metacognition*

The work of Piaget has led to contemporary research into metacognition (knowledge about one's own thinking) (Robson, 2016). Recent research has shown that children are capable of implicit metacognition (without awareness) from two and a half years of age (Geurten & Bastin, 2019). Hattie's meta-analysis identified that when learners have the skills to think about their learning, they can achieve up to eight months of educational progress (Hattie, 2012).

A study conducted across an academic year in six schools in Wales measured childrens' perceptions (aged 4.6 to 6.6 years) of how they demonstrated their thinking (Lewis, 2018). At the start of the study, children's comments indicated that they associated behaviours such as sitting with their ability to think. By the end of the study, having participated in multiple video stimulated reflective dialogue opportunities where children had ownership about what to video and what to discuss, children's perceptions of their thinking had markedly changed. Children were able to describe strategies and understandings that good thinkers engaged in, such as looking carefully at their work; making connections between learnings; and talking with others to obtain ideas.

Research in the area of metacognition (Robson, 2016) draws attention to learning being more than acquiring knowledge. Understanding why metacognition is important and knowing how to teach core skills for metacognition enables early years teachers to create learning environments where thinking is valued, dialogue about thinking is a regular occurrence, and there is increasing communication about how learners gain skills for influencing their own learning achievement. The literature draws attention to the need for teaching metacognition skills in the early years, assisting little people to be successful learners from the beginning of formal education.

2.3.5.   *Early Years Pedagogy*

The extensive and significant body of work on early years learning theories has underpinned a range of pedagogical approaches informed by early years research (Arthur et al., 2020; Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2014b; Farquhar & White, 2014; Fleer, 2021; Fluckiger et al., 2015; Grajczonek, 2010). The translation of *pedagogy* translates from Greek to English as "to lead the child" (Farquhar & White, 2014, p, 822). Scholarship in early years pedagogy has influenced the development of early years curriculum and frameworks such as the EYLF (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [DEER], 2019), the Australian Curriculum *(Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2014a)* and the *Queensland kindergarten learning guideline* (Queensland Studies Authority, 2006). In addition, research about how children learn has shifted the emphasis in early years education from a transmission approach of imparting knowledge, to utilising pedagogical practices that value holistic approaches to children's social, cultural contexts, and learning (DEER, 2011; Barblett et al., 2016; DEER, 2019; Grajczonek, 2012; Haslip & Gullo, 2018).

The Australian Curriculum emphasises *what* to teach, giving rise to increasing whole-class teaching and direct instruction in early years classrooms (Barblett et al., 2016; Fluckiger et al., 2015). This misconception highlights the need to differentiate between *what* to teach (the curriculum) and *how* to teach (pedagogy) (Fluckiger et al., 2015). The literature also reveals a diversity of understanding about whether pedagogy facilitates learning, or is part of the learning process (Arthur et al., 2020; Fleer, 2021; Fluckiger et al., 2015).

The Queensland Government (Department of Education) recognised a commissioned research by a team from Griffith University to conduct a literature review and develop a way forward (Fluckiger et al., 2015). This literature review identified that early years learners need a variety of

approaches and multiple pedagogies (Fluckiger et al., 2015). The Griffith University team synthesised the findings of their extensive literature review, identifying eleven characteristics of pedagogies required by early years learners. These characteristics are active learning, creative investigations, collaboration, explicit teaching, scaffolded learning, playful learning, agency, language-rich, and dialogic learning. In addition, research on pedagogy reveals pedagogies that focus on the needs of learners and being responsive to learners are essential for high-impact learning (Fluckiger et al., 2017, August 27; Fluckiger et al., 2015).

2.3.6. Pedagogical Decision-Making

Research demonstrates that teachers draw on multiple conceptions about how children learn to make choices about how they impact learning (Kinkead-Clark, 2019; Paananen & Lipponen, 2018; Rintakorpi, 2016). They draw on knowledge from various sources to arrive at pedagogical reasoning (Schachter, 2017). Studies show the need for learning experiences that are mindful of children's cultural backgrounds and existing knowledge beyond school (Cantor et al., 2019; Karabon, 2021), indicating a strong need for pedagogical decision-making to be informed by the cultural and social background of the child (Kinkead-Clark, 2019).

Numerous studies suggest that pedagogical decision-making in the early years needs to be learner-centred, provide scaffolding and enable active learning (Fluckiger et al., 2015; Hesterman & Targowska, 2020). The recent focus on academic achievement in the early years (Haslip & Gullo, 2018; Nicolopoulou, 2010) can mean that moving to an approach that holistically views learning is often met with caution (Barblett et al., 2016; Hesterman & Targowska, 2020). Furthermore, due to the recent changes in understanding early childhood, educators may need to embrace a paradigm shift to let go of historically held beliefs (Karabon, 2021). It can be challenging to depart from ideas about pedagogy as teacher-led and constructed child-centred pedagogy that is agentic, enabling learners to have a voice in their learning and is continually

responsive to learner needs (Karabon, 2021). Agency is defined as being able to participate in decision-making about what to learn and how to learn something for the purpose of expanding capabilities (Adair, 2014). The absence or presence of agency in early childhood classrooms impacts on learner's engagement, problem-solving capacities and teacher judgements for assessment (Adair, 2014).

Studies show that documenting and analysing pedagogy is a further issue that may need consideration for early years education (Arthur et al., 2020; Paananen & Lipponen, 2018). Teachers need to analyse aspects of pedagogical decision-making, including which children's voices and perspectives they preferenced and documented (Paananen & Lipponen, 2018). Research reinforces that pedagogical decision-making improves outcomes for learners when there is consistency and alignment between policies, local contexts and learning philosophies (Arthur et al., 2020; Rintakorpi, 2016).

In one study, data collected from teachers and students over two years highlighted five significant factors that influenced pedagogical decision-making: habitus (influence of a teacher's professional life), teacher motivation, ontological security (feelings of safety), routine, and time and place (Burridge, 2018). However, few studies have examined how early years teachers arrive at pedagogical decision-making daily instructions for language and literacy (Schachter, 2017). While there is significant literature to signpost how early years teachers need to facilitate learning, there is little research to show how practitioners make decisions about pedagogy.

Studies show the need for early years learning environments immersed in language and dialogue with adults (Davies et al., 2013; Fluckiger et al., 2015; Ostroff, 2020). Research reveals that children's language development is aided by exposure to increasingly complex language structures and open-ended questions (Paatsch et al., 2019; Siraj-Blatchford, 2010). An early years study in England (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010) identified highly effective pedagogical strategies being adult

modelling and *sustained shared thinking* opportunities. In this study, high-impact learning occurred when learners worked one-on-one with an adult or peer who asked open-ended questions to extend the learner's thinking to investigate, problem-solve, extend a narrative and evaluate. Analysis showed that from 5,808 questions posed by teachers during the study, only 5.5 per cent were open-ended questions. Half of the activities conducted in highly effective learning environments were initiated by learners, with adults often extending these activities to provide a cognitive challenge without dominating. The study also found a correlation between Vygotsky's theory of the *zone of proximal development* with the open-ended questions and teachers' scaffolding techniques. Significantly, teachers with a strong understanding of how children learn and good curriculum knowledge were integral to creating highly effective learning environments (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010).

In early years pedagogy, unresolved tensions drive a wedge between theory and practice (Sproule et al., 2019). Three areas of debate include: The place and purpose of play, the degree to which learners are permitted to initiate their learning, and the type of learning that is needed (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Sproule et al., 2019), which all have implications for the role of the teacher. One of the consequences of these unresolved tensions is that early years teachers can lose pedagogical confidence. However, the literature suggests that building early childhood educational theory knowledge informs pedagogical decision-making and assists in building pedagogical confidence (Barblett et al., 2016; Sproule et al., 2019).

2.3.7.   *Play, Play Based Learning and Playfulness*

The debate around play and play-based learning is significant and impacted by the increased emphasis on academic standards in the early years, leading to a lack of consensus about the value of play-based learning (Barblett et al., 2016; Breathnach et al., 2017; Broadbent, 2015; Hesterman & Targowska, 2020; Kinkead-Clark, 2019; Nicolopoulou,

2010; Pyle & Danniels, 2017). In Northern Ireland, an eight-year study found that early years teachers were unclear about their role during play and the educational value of play, even after extensive professional learning (Sproule et al., 2019). A scoping review analysis of the literature about play-based learning (Pyle & Danniels, 2017) found that teachers' expectations and their perception of the value of play were primarily associated with whether play focused on developmental learning, or academic learning. At both a national and international level, research is revealing that early years teachers have differing views about how to define play-based learning, whether it holds value for academic learning and what a play-based pedagogical approach looks like in practice (Barblett et al., 2016; Breathnach et al., 2017; Fluckiger et al., 2017, August 27; Nicolopoulou, 2010; Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

In response to this diversity of understandings, the term *playfulness* has emerged as a resolution to the tension between theory and practice and to demonstrate that academic learning can occur through play (Fluckiger et al., 2015; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Sproule et al., 2019). Research has shown that children who engage in pretend play can have opportunities to practice advanced language skills, complex thinking and social and emotional skills (Corsaro, 2020; Pyle & Danniels, 2017). The notion of the environment as the third teacher calls early years educators to be attentive to how children can co-construct play spaces to build meaningful places for fostering imagination, identity and developing a sense of security (Green & Turner, 2017).

A Canadian research project identified five different types of play in kindergarten learners, in the following order from most child-directed to most teacher-directed: free play, inquiry play, collaboratively created play, playful learning, and learning through games (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). While there is a huge volume of literature on play, there is little research about how teachers position themselves in play (Fleer, 2015), which is knowledge teachers need to know how to facilitate learning through play in their role. Fleer's research addresses this gap by finding

that teachers position themselves in children's play in five different ways (being near play, in parallel, following play, engaged in play or being inside of the imaginary play) (Fleer, 2015). Researchers who study the impact of play on children's learning report that play is deceptively complex and shaped by teacher beliefs, practices and resources (Fleer, 2021; Kinkead-Clark, 2019).

While Fleer (2021) argues that studying play is "a serious and academic endeavour" (p. 116), the literature suggests that this understanding of play may not be prevalent in primary schools or shared among early years teachers. Pyle and Danniels note that accepting play as a vehicle for academic learning holds a significant challenge as "The adjustment required by the implementation of play-based learning, especially for those teachers who currently strictly view play as a context for the development of personal and social skills, is dramatic" (Pyle & Danniels, 2017, p. 287). The key to understanding the value of play and other high-impact pedagogies for early years learning appears to building knowledge of early childhood development and theories (Arthur et al., 2020; Fleer et al., 2013; Fluckiger et al., 2015; Grajczonek, 2013; Moore et al., 2017; Ostroff, 2012).

2.3.8.   *Scripture Storytelling*

Hansell (2015) argues that knowing biblical stories is essential to avoid being "religiously illiterate" (p. 25), and to understand biblical stories intelligently requires being able to question, explore and express these stories in different ways. Therefore, Scripture storytelling can be classified as a pedagogy and there are multiple approaches to storytelling throughout the literature. Phillips (2013) defines storytelling as the activity of a story being told orally to a live audience, where there is no book or script. Rahiem (2021) contradicts this understanding of storytelling by claiming that it is time to engage in digital storytelling using multiple tools to create an approach to teaching and resources for learning. Storytelling integrates play, narrative, individual and group

spontaneity and participation, providing a rich context for developing language, creativity, learning skills and building social competence (Holmes et al., 2019; Nicolopoulou et al., 2009).

Crafting a narrative for storytelling, either individually or in small groups, ensures that learners employ twenty-first-century skills of critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity (Cherry, 2017). Davies (2007, p. 3) claims, "We are storytellers every day whether we realise it or not and it is a skill that can be developed and used in education with exceptional results". Unfortunately, few teachers have embraced storytelling as a pedagogy (Phillips, 2013). However, there are significant benefits for enabling learners to build empathy and relationality, explore multiple meanings, connect learning and move from identifying what happened in the story to understand what it means (Hansell, 2015; Phillips, 2013). Additionally, storytelling activates the same parts of the brain (the vocabulary and sensory areas) as if learners directly experienced the storyline (Cherry, 2017).

Hyde (2019) writes on the methodology of Godly Play as a way to nurture children's spirituality through Scripture storytelling. Godly Play follows a strict process and principles for retelling biblical stories using images, objects, and characters to engage children in the story. According to the Godly Play Australia website, training occurs over three days and has evolved from over forty years of research and practice (Godly Play Australia, 2022). In Godly Play, the storyteller uses a *script* (a biblical story with language adapted for children) that storytellers memorise (Godly Play Australia, 2022).

Grajczonek and Truasheim (2017) raise concerns about using Godly Play in an educational setting. They point out that Jerome Berryman (influenced by the work of Maria Montessori and Maria Cavalletti in using concrete resources with early years learners), established Godly Play for use in Christian parish settings. Therefore, it began as a catechetical activity - where the aim is to develop faith - rather than a methodology

suitable for religious education - where the aim is to build knowledge (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, para. 69).

Grajczonek and Truasheim argue that the prescriptive structure and processes for Godly Play do not align with contemporary theories and understandings about how children learn. Key objections raised are that the Godly Play approach excludes children's perspectives and voices, allowing the storyteller to retain the power, while learners remain passive recipients of learning. In addition, there is no recognition of prior learning and no dialogical interaction with equality of initiation between adults and children to help learners build knowledge.

Other objections to Godly Play within a religious education context include the lack of agency, with children permitted to speak when asked specific questions to *wonder* about the story (Grajczonek & Truasheim, 2017). The role of the adult is to follow a strict process, including not making eye contact with learners to ensure the focus remains on the story (Hemmings, 2011). Godly Play does not involve adults sharing their interpretation of the story, even if a child poorly misinterprets a story in a way that could be harmful (Grajczonek & Truasheim, 2017). Literacy is limited to oral transmission, and using prescriptive resources may hinder children's imagination and propensity for imaginative, creative investigation and play (Grajczonek, 2010).

In contrast, teachers who employ early years theory in an educational setting would respond to learners and learners' interests and negotiate with learners how to listen to a sacred story and follow the cues of learners as appropriate. As Godly Play or variations on Godly Play have entered some Catholic primary schools, understanding this debate in the literature is crucial for this research.

While storytelling is a pedagogy endorsed through the literature for effective teaching (Cherry, 2017; Hansell, 2015; Huth et al., 2021; Law-Davis et al., 2019; Phillips, 2013), there is no consensus in the literature about how Scripture storytelling can occur within the educational endeavour of religious education. This significant gap can readily

contribute to theory-practice divisions in religious education settings. For example, some educators suggest that if a diocese takes a catechetical approach to religious education, Godly Play is appropriate but concede the need for adaptations in an educational setting (Law-Davis et al., 2019).

Hyde's earlier research identified learning dispositions that early years learners use through the process for Godly Play, where learners are involved in meaning-making and the meaning is visible to others. A later review of his research uncovered a new element termed *connecting to life*, where learners make connections between their own story and a Universal Story through the learning process for Godly Play (Hyde, 2019). Finally, it is important to note that the Godly Play debate in the literature does not centre around whether Godly Play promotes children's spirituality. Instead, the debate centres around the process for Godly Play not always reflecting early childhood theory, making it unacceptable in its pure form for a religious education classroom.

2.3.9.   *The Relevance for This Research*

The educational implications for this research are significant as the literature reveals multiple theory-practice gaps this study needed to address. Therefore, this literature review highlights that most early years teachers will probably not feel confident teaching Scripture for plausible reasons. First, historical reasons contributed to Catholics having little Scripture access and education. Second, the academic field of Scripture scholarship reveals that it will take time and skill to interpret Scripture adequately, conducting a close reading of the text (2022) rather than a superficial or literal reading. Third, the literature reveals significant tension between growing academic expectations for early years education and early learning development theories. Therefore, early years teachers are likely to have questions about what pedagogies they can confidently employ. In addition, they may not be highly familiar with the growing body of knowledge about early childhood development and theories unless they have recently undertaken academic study in this area.

However, the literature also highlights that building shared understandings about early childhood development and theory assists in building confidence in pedagogy and developing knowledge about why some pedagogies will have a higher impact than others. The debate about Godly Play draws the theory-practice gap further into the three distinct fields of early childhood theory, pedagogy and religious education. This debate has significant implications for what teachers in this study could implement for Scripture storytelling, given that participants work in a context where catechesis is not an explicit component of classroom religious education in the Archdiocese of Brisbane. Essentially, the literature exposes potential theory-practice gaps but also provides critical insights for addressing the complexities of closing or minimising the theory-practice gaps.

2.4. Capacity Building in Education

Given the multiple theory-practice gaps already exposed through the literature review and the focus of this study, the area of capacity building requires significant attention. The term *capacity building* only gained worldwide attention in the 1990s in the context of international and national development (Dinham & Crowther, 2011). One observation from reviewing the literature is that the term *capacity building* has broad usage. Capacity building frequently appears in the title of a project. Yet, the report on the research outlines what occurred to build participants' knowledge and skills and may not directly reference the term *capacity building* again. Therefore, there is a sense that capacity building refers to skill development and improvement in one's ability to undertake a role.

The following sections will examine how self-efficacy, collective efficacy, school leadership, culture and expectations, and teacher collaboration play a role when focusing on capacity building. The literature shows strong connections between capacity building and school leadership (Dinham & Crowther, 2011; Fullan et al., 2014; Hattie, 2012; Lynch et al., 2016). Likewise, professional learning undertaken in a supportive

context, focusing on collaboration and data-driven practices, enables teachers to build capacity (Johnston & George, 2018). The connection between *capacity building* and *professional learning* is so strong that sometimes the terms are used interchangeably throughout the literature (Johnston & George, 2018).

However, capacity building is also associated with transformation, where attitudes and mind-sets are changed over time (United Nations Academic Impact, n.d.). Such attitudes are closely associated with professional dispositions required for successful professional learning (Nolan & Molla, 2018). The notion is that effective capacity building is more than skill development. Understanding *why* practice needs to change reduces resistance to change and increases risk-taking to try a new approach. Hence, the role of theory in capacity building in education is vital and needs closer attention (Biesta et al., 2011) to achieve high robust research and sound educational practice.

In education, capacity building is strongly linked to different stages of change and managing change (Omdal, 2018). Continuous capacity building in education is successful when there are cycles of inquiry, feedback, evaluation and intervention (Fullan, 2016). Therefore, professional development may not lead to educational change if there is no opportunity to engage in cycles of inquiry and build social capital to gain a shared understanding of the need for change (Fullan, 2016). Studies also show that well organised leadership teams with a strong vision can build teacher capacity, resulting in higher learner achievement levels (Lynch et al., 2016)

Shared leadership (distributive leadership) assists build capacity in educational settings (Dinham & Crowther, 2011; Freund, 2017). However, capacity building in education is complex and requires system support (organisational capital), but it can occur through careful planning and attention to staffing, roles and functions (Dinham & Crowther, 2011; Lee, 2016). However, highly effective leaders build collective capacity by

creating the right conditions (Jones & Harris, 2014; Lee, 2016).

2.4.1.   *Professional Learning*

Surprisingly, research into professional learning for teachers that leads to student learning improvement does not have a long history compared to research about links between teacher effectiveness and school effectiveness (Muijs et al., 2014), and is much more challenging to obtain accurate data (Lindvall et al., 2018). Limitations to research accuracy include measuring professional learning effectiveness through multiple lenses, such as the degree to which learning accomplished the facilitator's or organisation's learning intentions rather than the degree to which teachers changed their practice after professional learning (Meissel et al., 2016). Accordingly, Sims and Fletcher-Wood (2021) argue that the most effective way to measure high-impact professional learning is to focus on the degree of skill acquisition rather than any of the characteristics associated with effective professional learning due to the methodological limitations of many studies. Therefore, the literature on evidence-based practices that enable professional learning to transform professional practice is a minor component of the literature on professional learning (Muijs et al., 2014).

Professional development is also frequently interchanged with professional learning throughout the literature, illustrating there is no consistent definition (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). However, these terms may be defined differently, with the term *development* reflecting something that happens to buildings and places (Mattson, 2014). In contrast, individuals who want to grow knowledge and skills are more likely to describe a need for learning rather than being developed. Additionally, when development happens to people as part of professional training, it is generally predetermined by trainers and policymakers and therefore has become associated with a top-down model (Labone & Long, 2016; Mattson, 2014).

Alternatively, professional learning emphasises the individual's actions, reflecting ownership rather than compliance (Mattson, 2014). Another term in the literature is continuing professional development and learning (CPDL) (Cordingley, 2015), which focuses on ongoing learning opportunities. The characteristics of CPDL include continuing collaboration with peers, the engagement of specialist and peer support, a commitment to enquiry learning and theory to refine teaching practice and the use of scaffolding and modelling (Cordingley, 2015). The relevance of the different terms for this study is the emphasis on ongoing professional learning and the similarities with the approach of DBR. This study's challenge is monitoring and supporting skill development through continuing professional learning effectively.

Traditionally professional learning begins with a focus on building professional knowledge and skills. However, a synthesis of the evidence of what contributes to effective professional learning for teachers identifies two pre-steps. The first is determining what knowledge and skills learners need and the second is recognising what knowledge and skills teachers need to enable their learners to achieve the intended learning (Muijs et al., 2014). When teachers see that professional learning positively impacts student learning, teacher motivation and responsibility for professional learning increases (Timperley, 2008). Therefore, professional learning needs to allow multiple opportunities to practise and monitor the effectiveness of implementing the skills learned and also allow teachers to have agency (Calvert, 2016; Muijs et al., 2014). However, the literature also shows varying degrees of improvement in student achievement due to professional learning, and often minor improvements that take several years to build (Meissel et al., 2016).

Research reveals elements of teachers' learning environments that promote effective professional learning (Timperley, 2008). Three key factors are learning with colleagues, being supported by knowledgeable expertise external to the group, and ensuring a strong focus on learners' needs (Timperley, 2008). Teachers find professional learning meaningful

and transformational when it occurs over a longer duration with ongoing opportunities to build relationships (Attebury, 2017). Research into high-performing systems shows that professional learning centred around improvement cycles creates a culture of ongoing professional improvement where teachers and leaders share responsibility for the learning of all participants (Jensen et al., 2016).

The inclusion of external expertise assists to align practice with current educational theories about learning, learners and pedagogies (Timperley, 2008). The inclusion of school leadership is also rated as a critical factor (Jones & Harris, 2014; Leithwood et al., 2008), especially when professional learning occurs within the school (Timperley, 2008). Beyond one school, creating communities of practice or professional learning communities to employ these processes leads to high-impact professional learning (Forde & McMahon, 2019; Lee, 2016).

Commonly named characteristics of effective professional learning include subject-specific learning, providing feedback on practice, collaborative practices, continuation over time, connection to practice, active learning, the use of external expertise and teacher buy-in or commitment (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Labone & Long, 2016). However, the literature suggests that teachers do not always value professional learning, but it can contribute to crafting exemplary teaching (Forde & McMahon, 2019).

Finally, professional learning focused on learners' needs also requires learning environments with a culture of trust and challenge (Daly et al., 2021; Leana & Pil, 2006). As a result, teachers become skilled in identifying what is necessary for deep learning rather than superficial, surface knowledge (Timperley, 2008). Liou and Canrinus (2020) draw from key theoretical concepts about learning to propose a capital framework for effective professional learning that includes three core components: social capital, human capital, and emotional capital. In addition, professional learning through mentoring significantly contributes to the social dimension of learning through building social capital (Nolan &

Molla, 2018). However, professional learning is valued when participants establish positive relationships with their mentors (Basturk, 2016).

The literature demonstrates that professional learning can be critical in building teacher confidence. This insight has relevance for this study as teachers are likely to experience low confidence in teaching Scripture as they know they will participate in research about capacity building. However, a gap in the literature is the impact of emotional capital on an educator's ability to ensure that professional learning strengthens practice (Daly et al., 2021), to provide further insight into influences such as a teacher's self-efficacy, emotional states and meaning-making. An observation of the literature is the diversity of impact that studies afford to professional learning changing practice.

2.4.2.   *Confidence, Self-Efficacy and Collective Efficacy*

High self-efficacy strongly correlates with confidence, and a survey of pre-service teachers in Western Australia found that 80% of respondents lacked confidence in teaching Scripture (Law-Davis et al., 2019). Therefore, this literature review section provides insights for effectively building confidence, self-efficacy and collective efficacy for teaching Scripture. The term 'self-efficacy' results from the work of Bandura (1997) over twenty years, asserting that "Confidence is a catchword rather than a construct embedded in a theoretical system" (p. 387). Self-efficacy is a person's belief in their capability level (Bandura, 1997). Klassen and Chiu (2010) define teacher self-efficacy (TSE) as a valuable quality that reveals teachers' beliefs about their ability to impact student learning. TSE is considered one of the highest motivational factors influencing job satisfaction and student achievement (Edinger & Edinger, 2018; George et al., 2018; Lee, 2016).

Bandura (1997) identified four sources of efficacy beliefs. The first is experiencing success (mastery experiences). The second is observing someone else experiencing success (modelling). The third is being told by someone trusted that we are capable of experiencing success

(persuasion). And the fourth is our emotional well-being that regulates our ability to believe in our skills (physiological state). Bandura's findings provide insights into *how* to build self-efficacy for teaching Scripture for this study and *how* educational leaders might support teachers to achieve success by implementing strategies such as modelling.

A synthesis study (Marjolein & Helma, 2016) incorporating forty years of research on TSE, found that teachers with high self-efficacy tend to cope with a range of behaviours, drawing on proactive, student-centred approaches that resulted in less conflict with learners. Findings from the study indicate that high TSE links with high job satisfaction, commitment, and sense of personal accomplishment. Teachers with high self-efficacy may also suffer less from stress, exhaustion and burn-out (Marjolein & Helma, 2016). Conversely, teachers with low self-efficacy may suffer higher levels of work dissatisfaction and exhaustion (Marjolein & Helma, 2016). Additionally, professional learning communities positively impact TSE, suggesting a strong link between school organisational culture, professional learning and self-efficacy (Lee, 2016). Therefore, the way that leadership teams design professional learning can greatly impact teachers' confidence and self-efficacy.

Another term found in the literature is collective teacher efficacy (CTE), defined as the beliefs and judgements that a group of educators hold about their ability to impact student learning, reflecting taking collective responsibility for students' learning (Derrington & Angelle, 2013; Donohoo, 2017). Berebitsky and Salloum (2017) sum up collective efficacy by asking if teachers believe in the commitment and skills of their colleagues to educate all learners. CTE also builds distributive leadership in schools as the group takes responsibility for ensuring high learning achievement (Derrington & Angelle, 2013). Collective efficacy influences teacher's actions and student achievement levels (Berebitsky & Salloum, 2017; Eells, 2011). Some researchers rank CTE as the number one influential factor on student learning achievement (DeWitt, 2019; Donohoo et al., 2018).

Hattie's meta-analysis research (2012) found that the teacher is the greatest source of variance that can make a difference to students' learning achievement. Hattie concludes that strengthening professional capital builds collective teacher efficacy, and collective teacher efficacy quadruples the rate of student learning (Hattie, 2012). Unsurprisingly, studies also suggest there is a link between collective efficacy and pedagogy (Berebitsky & Salloum, 2017; Klassen & Chiu, 2010). Studies have also found a link between positive teaching experiences where educators see learners experiencing success, with increased teacher efficacy levels (Podolsky et al., 2019).

Fullan and Hargreaves (2013) write that capital is about investing in human resources, namely teachers. Collective efficacy "is by far the most powerful change strategy if the group is focused and well-led" (Fullan, 2016, p.33). DeWitt (2019) documents five phases for building CTE. First, co-construct a team goal. Second, learn from resources and find new strategies to address the goal. Third, trial the strategy. Fourth, evaluate the impact. Finally, refine the strategy or celebrate the successful implementation. The gap in the literature is that there is no clear evidence and little research about predictors of collective efficacy (Berebitsky & Salloum, 2017).

Responding to the gap in the literature, Salloum and Berebitsky (2017) studied the relationship between collective efficacy and teacher's social networks. Their work showed that teachers who turn to one another for advice about teaching and learning strengthen collective efficacy. Bandura's (1997) social learning theory underpins self and collective efficacy. Bandura posits that humans do not learn in isolation but from watching others' reactions, responses, and actions. Bandura's work is related to the work of Lev Vygotsky on social learning. Bandura demonstrated that collective efficacy impacts student achievement levels more than socio-economic background (Donohoo, 2017). The literature on self-efficacy and collective efficacy has much to offer the DBR process

for this study, providing insights into ways of working that are most likely to make a positive difference.

2.4.3. *Social Capital*

Leana and Pil's (2006) groundbreaking research measured the difference between social capital and human capital in over two hundred urban public schools in the United States of America. Social capital defined the degree to which teachers shared information with colleagues and built relationships of trust and collective practice. Human capital defined the degree of an individual teacher's professional knowledge and skills. The results showed that schools with high social capital resulted in higher student achievement levels than schools with high human capital. However, student achievement levels were highest when a school had high social and human capital levels (Daly et al., 2021; Leana, 2010; Leana & Pil, 2006).

Leana (2010) raises the need for schools to focus less on individual professional learning and more on building social capital, which links with Hattie's (2012) finding about the need to reduce the variance between teachers. Changing schools and systems requires having a critical mass of teachers with high social capital who share the same norms, dialogue with each other and build a climate of strong professional trust (Leana, 2010).

Some scholars draw on Bourdieu's concept of social capital, which is deeply rooted in sociology and espouses that social capital is inextricably linked to context (Nolan & Molla, 2018). Bourdieu's theory maintains that social capital resides in the individual and is linked to class, status and power, positioning social capital to reflect one's social context and the inequality of power among individuals (Claridge, 2015; Demir, 2021). Using Bourdieu's theory, researchers found that professional learning occurs through the three domains of professional dispositions, pedagogical knowledge and social capital (Nolan & Molla, 2018). Some researchers believe Bourdieu's theory is complex and underutilised (Claridge, 2015).

Other theorists position their concept of social capital differently. Coleman presents social capital as a force for good, enabling the group to achieve more than the individual, contributing to a sense of belonging and team identity (Demir, 2021). Therefore, social capital is a driving force behind positive educational change.

A systemic review of research on social capital spanning fifteen years found that social capital contributed to five outcomes: (1) professional development, (2) change implementation, (3) new teachers joining, (4) job satisfaction and retaining teachers and, (5) student achievement improvement (Demir, 2021). Research has also found a correlation between social capital and the degree of innovative teaching practices in schools and professional learning communities (Parlar et al., 2020). Leana's research (2010) warns against awarding individual teachers' efforts and emphasises building communities with strong social capital, which will mean high student achievement levels will follow. Educational change occurs through collaborative cultures, rather than individual advancement of knowledge and skills (Leana, 2010).

The literature represents a growing understanding of the significance of social capital in organisational change, professional learning and building capacity. Understanding social capital is essential for this study, as it highlights the need for design principles that promote shared understandings and professional trust to focus on *building* social capital. The work of Leana and Pil (2006) calls for educators to change their paradigms and move to high-impact ways of working. The process of DBR provides a structure where teams work together, creating a natural environment to build strong capital. Understanding the power of social capital advantages the research processes, enabling emphasis on building trusting, collaborative relationships.

2.4.4.   *Leading School Improvement*

There is increasing recognition that educational leadership is highly contextual, responsive, and sensitive to system and individual school

culture, needs and expectations (Chitpin, 2016; Harris, 2020). Each school has immovable factors that impact the capacity for change (Harris, 2020). The degree to which context contributes to educational leaders successfully leading the school improvement journey is so great that future research needs to invest in learning about school improvement in context (Harris, 2020).

International and national research identify school leadership as a critical factor in school improvement (Fullan & Quinn, 2015). "Constantly improving and refining instructional practice so that students can engage in deep learning tasks is perhaps the single most important responsibility of the teaching profession and educational systems as a whole". (Fullan & Quinn, 2015, p. 4). The growing body of evidence that school leadership directly impacts student achievement is so significant that Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins (2008, 2020) revised their 2008 claim that classroom teaching has more impact on student learning than school leadership.

Research evidence continually demonstrates that educational leaders draw on four domains: setting directions, building relationships and building capacity in others, improving practices, and teaching and learning (Leithwood et al., 2020). A study exploring highly effective principals in different countries found that these principals secured change by building social capital, and leading school improvement through focused, collaborative professional learning (Jones & Harris, 2014). Research shows that leaders need to put processes and systems in place to support educators' successful knowledge transfer through professional learning (Brown et al., 2020). High performance in education is not accidental but occurs through intentionality, perseverance and tenacity (Jones & Harris, 2014). Through collaborative professional learning, participants focus on challenges encountered in practice, problem-solve, and collectively grow in confidence to try new approaches (Jones & Harris, 2014).

2.4.5. Religious Education Leadership

While educational leadership has received considerable attention in recent years (Dowling, 2011), there is far less research on religious education leadership in Australian Catholic schools, especially in the last ten years. The role of religious education leadership is bi-dimensional with responsibilities to both the school and the Church (Hesterman & Targowska, 2020). The role description statement for the position of Assistant Principal Religious Education in Brisbane Catholic Education schools draws on Fullan and Quinn's coherence framework (2015). The role description states the key result areas are to deepen Catholic identity, focus direction, create collaborative cultures, deepen learning, and secure accountability (*Religious Education Curriculum P-12*, 2020). These elements reflect the changing nature of the role of religious education leaders, which has developed over time to strengthen the focus on leadership (Dowling, 2011).

Studies show challenges in retaining religious education leaders in Victorian Catholic schools due to a lack of qualifications, lower pay levels than other leadership roles, a sense of disconnection from other staff, and feeling overwhelmed with responsibilities and un-supported (Buchanan, 2018). Buchanan's research (2013) indicates that religious education leaders can be required to hold a Masters degree (or equivalent) in religious education. This requirement shows a significant change since Stead's (1996) call for increased qualifications for religious education leaders. When religious education leaders identified what they needed for professional support, they mentioned mentoring, developing leadership capacity, and networking with peers (Buchanan, 2013).

One type of leadership identified in the literature in the final stages of analysis is the concept of distributive leadership. Distributive leadership is about recognising that leadership occurs more effectively if it is spread across a team of people (Thien, 2019). Currently, no shared definition of distributive leadership exists (Daniëls et al., 2019). Shared decision-making, and strong collaborative relationships characterise distributive

leadership (Cansoy & Parlar, 2018). Further research is needed to gain more evidence about the connections between distributive leadership, teacher preparedness, and commitment to change (Thien, 2019). In addition, educational leadership requires more research about highly effective practices for educational leaders (Leithwood et al., 2020).

The literature review reveals significant interconnections between school leadership and teacher's attitude to professional learning, building capacity, self-efficacy, collective efficacy and social capital because school leaders drive the school's culture. Therefore, including the religious education leaders in this study is critical as school leaders hold the keys to teacher success (Freund, 2017; Harris, 2020; Leithwood et al., 2020). In addition, much of the literature in this section constantly reinforced the power of educational leaders to create the conditions for learning improvement, so equipping religious education leaders with this research knowledge is essential.

The literature suggests that if the religious education leaders and principals of the four schools in the inquiry can prioritise building social capital and enable time for participants in the study to deepen understanding of their practice, self-efficacy will grow and learning achievement will increase. Therefore, intentionally focusing on building social capital within the research design and ensuring that participants are fully cognisant of social capital's hidden power appeared key to successfully achieving the research aims.

2.5. Summary of the Chapter

The literature review presents many critical considerations for this study. First, it identifies places where theory-practice gaps are likely. The issues arising in the review suggest that theory-practice gaps may come about for reasons beyond individual and school influence. However, using the knowledge contained in the literature review, enabled rich insights for research design and interventions, informing a journey that aims to close theory-practice gaps. Second, the literature review identifies theories

that explain how to build evidence-based practice and understand the meaning of successes and challenges encountered by practitioners. The scope of the review also highlights many theoretical underpinnings for this research, where different academic fields intersect and bring meaning to the bigger picture of the data.

The task of interpreting Scripture within a Catholic hermeneutical model is complex yet non-negotiable for religious education teachers in Catholic schools. The literature review exposes diverse opinions, frameworks and expectations for how teachers in Catholic schools are required to teach Scripture. Debate continues about the place of catechesis, spirituality and faith within religious education. On a national education level, debate continues about the place of play, spirituality, and the impact of educational and learning theories on pedagogies for early childhood learners. Principles arising from this literature review provided a tangible way of making sense of the complexity of hermeneutical approaches to teaching Scripture and remembering core insights to inform practice.

Finally, if early years teachers are to build capacity and self-efficacy for teaching Scripture, they require leadership to steer the journey forward in appropriate directions. The initial literature review held the keys for successfully navigating the learning improvement journey. Self-efficacy and collective efficacy building happen effectively through creating social systems where learners develop strong social capital, learn from one another, and grow professional capital. In the midst of such debates, the literature review formed the foundation to address the questions from research participants that inevitably arise about what to teach, how to teach, the purpose of teaching and the type of learning desired. As the study progressed and the literature review continued to widen it became clear that every section of this literature review held keys for this inquiry.

CHAPTER 3: THE METHODOLOGY

Chapter One set the scene and context for the study and provided the rationale, goals and questions to explore. Chapter Two explored an extensive overview of the literature that helps inform this study, and formed the theoretical underpinnings of this project. Chapter Three extends to outline the research process and positions the research within my framework of beliefs. This chapter synthesises the design-based research approach, provides a rationale for using this approach and explains the method of data analysis. Additionally, the chapter provides an overview of the participants and reports the study's ethical considerations and undertakings, and the limitations and delimitations.

3.1. Positioning the Research

The research paradigm and philosophical underpinnings reflect my beliefs and my positioning of this inquiry. In essence, I believe people learn by themselves and with others, constructing their understanding of the world based on their own life experiences and constructing meaning from their multiple realities, experiences, and interpretations. Therefore, this research situates within the constructivist, interpretivist paradigm, which values the lived experiences of others (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1997; Lincoln & Guba, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

I believe that Scripture enables adults and children to make meaning; therefore, this research strongly focuses on pedagogy to facilitate learning and meaning-making. As a researcher, I am positioned within an interpretivist axiology, as I am part of the research and operate through a subjective lens, valuing the beliefs and insights of others (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This paradigm frames my understanding of the world and the value of learning as a social phenomenon.

I understand this study as design-based research informed by crucial ideas from hermeneutics. At the heart of the valuing of interpretivism is the desire to explore and search for situated or local

meanings (Borko et al., 2007), as all human languages, communities and rituals are about meaning-making (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2015). A central focus of this research is enabling students to use Scripture to create meaning in their lives, using storytelling's power to shape, affirm, and reflect on their sense of self and growing awareness of identity. A research paradigm reflects fundamental assumptions and beliefs regarding reality and how it is perceived, guiding the researcher when selecting an approach to research (Kinash, 2006; Wahyuni, 2012). As such, this research is situated within a naturalistic ontological stance, acknowledging that individuals construct their meaning from their multiple realities, experiences and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 2016).

Positioned within an interpretivist axiology and a naturalistic ontological stance, I believe that learning needs to be purposeful to enable learners to be cognisant of the impact of one's decisions, attitudes and actions. I believe that purposeful learning can change how people choose to live in the world, leading to transformative learning. To illustrate, learning about the causes of global warming and sustainability through science and humanities curriculum is pointless as an exercise in knowledge acquisition unless increased understanding leads to awareness about how to live well in our world (Leal Filho et al., 2018). At this point of insight, classroom teaching and learning can be transformative, influencing decisions about how to live in ways that are less likely to contribute to global warming. In religious education, purposeful learning about justice issues may lead to a change in attitude about refugees or writing a letter to advocate for the rights of a disadvantaged group.

I believe transformative learning shapes attitudes, beliefs, and actions that equip learners to live well in their places and inspire them to begin creating the future they want to see. As Orr (1991) writes, the future of our planet depends upon the part we each choose to play to ensure the world is habitable and humane. Therefore, this project will adopt an inquiry approach, reflecting a constructivist epistemological

position, where ways of knowing come from subjective and social phenomena (Merriam & Bierema, 2013; Wahyuni, 2012).

A constructivist epistemological position reflects the value I place on a strengths-based perspective (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). I believe that children and adults are capable, and bring with them their idiosyncrasies and uniqueness. I also understand that individuals construct their knowledge and understandings from their life experiences in relationship with others in their own cultural and societal environments (Merriam & Bierema, 2013; Ormel et al., 2012).

This position places the researcher as a social actor in an inquiry and an integral part of the research. It also acknowledges the subjective lens of the researcher, as opposed to the positivist research paradigm, where the researcher collects data and maintains an objective, value-free stance, independent of the data (Wahyuni, 2012). Finally, this project is based on design-based research grounded in real-life situations and epistemologically pragmatism (Jetnikoff, 2015). Design-based research provides an approach (Herrington et al., 2007) for the study that reflects the paradigms and philosophical underpinnings outlined.

3.2. A Researcher's Journey Into Design-Based Research

Design-based research (Herrington et al., 2007) showed significant benefits for meeting this study's research goals and aims through investigating different research approaches. The initial investigation was a journey of discovering design-based research's merits, challenges and potential. In the early stages of this research journey, a high sense of anticipation accompanied a night of relentless reading of McKenney and Reeves' (2012) book *Conducting Educational Design Research: What, Why and How*. The title was unambiguous and fuelled expectations that the book would reveal how to conduct this research. But, by the last page, deflation set in. The book failed to provide a blueprint for the way forward.

Slowly the realisation dawned that there was no blueprint. The connotation missed was in the word *design*. There can be no blueprint when the research context is key for designing the way forward. Design-based research is an "evolving methodology with substantial variation" (Prediger et al., 2015, p. 877). Therefore, each inquiry's *what*, *why* and *how* will differ, reflecting the presenting needs and opportunities.

Unfamiliarity with design-based research necessitated networking with others who had used this approach. During this initial stage of the study, networking allowed me to spend time at the University of Calgary with the team in the Galileo Educational Network. This experience provided opportunities to meet with people who used the design-based research approach for doctoral studies or the advancement of educational practice. My days at the University of Calgary were invaluable for developing an understanding of the nuances, potential obstacles, and the power of design-based learning as an approach for research, leading to the goal of learning improvement and educational practice that is sustainable and innovative (Jacobsen, 2014).

3.3. The Emergence of Design-Based Research

DBR originated as a research approach through the 1992 publication of the work of Brown (1992) and Collins (2004). Their work identified a need to move educational research beyond clinical, sterile environments, to investigate real-life problems in natural settings to obtain valid, trustworthy results. Highlighting the need for research that contributes to educational practice, most educators find it challenging to name educational research that has significantly impacted practice (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Reeves et al., 2011). Yet, people can readily name multiple ways medical research has impacted practice (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Reeves et al., 2011).

For educational research to lead to learning improvement, the research needs a transformative agenda (Barab & Squire, 2004; Leal Filho et al., 2018; Ormel et al., 2012). Therefore, researchers need to consider

the role of social and political contexts and be accountable for the consequences of research developed in particular contexts (Barab & Squire, 2004). According to Ormel (2012), educational research has two key goals: to build new knowledge and improve practice. DBR researchers believe the gap between research and practice can be reduced (Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010).

With this challenge apparent, DBR has emerged to achieve research that produces *usable knowledge* (The Design-Based Research Collective, 2003) to impact education (Brown, 1992; Eisenschmidt & Niglas, 2014; Herrington et al., 2007). The term *usable knowledge* is particular to DBR as it highlights a key aim of creating knowledge that others in similar contexts can use to strengthen educational practice (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Barab & Squire, 2004; Ormel et al., 2012; The Design-Based Research Collective, 2003). Conducting research that simultaneously develops theory and builds practice through the partnership of researchers and practitioners defines the hallmark of DBR (Ormel et al., 2012).

DBR is an evolving approach to research (Easterday et al., 2014; Hoadley & Campos, 2022). Different names for DBR have evolved from various places over time and for varying needs (Kennedy-Clark, 2015; Ormel et al., 2012; Prediger et al., 2015). *Design research*, *design experiments*, and *educational design research* are some terminology variations, and these names are not synonymous (McKenney & Reeves, 2012; McKenney & Reeves, 2019).

This variation has contributed to the lack of a consistent definition of DBR. Typically, DBR definitions include at least one of three different perspectives of the purpose, the process, or the characteristics of DBR (Wang & Hannafin, 2005). In essence, DBR facilitates pragmatic inquiry (Goff & Getenet, 2017; Gómez Puente et al., 2013; Wang & Hannafin, 2005), where participants work together to solve complex problems and seek to understand the environment they operate within, rather than control the variables (Cobb et al., 2003; Jetnikoff, 2015).

3.3.1.　　Characteristics of Design-Based Research

DBR is both complex and multi-faceted (McKenney & Reeves, 2021). For this study, the following definition selected for DBR draws from McKenney and Reeves (2012). DBR is an approach to research that advances theoretical understanding and educational practice by systematically building research-informed solutions to educational problems and developing and testing theory in natural, everyday learning environments. McKenney and Reeves (2012) note that while DBR has a high potential to impact educational practice significantly, it is also enormously ambitious due to the expectation of simultaneously developing practice and building theory relevant to people outside the research context. Furthermore, DBR recognises that theory or interventions alone have limited impact on changing practice sustainably, but the combination of both is powerful (Easterday et al., 2014).

A defining feature and first characteristic of DBR is that the research takes place in context, within the complexity, diversity and flexibility of the real-life setting in which education takes place, to produce authentic results that will provide insights for others working in similar contexts (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Barab & Squire, 2004; Easterday et al., 2014; McKenney & Reeves, 2019; Ormel et al., 2012).

The term n*atural environments* is, therefore, a term frequently used for DBR. Berliner (2002) declares that educational research conducted in a natural educational setting is a study conducted under conditions that scientists would find intolerable. However, theories often fail in education because they cannot incorporate all the contexts of human beings (Berliner, 2002). Another feature of the flexibility of DBR is that the researcher can take on multiple roles, such as facilitator, mentor, educator, observer, and designer (Kennedy-Clark, 2015; Ormel et al., 2012).

A second characteristic is DBR is collaborative and linked to a third characteristic of being grounded in practice (Jen et al., 2015; McKenney &

Reeves, 2019). The researcher forms a research team with practitioners who seek answers to the problem, and whose voices represent different roles and experiences (Barab & Squire, 2004; McKenney & Reeves, 2021). This team drives the DBR process (Ormel et al., 2012), working together to identify the problem and explore relevant literature, research, theory and practice that may address the challenge (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; McKenney & Reeves, 2019). Finally, the research team employs the knowledge gained to design an intervention they believe will assist in overcoming the problem.

A fourth characteristic is DBR is theoretical, but has a dual intent of developing theory and improving practice (Becker & Jacobsen, 2020; McKenney & Reeves, 2019). Through analysis, new theory emerges, and practice draws increasingly closer to theory (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Papavlasopoulou et al., 2019). Therefore, a fifth characteristic of DBR is that it is iterative (McKenney & Reeves, 2019). Designing and analysing interventions is a continuous cycle that builds knowledge and refines practice over time (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Jen et al., 2015; The Design-Based Research Collective, 2003). It is imperative to see evidence of improved practice throughout testing cycles to validate that the theory developed is trustworthy. Analysis determines the effectiveness of interventions, with DBR allowing various tools and methodologies (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012).

A sixth characteristic is that DBR is productive (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012). The intervention designs lead to the development of design principles to provide usable knowledge for others facing the same challenge in a similar context (Goff & Getenet, 2017). *Design principles* develop early in the research journey to guide and inform the intervention design (Herrington et al., 2007). By the research conclusion, the design principles have been tested through the research process, enabling the final version to contribute to new theory (Becker & Jacobsen, 2020). This knowledge may lay the foundations for further research. Notably, the results of DBR need to combine theory, practice and design principles to

inform future research, practice and design (McKenney & Reeves, 2019; Meyers et al., 2018) as DBR develops theories that work (Cobb et al., 2003; O'Neill, 2012).

Additionally, the DBR journey is never totally clear from the outset. The journey evolves through designing interventions in response to needs and insights from literature, and analysing the impact of the interventions (Ormel et al., 2012). DBR can result in stages where the process can appear disorderly and require considerable time to incorporate multiple iterations (Becker & Jacobsen, 2020). (Goff & Getenet, 2017). O'Neill (2012, p. 120) highlights this aspect as one of the challenges of DBR because "if you are really thinking as a design-based researcher, you regularly wonder what you are up to". Only at the end of the journey does maximum clarity become possible, as the researcher looks back and sees the whole picture, enabling retrospective analysis of the research journey and further development of design principles (Goff & Getenet, 2017; McKenney & Reeves, 2019; O'Neill, 2012; Wang & Hannafin, 2005).

3.3.2.   The Place of Theory in the Design Element of DBR

The design element of DBR is a creative process constrained by contextual elements and the aims of DBR (O'Neill, 2012). However, the design always needs to be mindful of both the limitations of the research context and the research aims, to develop both theory and improve practice (McKenney & Reeves, 2019; Papavlasopoulou et al., 2019). Furthermore, as the desired outcome for DBR is knowledge of how to build sustainable, improved practices that could benefit others (Jacobsen, 2014; Papavlasopoulou et al., 2019), the design of any intervention needs to be considered achievable for the people working in a particular space, with the resources and time available (Becker & Jacobsen, 2020).

O'Neill (2012) emphasises that theory is a heuristic for design because theory is incomplete. Using the analogy of aeronautics, O'Neill argues that the body of theory available for aircraft designers (such as Newtonian mechanics and fluid dynamics) functions to guide design rather

than determine the design. O'Neill considers that scientific theories have more explanatory power and predictive ability than educational theories (such as Vygotsky's sociocultural theory). Therefore, theory needs to function as a heuristic to predict designs that will have the desired impact in DBR. The processes of DBR are essential for monitoring the accuracy of each prediction when applied to practice (McKenney & Reeves, 2021).

Part of the role of the researcher for DBR is optimising designs, so each design is shaped by theory, mindful of the DBR goals, whilst remaining sensitive to local and practical constraints (Ormel et al., 2012). DBR merges empirical research with theory-driven design (Papavlasopoulou et al., 2019). McKenney and Reeves note that while the term *design-based research* is accurate, it does not do justice to the role of theory, as it would be a misrepresentation of DBR to believe it is only a research-informed design (McKenney & Reeves, 2019).

3.3.3.   *Rationale for Design-Based Research*

From the outset, the essential functions desired from a methodology were for the voices of practitioner wisdom to impact this study, and the research process, to enable bridging theory and practice. These elements were critical due to the paucity of research that allowed teachers' practical wisdom and experiences to acquire knowledge about what made a difference in building capacity and self-efficacy for early years teachers of Scripture. By examining the differences between both DBR and action research, DBR afforded greater efficacy to achieve the goals of this study, since a prerequisite for conducting DBR is the identification of a theory-practice gap.

While both participatory action research (PAR) and DBR involve collaboration with practitioners, the goals of DBR need to stay in sharp focus (Ormel et al., 2012). In contrast, participants in PAR may direct the research in any way suitable for their context and needs, as PAR has a broad goal of learning (McNiff, 2013). Given the lack of research in this

area of focus, there was a desire to produce findings that would be helpful for others working in similar contexts, which is not a PAR expectation.

Additionally, DBR uses theoretical knowledge as a lens for research and further development (Jen et al., 2015; Ormel et al., 2012), whereas theoretical knowledge may or may not be part of PAR (Erwin et al., 2012). Finally, the priority of collaboration as a goal of this project meant that the *involvement* feature of DBR was important. Involvement in DBR is not simply a matter of obtaining data on current teacher practice, as it may disrupt, modify and challenge teacher practice due to the requirement for theory to inform the practice (Cobb & Jackson, 2015).

DBR requires the researcher to control the research design to ensure the research journey can meet the study's goals. For this research, *goal one* was to collaboratively work with early years teachers to explore and develop strategies, processes and *early learning environments* that build usable knowledge for teaching meaningful Scripture to young children. *Goal two* was to use the approach of DBR to develop professional learning strategies and processes to support innovative professional learning that then translated into professional practice. Therefore, the strength of DBR as the methodological approach for this doctoral project was to support the process of moving beyond observation and employ collaborative partnerships between the researcher and practitioners to examine and build both practice and theory (Herrington et al., 2007). For this study, DBR effectively situated the researcher as part of the research and practitioners as active participants, whose wisdom contributed to identifying the core challenges and achieving the research goals (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Barab & Squire, 2004; Cobb et al., 2003; Eisenschmidt & Niglas, 2014; Jen et al., 2015; Wang & Hannafin, 2005).

3.4. The Process of Conducting Design-Based Research

There is no single approach to DBR. There are four phases of DBR put forward by Reeves (2006, p. 59). Phase one involves analysing the

problem, and collaborating with practitioners. The second phase requires developing solutions informed by theory (design principles). Phase three involves iterative cycles of testing and refinement. Phase four consists of reflection to produce design principles and usable knowledge for others.

To demonstrate the diversity, flexibility and fluidity of DBR, the work of Easterday, Lewis and Gerber (2014) provides seven steps for the DBR process to focus, understand, define, conceive, build, test and present. The contrast between this model and the one earlier of McKenney and Reeves (2012) shows different ways of naming the processes and stages of DBR and demonstrating there is no blueprint for DBR. Instead, it is only after focusing, understanding and defining the problem that the process for the research (the *blueprint*) can start to take shape to address the context-specific needs (Herrington et al., 2007; McKenney & Reeves, 2021).

McKenney and Reeves (2012) also identify three core processes within DBR: "analysis and exploration; design and construction; and evaluation and reflection" (p. 77). Analysis and exploration begin by carefully exploring the research focus to refine the study and identify a clearly defined problem to address (McKenney & Reeves, 2019). These three processes became the pathway for this study as well-defined and constructed phases enable DBR researchers to report their journey (Easterday et al., 2014).

A hallmark of DBR is that the researcher conducts the investigation in collaboration with practitioners who encounter the research problem regularly (The Design-Based Research Collective, 2003). Therefore, the first phase of analysis and exploration for this study began with collaboration with DBR researchers, as well as informal conversations with colleagues, including religious education leaders, to consider how to design the study for maximum effectiveness. In addition, a literature review occurred to explore existing knowledge about the research problem, identify critical gaps, and find insights about eliminating or successfully addressing the research problem (Herrington et al., 2007).

As the focus of the inquiry took shape, initial principles for design were identified to understand needs, context and literature insights. This process guided the overall research design and framed decisions about the study. Developing design principles for interventions ensured that theory and practice would work together to refine the problem, build theory and create robust practice (Herrington et al., 2007; McKenney & Reeves, 2012). The research plan began to take shape with greater clarity of the problem to investigate, and with existing research helping to shed light on how to proceed. The next step involved identifying research goals and a methodology best aligned with the purpose and context.

The second core process of design and construction moved the focus to data collection. First, knowledge from theory and practice drove the development of an intervention (potential solution) (Gómez Puente et al., 2013; Jen et al., 2015). Second, iterative cycles of trialling occurred to test the impact of the intervention (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Herrington et al., 2007). Concluding the cycle, meetings with practitioners were convened to gather evidence of the impact of the intervention.

Finally, the analysis of data determined whether the intervention adequately provided a solution to the problem or if further refinement was required (McKenney & Reeves, 2019). DBR conducted rigorously enables the generation of new theory through ongoing analysis of the impact of each intervention and the overall design (Cobb et al., 2009; Kennedy-Clark, 2015). Therefore, during this phase, a strong focus occurred on developing the conceptual framework to ensure that insights from practice and analysis informed and reshaped the conceptual framework during each data collection cycle.

Lastly, the core processes of reflection and evaluation were employed to draw the research to a conclusion (McKenney & Reeves, 2012). Conducting retrospective analysis enabled the researcher to look back over the entire research and analyse what emerges by viewing the whole journey (Goff & Getenet, 2017; McKenney & Reeves, 2012; Wang & Hannafin, 2005). The identification of research findings enabled further

revision of the design principles. McKenney and Reeves (2019) suggest that the research journey concludes with disseminating the knowledge gained from the study to assist others working in similar contexts (Herrington et al., 2007).

3.4.1.   The Design-Based Research Steps for This Study

The steps undertaken for this research journey, responded to the research goals in the context of this study. This graphic also demonstrates the building of the conceptual framework through each step of the DBR process and highlights that each step is not necessarily linear. Instead, revisiting steps as needed continually informs the development of the conceptual framework. As DBR is context sensitive, enabling the design to respond to local needs, the construction of Figure 3 occurred to show how DBR took place for this research journey.

Figure 3

The Steps Undertaken for This Doctoral Research

3.4.2. The Introductory Steps in the Research

The journey began by identifying the problem, drawing on prior knowledge obtained through being a practitioner in religious education. Examining practice over a long period considerably assisted in determining what the research needs to address to impact practice, build theory and contribute to an area with a glaring gap. The fact that the research focus and title never changed throughout the study is a testament to the clarity of the research problem from the outset.

The literature review also contributed to constructing the conceptual framework for building professional capacities to teach Scripture in the early years. Additionally, the literature review also contributed to designing the data collection phase. Finally, everyday conversations with practitioners assisted in shaping the research design, as religious educators gave verbal feedback and suggestions about how to design the research more effectively.

3.4.3. Developing Design Principles

Drawing up initial draft design principles assisted in summarising critical learnings to guide the design of the interventions during a later stage of the research. In the early stages, the design principles also functioned as guidelines for the processes required during the study. They informed decision-making about what needed to be in place to undertake the research effectively (see Appendix A). The design principles were context-sensitive and arose from insights presented in the literature to guide the research in authentic, appropriate ways. The draft design guidelines developed to ensure that the inquiry achieved the aims of DBR for this study were:

1. Building capacity and teacher self-efficacy occur most effectively with religious education leadership support.
2. Capacity building and the growth of teacher self-efficacy occur most effectively through building strong social capital.

3. Capacity building and the growth of teacher self-efficacy needs to enable practitioners to experience success from the start of their research journey.

4. Multiple ways of gathering and sharing data will strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings and cater for different ways participants will prefer to provide data and learn from one another.

5. Interventions need to reflect both theoretical perspectives and practitioner needs.

6. Interventions need to target solutions that are perceived to have the potential for high impact to address key challenge areas.

7. To achieve interventions with high impact, the research team must engage in critical thinking processes that enable analysis and evaluation of the core causes and essential questions underpinning the problem investigated in the inquiry.

3.4.4. *Designing and Conducting the Research*

This research design emanated from practitioner wisdom and the design principles above (which reflected both DBR requirements and theoretical insights from the literature). A clear need arose for religious education leaders to participate in this research, including early years teachers who were interested in and committed to building capacity and self-efficacy. Without the involvement of religious education leaders, early years teachers would have little support and limited opportunities for building social capital and implementing learnings from the research beyond the inquiry.

As education is a pragmatic endeavour, the need to focus on *why* rather than rushing to identify what to *do* was paramount. Therefore, strong interventions would be an outcome of processes that encouraged participants to think beyond the surface level and deeply consider the causes of each challenge presented.

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3.5.   The Research Design

The research included a major study and a minor study. Initially, the terms *sub-study one* and *sub-study two* (McKenney & Reeves, 2012) identified two different components of this research. However, the terminology left most people seeking clarity. Therefore, due to ongoing questions about the meaning of this terminology for the study, a more accurate naming of the two components of the research resulted in using the terms *major study* and *minor study*.

3.5.1.   *The Journey of Finding Participants*

To ascertain the level of interest in participating in the major study, an expression of interest was sent to all the Catholic schools I professionally supported from 2011 to 2018 in the Archdiocese of Brisbane. Upon submitting the research proposal in 2018, thirty people from five schools indicated a strong desire for their schools to participate in this research. The data collection phase began in 2019. By then, three of the five schools had new principals, new leadership teams and changing priorities, leading to three religious education leaders indicating the timing was not suitable for their school to participate in this research. One religious education leader with high interest and commitment reported that no early years teachers at her school expressed interest in participating. By the end of 2018, only two religious education leaders remained enthusiastic about participating in the study in 2019, along with several early years teachers from their schools.

In 2019, changes occurred to clustering schools within the Archdiocese, resulting in religious education officers working with new school clusters. Two religious education leaders from the new group of schools I supported expressed a strong desire to participate in the study. Finally, four schools in the Archdiocese of Brisbane demonstrated readiness to participate in the major study. Each religious education leader of all four schools strongly desired to build capacity in early years Scripture (linked to their school goals). Each school had principal support

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for teachers to participate in the study, and had one or more early years teachers interested in participating in this study.

3.5.2. *The Participants*

To protect anonymity, the names of biblical women replaced the names of participants, as all participants were female. The lack of male participants reflects that few males work in early years education in the Archdiocese of Brisbane, and a higher percentage of women work in primary schools. The names of biblical women also replace the names of each school. While most of these women are not official saints in the Church, their stories are inspiring and primarily ignored or misrepresented throughout the history of the Church (Kroeger, n.d.).

Strikingly, three religious education leaders were the only other leadership team member in their school apart from the principal, so they juggled multiple roles and responsibilities for leadership in their schools. The following overview provides the context of each school and relevant information about the participants. As the researcher's relationship with participants led to strengths and challenges for this study, the overview also includes the length of time the researcher worked with each school and religious education leader.

St Mary Magdalene's is a large primary school with almost seven hundred students, situated over one hundred kilometres north of Brisbane, on the Sunshine Coast. The religious education leader, Naomi, brought a high level of experience and Master's qualifications to the role. In 2018 Naomi secured the support of her school principal for participation in this study, and then a new principal arrived in 2019. It was a testament to Naomi's clarity about the need for building capacity and self-efficacy for teaching Scripture to early years learners that she quickly gained the support of the incoming principal for her school's inclusion in the research. In addition, four early years teachers wished to participate in the research journey. Three of these highly experienced teachers had vastly different confidence levels for teaching Scripture, with

Anna already highly skilled in the Scripture storytelling process. Ruth was in her first year of teaching.

As a person with strong interest in teaching Scripture and early years learners, Naomi showed significant interest in this study, requesting consideration for her school to participate in the research as soon as she heard about it. In the years leading towards developing the research design, conversations with Naomi brought rich insights into the research design.

It was upon Naomi's advice that this study became Preparatory to year three rather than stopping at year two. Naomi argued that year three is a pivotal year for early years learners, although year three teachers may not consider themselves as early years teachers. Naomi observed that when year three learners engaged in good early years pedagogies, they experienced higher levels of educational success in upper primary years. Naomi had also observed over the years that the reverse was true and children could struggle in the upper years of primary if they did not experience early years pedagogies for long enough. The transition in year three could be pivotal for ongoing learning success.

St Junia's is considered a medium size school with just over three hundred students, situated in a country area over three hours drive from the city of Brisbane. The religious education leader, Claudia, has worked in multiple schools in this same role and indicated that she saw a strong need to develop capacity for the teaching of Scripture but was unsure how to lead this journey, as evidenced in her first journal entry:

> I've been a teacher within BCE (Brisbane Catholic Education) for twenty-seven years and have always taught Scripture in RE (religious education) lessons. However, I feel that my own knowledge is limited as I do not feel that the teaching that I received when I was at school was sufficient. There is a much greater emphasis on Scripture now than when I first started teaching (2019).

Therefore, for Claudia, participation in this research held a dual intention for building capacity for both early years teachers and developing her knowledge of Scripture to build religious education leadership. In addition, Claudia had two preparatory teachers, Miriam and Phoebe, wishing to participate in the study. In this school, both preparatory classes came together for religious education, and Miriam planned and taught religious education for both classes, while Phoebe played a supporting role.

St Huldah's is a small, coastal school in the Archdiocese of Brisbane with just over two hundred students in a Brisbane suburb. The religious education leader, Tabitha, has worked in another diocese in the role of religious education leadership, where she developed an understanding of *Scripture storytelling* processes. St Huldah's had two teachers highly motivated to participate in the research. Rebecca had taught in both primary and secondary schools, while Gabrielle was in her first year of teaching.

The male principal of St Huldah's had a strong early years background and was highly supportive of his school's inclusion in the research. Unfortunately, the principal's planned journey to visit Reggio Emilia in Italy could not proceed due to the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020. However, it does demonstrate that St Huldah's had significant principal support for building capacity in early years education. Due to health challenges, after commencing the inquiry journey, Tabitha unexpectedly needed to take significant leave during 2019 but remained supportive of the research and was involved when possible.

St Priscilla's is a small, inner-city school in the Archdiocese of Brisbane, with just over two hundred students enrolled. The religious education leader, Esther, was in her first appointment to religious education leadership and had been in this role for several years at the school. Esther had conveyed a strong desire for her school to participate in the research due to the research focus aligning with critical needs she identified in the school. Through collegial conversations, Esther discovered

the possibility of this study and immediately showed interest, hoping the research data collection phase would be ready to begin in 2018. Esther's enthusiasm for participating in the study never waned, and she waited for the finalisation of the research design and ethics approval. St Priscilla's had four early years teachers who wanted to participate in the study, and all four teachers exhibited low confidence in teaching Scripture to early years learners, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Overview of Schools in the Research

	St Mary Magdalene's	St Junia's	St Huldah's	St Priscilla's
Student enrolment	Over 650 students	Over 300 students	Over 200 students	Over 200 students
Distance from Brisbane city	Over 120 kilometres	Over 250 kilometres	Over 20 kilometres	Over 5 kilometres
RE leader (APRE)	Naomi	Claudia	Tabitha	Esther
Assistant Principal role in school	Another person is in AP role	Claudia	Tabitha	Esther
Classroom teaching role for RE leader	No	No	Yes – I day a week	No
Other roles assigned to RE leader	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Early years teachers participating and year level they teach	Anna (Prep) Ruth (Prep) Hannah (1) Elizabeth (3)	Miriam (Prep) Phoebe (Prep.)	Rebecca (Prep) Gabrielle (3)	Bernice (Prep) Sarah (1) Joanna (2) Abigail (2)
Researcher was Education Officer RE with school in years:	2011-2018	2019-2020	2019-2022	2011-2018

Note. In the Archdiocese of Brisbane the Assistant Principal Religious Education (APRE) role is a leadership position with full-time classroom release in schools with an enrolment over 600. Additionally, these large schools also have someone appointed to the Assistant Principal role with full-time classroom release. In smaller schools the principal determines the additional roles for the APRE, often combining roles to enable less class teaching responsibilities and more administration time.

The design for the major study involved working with four religious education leaders and twelve early years teachers across four schools. Establishing a research team enabled a smaller cohort of people to operate as the decision-making and leadership group (McKenney & Reeves, 2012). To draw upon all levels of practice and wisdom, the research team consisted of the researcher, each religious education leader, and one teacher from each school, where possible. School leaders considered which teacher from their school had the appropriate vision, commitment and highest level of skills to carry the research forward. They then invited this key person to participate in the research leadership team, if the teacher conveyed a high degree of willingness and capacity to be involved. Due to existing study commitments of the teachers involved from St Junia's, Claudia decided there would be no teacher representation from her school on the research team, ensuring respect for the needs of participants.

As most practitioners taught two religious education units a term, the research design involved the research team meeting twice a term over a year. The purpose of each meeting was to identify the challenge that the research needed to address, explore key literature, identify a potential *solution* (intervention) to trial and collect evidence of the impact of the intervention (Herrington et al., 2007). This regularity of meetings enabled the research to keep moving forward while being perceived as manageable for participants. The research team were also able to contribute to the analysis of the impact of the intervention.

3.5.3.   The Research Design for the Major Study

Research design for DBR needs to demonstrate key criteria to ensure the design is robust and workable (Becker & Jacobsen, 2020). DBR for doctoral purposes needs to include practitioner focus and collaboration, at levels not required for more traditional research (Herrington et al., 2007). The design element in DBR values knowledge creation, and all types of data may contribute to building and refining an effective design (Kennedy-Clark, 2015). Additionally, the design needs to enable the achievement of the research goals (Easterday et al., 2014).

Applying the key elements and criteria for research design led to developing a series of meetings with participants in the major study, conducting these meetings approximately twice a term to enable participants time to trial the intervention, yet keep the momentum of the research journey. In addition, school visits and interviews allowed for two other critical ways to obtain data triangulation, and participants could conduct journal writing individually. While the initial design presented in the research proposal outlined eight meetings over a year, starting with a whole day for all participants to step more confidently into the research journey, the table below summarises the reality of what happened.

Changes to the research design occurred due to participant feedback and insights obtained through data analysis. Unfortunately, school visits in the last term of the research did not happen due to the impact of the Covid19 pandemic. However, the consistency of the data by the end of the research suggested that school visits in the final term of the data collection would be unlikely to add significant new knowledge. Table 2 provides an overview of the data collection phase.

Table 2

An Overview of the Major Study

Research leadership team meetings 2019			
The process	Date and time	Primary purpose	Data collection
Meeting one: face to face	May 1st 9.30am to 2.30	To explore the problem, investigate key literature and build shared understandings about the research journey.	Set up login details for individual journal writing Document insights and decisions arising from the day
Meeting two: video conference	Thursday May 23rd 2019, 3.30 to 5.30	To evaluate the impact of the intervention and determine next step	Documentation uploaded from schools
Meeting three: video conference	Thursday June 27th, 3.30 to 5.30		Meeting video recorded and transcribed
Meeting four: video conference	Tuesday 19th November 2019, 3.30 to 5.30		
Meetings for all research participants 2020			
Meeting five: face to face at St Mary Magdalene's school	Wednesday 12th February, 9.00am to 2.45pm	To build social capital To evaluate the impact of the intervention and determine next steps.	Documentation developed by the group on the day Teacher planning documentation
Meeting seven: face to face at St Mary Magdalene's school	Monday 9th March, 9.00am to 2.45pm	To build skills for analysis of teaching and learning.	Journal writing

The process	Date and time	Primary purpose	Data collection
	Researcher half day visits to schools 2019		
St Junia's visit:	Monday 17th June (p.m.)	To meet research participants in their school/class contexts to observe and hear strengths, challenges and questions about teaching Scripture.	Journal notes written by the researcher after each school visit
St Mary Magdalene's visit:	Friday 21st June (a.m.)		Photographs taken onsite
St Huldah's visit:	Tuesday 25th June (a.m.)		
St Priscilla's visit:	Wednesday 26th June (a.m.)		
St Huldah's visit:	Friday 1st Nov (a.m.)		
St Mary Magdalene's visit:	Monday 11th November (a.m.)		
St Junia's visit:	Monday 11th November (p.m.)		
	Interviews with participants		
Religious Education Leaders: Mode: video conference	Friday 17th April, 2020, 10.30 a.m. to 12 p.m.	To hear individual and group perspectives at the end of the research journey	Meeting video recorded, transcript developed and data analysed when transcript received
Early years teachers Mode: video conference	Friday 17th April 2020, 2 to 3 p.m. Sunday 19th April, 10 a.m. to 11 a.mm		

3.5.4.   The Research Design for the Minor Study

While the major study focused on teaching Scripture, the minor study focused on professional learning about Scripture for teachers. Investigating these two areas within one study allowed for a more holistic understanding of the factors contributing to building capacity and self-efficacy for teaching Scripture to early years learners, as professional learning can directly address teacher needs (Meissel et al., 2016). Therefore, the minor study required a design to enable the efficacy of the professional learning opportunities to be more visible, allowing for strengthening or modification if needed.

In 2012 Brisbane Catholic Education began providing targeted professional learning in Scripture, responding to the needs of early years teachers to build more significant knowledge about leading Scripture learning. By 2018, this professional learning opportunity involved four Scripture *twilights* offered each term, in various venues, from 4.00 pm to 6.00 pm, primarily for interested teachers and religious education leaders. Attendance records showed significant interest and commitment to this professional learning, especially for voluntary attendance. Data from Brisbane Catholic Education reveal 947 registrations for these professional learning sessions in 2018. In 2019 the number rose to 1,436 registrations over the year. However, judgements about the success of professional learning need to focus on the impact of professional learning to improve teaching and learning in the classroom (Meissel et al., 2016). Therefore, the minor study enabled a deeper investigation into people's experiences of this form of professional learning, and helped to gain insights into the degree of impact on building confidence and self-efficacy for teaching Scripture to early years learners.

As this was a minor study, the research design intentionally limited the scope of this study to ensure manageability and feasibility. Therefore, the minor study only focused on the professional learning provided through the Scripture twilights to address the second research goal, to use the approach of DBR to develop professional learning strategies and

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processes to support innovative professional learning that then translate into professional practice. In addition, the design included establishing a *Scripture twilights research team* to meet once a term to review the Scripture twilights, following the DBR cyclical phases for data collection.

Team meetings and interviews with early years teachers and religious education leaders who participated in the Scripture twilights allowed for gathering data through the transcripts from these recorded meetings. Unfortunately, the pandemic also impacted teacher availability for interviews in the last term of the research so only half of the planned interviews could go ahead. However, the consistency of the data analysis indicated sufficient data in conjunction with the major study. Table 3 provides an overview of the data collection phase for the minor study.

Table 3

An Overview of the Minor Study

Scripture twilights research team meetings	Meeting 1: Friday 19th July, 2019, 3.30 to 5.30pm
	Meeting 2: Tuesday February 4th, 2020, 3.15 to 5.15pm
	Meeting 3: Thursday 26th March, 2020, 3.30 to 5.00pm
	Meeting 4: Monday 30th March, 2020 3.30 to 5.00pm
Focus group interviews with early years teachers and religious education leaders who participated in the Scripture twilights	Tuesday November 19th 2019, 3.30 to 4.30pm
	Tuesday 26th November 2019, 3.15 to 4.15pm
	Interview with religious education leaders in study A who have also participated in the Scripture twilights: Friday 17th April, 2020, 10.30 to 12pm
	Scripture twilight interviews with early years teachers in major study who had also participated in the twilights: Thursday 16th April 2020, 1.30 to 4pm

3.5.5.   *Data Collection*

The data collection for the minor study took place over a year, from May 1st 2019, to the end of April 2020. DBR employs data triangulation to reduce the possibility of bias from evidence and findings that rely on one method of data collection alone (Meyers et al., 2018). The transcripts of meetings provided the primary source of data. However, data also came from personal journal writing, focus group interviews and documentation created during the study, allowing for a diversity of sources to cross-check for the consistency of findings. Researcher field notes and journal writing also contributed another dimension of data.

In line with data collection expectations for DBR, data were analysed "immediately, continuously, and retrospectively" (Wang & Hannafin, 2005, p. 17). In addition, ethical obligations ensured attention to storing data appropriately through three different online platforms, approved by the University of Southern Queensland. When changes to the ongoing viability of online platforms occurred, the university's ethics committee approved all subsequent changes for data storage needs.

3.5.6.   *Data Analysis*

The inductive approach of thematic analysis (TA) enabled the identification of patterns of meaning in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2021). The first step of TA involved becoming familiar with the data to generate codes for information relevant to the research question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). An initial analysis of the data coded each theme emerging, with no priority given to the number of times the theme occurred as the emphasis was on identifying patterns of meaning. Therefore, a theme appearing only once was considered as having the potential of holding significant meaning, just as a theme that continually reoccurs would hold meaning. The second layer of analysis reduced the overall themes to two or three major themes to summarise critical meaning observed through the data and identify notable gaps. The third layer of analysis focused on the question: *What did these themes mean*

concerning the research goals and questions? At the third level of analysis, the richest insights became apparent.

Braun and Clarke (2012) note that TA is well suited for participatory action research and in the early stages of a research career, leading to the decision that TA was highly appropriate for this study. As DBR generates a high amount of data (Ørngreen, 2015) the flexibility of TA enabled the data to provide critical insights to inform the design of interventions and to construct design principles (Ormel et al., 2012; Wang & Hannafin, 2005).

When all the data collection and analysis of each cycle concluded, the process of retrospective analysis began, reviewing the data as a whole (Wang & Hannafin, 2005). Again, new insights from a big-picture perspective led to new meaning, further informing the conceptual framework and development of models and processes that brought new theoretical knowledge to teaching Scripture. A later chapter was devoted to this phase of the research. The last phase of the data analysis is writing the thesis report respectfully as a *custodian of the story*, respectfully honouring, retelling and finding meaning in the stories of individuals within their own contexts (Brown, 2019).

3.5.7. *Evaluation of Interventions*

Data drive the evaluation of the impact of each intervention (The Design-Based Research Collective, 2003). A transparent evaluative process is critical; as Andersen and Shattuck (2012, p. 17) assert, "Design-based interventions are rarely if ever designed and implemented perfectly; thus there is always room for improvements in the design and subsequent evaluation". Brown (1992) calls for potential solutions to be practical and stipulates, "an effective intervention should be able to migrate from our experimental classroom to average classrooms operated by and for average students and teachers". Essentially, the evidence for each intervention needed to demonstrate that shifts in student understanding and interpretation of Scripture would not have occurred

otherwise (Reimann, 2011). Considering the wisdom from Andersen, Shattuck, Brown and Reimann, constructing questions to evaluate the impact of each intervention provided an evaluation framework for each intervention while remaining faithful to DBR principles and the research goals (see Table 4):

Table 4

Questions to Evaluate the Impact of Each Intervention

Evaluating the impact of the intervention:
1. Could this intervention be used by any early-years teacher of Scripture?
2. Is there clear evidence that the intervention positively impacted practice?
3. Is there clear evidence that the intervention positively impacted building teacher capacity?
4. Is there any adjustment needed to this intervention for increased effectiveness?

3.6.   Ethics

The major and minor studies both had two research groups. The major study comprised the research leadership and early years teacher teams. The minor study comprised the Scripture twilights research team and participants attending the Scripture twilights. Some participants elected to become involved in more than one team. Therefore, each group required a Participant Information Sheet and a Consent form, which required sending eight forms to obtain ethical clearance (see Appendix B for a sample).

Ethical clearance was sought for participants to use eSpaces. This online university research platform enabled participants to upload securely and access data shared with all participants, or individual journals for confidentiality. The storage of data took place on three

different online platforms, all suitable for university research requirements.

In hindsight, obtaining ethical clearance for this research began with an initial view of filling in forms to provide essential information to a committee. However, when the first submission resulted in outright rejection, a new perspective emerged of understanding ethics through legal obligations and human rights (Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012). At this point, ensuring that the research design addressed all risks contained in the research to minimise harm became challenging (Australian Research Council, 2018).

The University of Southern Queensland and Brisbane Catholic Education required ethical clearance, and both needed different risks addressed. The issue was unclear differentiation from an employer's perspective between my dual roles of education officer and researcher, as a different set of rules for conduct applied to each role. Furthermore, one was a paid position while the other was not. Therefore, the risk led to issues regarding intellectual property rights. Managing this risk led to developing a written agreement with the employer about clearly delineating time for research in schools as part of my professional learning and the researcher retaining all intellectual property rights (see Appendix E).

A key area of concern for the university ethics committee included minimising the risk of coercion of teachers to participate in the research. In addition, the ethical challenges of having existing relationships with research participants emerged. The greatest challenge as a researcher was not knowing alternative ways to approach participation in the study, and not knowing where to source this information. Eventually, a phone call to the university ethics office led to mentoring about risk management. Due to the risk of coercion perceived by the ethics review committee, the strategy approved involved an administration person sending and receiving forms from participants. Distributing the documents in this manner led to feedback from participants indicating the process

was time-consuming and *clunky*. As a response to the needs of participants, further liaison with the ethics office allowed a revision in the process so that participants could send forms directly to the researcher.

The other ethical issue that needed attention reflected one feature of DBR where the researcher can work in multiple roles including facilitator, mentor, observer and designer. Providing increased information about DBR on the second ethics application addressed the committee's concerns about working in various roles as a researcher. The provision of ethical clearance included participants being guaranteed anonymity in any published works resulting from the research, and participants having the right to withdraw at any time. It took six months to receive ethical approval for this research. Five revisions happened before receiving the initial approval (see Appendix C).

3.7.   Researcher Reflexivity

Barab and Squire (2004) point out that critics of DBR can view the multiple roles of the researcher as a threat to making trustworthy statements about a DBR investigation. While the inclusion of numerous schools in this project and the consistency of findings across schools assisted in addressing concerns about researcher trustworthiness, so did researcher reflexivity. Qualitative research relies on judgements from the researcher, and reflexivity relates to the researcher's subjectivity (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). Expectations for practising ongoing reflexivity throughout qualitative research are growing to enable researchers to intentionally step back from viewing the data through their context, identity, assumptions, bias, beliefs and decision-making (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022).

Therefore, throughout the research, multiple practices assisted in addressing reflexivity. The first involved having conversations about the data, data analysis and observations with supervisors and members of the two research leadership teams. Sometimes this led to not pursuing a line of possible meaning, as no one else saw the same issues appearing in

practice or the data. The second involved journal writing and consciously writing about factors that led to decision-making for the study.

Finally, the third resulted from personal curiosity, analysing some of the data for a second time to see how it compared to the first analysis, and always after a long break from the data. Interestingly, reflecting Wang and Hannafin's (2005) call to analyse data immediately, the second analysis never revealed as many details and nuances as the first. While strong similarities emerged, the first analysis always provided the fuller insights. These three practices occurred throughout the research from the point of data collection.

3.8.   Limitations and Delimitations of the Research

A significant delimitation, previously noted, is the researcher's limitations on the scope of the minor study. As the minor study provided a holistic focus for this study to gain insights into early years teachers' experiences of professional learning and teaching practice, the minor study was limited to the scope of the research goals. In addition, the onset of the pandemic led to fewer people having availability for interviews at the end of the study, reducing the amount of data for gathering evidence of the impact of the last intervention.

A further delimitation relates to the overall research design. Feedback from one of the religious education leaders indicated that another delimitation of the research was not inviting Education Officers - Religious Education to be members of the research leadership team or asking them to participate in a meeting as experts in their field. Including extra support for schools where both the religious education leader and early years teachers expressed low confidence in teaching Scripture may have provided the assistance needed for all schools to stay in the research project until the conclusion of the data collection. Including other Education Officers in Religious Education may have also built social capital at the system level, acting as a pivotal contributor in taking the research findings forward.

A significant limitation occurred due to the withdrawal of some participants relatively early in the data collection phase, leaving the study unable to gain insights into the needs of teachers and learners in years one and two. In addition, only one year three teacher remained in the study for the year, leaving no other year three teachers with whom to compare experiences and learnings. Therefore, another limitation of the study was the small number of teachers in Years One to Three who continued for the whole data collection phase.

Although the study included participants from multiple schools, these schools were in the context of the Archdiocese of Brisbane. Therefore, the findings cannot reveal the reality of early years teachers in all Catholic primary schools in Australia, or internationally. However, the DBR approach produces usable knowledge for others working in similar contexts (McKenney & Reeves, 2021). Therefore it is hoped that this study will encourage people working in other schools and dioceses to take the relevant insights, findings and recommendations to advance Scripture learning in their contexts appropriately.

3.9. The Conceptual Framework: An Introduction

In line with expectations of doctoral studies, throughout this research journey, consideration was given to developing new theoretical knowledge from this study (McKenney & Reeves, 2019). For DBR, the new knowledge must be readily usable by others working in similar contexts (Ormel et al., 2012). Therefore, throughout this research journey, a conceptual framework was constructed for building capacities to teach Scripture in the early years, reflecting theory informing practice and data analysis driving the framework's development.

The initial iteration of the conceptual framework took place in the first phase of the research, from reading the literature and reflecting upon practice. At the core, there seemed to be three essential elements required: knowledge of the Scripture text(s) teachers needed to teach, and teacher understanding of this text and decision-making about how to

teach the text. As there were three elements, they formed a triangle shape. The colour chosen throughout the construction had no meaning other than a way to distinguish between framework elements, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

The First Iteration of the Conceptual Framework
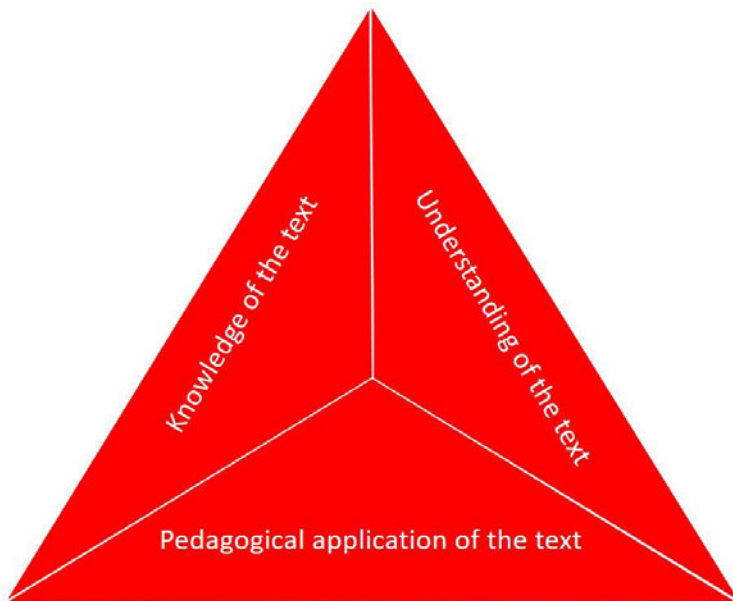
Scripture is central to religious education and authoritative Church documents state that it is essential to distinguish between literal and spiritual readings of Scripture (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1997, para. 115). Therefore, teachers in Catholic schools need to be "very carefully prepared", equipped with religious knowledge and appropriate qualifications to employ "pedagogical skill that is in keeping with the findings of the contemporary world" (Paul VI, October 28, 1965, section 8: para. 3). As teachers need to know other ways of interpreting the text beyond a literal perspective, careful preparation was essential.

At this initial stage of the research journey, the three components in the initial conceptual framework identify the areas that seemed to be critical for building teacher capacity. Knowledge of the text is logically the first requirement. For example, to teach about the birth of Jesus as a biblical story it was critical to know there are two different stories (Luke 2:1-20 and Matthew 1:18-25). Then, it seems logical that one needs to

develop an understanding to enable the reader to obtain meaning from the text. Finding out about the features of the text (for example, the genre, the symbolism) and the context of the text assists in discovering meaning from the ancient, sacred words, which leads to applying this knowledge to decide how to teach Scripture texts. Finally, in determining how to best learn about Scripture and how to teach Scripture, the literature illuminated the need to build social capital (Leana & Pil, 2006) to maximise learner achievement levels, reflecting the decision to add the next layer of the framework, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5

The Second Iteration of the Conceptual Framework
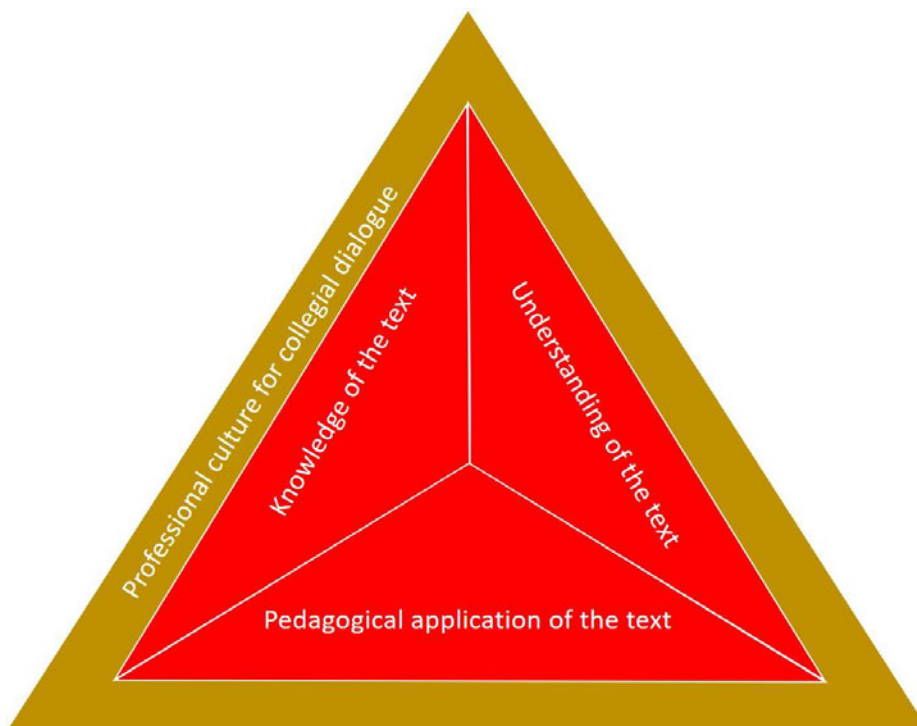
Building a culture where teachers have professional trust and shared understanding is key to ensuring school learning improvement (Daly et al., 2021; Leana & Pil, 2006; Nolan & Molla, 2018). Therefore, building social capital through teachers sharing insights about Scripture and deepening their understanding of relevant meaning from Scripture appeared to be what would provide the most robust pathway for building capacity to teach Scripture. Through insights from practice, it seemed

logical to place knowledge, understanding and application together. However, insights from research about social capital (Daly et al., 2021; Leana & Pil, 2006; Nolan & Molla, 2018) led to the next layer of the conceptual framework.

The data collection phase of this inquiry would enable testing of the trustworthiness of each element of the framework. At this point, the conceptual framework was built purely from my insights as an educator and researcher. Conversations with colleagues and research supervisors clarified the conceptual framework's core components, leading to a growing awareness that this process could occur in various ways in different contexts. The desire to name this component of the conceptual framework to reflect most clearly what was needed led to using the phrase *professional culture for collegial dialogue* rather than social capital. How each school decides to action these core elements will reflect what works best in their context, as shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6

The Third Iteration of the Conceptual Framework
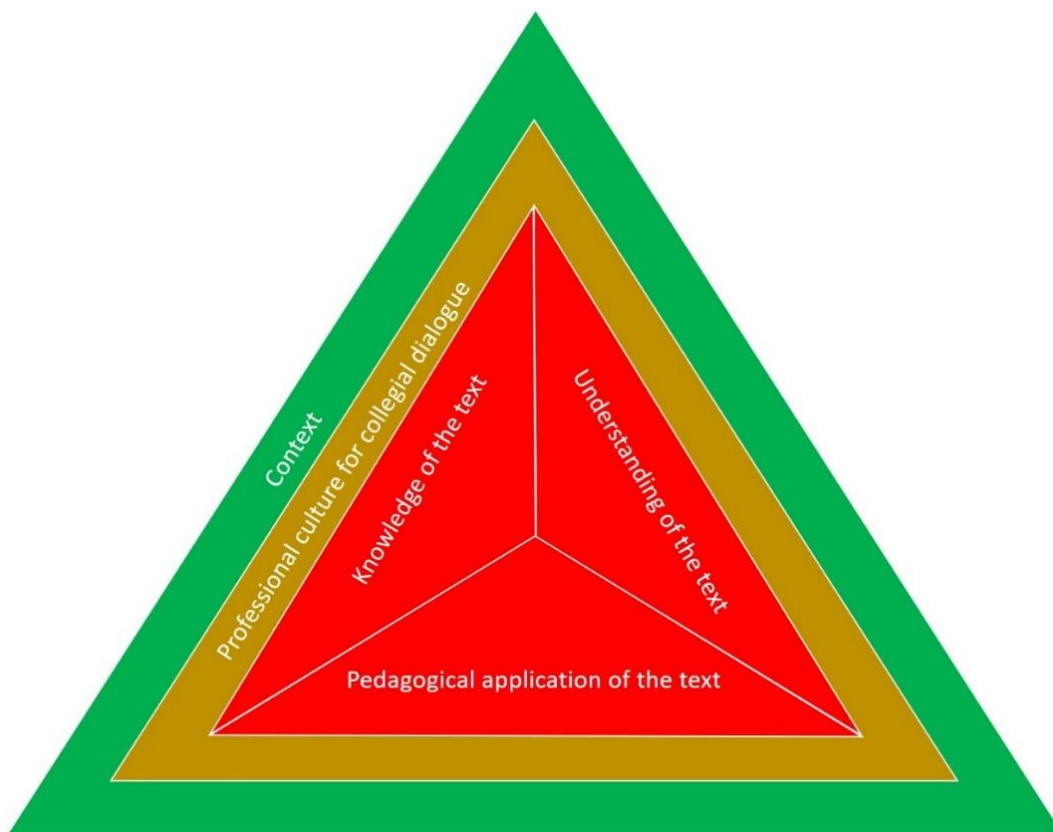
As the conceptual framework began to evolve, there was a strong awareness of the need for the framework to provide *usable knowledge* for others working in similar contexts. Terminology and phrasing were as crucial as the individual elements and processes identified within the framework, to enable others to interpret reasonably complex information readily. The term *context* brought about robust dialogue with some colleagues as *context* is a term readily used concerning Scripture, resulting in the ambiguity of meaning for some people. Therefore, to remove the ambiguity, the term *local setting* became an addition to the outer layer of the framework. In essence, before commencing data collection, the trustworthiness of the framework was tested against the wisdom of people who worked in different educational contexts for building teacher capacity. As the design for this inquiry began to take shape, it became apparent that capacity building for early years teachers required the support of religious education leaders, as highlighted through the literature. Figure 7 shows the next phase of development.

Figure 7

The Fourth Iteration of the Conceptual Framework
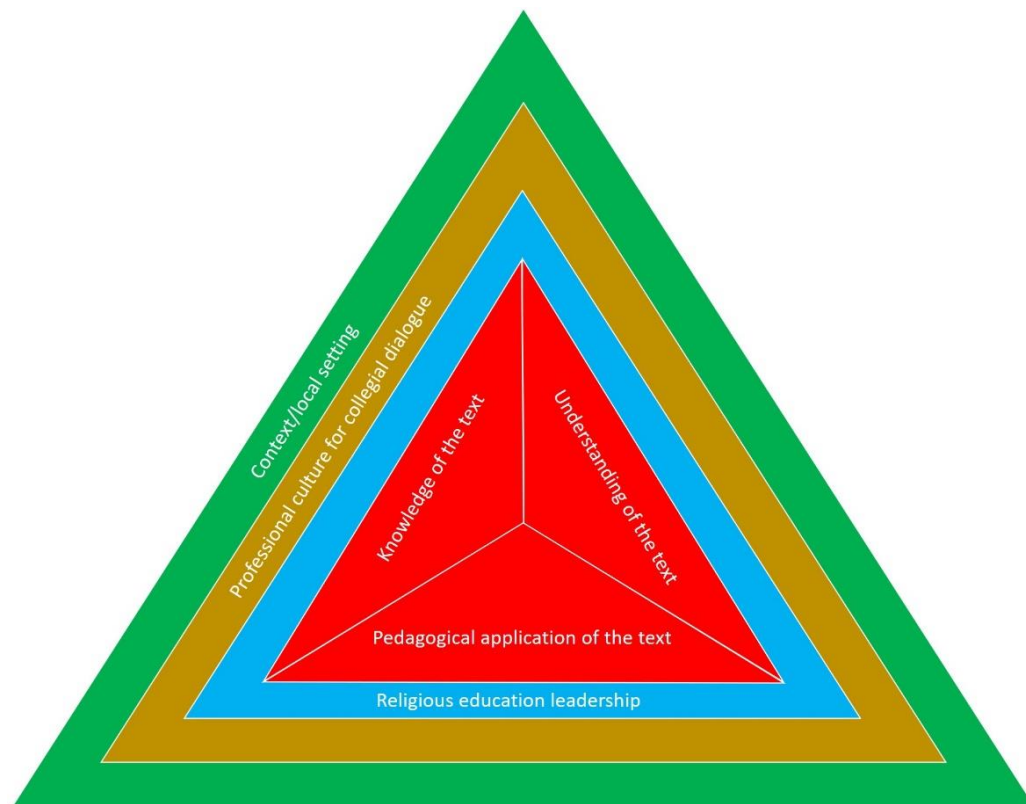
Religious education leadership is a role found within every Catholic school in Australia and is a shared endeavour across the leadership team. For example, while principals have the task of ensuring their school is authentically Catholic, in Brisbane Catholic Education schools, it is the role of the Assistant Principal in Religious Education (APRE) to lead religious education. Therefore, religious education leadership support was essential for the teachers in this research.

The following chapters of this thesis will explore the insights gained through the major and minor studies, including the retrospective analysis and the ongoing construction of the conceptual framework. New theory is presented, building on existing theories underpinning this research. The final chapters then present the findings and implications of the study.

CHAPTER 4: THE MAJOR STUDY

Chapters Four to Eight build on one another to reach the conclusion of the research. Chapter Four synthesises the major study, reporting on collaboration with early years teachers and religious education leaders from four schools. Chapter Five presents a synthesis of the minor study, reporting on investigating the impact of system-wide Scripture professional learning on the capacity and self-efficacy of early years teachers for teaching Scripture. Chapters Four and Five document the iterative cycles of the DBR process, working with practitioners to determine interventions and their impact; designing learning environments to answer the research questions (Cobb et al., 2009). Chapter Six provides a retrospective analysis of the research data, revealing the study's findings from a holistic view and examining where the data links closely to existing theories, knowledge and research. Chapter Seven explores how the research findings contribute to building new and usable knowledge that others working in similar contexts could find valuable. The final chapter draws the study to a conclusion.

Reporting about the research in Chapters Four and Five has a dual intent of reporting what happened (how each potential solution evolved), and what emerged (the data and the meaning) (McKenney & Reeves, 2012). Reporting the data analysis focuses on the meaning that surfaced, demonstrating the study's complex, multi-faceted, collaborative nature. This chapter shows how DBR is productive, grounded in practice, and aims to develop theory and practice (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Barab & Squire, 2004; Becker & Jacobsen, 2020; McKenney & Reeves, 2019).

Throughout the following chapters, the DBR process and insights from the major and minor studies highlight the degree of trustworthiness of the data. Every insight, challenge, decision, and process reported in the following two chapters leads to the study's overall findings, including advancing knowledge about DBR, building capacity, teaching Scripture, and making recommendations for future research.

4.

4.1. Meeting 1: Exploring the Problem

The research leadership team met for five hours on May 1, 2019. All members attended except Tabitha (who needed to honour her class teaching commitment due to unexpected disruptions to her teaching schedule). The meeting focused on enabling participants to develop familiarity with the research project and provide direction.

Practitioners engaged in professional dialogue, and the flow of the day reflected the DBR phases identified in Chapter Three (Easterday et al., 2014) as *focus*, *understand*, define, *conceive*, and *build*, with participants leaving to *test* the intervention in practice. Projecting group responses onto a large screen ensured the accuracy of the data captured and allowed participants to see that all individual and collective responses had value. The day enabled participants to meet one another, build rapport, shared understandings and trust, and build social capital (Leana, 2010).

4.1.1. Identifying Blocks to Capacity Building

The team discussed the merits and implications of the following vision for teaching Scripture to early years learners, presented at a National Symposium for Religious Education (Nolen, 2018):

> Imagine if all students starting year four already had four years of learning key concepts about the Bible, being engaged in learning Scripture stories through quality storytelling and other age-appropriate pedagogies that promoted critical thinking, enabling students to authentically critique resources and discover rich meaning from the text.

Participants supported this vision and decided that although it was not the reality for most classrooms, it would enable solid foundations for Scripture learning if the concept became a reality. The vision also provided a goalpost for the efficacy of the research. Discovering the viability of the vision would assist in monitoring the trustworthiness of the

research findings. Significantly, participants named a lack of teacher confidence as the dominant factor preventing this vision for the meaningful teaching of Scripture. Table 5 outlines seven factors participants identified as causes of low teacher confidence:

Table 5

Challenges in Teaching Scripture

Research leadership team insights
1. When Scripture is not valued, it is given low priority.
2. System, school and personal time, energy and resources can become directed to other priorities, leaving Scripture neglected.
3. Low professional and personal knowledge of Scripture.
4. The religious education leader sometimes lacks confidence and knowledge for leading Scripture learning.
5. A lack of resources.
6. Adult learning about Scripture can lead to literal belief being shattered and not replaced by anything, resulting in a *faith crisis* where people do not know what to believe.
7. The introduction of prep in Queensland schools aligned closely with the introduction of the Australian Curriculum, and most teachers did not permit themselves to engage in early years pedagogy.

These seven factors reveal multiple professional, personal and school / contextual factors that impact confidence. The data imply that one's professional capacity, environment, and faith experiences can significantly impact Scripture teaching. Therefore, the first intervention must target at least one of these seven factors.

Unexpectedly, two religious education leaders described how people assumed they knew how to lead Scripture learning. However, they professionally lacked the necessary knowledge and skills to show learning improvement in Scripture. The other religious education leader spoke of continually growing their ability to lead Scripture learning effectively. As a

result, religious education leaders wanted to participate in this research to build their capacity to lead Scripture learning.

4.1.2. Insights From the Literature to Inform Practice

The research team explored key literature to identify what I described to participants as the *flecks of gold* that provided insights for the inquiry. Topics explored included teaching Scripture (Carswell, 2018b), Godly Play (Grajczonek & Truasheim, 2017), and teaching the Bible (Pollefeyt & Bieringer, 2005). Broader areas included leading learning improvement (Fullan, 2016; Timperley, 2015), age-appropriate pedagogies (Fluckiger et al., 2017, August 27), and social capital (Leana & Pil, 2006).

Participants' dialogue indicated the literature was unfamiliar, including age-appropriate pedagogies, suggesting that knowledge of educational theories and early childhood development did not drive pedagogical decision-making. Two questions remained to explore during the study. First: How do we honour the integrity of each text? Second: How do we inspire interpretation and imagination through our teaching of Scripture? Participants also spoke about potential ways to address challenges, reflecting that this inquiry needs to consider alternatives to current educational practices (Herrington et al., 2007).

4.1.3. Identifying Strengths in Practice

In presenting the Scripture Planning tool, participants heard the story of the name change from *Teacher readiness to teach the text* to a *Scripture planning tool,* in case teachers perceived the original title they lacked professionalism. The team listened to the research expectations for leaders and how each role could contribute to the research. As DBR was new to all participants, there was genuine enthusiasm for participating in a study that allowed them to bring their practitioner wisdom to the project, identifying challenges, solving problems collaboratively, and strengthening practice.

The team identified the strengths they saw in contemporary practice, which all fell into three categories: spirituality, pedagogy, or Scripture interpretation and linked to significant components of the literature review. These insights provided direction for the overall research journey, suggesting possibilities for designing interventions that build on existing strengths. Table 6 shows the responses, with researcher analysis of the potential significance of this study.

Table 6

Strengths Observed in Teaching Scripture

Participant responses	Researcher analysis
Children are interested when the teacher talks about God. Even those with challenging behaviours are attentive.	This observation suggests that *God* interests all children, regardless of whether they identify as a person of faith. Also suggests teachers need confidence to talk about God.
Scripture storytelling holds rich possibilities through the arts and is an untapped space with much potential.	Scripture storytelling is a pedagogy to explore more deeply within this research.
Teacher confidence in Scripture storytelling reflects the degree to which teachers engage deeply with the text prior to storytelling.	This observation indicates a direct correlation between teacher understanding of the text and confidence in Scripture storytelling.

4.1.4.   Intervention one: Building Understanding of the Text

Deepening the analysis of the cause of low capacity for teaching Scripture, participants separated into two groups to conduct a *Five Whys* (Mind Tool Content Team, 2019) activity (Appendix F). Due to the clarity gained through the *Five Whys* process, participants argued for the Scripture Planning tool as the first intervention as it addressed the identified need but was new. Hence, the tool's impact needed measuring. This process reflected the collaborative, iterative approach of DRB (Goff & Getenet, 2017; Herrington et al., 2007; The Design-Based Research Collective, 2003). Figure 8 shows the Scripture Planning tool.

Figure 8

A Prep Sample of the Scripture Planning Tool

PREP ACHIEVEMENT STANDARD

By the end of Prep, students communicate clearly their ideas, feelings and thoughts about God, the goodness of God's creation and God's plan that people help each other to live safely and happily together, for the good of all. They identify connections between some Old Testament stories and their personal experience, including the experience of the goodness of creation. They listen and respond to stories of and about Jesus in the Gospels that tell of Jesus' life as a Jew, his mother Mary, his friends and family; of Jesus praying and teaching others to pray; and of his suffering, death and resurrection. They recognise Jesus' teachings about love, compassion and forgiveness that challenged people about the way they were living. They relate examples of people having the freedom to choose between good and bad, right and wrong.

Students understand that prayer helps believers to follow the teachings of Jesus; to live according to God's plan. They recognise ways in which believers pray either alone or with others, using word, music, action, silence, images, symbols and nature, and participate with respect in a variety of these prayer experiences, including meditative prayer, the Sign of the Cross, and Amen. They describe ways in which believers pray together during special celebrations and rituals that mark important times in the life of believers and in the Church year.

SCRIPTURE PLANNING TOOL

What would I need to teach before I share the text with students?

Key message of the text:

Features of the text to explicitly teach:

Assessment ideas:

Luke 10:25-37 The Good Samaritan

Questions I could ask to assist students to think about the meaning of the text for our lives today:

Key activities to teach the text:

The critical insight emerging from the day was that low confidence indicates low self-efficacy, and is a core indicator of the need for capacity building. While low confidence in teaching Scripture did not surprise me, the degree to which religious educators expressed their low confidence arising from a lack of knowledge about how to lead Scripture learning did surprise me. Therefore, identifying what early years teachers needed to do to enable meaningful teaching of Scripture provides critical information for religious education leaders.

The wisdom of practitioners validated multiple theory-practice gaps for the study to keep in focus to build capacity. Two significant gaps identified were i) the interpretation of Scripture and ii) early childhood pedagogy (including Scripture storytelling vs Godly Play). The high confidence practitioners displayed in identifying the first intervention reflected the time afforded to explore the problem beyond a surface level. Close collaboration with practitioners to investigate the problem before rushing into the data collection phase can challenge doctoral students using DBR approaches, often due to constraints on time and resources (Kennedy-Clark, 2015). Participants expressed appreciation for spending the day together and indicated it energised and equipped them to confidently start this research journey in their schools.

4.1.5.   Building the Framework: Theory Informing Practice

During the first meeting, participants also viewed the conceptual framework (see Figure 9) for the first time and heard how the framework would grow and change throughout the research as new insights came to light. At this point, the three components of knowing, understanding, and interpreting appeared to be the central focus, and the importance of developing a robust culture for professional dialogue in appropriate ways for the school context. Surprisingly, this presentation of theory resonated. Some participants stated that they were excited to see the conceptual framework and participate in its ongoing construction, believing it would make a valuable contribution to others. Figure 9 shows the framework.

Figure 9

The Conceptual Framework Presented at Meeting One
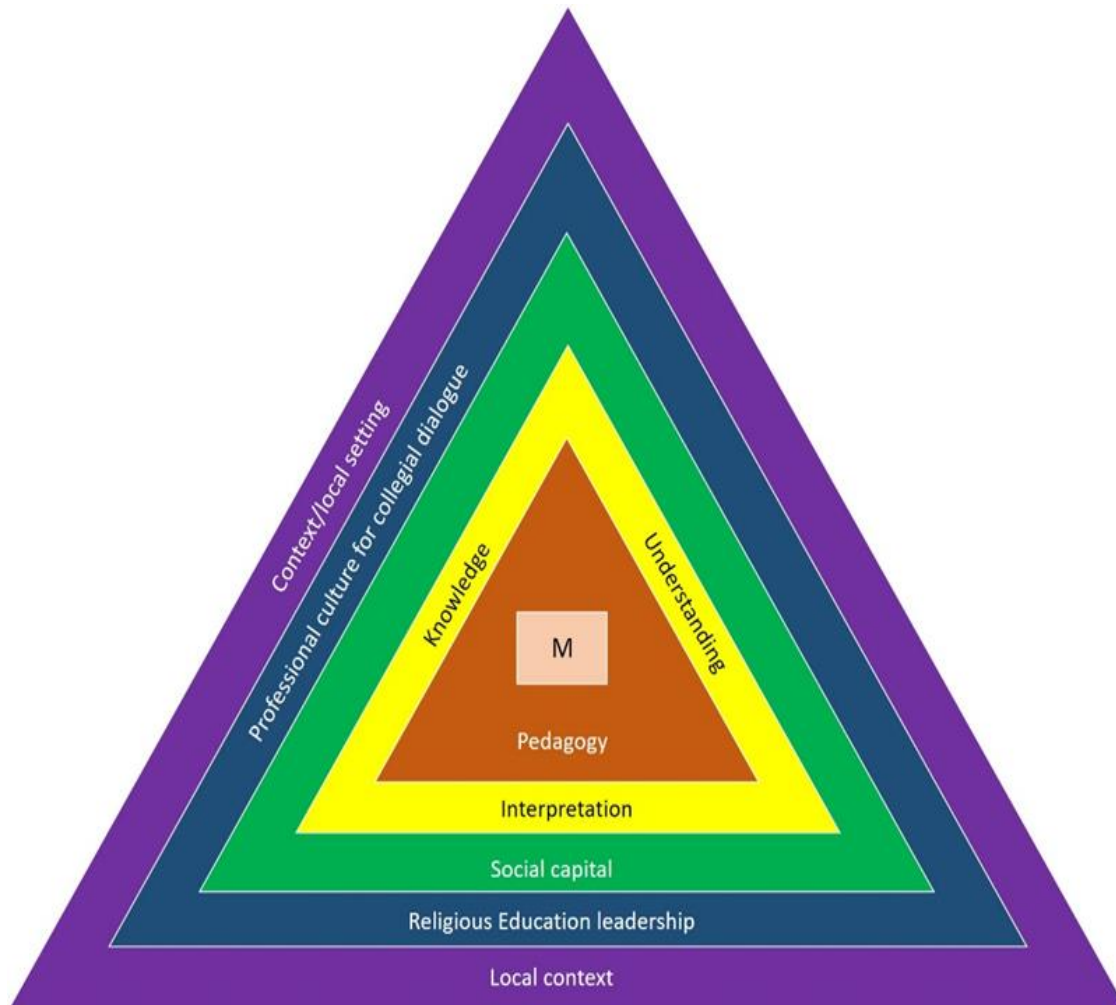
After sharing insights from the literature, the conceptual framework represented core elements that the group had already discussed. In essence, the framework appeared to synthesise the fundamental components required. Therefore, these leaders would now work with people in their local school contexts, finding ways to build shared understandings and practices and build trust to influence how teachers grow their knowledge and interpretation of Scripture before teaching biblical texts. The conceptual framework also clarified that teaching Scripture aims to enable learners to find appropriate meaning in the text, keeping the end goal in focus. The only place to strengthen the framework was to show the connection between teacher knowledge,

understanding and interpretation of the text with pedagogy. The arrows served to portray this connection, as displayed in Figure 10.

Figure 10

Connecting Teacher Understanding of the Text and Pedagogy
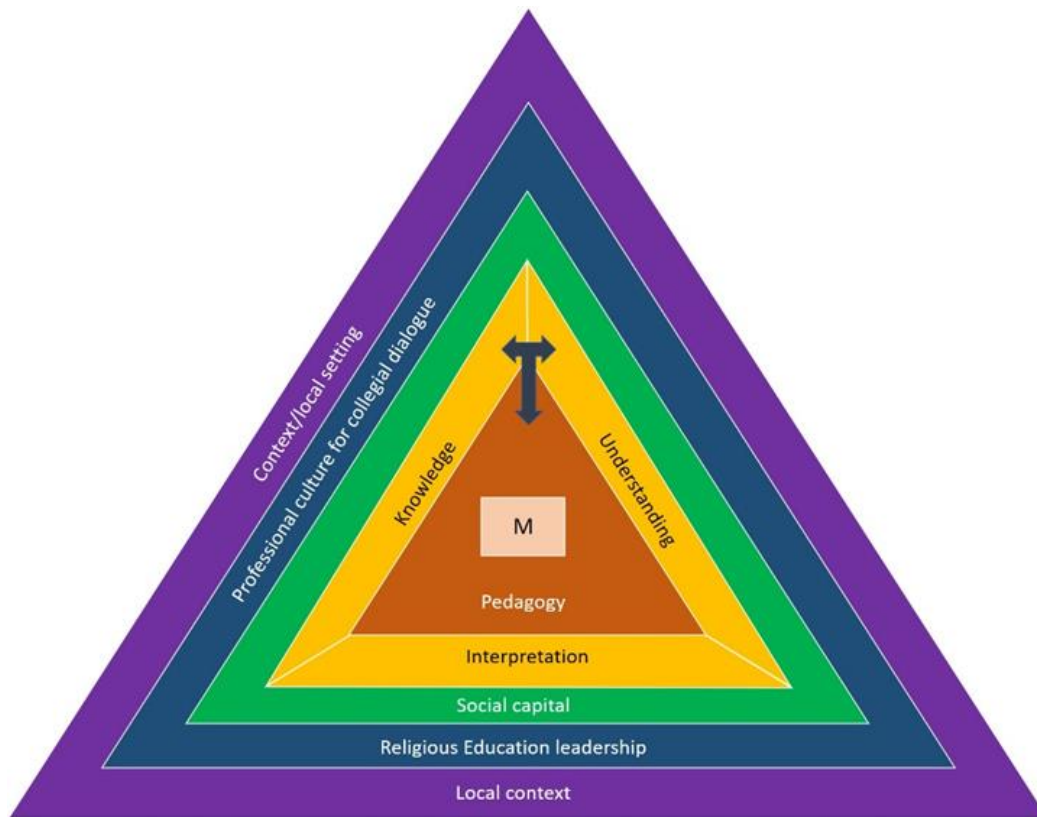
4.2. Meeting 2: Interpreting the Text

After the initial day, all research leadership team meetings focused on evaluating and further designing interventions. The second meeting took place for an hour via video conference on May 23, 2019. Unfortunately, Naomi and Tabitha could not attend due to personal or family illnesses. Tabitha took extended leave this term and requested my support as Education Officer (Religious Education) to lead the planning process during designated teacher release times. This role allowed me to see the intervention through both a practitioner and researcher lens. Data analysis after the meeting identified eleven themes emerging in the first level of coding. The second level of coding identified two overarching themes summarising key patterns of meaning: insights into practice and

insights into theory and design (see Appendix G, which shows a sample of thematic analysis for this meeting).

Presenting themes from the data included Scripture planning considerations and challenges, teacher skills, teacher support, pedagogy, and leadership needs. Participants reported positive experiences of trialling the Scripture planning tool, although St Junia's had not begun their trial due to interruptions to plans. The research leadership team had intentionally selected this meeting date reasonably close to the initial meeting, but, in hindsight, we did not allow enough time between sessions.

4.2.1. Identifying Shifts in Practice

All participants who had used the planning tool identified that it placed their attention on the text, leading them to focus on explicitly teaching the text rather than broadly planning activities for religious education time. Rebecca stated, "I loved it, actually. I thought it was a really nice way of planning as well" (indicating that in changing the tool's name the focus had inadvertently changed from interpretation to planning).

Rebecca highlighted the benefits of DBR being flexible to allow my work in multiple roles as researcher, mentor and education officer, providing planning **support for her school and discovering the importance of having people support and mentor the process of interpreting the text. Rebecca commented, "I think I was at an advantage to everyone else, though, because you were there when I did it, giving me lots of insights or tweaks that I could add. It worked really well for me and my teaching partner."**

While only the participants in the research were trialling the tool, sometimes other teachers on staff also used the tool for planning.

Anna observed her colleagues working with the planning tool and stated that "instead of having superficial ideas", the teacher

**carefully considered "going deeper and staying open-ended".
Bernice added, "Yes, I agree with what the others were saying.
We were really able to get more into the Scripture and pull out
deeper understandings". Rebecca stated her planned had changed
because "**The focus was more on the actual Scripture than the little
activities that little kids could do around that particular Scripture". The
feedback **suggested that the planning tool led to a deeper
understanding of the text, resulting in more purposeful teaching.**

How teams used the tool also contributed to building social capital.
Anna reported, "I sort of took a back seat and let my team discover every
part of the tool for themselves". Each team used the planning tool
according to the processes and support available for planning in their
context. Anna's reflection highlighted the importance of social capital and
how planning practices can contribute to building or neglecting social
capital:

> Yes, just that excitement in planning together. I think that even
> if one person took all of this and went and did the plan by
> themselves, they've got everyone's ideas and everyone's
> thoughts and prior knowledge, I suppose, without going deeper.
> And I think that it did – for one of our younger teachers who's
> never taught prep and never taught this particular Scripture,
> which was the Ten Lepers, she read the Scripture with new eyes
> and straight away had ideas. And because we were all together,
> she shared them, so lots of collaboration, which I think is a more
> ideal way to plan than one person going away and bringing it
> back for the others. **Figure 11 shows a copy of Rebecca's
> planning tool.**

Figure 11

Rebecca's Completed Scripture Planning Tool

PREP RELIGION ACHIEVEMENT STANDARD

By the end of Prep, students communicate their ideas, feelings and thoughts about God, the goodness of God's creation and God's plan that people help each other to live safely and happily together for the good of all. They identify connections between some Old Testament stories and their personal experience including the experience of the goodness of creation. Students listen and respond to stories of and about Jesus in the Gospels that tell of Jesus' life as a Jew; his mother Mary, his family and friends; of Jesus praying and teaching others to pray; and of his suffering, death and resurrection. Students recognise Jesus' teachings about love, compassion and forgiveness that challenged people about the way they were living. They relate examples of people having the freedom to choose between good and bad, right and wrong.

Students understand that prayer helps believers to follow the teachings of Jesus to live according to God's plan. They recognise ways in which believers pray either alone or with others, using word, music, action, silence, images, symbols and nature. They participate with respect in a variety of these prayer experiences including the Sign of the Cross, and Amen and meditative prayer practices especially silence and stillness and lighting a candle. They describe ways in which believers pray together during special celebrations and rituals that mark important times in the life of believers and in the Church Year.

ASSESSMENT ideas:

- Act out how we can be compassionate, loving forgiving
- Tell a story about forgiving someone/paint a picture – make a booklet.
- Relate examples of them making decisions
- Interview students why

QUESTIONS I could ask to assist students to think about the meaning of the text for their lives today:

- Are others affected by the choices we make?
- How could this story help me when I have to make a (difficult) choice?
- How do I know when I've made the right decision?
- What could we do to bring about God's dream?
- How do we feel when we've made a choice that reflects God's dream for our world? How do we feel when we don't…
- How does this story help us know God's dream for our world?

SCRIPTURE PLANNING TOOL

KEY MESSAGE OF THE TEXT

-love your neighbour as you love yourself

-God's dream to be happy and safe by treating others they way we want to be treated.

The TEXT: Luke 10:29-37

FEATURES of the text to explicitly teach:

In this story what does neighbour mean.-Jesus uses stories to teach people about God. -travel with oil and wine, now days first aid kit

What animals lived in Jesus country

-Samaritan paid the Jewish innkeeper

-Luke's Gospel-where is it found in the bible. Sacred story/bedtime

WHAT would I need to teach before I share the text with students?

- The different types of people and where they are from. Samaritan, Levite, Priest, innkeeper (dodgy rep)
- -roles Priest worked in the temple. Man of God. Important role.
- Temple in Jerusalem

- -long journeys and how they were taken -bandits were common. Notorious for robbers

-in those days most people only had one set of clothing

KEY ACTIVITIES to teach the text:

- Map out journey Jerusalem to Jericho
- Show roads of the time
- How can we show kindness?
- Anchor chart – how to behave
- Object lesson on God's love – how it never goes out
- Role play the journey and everybody in the story
- Anchor chart what does compassion, mercy, love and forgiveness look like, sound like feel like?

Other considerations that emerged from this intervention centred around resourcing planning and pedagogy. Challenges included identifying and understanding resources that teachers and religious education leaders require to support planning. Esther conveyed that her teachers asked: "Where can we get that information and make sure it's reliable and accurate and helpful to everyone?" Rebecca reflected on how the intervention brought new insights to her experience of completing an assignment for a religious education accreditation course:

> I submitted a few lessons from a unit I did…and I got my assignment back, and it was very average. And at the time, I thought, you know, I thought that was much better than what I was given credit for. But having done the exact same Scripture with you, I think to myself that I'll do that completely differently now…the other one feels airy fairy now!

In the process of dialoguing about how to design the subsequent intervention, Claudia openly expressed the need to build her skills for religious education leadership:

> And I feel this pressure that I should know so much more than I do because we're considered the experts in our schools. And in many cases, I'm asked questions that I'm not confidently able to answer, and I've got to go away and find out things myself, which is fine, but I'm really open to anything.

This analysis illuminates the value of supporting early years teachers to interpret and plan Scripture, the need to build capacity in religious education leadership and the need for strategies that can interrupt and disrupt teaching in a valued way. Otherwise, there is a risk of repeating the same teaching practice year after year, without learning how to critique and build better practice.

Rebecca's comment that her lessons seemed "airy-fairy" once she experienced learning about the text at deeper levels raises questions about *quality assurance* processes for teaching Scripture. How are teachers supported to ensure the interpretation of the text they present is

appropriate and relevant for learners today? Who provides *quality reassurance* for teachers' interpretation of the text or provides support to deepen their adult understanding of the text? What happens if the religious education leader does not feel equipped to undertake this role?

In all cases, teachers who trialled the Scripture Planning tool experienced increased confidence to teach Scripture because they had spent time deepening their knowledge and understanding of the text. The data analysis showed that when teachers had access to leadership support, appropriate resources, and time to explore essential questions, people readily developed shared understandings of the text and ideas for teaching the text.

A limitation identified was time. Concerning the subsequent intervention, participants requested additional time to evaluate the impact of the intervention on planning. Rebecca stated, "I'd like to see how that planning goes when I teach the unit as well. I think that there would be some more feedback…after I've taught it".

What was becoming apparent was that there were two levels to the research design. One operated at the whole group level for the research leadership team meetings and interventions. The second level functioned in the local school context. When religious education leaders could find ways of bringing teaching teams together for professional conversations about practice, teaching teams began growing in shared understandings and trust.

Essentially, religious education leaders tried to apply the processes and insights from the research to their local contexts, which significantly contributed to advancing the research journey. Leaders applied the knowledge gained through the first day together in any way that they could in the local contexts. Table 7 shows the evaluation of the first intervention.

Table 7

Evaluating the Impact of Intervention One

Evaluation question	Response
1. Could this intervention be used by any early-years teacher of Scripture?	Evidence reveals that others outside the research can use the same tool effectively.
2. Is there clear evidence that the intervention positively impacted practice?	Yes and purposeful learning about Scripture is more likely to occur.
3. Is there clear evidence that the intervention positively impacted building teacher capacity?	Yes.
4. Is there any adjustment needed to this intervention for increased effectiveness?	More time is needed to allow all participants to trial the tool.

4.2.2.   Aligning the Conceptual Framework to Theory

Some of the insights from practice reflected the theory and design underpinning this research and provided further clues about teacher needs. As the teaching teams dialogued about what they were doing and why they were doing it, they strengthened social capital, building trust in one another to share their thoughts and ideas about the text and how to teach it. This experience demonstrated the emergence of the theme of social capital.

Claudia had met with her teachers in the research, taking them through what the research team did during the first meeting. "They were particularly impressed with age-appropriate pedagogies – that they'd never seen before – but very much enforced their way of thinking and how they run things in prep, so I think they felt really reassured."

Therefore, meeting as a team to implement the intervention strengthened shared understandings and built social capital.

The analysis of the intervention showed a strong alignment with the theory of social capital, and the need for teachers to be confident in interpreting the text before teaching the text. What emerged was that teacher knowledge, understanding, and interpretation of the text played a significant role in building teacher confidence and capacity to teach Scripture well. As teachers experienced challenges in how to interpret the text, a strategy that appeared to aid this process was the presence of a *knowledgeable other*. The religious education leader or education officer in religious education provided this support when trialling this intervention. Therefore, the design of this inquiry needed to be sensitive to providing ways for participants to grow in their understanding of the purpose of what they are doing, and have access to a *knowledgeable other* if they do not feel confident in interpreting and planning Scripture.

While the data affirmed the primary layers of the conceptual framework, one absence noted was the notion of pedagogy drawn from understanding how children learn. Therefore, adding a new framework layer with the phrase *know students and how they learn* helped ensure this connection did not go unnoticed. The core skills teachers changed to: *Build teacher knowledge of the text* to lead to *understanding of the text;* to *enable interpretation of the text*.

When teachers engaged in these practices, the emerging data showed a significant shift towards building better practices. Furthermore, the language in the framework around social capital started to change. Considering the insights from the analysis, the language in the framework changed to *develop social capital through communities of practice*.

Additionally, the practices and importance of the role of religious education leaders became highlighted. The religious education leaders ensured teachers had time to meet and learn together and supported team planning. Therefore, the language in the framework changed to *commit to leading Scripture learning*.

Finally, each religious education leader needed to establish sustainable ways of meeting and working together to ensure the capacity-building journey could occur in their local context. Therefore, the language in the framework changed to *apply the framework in contextually sustainable ways*. This insight from the data analysis directly links to the literature and research about effective leadership requiring commitment (Jones & Harris, 2014). Discovering different ways that each leader in the study can apply the vision for their context needs consideration in light of calls for more research about the significant impact of context on leadership ability to ensure learning improvement (Harris, 2020). The next iteration of the conceptual framework is shown in Figure 12.

Figure 12

The Conceptual Framework: Building Clarity
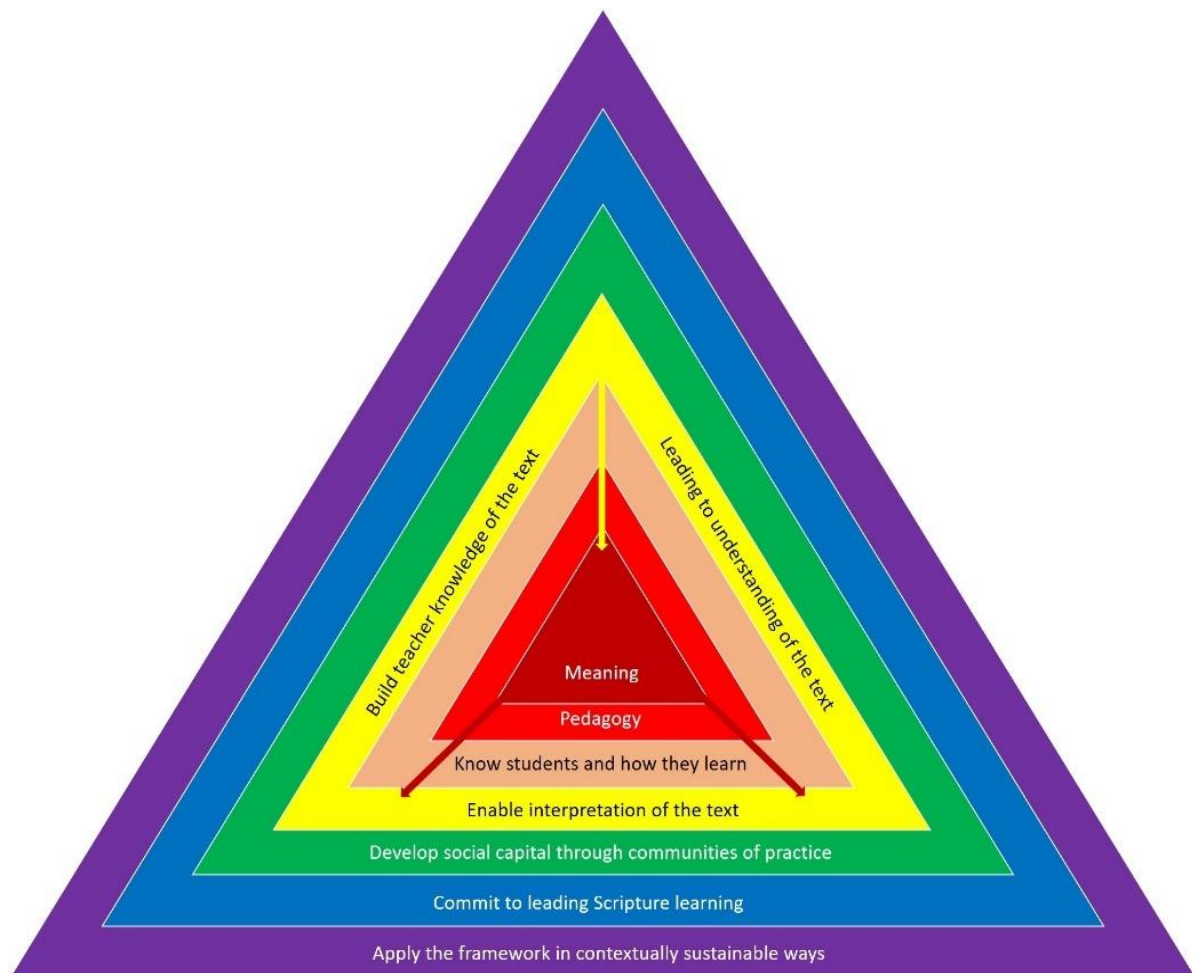
4.3. School Visitations: Insights From Immersion in Practice

The following insights for this study emerged through visits to the schools. Data analysed from my journal writing about school visits revealed twenty-six themes. The second analysis level identified two significant themes: (a) Learning about the Bible and (b) understanding what will positively impact the research. Each of the twenty-six themes then aligned with one of the major themes.

At this point, the difference between ethically collecting data and mindfully working with people came into sharp focus. I wondered if I had made a design error in committing to be an observer in classrooms, as an excerpt from my journal reveals my thinking:

> Whatever happened in that visit needed to be about building a relationship with the teacher, modelling that this was about working in partnership and collaborating rather than an inspectorial visit. I needed to do whatever I could to respond to wherever the teacher was in her journey (Researcher journal notes, June 17, 2019).

Primary teachers are generally not used to having an adult audience, so participants could naturally experience rising anxiety levels about my visit. However, there could be a major difference if I focused purely on ethics and neglected teacher needs as a researcher. This pivotal learning moment was that research design requires a two-fold focus on deeply mindful processes that consider ethics and participant needs. By the end of school visits, the importance of learning from participants in their contexts was indisputable.

4.3.1.   St Junia's: Insights From Collaboration and Modelling

At St Junia's school, Miriam proposed a visit to the prep classrooms to observe students learning about the story of David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17:1-49) because she was impressed with their language and dialogue about the story. Miriam expressed that her biggest challenge at the start of the year was not knowing how to define God, as many preps

had never previously heard of God. When I replied that she didn't need to define God because we teach that God is a mystery and no one will fully understand all there is to know about God, Miriam's face looked relieved as she said, "Oh, that's so good!"

This critical challenge of leading theological reflection with learners may not have been apparent without meeting and dialoguing with teachers in their contexts. This conversation exposed the importance of the capacity for leading theological reflection. This capacity plays a vital role in enabling dialogue about God, considering what the author wants people to understand about God and building an increasingly complex understanding of the nature of God. This conversation also reveals the individual nature of capacity building, highlighting the importance of identifying individual teacher needs.

A visit to Miriam's classroom allowed the Prep learners to take delight in demonstrating their knowledge about the story of David (the shepherd boy) and Goliath (the tall Philistine warrior), showing me on a map where the Philistines lived at that time. The prep learners showed deep engagement and rich knowledge about the story. However, they had not yet reached the stage of expressing meaning beyond amazement that a little shepherd boy had overcome a giant equipped with armoury and weapons.

As Miriam had mentioned difficulty teaching the second creation story from the book of Genesis, the opportunity arose to model some teaching strategies for this story. With both Prep classes, the Prep teachers and religious education leader present, I told a story about all the Preps in their school running on concrete one day while it rained, then falling over and scraping elbows and knees, resulting in tears. However, the principal and religious education leader came to clean up their wounds and tell jokes to make them laugh again. Then I asked, "Did that story really happen?" All the Prep students confidently responded, "No!" So, I admitted that I had just made it up.

Then I asked, "But does that story have any important messages, even though it never really happened?" A few hands went up immediately, and the first person I asked replied, "Yes. If you run on concrete, you can get hurt". I asked, "Do you think there are any important messages in that story about this school?" Immediately, a few hands shot up, and a boy answered, "Yes. People in our school look after us". This unplanned teaching opportunity demonstrated that using the life experience of learners to create an obviously fictional story is an effective strategy to enable young children to look beyond the surface level (literal meaning) of a story to discover rich meaning.

The experience confirmed that young children could infer meaning. However, it also showed the importance of scaffolding learning. Furthermore, this experience suggested a need for identifying explicit skills that support Scripture learning to move beyond literal interpretation and uncover the *treasures* in the story.

Upon reflection, there seemed to be a gap between what the curriculum presented for teaching Scripture and the identification of explicit skills and strategies that learners required for meaningful Scripture learning. In this case, using a *thinking strategy* for meaning-making enabled learners to infer meaning. There seemed signficant potential for writing curriculum based on evidence of what teachers need to know and understand to facilitate meaningful learning.

This activity set the scene to talk about how we don't know whether all the stories in the Bible really happened, but we know they all have special meaning to help people understand something about God and what God is like in people's lives and our world. Learners then used playdough to imagine they were God, creating a human being and blowing life into this person while listening to the story from Genesis. Next, I asked if the air was the only thing God would breathe into a person, and learners began offering other ideas about the need for people to have love. Figure 13 depicts the learners at work.

Figure 13

Miriam's Class Created an Earth Creature
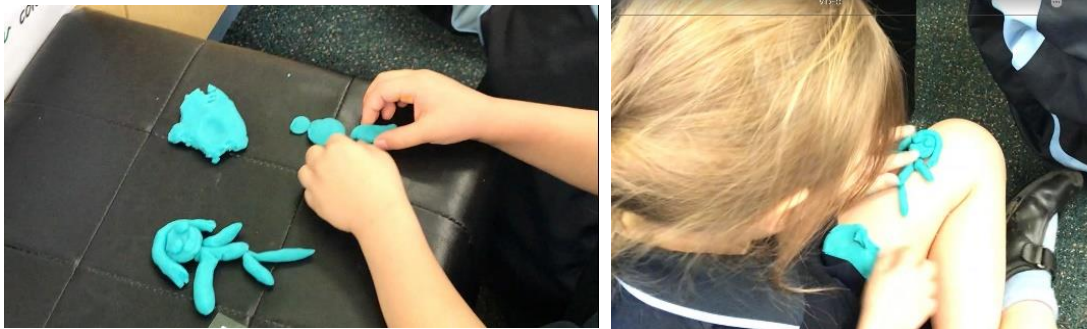
There are vital insights to highlight from this experience. First, while learners enjoyed Scripture learning, there seemed to be potential for learners to deepen their learning by introducing deeper thinking concepts such as considering *why* events may have occurred and *what meaning* the story could hold for people today. In considering *why* teachers might not lead learners beyond a surface-level understanding of the text, it became apparent that understanding the purpose of teaching Scripture influences what teachers hope students will achieve.

To illustrate: if teachers think that they need to teach Scripture because sacred texts simply because they are a component of the Religion curriculum, they will likely view Scripture teaching as non-negotiable. Then, teachers could develop a sense of efficacy when learners demonstrate a surface-level solid knowledge of Scripture. However, if teachers understood that the purpose of teaching the text is to encounter "the message of faith" and "grasp cultural implications" for contemporary living (Benedict XVI, 2010, section 111), teachers would want to move learners to a deeper position than surface-level knowledge acquisition. Teachers would more likely want to employ strategies that enable learners to apply their learning to articulate how the text can challenge, inspire or assist people today. Therefore, it seems that teacher clarity about the purpose of teaching Scripture is interrelated with teacher efficacy in determining student achievement levels.

Second, the experience of working with the preparatory classes at St Junia's school highlighted that early years learners *can* understand

insights in the text beyond surface-level knowledge and literal understanding of Scripture. In this case, the creation story from Genesis 2 could be taught as a literal story about Adam and Eve as the first humans in the world, especially if teachers had little prior understanding of the text. However, teacher knowledge and understanding were crucial for teaching this text beyond a literal story. This story just happened to be a text I had previously studied, so I knew that the names *Adam* and *Eve* are not in the core text for Prep learners. Instead, I could draw on my knowledge that the English word *man* in the text comes from the Hebrew word *ha adam*, and the most accurate term in English is a genderless *earth creature* rather than a *man* (Elmer, 2010, September 17). I then taught learners that "earth creature" was the most accurate term, representing neither male nor female. This teaching enabled some learners to identify meaning beyond a literal interpretation of the text.

The exercise demonstrated that building teacher knowledge and understanding of the text provided insights into how early years learners could obtain meaning from key terminology. Therefore, it seems that teacher understanding of the text is interrelated with *what* to teach about the text. Furthermore, it suggests that using biblical texts presented in the simplest language for children to understand can prohibit learners from obtaining rich meaning from the text. In this case, meaning-making for learning occurred at deeper levels when the most accurate terminology could be used and explained, enabling learners to access richer, more truthful insights into the text.

Third, pedagogies play an influential role in teaching Scripture. When the preparatory students at St Junia's had opportunities to hear a story of fiction that incorporated elements they knew to be factual, some students immediately identified appropriate meaning from the story. This experience suggests a need to explicitly teach skills for interpreting the text for meaning. Therefore, the process of finding the treasures below the surface of Scripture texts (Osborne, 2017, Series Preface) can occur through rich questioning, storytelling, scaffolding and working with

resources that children naturally enjoy for active learning as they all have a role to play (Fluckiger et al., 2015).

This analysis reveals that when early years learners are engaged in pedagogies needed for rich learning, they can think deeply about Scripture. When storytelling enables learners to scaffold thinking about the genre of the text, early years learners can identify how the text reveals insights about God, as discovered through the genre of sacred myth rather than as a historical, scientific text. Therefore, a teacher's understanding of how children learn and pedagogy is interrelated with deciding *how* to teach learners effectively.

Fourth, the feedback from Miriam and Claudia suggests that working in partnership with early years Scripture teachers is helpful. Claudia elaborated at the following research team meeting: "When Beth came…she actually visited the Prep rooms and demonstrated a little lesson which we got a lot from. And so that was great" (Meeting three, June 27, 2019). Therefore, the evidence suggests that modelling can be a powerful strategy to help build teacher capacity and self-efficacy.

Finally, professional conversations frequently led participants to recall family beliefs or faith challenges. Journal notes capture this observation:

> It became clear to me that faith and seeking religious understanding was not just a curriculum area for Miriam but a part of her whole identity as a person. What she taught and discovered in her journey as a Prep teacher impacted her own personal faith journey as both an individual and a parent (Researcher journal notes, June 17, 2019).
> The data seemed to indicate that teaching Scripture can impact a teacher's spirituality and identity.

4.3.2.   *St Mary Magdalene's: Scripture Storytelling*

This visit occurred on Monday 17, June 2019 and began with Naomi stating that Ruth wanted to withdraw from the research. Ruth felt

overwhelmed in her first year of teaching. When I met Ruth, she revealed that she had found the Scripture planning tool effective in helping her build confidence to understand and teach the text.

> Ruth had enjoyed being part of the research but could not find time for extra activities such as journal writing. Consequently, Ruth opted to withdraw from the study but continued working closely with Naomi and her Prep year level team to build capacity for teaching Scripture.

It is noteworthy that by the end of the year, Naomi and the principal observed Ruth had obtained the confidence and proficiency required to lead Scripture learning with her new teaching team the following year. While the inquiry had limited participants from each school, evidence began to mount of the impact of the research flowing over into building capacity for other teachers in the school.

In Anna's classroom, Prep students gathered around different tables where varying resources allowed for a choice of activity. One group chose to engage with wooden characters and objects to retell the story of the Good Samaritan. Two learners agreed to retell the story, doing so with high competence. Anna then asked some *I wonder* questions, and the learners responded appropriately, as captured in Figure 14.

Figure 14

Anna's Learners Retell the Good Samaritan Story

Learners readily retold the story and showed signs of having agency in their learning as they chose what resources they wanted to use. Anna has never learned the Godly Play method of teaching Scripture. However, she previously discovered the art of Scripture storytelling in another diocese, having been taught by someone who had adapted learning strategies from a Godly Play foundation for classroom religious education. Anna made further adaptations to the process and outlined how she memorised the entire Scripture story she needed to teach, retelling the story using the exact wording from a Bible.

For the past ten years, Anna had used an adult Bible rather than a Children's Bible, memorising the text to conduct Scripture storytelling and experiencing high-level engagement from learners. Anna's experience was remarkable as early years teachers commonly seek versions of biblical stories that children may more readily understand than using a Bible written for adults. However, Anna presented evidence that early years learners in a primary school did not need adults to paraphrase or adapt biblical stories. Instead, they required teachers to lead them in obtaining appropriate meaning from the biblical text.

Scripture storytelling seemed to provide a way of learning that honours the pedagogical characteristics of narrative, active learning, collaboration and language-rich learning (Fluckiger et al., 2017, August 27). Therefore, Anna's classroom practice reflected the theory well in these areas. However, the research team did not have a shared understanding of Scripture storytelling processes, or how this pedagogy aligned with early childhood theory. Therefore, the team required further work to examine how theory could assist in building the practice of Scripture storytelling.

Anna commented on the importance of my school visits to see the contexts of people in the inquiry, develop new insights from each context and identify differences and similarities in the same journey occurring in different places. Onsite I could visually

witness teacher challenges and enthusiasm, as evidenced during a conversation with Naomi about Scripture storytelling when Hannah arrived at the end of the teaching day, clearly relieved to sit down. Within fifteen minutes of Hannah talking about teaching Scripture, I exclaimed, "Hannah! Look at your face! You came in here looking exhausted, and now your face is filled with energy". Hannah smiled and replied, "I just love teaching Scripture". From such experiences, I realised that school visits represented an essential inclusion in the research design, but they required **careful consideration and negotiation with participants.**

Unfortunately, on September 5, 2019 Hannah emailed to say she needed to withdraw from the research due to the stress of a family situation, rendering her unable to take on any extra commitments. Nevertheless, Hannah demonstrated that teaching Scripture to early years teachers can be a joy, bringing energy and a love of learning into teaching. In fact, except for Anna, all the other teachers in the research from St. Mary Magdalene's ended up withdrawing, citing ill health of themselves or family members.

4.3.3.   St Huldah's: Teaching Critical Thinking Skills.

At St Huldah's, spending significant time in multiple roles afforded me numerous opportunities to visit classrooms. Rebecca's classroom always had visual displays of Scripture learning. A core challenge Rebecca expressed was moving learners beyond surface learning to deeper understandings and critical thinking. Together we considered various strategies, and Rebecca would report back the degree of success she experienced.

For this visit, I entered into a role-play with Rebecca's learners, dressing up as Jesus and responding to questions. The two Prep classes came together in awe. However, in hindsight, we needed to scaffold this experience and build critical thinking skills before I appeared as *Jesus*, to

enable learners to conclude that I could not possibly be Jesus who lived thousands of years ago.

A visit to the year three class revealed that year three learners had the capacity for high levels of critical thinking and that Gabrielle was providing many opportunities to foster critical thinking and interest in biblical texts. For example, one boy asked if any of the Gospel authors knew Jesus when he was alive. I replied by saying this was a question I did not think I ever considered until I was an adult, so I was very impressed. The year three class was interested to learn that Luke even wrote at the start of his Gospel that he never knew Jesus personally. Dialogue with rich questioning opportunities, modelling, and collaboration proved rewarding pedagogies. These classroom visits demonstrated that early years learners are highly capable and can enjoy Scripture learning. My classroom experience also showed that learners appreciated it when teachers could confidently answer their questions about the Bible.

4.3.4.   St Priscilla's: Finding Teacher and Learner Needs.

Esther made contact a few weeks earlier to indicate her teachers wanted to ask me a few questions about the research. Having not heard confirmation about the meeting time, but knowing the religious education leader was under pressure (building works and construction workers had even taken over her office), I arrived at the school. I had a backup plan for alternative work elsewhere if the time was inconvenient. It transpired that teachers had forgotten to reply to Esther's email about the meeting but were happy to spend time with me in the role of researcher, visiting classrooms.

The Prep class was a different experience from St Junia's. When I heard the Preps had been learning about creation stories, I asked the class, "Do you think God would breathe anything else into people other than air?" Every response reflected a literal interpretation of God making our bones, or bodies. Then I told them what some of the Preps in St Junia's school had told me about this story, and their eyes opened wide

in amazement. A conversation with Bernice confirmed that this cohort had strong, literal thinking. In hindsight, I did not scaffold my questions by telling a story that was obviously fictional but still contained significant meaning, highlighting a clear connection between teacher pedagogies and learners' ability to find meaning in Scripture.

Moving to the year two classes, I asked learners what questions they had about the Bible. Joanna and Abigail later remarked on how impressed and surprised they were with some of the questions, indicating that learners had the capacity for deep thinking. Finally, I talked with learners individually in the year one class and asked what they knew about the Bible. Learners knew how to hold the Bible and place it in a prayer space, but they also believed a picture storybook about Bible stories was the actual Bible. This encounter highlights a need to distinguish between teaching *about* the Bible and teaching *biblical texts*.

A conversation with Joanna revealed misunderstandings about roles and responsibilities that led to her not using the Scripture planning tool. Joanna wanted to report directly to me for reporting, planning, feedback, and general learning improvement. She declared that her motivation for participating in the research was to work with me. Therefore, now that I no longer supported St Priscilla's in my education officer role, Joanna wanted to work directly with me as a researcher. I explained to Joanna that this was inappropriate because Esther wanted to build her own skills for leading to enable the capacity-building journey to continue beyond the duration of the research.

We agreed to ask Esther to organise a time for the school's new education officer to support teachers planning religious education. Unfortunately, I did not see the education officer before the planning day to explain the intervention we were using for planning. On the planning day, Esther was suddenly required elsewhere in the school to deal with other needs. Therefore, the Scripture planning tool trial did not occur due to a lack of communication with the education officer.

Visits to schools proved to be a vital component of the research design. What became apparent was that the visits were not only about data triangulation (Herrington et al., 2007) but also involved relationship building, enabling participants to share their stories, and responding to the needs and questions of participants in the research. For example, modelling strategies for teaching Scripture provided an opportunity to work in partnership with teachers and religious education leaders, who could see they brought high skills to the educational activities through their expertise in classroom management and knowing their learners. In addition, the school visits resulted in rich conversations with participants, allowing greater anticipation of ongoing needs to address within the DBR process.

4.4. Meeting 3: Building Understanding of the Text

Members of the research team met via video conference using the zoom link for the University of Southern Queensland on June 27, 2019. While all participants had communicated their availability the previous day, there was no representation from St Priscilla's. Later communication revealed some participants were unwell or had seriously ill family members. Esther later disclosed that a staff member had collapsed, so Esther needed to manage the situation. Therefore, the meeting had representatives from two schools, and all participants from those schools attended. The meeting lasted two hours, from 3.30pm to 5.30 pm, and participants joined the video conference from their school environment.

The goals of this meeting were to hear from those who had trialled the first intervention, listen to an update from other schools, and identify how to proceed for the second intervention (to develop shared understandings about how children learn). Having additional time provided new insights that did not appear during the first trial of the Scripture planning tool. Therefore, this demonstrated the need for the research design to continue seeking feedback about all interventions. over time. From the transcript of this meeting, twelve themes surfaced through

the first level of analysis. The second level of analysis identified two overarching themes of pedagogy and building and implementing theory.

4.4.1. Documenting Teacher Learning About the Text

The dialogue continued from the previous meeting about readiness to teach the text and the importance of understanding processes that strengthen Scripture planning. Claudia discovered funding for teacher release was available, so she hastily assigned it to work with Prep teachers to use the Scripture Planning tool (after teaching the story of David and Goliath during the term). Claudia reported:
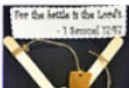
> And so what we did today, we just sort of backtracked and probably did a lot of the work that should have happened before that lesson. So we've done things in a different order, but I can really clearly see now the purpose of why we're doing what we're doing. And why the planning should be done before the lesson.

Claudia explained how Miriam had adapted the Scripture planning tool in working through the elements of this resource retrospectively after teaching the text. Miriam retained the part of the Achievement Standard relevant to the unit of work and added another question about links with other curriculum areas. Claudia suggested that making connections between curriculum areas "is something I guess we're always trying to do as teachers". For the story of David and Goliath, Miriam had found connections with maths and science.

Additionally, Miriam "added the names of the five contexts in brackets", reflecting the approach used in the *Religious Education: Curriculum guidelines for the early years* (Brisbane Catholic Education, 2007) and the *Early Years Curriculum Guidelines (Queensland Studies Authority, 2006)*. Miriam's changes highlighted some of the diversity of understanding early years pedagogy in Queensland schools. Figure 15 shows Miriam's adaptations of the Scripture Planning tool, and Miriam has placed red arrows and yellow highlighting to indicate her changes.

Figure 15

Miriam's Changes to Intervention One

Learning Intention: (from Prep Achievement Standard)

<mark>They identify connections between some Old Testament stories and their personal experience</mark>

Success Criteria: (from Prep Content Descriptions)

Religious Knowledge and Deep Understanding

Familiarity with characters, events and messages from some key Old Testament stories, including and David (1 Samuel 17:1-49), is a means of connecting Scripture and real life.

Skills

Listen and respond to Old Testament stories. Share feelings and thoughts about the events, characters and messages in some familiar Old Testament stories

Make links between some familiar Old Testament stories and their own experiences by sharing characters, events and messages that may be similar to or different from their own experiences.

ASSESSMENT ideas:

- Drawing a significant event from an Old Testament story and event from student's own experience that are similar.
- *"Can you think of a time you were brave like David? A time when God may have helped you to have courage and believe in yourself?"*

QUESTIONS I could ask to assist students to think about the meaning of the text for their lives today:

- What is the message of this story?
- What is God trying teach us through this story?
- What is God's dream for us from this story?
- How can we pray with this message in mind?

Links to other curriculum areas:

MATHS – measurement: comparing height of Goliath with David

SCIENCE – growing giant sunflowers to give context to height of Goliath

SCRIPTURE PLANNING TOOL

KEY MESSAGE OF THE TEXT

(focussed teaching & learning)

- Importance of having faith/God is always with us and helping us.
- God is like a shepherd, caring for us, loving us, trying to protect us.
- God wants people to keep believing in themselves. God can do great things even through little people.
- Having a heart of courage, faith in God and strength to do things that might seem too hard.

The TEXT: David & Goliath

(1 Samuel 17:1-49)

FEATURES of the text to explicitly teach: (focussed teaching & learning)

- Familiarising concepts – giant, army, valley, camp, *6 cubits and a span*, champion, armour (coat of mail), shepherd, servant, wadi, sling, *disdained him*, stone, enemies.

WHAT would I need to teach before I share the text with students?

- Folklore/Narrative (hero story?)
- Story setting – show map of Judah/Elah Valley google maps
- Discuss people – Philistines/Israelites *Why are they fighting?*
- Characters – God, David, Goliath, King Saul & the Israelites, Philistines, Jesse and his sons (Eliab, Abinadab, Shammar.)

KEY ACTIVITIES to teach the text: (play, investigations, real-life, transitions/routines)

- Goliath height poster on wall
- Minibook
- Using Omni people to tell story
- Craft – bag of stones
- Playdough to make characters
- Finger puppets
- Slingshot craft with paddlepop sticks, string, glass bubbles.
- Drama – acting out the story
- What is a slingshot? How does it work?
- Beginner's Bible YouTube – compare story with scripture story previously told.

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Naomi identified that people were now using the above tool for two different purposes:

> It's interesting, there's probably, in you doing it afterwards there's probably greater depth - so it would be important - I suppose it depends on what the tool is used for. Is it used as a readiness tool, or is it used as like a snapshot overview, what you've got there? We use it more as a readiness tool as to: What do we need to have prepared before we go on?

The name change for this resource from Readiness to teach the text to Scripture planning tool now had implications. Key themes from the data pointed to the need for being cognisant about all the elements required to achieve readiness to teach the text. Miriam's use of the Scripture planning tool was impressive in demonstrating this resource could assist in building capacity. In a context where neither the teacher nor religious education leader felt confident about leading Scripture learning, they had used resources to identify key themes emanating from the text. In this case, the resources used were readily accessible and interpretable by Miriam and Claudia. Intervention One demonstrated that the Scripture planning tool supported teachers in building their knowledge and understanding of the text, thereby achieving readiness to teach the text. When teachers could appropriately interpret the text, they were ready to teach the text and use the resource as a planning tool.

At St Junia's, Claudia reported the research work to the principal. "And he was quite impressed and excited by it. He made a good point. He just wondered about the long-term effects this will have on our current planning documents". Due to the positive impact of the Scripture planning tool, the leadership team at St Junia's were looking to introduce this way of planning throughout the whole school.

4.4.2.　　　*Identifying Shifts in Practice*

Feedback from participants highlighted other insights. Claudia reported that as Miriam's confidence in teaching the text grew, both Prep teachers could readily identify each learner's level of learning achievement. Unexpectedly, the assessment of learning was clear and readily justifiable. Claudia outlined the experience of one Prep teacher, who "always hesitated and never felt as though if she was questioned directly over it (assessment) whether she would be able to back that up". Furthermore, Claudia outlined how the Prep teacher's approach to teaching Scripture had changed:

> They also said this time, when they use the mandated Scripture text, they used it as the focus of their unit of work rather than just a story to support the theme or something to add on at the end. So I think they've totally flipped their learning. And here at Saint Junia's, we've never, I guess, taught the Scripture or the messages in the Scripture as the focus of the unit. I think they've always taught the mandated text, but it's probably just been an add-on. So that's probably a key learning.

This change in the placement of Scripture in religious education learning is highly significant. Taking a Scripture text and reducing the meaning of the text to align with themes from the religious education curriculum is considered *proof texting*, and it is a practice to be avoided (Carswell, 2018a; Stead, 1996). Previously, Miriam and Phoebe taught a unit of work on *creation* and added a biblical creation story in the final teaching stage.

The data show that using this approach will likely lead to learners only finding surface-level meaning in the text related to a singular focus, such as *God made the world*. However, Miriam and Phoebe discovered that the biblical texts provide a foundation for teaching the rest of the curriculum by teaching Scripture first. Learners are then not viewing the text from a narrow perspective of one curriculum theme, but multiple themes, insights, and meanings become apparent. Therefore, the new

approach Miriam and Phoebe used reduces one theory-practice gap. Teaching the core text and "allowing the insights from the text to enrich understanding of the curriculum" (*Religious Education Curriculum P-12*, 2020, p. 238) is also the expected practice.

Naomi observed that in planning with early years teachers, "our conversation today was nearly like professional learning for our team". Through team dialogue, early years teachers had "acknowledged that we needed to do more work in this space", and they thought about pedagogy at "that deeper level". Evaluating learning tasks and opportunities, teachers defined "busy things" and asked what they could do "to go beyond just the busy things?".

This question reveals that not all planned teaching leads to rich learning. Some learning *activities* keep learners "busy" rather than engaged in active learning. These comments from practitioners reveal honest reflection on practice while building social capital to develop shared understandings of what constitutes effective pedagogies. The feedback also indicates strong leadership, promoting a safe environment where teachers can ask challenging questions that disturb practice.

Further feedback about the first intervention highlighted how resources can contribute to teachers departing from the curriculum. Naomi explained that sometimes in planning, teachers "go to the resource first rather than the Scripture or the main expectation of the curriculum. So, I think the beauty of this tool is it doesn't have resources on it at this point". Therefore, the data suggest that resources for teaching Scripture can be problematic, with some redirecting the learning, and others being too academic for early years teachers to obtain educational meaning readily.

Claudia excitedly shared a story about the Preps at her school suffering end-of-term tiredness. Consequently, Miriam and Phoebe decided to put on a *David and Goliath* video for both Prep classes together.

And the kids sat there for twenty-seven minutes, intrigued and watched the whole thing. They said they've not seen the kids so engaged all year. I've never been able to put something on and just, you know, leave them. And the kids critiqued the video (Claudia, meeting three).

As Miriam and Phoebe had taught the story using an approved translation to teach the text, Claudia recounted how the Prep learners quickly pointed out inaccuracies between the biblical text and the video. "And they just sat there and were like, 'Well, that didn't happen in our story, and this didn't happen'. So they were able to pick all of these similarities and differences". Teachers noted that it turned out to be "really valuable". Miriam and Phoebe spoke with Claudia about how the experience exposed the importance of teaching an appropriate biblical translation before introducing other resources. This experience was a pivotal moment as it demonstrated the capabilities of young children when Scripture teaching follows processes that honour the integrity of the text and the learners' ability, rather than reducing the text's meaning and limiting the learners' abilities.

Claudia had uploaded all the planning for teaching *David and Goliath* onto the eSpaces site for all participants to access. However, she found it "a bit clunky trying to upload documents". Additionally, while eSpaces met the requirements for ethical storage, it was not as *user-friendly* as teachers needed, and teachers reported forgetting user names and passwords, resulting in low-level use of the site. (After the data collection phase, the university provider discontinued the eSpaces site due to the ability of new, more efficient collaborative tools.)

The data analysis from this meeting showed that the intervention was effective, with no changes required. In three schools, the Scripture Planning tool was starting to be the first step in the planning process. An intervention with longevity indicated that our initial investigations of the problem the team wanted to address had led to the right starting point for the DBR process.

4.4.3. Building the Framework: Leading With Intentionality

Hearing Claudia's experience of almost giving up on finding time to participate in the research but then seeing an opportunity to work with her Prep teachers, revealed a vital leadership capacity of being intentional. Claudia held onto the vision of assisting teachers in building capacity to teach Scripture and waited for the first opportunity to move forward. Therefore, Scripture learning improvement seems to need a leader's vision, commitment, and intentionality,

Claudia's experience also demonstrated that sometimes a leader could aspire to a vision and be committed to it. However, they cannot lead intentionally due to circumstances beyond their control. The data suggest contextual factors impinge upon one's ability to be effective in leadership. From this analysis the blue section of the framework changed to *Aspire to the vision, then commit to leading Scripture learning with intentionality,* as shown in Figure 16.

Figure 16

The Conceptual Framework: Leading the Vision with Intentionality
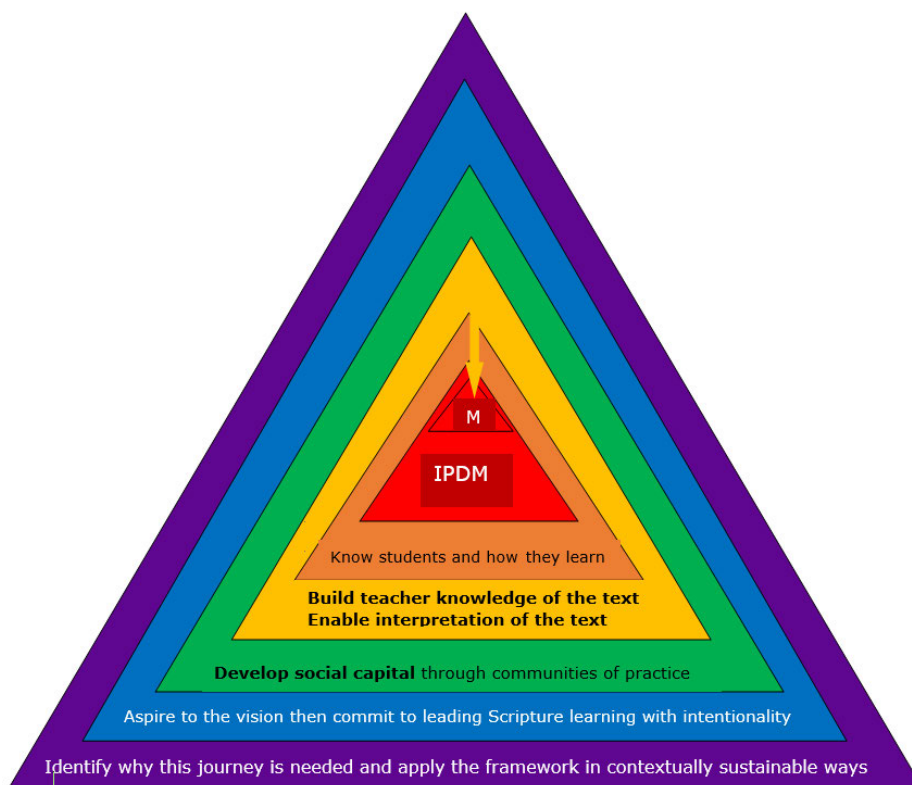
Note. IPDM is Informed pedagogical decision-making (for meaning).

4.4.4. Intervention 2: Pedagogical Decision-Making

To allow additional time to continue evaluating the Scripture planning tool and in the absence of any evidence of changes required, the focus for designing the subsequent intervention moved to pedagogy, as teaching the text is the professional reason for interpreting the text. Due to the exploration of crucial literature during the first meeting, the team identified the need for participants to explore how young children learn in order for teachers to build confidence in pedagogical decision-making. Participants agreed to spend a day working with an early years educator during the school holidays. Unfortunately, email communication later revealed the educator was unavailable.

The plan (the design) now required reworking. Eventually, the team agreed to revert to the alternative prototype suggested at the previous meeting, to read literature about how children learn, and to share insights with others from their schools involved in the research. The need was clear, but how to address it effectively was not, and it took months to progress. Finally, I synthesised core insights about early years learning theories into a PowerPoint format for each team to read, discuss and document their ideas about how the theory needed to impact practice.

4.4.5. Teacher Ability to Interpret and Plan the Text

Esther organised a day for me to support teachers in the research to use the Scripture planning tool for planning religious education. As a result, I received approval from the appropriate people to work with teachers on September 3, 2019 from 8.30 am to 3.00 pm at St Priscilla's school. As Education Officer, I led teachers through the same planning processes that teachers at St Huldah's school were using (investigating the text to find deeper meaning and then concept mapping key teaching about the text), including using the Scripture Planning tool. As a result, teachers expressed appreciation, asked questions and indicated increased confidence about what to teach. Unfortunately, Esther could not be with

us for most of the planning time as she continually received requests to respond to other needs in the school. Esther was apologetic, but teachers realised the situation reflected the multiple duties required of religious education leaders in small schools with no deputy principal.

The purpose of the concept map was to find a relatively quick way of documenting what to teach, as exploring the text well seemed to take most of the planning time. Concept mapping did not limit thinking about the text but captured core insights into what was important to teach about the text. Figure 17 shows the concept map.

Figure 17

Concept Mapping Key Teaching Points
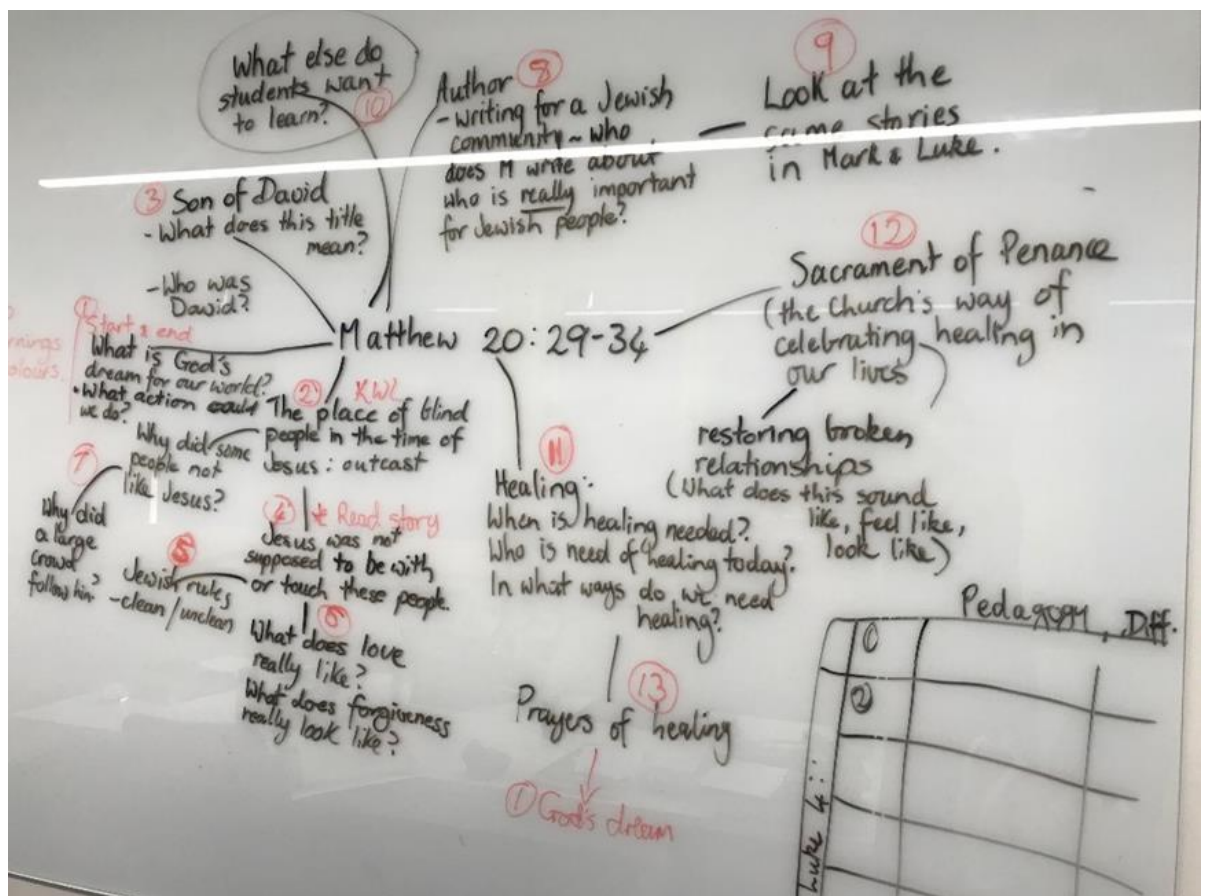
Note. Figure 17 displays a concept map from the planning with teachers at St Priscilla's.

The concept map identifies what to teach from the text and outlines a pathway for learning by numbering a possible teaching and learning sequence. We explored how each *number* could go into a table format

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where participants could identify appropriate pedagogies to teach each concept and consider differentiation for learners. (The reference to Luke 4 in the table refers to the text planned with the previous group.)

Planning with teachers at St Huldah's and St Priscilla's allowed me to observe needs closely and hear the concerns, successes and challenges encountered in teaching Scripture. First, no one entered the room confident in their ability to find meaning beyond a surface reading of the text. Second, teachers enjoyed hearing about the text and discovering meaning at deeper levels because it gave them confidence in their interpretation of the text, with new insights emerging through group dialogue about the text. Third, viewing three different translations of the text: New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition (NRSVCE), New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE) and the Contemporary English Version (CEV), enabling the identification of words and phrases with the richest meaning, leading to a choice of translation for each text. Finally, moving from translating the text to identifying what to teach about the text (documented in a concept map) was a litmus test for teacher confidence to interpret and teach the text.

Teachers found concept mapping more challenging than I anticipated, and the natural inclination to move straight into planning learning opportunities proved incredibly strong. This experience led to identifying three steps for Scripture planning: (a) to interpret the text for adult meaning, (b) to identify *what* to teach, and (c) to identify *how* to teach (pedagogy). (The Scripture planning tool assisted with each of these steps.) Feedback from teachers indicated that once they had the concept map, they left the room confident about their next steps for documenting and facilitating Scripture learning.

Esther also arranged for me to meet with the research participants after school to address questions about the subsequent intervention. However, only Esther and Abigail attended, and we were surprised to find the others were absent. Nevertheless, the time spent with Esther and

Abigail appeared to build confidence about completing the intervention.

4.4.6.   Responding to Needs: Building Judaism Knowledge

One of the emerging challenges named by participants was the need to build knowledge and understanding of Judaism to teach about the cultural and religious worlds that shaped Scripture texts. Brisbane Catholic Education supported the trial of a two-day program at the Sydney Jewish Museum, with places offered to participants in the research. Three teachers, two religious education leaders, and I attended the Sydney Jewish Museum program for either one or two days (October 2, October and October 3, 2019 from 10am to 4pm). All reported that the experience was valuable and revealed a wealth of scholarship, and cultural and historical contexts never previously considered in their interpretation of Scripture. Figure 18 shows some artefacts at the Museum.

Figure 18

Photos from the Sydney Jewish Museum
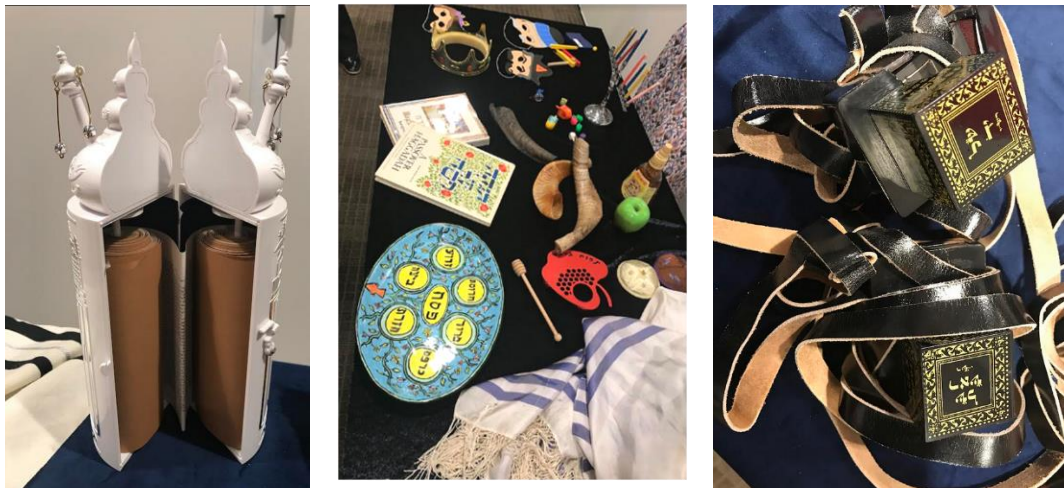
4.4.7.   Challenges in one School Context

Arranging a date for the following research leadership team meeting proved challenging to find a two-hour block of time that suited everyone, or even most people. The weeks slipped by until it became clear that Esther had ceased communication with me unexpectedly. Eventually, a

phone call to the school located Esther and apologies flowed. Despite meeting with Esther and Abigail, no one at St Priscilla's had trialled the intervention. Collectively, they lacked the confidence to complete the task and worried their inadequate responses would put the research at risk. In addition, teachers had applied to be part of the inquiry when I worked in the Education Officer role for their school. Now they felt disconnected from regular contact with me. Furthermore, when teachers planned with their new Education Officer, they were not using the interventions decided through the research. They did not feel confident asking the Education Officer to support them in making changes to their planning processes (although the Education Officer would have willingly assisted with the interventions).

Consequently, all the participants involved in the study at St Priscilla's met and unanimously decided to withdraw from the research. Most participants also knew they were teaching a different year level the following year, and some would no longer be teaching early years learners. While Esther was apologetic about her school not contributing to the research, I reassured her that the school had made a valuable contribution. The reasons participants struggled provided valuable insights into what was needed to build capacity (further outlined in chapters six and seven). I emailed the principal to indicate that we would need to make some changes to provide further support for teachers if anyone wished to continue in the study the following year. However, although I had a great professional relationship with the principal, there was no response. The conditions the school needed for successful participation in the research did not seem evidenced at this point, and I could not change the conditions.

4.4.8.   *A Second School Visit: Age-Appropriate Pedagogies*

The withdrawal of St Priscilla's left three schools to visit in early November. Now teachers were confident to show learners' work about Scripture, ask questions and request support. Meeting with Miriam, we

explored the two different infancy narratives. She shared her excitement about engaging her learners in making first-century Palestinian houses from boxes. Miriam's work with these texts later inspired some other teachers at St Junia's, who were amazed at the language, concepts and knowledge that Miriam's Prep learners gained about the two stories of the birth of Jesus.

The teachers in the research also expressed delight in sharing their success stories and professional learnings about teaching Scripture with their colleagues. Classrooms in all three schools visited had displays of artefacts that learners had made to deepen their understanding of the Bible and Scripture stories. Children's enjoyment of Scripture learning was evident through their confidence and delight in sharing their knowledge and experiences of Scripture with me.

Miriam recounted teaching the Good Samaritan story in the sandpit and needing to explain what she was doing as her principal walked past. Encouragingly, Miriam used early childhood theory to justify what she was doing and why. Miriam's journal writing and experience demonstrated clear evidence of an early years teacher independently using Scripture and early childhood theoretical knowledge to inform practice, leading to engaged, innovative teaching. Figure 19 shows evidence of Miriam's teaching.

Figure 19

Miriam Scripture Storytelling in the Sandpit

At St Huldah's, Rebecca's classroom showed ample evidence of learners regularly working to create artefacts, such as using blocks to build *Nazareth* and the *Temple in Jerusalem*, as shown in Figure 20.

Figure 20

Rebecca's Learners Built Nazareth and the Temple

Learners investigated the height and size of the Temple using blocks to build some of the features of the Temple and why Jews visited the Temple. Rebecca created different spaces and environments within the classroom. An old sheet became Abraham's tent, as shown in Figure 21.

Figure 21

Rebecca's Learners Created Abraham's Tent

Rebecca's classroom constantly displayed new and creative visual resources for Scripture learning, drawing many positive comments from visitors. Figure 22 shows how Rebecca drew inspiration from her visit to the Sydney Jewish Museum.

Figure 22

Rebecca's Learners Made Scrolls

Rebecca worked with her class to find old cereal boxes and create a visual representation of the Bible as a library of books. Each time Rebecca introduced a new biblical story to her learners, she printed a copy of it and assisted learners in putting it inside the box representing that book in the Bible. Figure 23 shows the library.

Figure 23

Rebecca's Learners Created a Library of Books

This artefact exposed one of Rebecca's challenges: determining how much to teach her learners about the Bible. As Rebecca's biblical knowledge increased, she found her teaching could go well beyond the curriculum content. On the other hand, as teachers developed core skills to enable learners to reach deep meaning, they needed to teach skills unnamed in the curriculum, which indicates that teachers would benefit from increased skill identification for teaching Scripture across each year level.

Gabrielle's year three class loved engaging with visual artefacts for Scripture storytelling and learners had enjoyed retelling the story of Jacob's ladder (Genesis 28:10-22). Gabrielle described how learners became deeply engaged in the story when they could see the story

represented visually. In addition, there was further evidence of pedagogical decision-making linking to the Scripture text, as learners explored the image of God as a potter (Isaiah 64:8) and then used clay to represent the meaning they obtained from the text (as shown in Figure 24).

Figure 24

Scripture Storytelling Resources Created by Year Three Learners

Teachers also named challenges. For example, Rebecca came to me said, "I'm still not getting my learners beyond surface-level learning. How can I get them to deep learning?" I asked a few questions and then made a few suggestions. Rebecca replied, "What you just said is exactly what I do for literacy, but I never thought of applying the same strategies to R.E. [religious education]". Rebecca's comment reflects Stead's (1996) call for teachers to draw on literacy approaches for teaching Scripture. It seems that it may be important to amplify this message more than twenty-five years later, to assist early years teachers in seeing the connections between teaching other types of literature and teaching sacred Scripture.

Visits to each school showed that while each intervention intentionally placed one aspect of teaching Scripture under close investigation, teachers continued to build their practice, implementing different pedagogies, learning from one another and drawing on insights from theory. Additionally, teachers self-identified areas where they needed to make changes and openly reached out for further support as they identified individual challenges. Finally, as teachers experienced their

learners demonstrating higher levels of engagement in learning and ability to interpret Scripture, their confidence and self-efficacy grew.

4.5. Meeting 4: Building Capacity and Self-Efficacy

Participants in the research leadership team met on November 19, 2019 from 3.**30pm to 5.30pm via USQ Zoom video conferencing. All members attended. The** purpose **of the meeting** was **to discover the impact of the previous intervention on reading and documenting insights about how children learn and whether to conclude or continue the research data collection.**

There were ten themes identified: evidence of building capacity; strategies for building capacity; Scripture storytelling; what is needed to build capacity; the impact of pedagogy change; evidence of participant needs; positive outcomes of building capacity and self-efficacy; the effect of intervention two, and, the **process of whole-school change. In addition, there were two overarching themes: (a) evidence of building capacity building and self-efficacy and, (b) evidence of the needs to inform the subsequent intervention.**

Participants identified multiple ways they observed capacity building occurring. For example, Naomi noted that sometimes religious education planning "is really hard", however, now "…we're actually having a real energy about it and people looking forward to saying, 'Oh, I'm going to do this Scripture next". Anna described how one of her team reduced the number of props to retell the two stories of the birth of Jesus due to increased knowledge of the Scripture texts, overcoming the influence of Christmas card images that "have a lot of the clutter that comes with popular culture". Anna's example highlights the critical need for an appropriate translation of Scripture to be the starting point for teaching religious education to ensure the accuracy of Scripture teaching.

Rebecca added that "knowing the steps" contributed to building capacity. Rebecca stated, "we didn't have the organization we've got now

to help us build that capacity. There's a very clear structure that we sit down with - we start with the Scripture". Rebecca's comments highlight that the learning process is one aspect of pedagogical decision-making. Teachers needed to decide how the learning journey began and ended and scaffold from one point to the next to continually build learners' ability to retell, understand, and interpret Scripture texts.

Evidence presented showed supportive mentoring, modelling and knowledge of the process of Scripture storytelling enabled a teacher to build capacity quickly. Furthermore, through engaging in dialogue with learners through Scripture storytelling, asking wondering questions and thinking questions, learners could more readily demonstrate different levels of thinking. Such clarity allowed teachers to readily assess the level of learning that each learner has reached. Anna reported that one of her teaching team had said that the wondering questions used for Scripture storytelling "were so amazing that she now has absolute clarity and confidence in the grades for students". Claudia agreed:

> It was definitely a comment that one of our Prep teachers made that she now feels a whole new level of confidence at this time of the year and knowing where her kids are at as a result of working with this program. I guess that is proof in itself, isn't it - how far some of them have come!

Naomi outlined that Anna's sharing of her research learnings with her team "…has meant that there's a real energy, and an interest and a desire to have a go and to learn more. I just think we're building capacity in all of our teachers because of that". Naomi stated teachers "…know within themselves…that they have the capacity to be at that next level, so they don't want to go back to the mediocre". Significantly, Namoi identified a point of irreversible change, indicating that teachers believed their new practices were valuable and sustainable. Naomi led to teachers striving to "…use all of the ways of working and knowledge of young children" to result in more robust teaching of religious education".

A by-product appeared to be that teachers became "better early years teachers". Therefore, Anna's participation in the research positively impacted her whole teaching team. In addition, the evidence suggested that building pedagogy capacity for teaching Scripture also improved pedagogies in teaching other learning areas.

Naomi spoke of the richness that Scripture storytelling brought to learners' thinking, wondering and discovering meaning from the text, as "…storytelling has been just when you're in that moment, and in that experience, it is really quite amazing". Naomi outlined that children's engagement in the process and "conversations" contributed to making "the teacher feel empowered to keep asking more questions…because it is positive and the children have this natural curiosity that they want to know the answers to questions". Through Scripture storytelling, teachers experienced higher levels of learner engagement and enjoyment, which led to building self-efficacy. Tabitha and Rebecca commented that they could now move the dialogue from "surface learning" to "deep learning", which they could not do a year ago. Rebecca explained that when learners remain at surface level learning, she asks, "What are we missing?' I think previously I didn't always know what I needed them to give me".

The data analysis reveals a clear connection between capacity building and self-efficacy. There appears to be a ripple effect when building capacity, as growing understanding and skills in one teacher leads to others building skills in an environment with substantial social capital. Building capacity for *how* to teach led to richer pedagogies occurring in other learning areas and increased capacity for assessment.

4.5.1.   The Framework: Using Theory to Inform Practice

Reading the conceptual framework became challenging because all the information seemed too significant to ignore. Therefore, a radical change to vertical presentation allowed for more details. Data analysis from the minor study also shapes the framework, as shown in Figure 25.

Figure 25

The Conceptual Framework: A Vertical Approach

Identify why this journey is needed and apply the framework in contextually sustainable ways

Aspire to the vision then commit to leading Scripture learning with intentionality

Develop social capital through professional teams of innovative practice

Build teacher knowledge of the text

Enhance teacher understanding of the text

Cultivate teacher capacity to interpret the text to gain meaning at adult level

Understand how students learn, informed by current literature and knowledge of each student's optimal ways of learning

Informed pedagogical decision making and application to cultivate student capacity to interpret the text at student level.
What do I need to teach? How will I teach this? When will I teach this? Where will I teach this? Why did my teaching impact / not impact? Who am I teaching?

Enable students to reach deep levels of authentic meaning from the text that informs, inspires, challenges and leads to transformational learning. Student interpretation of the text can lead to new insights into the text for students and teachers.

4.5.2.   *Challenges in Designing the Next Intervention*

The first task relating to the intervention was analysing the effectiveness of the previous intervention. The feedback about Intervention Two varied. Some teams had met and had a great dialogue about how children learn but had not documented anything or had gone straight to pedagogy application without showing evidence of *why* particular pedagogies were appropriate. It became clear that the intervention was challenging for everyone because investigating early years theory is not usually a task that early years teachers and religious education leaders spend time exploring outside formal study.

While I had endeavoured to make the task as manageable as possible by creating a PowerPoint to summarise critical insights into early years theory, participants had all responded differently to implementing the intervention. The intervention was so challenging that one school withdrew from the research because they did not know how to move forward and did not have the onsite support or social capital they needed. While some participants began to align theories of how young children learn with their classroom pedagogies to promote learning, the shared understandings of the research participants required strengthening. The implementation of the intervention lacked the rigour that DBR research demands.

Participants also reported that building capacity was not without challenges; therefore, the subsequent intervention needed to respond to these challenges. Participants acknowledged that the process of whole-school change took significant time, was not without challenges, and each school was in a different place on this journey. When asked about teacher responsiveness to changing how they plan for religious education, Claudia stated, "We've had a few that have openly said when they feel overwhelmed, they revert straight back to their old unit plans". Moving from term units to short cycles of planning that followed the model used for teaching English enabled teachers to see benefits over time. Claudia described, "By the third time that we met, people were saying, 'Oh, this is

really good. It's really clear'. It really allows for that particular Scripture to be taught well".

Although growth in confidence was evident, Rebecca expressed a desire to continue the research for another term. Rebecca explained, "I feel like you're just starting to fly, you're not quite soaring, and there's a couple more interventions that I feel like I need a little bit more support from the team with as well". Teachers had already delved into age-appropriate pedagogies to some degree, and as only three weeks of the school year remained, pedagogy became the next intervention focus. Participants believed it was manageable for teachers to identify at least one characteristic of age-appropriate pedagogies that they needed to develop and trial implementation. Then, teachers would record their experience of using one or more age-appropriate pedagogies in their planning or journals. Again, as only one term remained for data collection, this group began thinking strategically about what was realistically achievable by the end of 2019 and what needed to be held over until the following year.

Participants also agreed that they wanted to spend a day together early in 2020, in person, to focus on building social capital by sharing understandings and learning from one another. The religious education leaders liaised with their principals, who fully supported this initiative and agreed to provide the teacher release funding for this day. Ethical approval allowed the data collection to continue until the end of April, 2020. Effectively, spending a day together became the fourth intervention identified, with unanimous agreement that this pathway provided the most potential for continuing to close the theory-practice gaps, address challenges and learn from one another.

4.5.3.   *Pedagogies that Positively Impact Learning*

Classroom visits provided opportunities to see visual evidence of artefacts created by learners. For example, Gabrielle's class created props for Scripture storytelling. Learners also used clay to explore images of

God and they wrote descriptions of what each image represented, as shown in Figures 26, 27 and 28.

Figure 26

Year Three Depict how God Wants People to be in the World

Figure 27

How God Desires People to Live in Community

Note. Gabrielle described one learner's representation of God desiring people to have "listening ears, loving hearts and welcoming laps".

Figure 28

How God Desires People to Live in Community

Note. Gabrielle described a learner's representation of God desiring people to live together with love.

Miriam identified that providing opportunities for learners to share their knowledge with others was highly valuable and rewarding for learners. Figures 29 presents Prep learning about the birth of Jesus.

Figure 29

Miriam's Class Explore the Stories of the Birth of Jesus
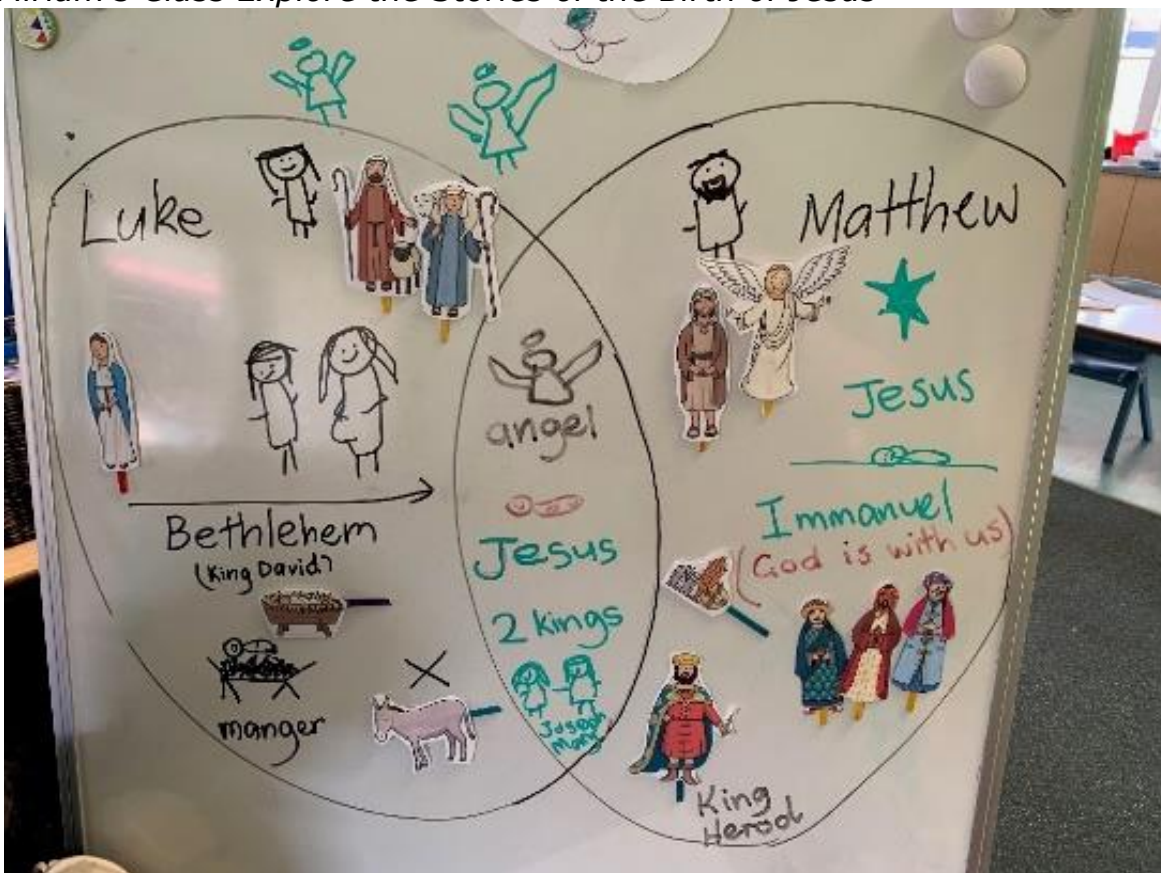
Note. The Venn diagram shows the differences and similarities Prep learners identified between the two stories of the birth of Jesus.

Figure 30

Miriam's Prep Learners Construct Housing in Jesus' Time

While intervention three occurred before being able to do justice to investigating early childhood theory as a whole research team, it did enable teachers to reflect deeply on their practice. In addition, journal writing revealed some astute insights. For example, Miriam's inclusion of how she started the learning process later became central for identifying the steps needed for the learning to move beyond a surface level, literal understanding to deep level understanding, enabling learners to obtain appropriate meaning for life.

4.6. Meeting 5: Social Capital Drives Professional Learning

This meeting occurred on February 12, 2020, from 9am to 2.45pm at St Mary Magdalene's school, located between the other two schools in this study. Gabrielle could not attend due to a clash with a professional learning day for early career teachers, and Tabitha was on maternity leave. In addition, in consultation with Claudia and the research supervisors, Miriam and Ruth (who participated in the minor study) joined the group due to high interest. Ruth spoke of being inspired by Miriam's learners and she hoped to build on their learning from Prep to Year One.

The agenda was to continue building collective understandings and professional trust by sharing practice insights, responding to emerging needs, and strengthening theory-practice links. Documentation developed throughout the day became data for the research. Figure 31 shows the responses captured on the whiteboard of the shared understandings.

Figure 31

Identifying What we Have Collectively Learned
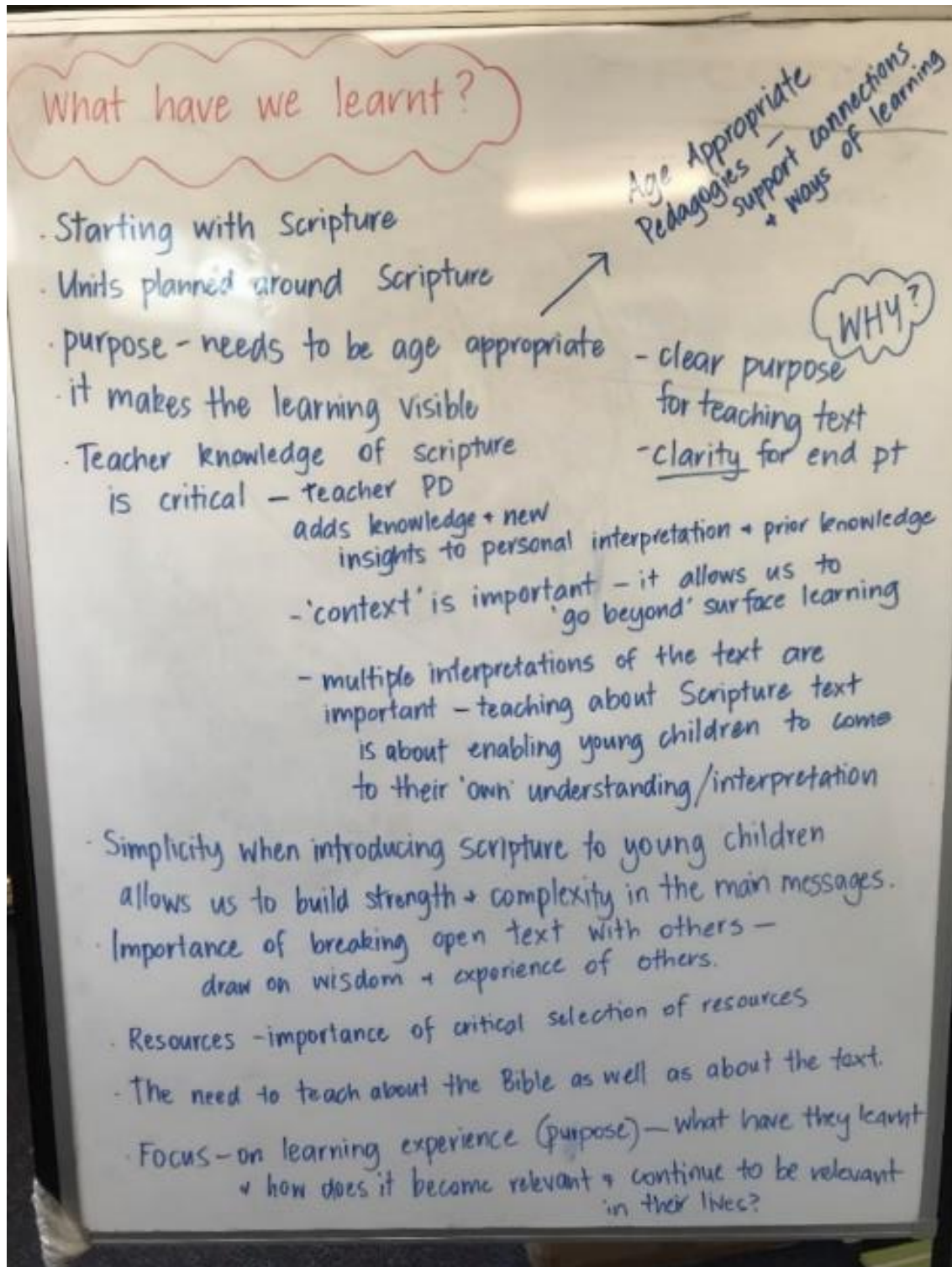
4.6.1. The Power of Analysing Teaching and Learning

Miriam granted permission to share her journal entry corresponding to intervention three, trialling one or more age-appropriate pedagogies.

As a group, we then entered a process of analysis. Tables 8 and 9 outline a summary of the team's analysis.

Table 8

Analysis of Story Journals: What Worked Well and why?

What worked well?	Why did it work?	Why? What can we learn from this?	Is there a link to age-appropriate pedagogies?
Allowing choices for learners	Provides ownership in learning	Appeals to every child and caters for different learning styles	Yes – the need for agentic *learning*
Hooking student interest	Engages every learner right from the start	Knowing learners well helps find multiple ways of engaging learners.	Yes – the need for being *learner focused*
Having a dramatic play area was inviting for students	Students enjoy learning through play	Allowing learners to retell the story creatively develops their understanding of the text	Yes – the need to include *playful* learning
Connections to prior knowledge is important	Enables learners to revise and build on their learning.	Need to embed this strategy within the storytelling process.	Yes, *storytelling* conducted well enables learners to build on prior knowledge
Introducing characters ahead of the text	Enables learning about relationships between characters to develop a pre-story profile	It is a powerful strategy for the process of Scripture storytelling	Yes, *storytelling* builds knowledge and understandings
Learners teach others what they have learned	Values learning and provides opportunities for meaningful dialogue	Scaffolding enables high skill achievement	Yes, it is *scaffolded* learning, language *rich, dialogic*, and *learner focused*

Table 9

Analysis of Story Journals: What did not Work Well and why?

What challenges did we encounter?	Why? What can we learn from this?	What wisdom can we gain?	Is there a link to age-appropriate pedagogies?
Lacked the language around Scripture for students to fully engage with the text	Teacher needs to play *with* learners to model language and provide explicit Scripture literacy teaching	Learners need opportunities to develop language prior to hearing the text and to hear the language in context of the text	Yes – the need for language *rich and dialogic* learning

Having worked through the analysis process together, participants practised this skill to analyse the teaching and learning from their individual classes. The ease of use of the questions for the analysis process led to unexpected, significant insights. The group noted that in the busyness of teaching evaluation of religious education is often not documented. However, the analysis includes the critical question of *why* an approach worked or did not work. By answering *why* the team gained crucial insights and robust evidence that confirmed what early years teachers needed to continue or change, and the focus remained on what learners required.

After the meeting, I added the final column to examine whether there was any correlation between the findings from the analysis to age-appropriate pedagogies. Only then did I discover that the findings from the team's analysis aligned directly to different age-appropriate pedagogies. Upon reflection, the age-appropriate pedagogies reflect *characteristics* drawn from research about what early years learners need.

Therefore, appropriate early years pedagogy that honours what learners need *will* reflect these characteristics.

4.6.2. *Scripture Storytelling: Building Understandings*

Participants were trying various approaches to Scripture storytelling. While Anna had been using this strategy for many years and Naomi learned the process from Anna, no other participants had experience in Scripture storytelling before involvement in this research.

Challenges named for Scripture storytelling throughout the research included decisions on what resources to use, the text to teach the Bible story, and how to conduct the Scripture storytelling in ways that would honour learners as capable people whose ideas and voices needed to be respected. In addition, questions arising included whether teachers needed to control the whole process, and whether asking *wondering questions* was sufficient to extend the learner's thinking about the text.

In essence, this came back to what people perceived as the purpose of teaching Scripture. If the reason for teaching Scripture to early years learners is to introduce biblical stories to children in a way that children find engaging and thought-provoking, then wondering questions may be sufficient. However, if the purpose of teaching Scripture is to find meaning in the text that can lead to transformational learning, then an educational process for Scripture storytelling appears to require more than wondering questions alone.

The group dialogued about how Scripture storytelling fits into the learning process. Participants came to a consensus, recording each step on the whiteboard. Highly thoughtful interaction between participants occurred to arrive at the ten steps identified. Figure 32 shows a record of the collated ideas of all participants.

Figure 32

Reaching Consensus about a Process for Teaching Scripture
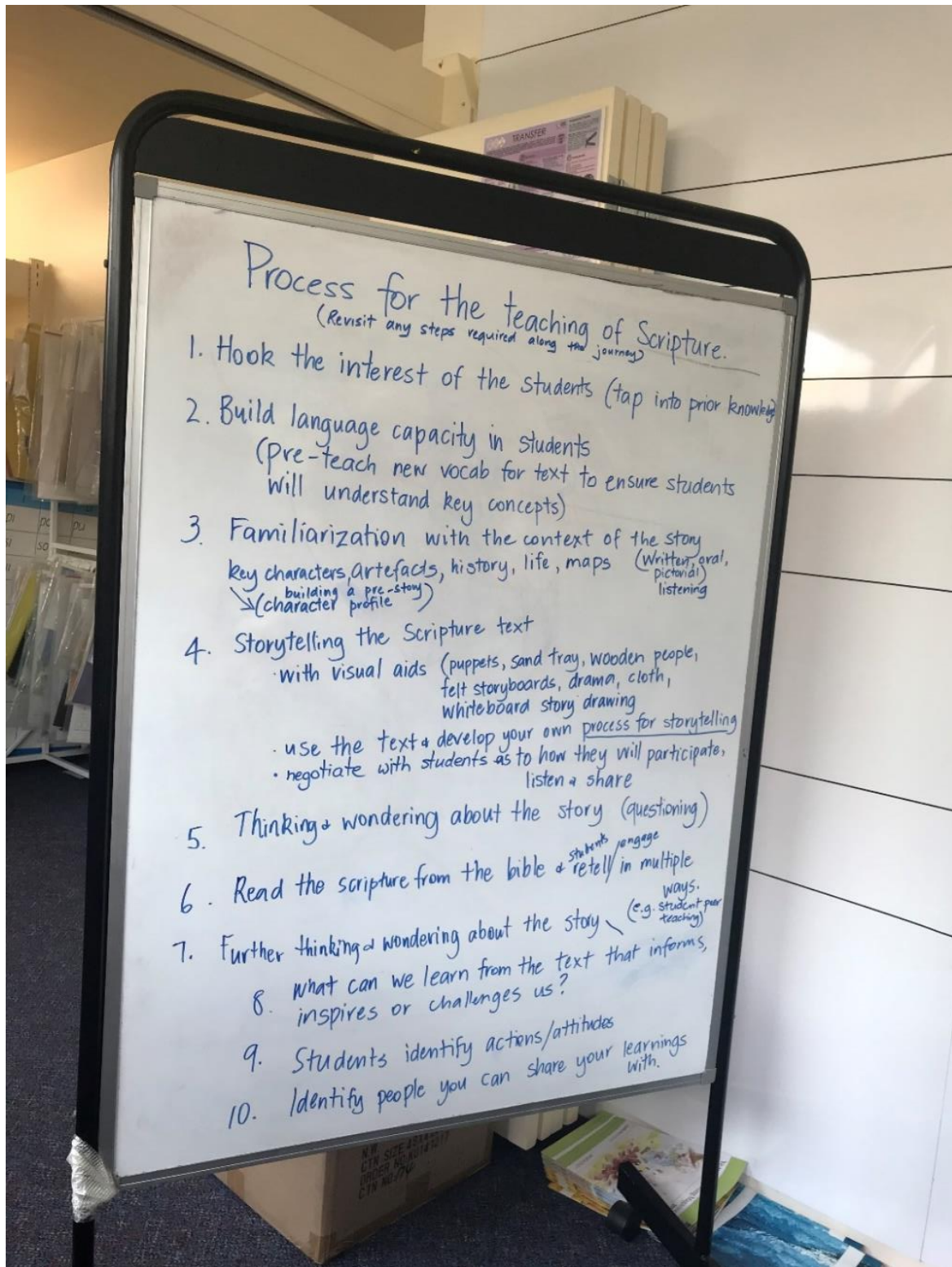
While Scripture storytelling was a strategy Anna and Naomi had engaged in for many years, it was relatively new for other participants. What was new for all participants was placing Scripture storytelling within the more extensive process of teaching Scripture in an educational context and deciding on the start and end points of this process. The research team's insights led to documenting steps for teaching Scripture from participants' experiences of what led to learners obtaining the richest insights from Scripture. Figure 33 shows some of Anna's resources.

Figure 33

Scripture Storytelling Background Scenes Used by Anna

To further strengthen the intervention about pedagogies that positively impacted the teaching of early years Scripture, teachers agreed to keep a *Story Journal* with photos and written reflections about how they taught a Scripture text, following the team's analysis process. The focus on *why* a pedagogy for teaching Scripture worked well or not ensured that the emphasis remained on the learner's needs instead of identifying what learners could *do* as an activity. The analysis process demonstrated that participants' experiences of teaching Scripture aligned directly with the research from Griffith University (Fluckiger et al., 2015) regarding the eleven age-appropriate pedagogies required for early years learning. Table 10 documents the intervention evaluation.

Table 10

Evaluating the Impact of Intervention Four

1. Could this intervention be used by any early-years teacher of Scripture?	Yes - teachers could meet to identify shared learnings, analyse their teaching, and document a learning process for teaching Scripture.
2. Is there clear evidence that the intervention positively impacted practice?	Yes (further evidence likely after the final interviews with participants when they have had an opportunity to extend the trial).
3. Is there clear evidence that the intervention positively impacted building teacher capacity?	Yes.
4. Is there any adjustment needed to this intervention for increased effectiveness?	No. However, the group would benefit from repeating this intervention to explore unresolved challenges further.

The analysis **of the** effectiveness of the intervention (see Table 10) showed that spending time together to build social capital was a highly effective way of engaging in professional learning. The day contributed significantly to building teachers' confidence, capacity, self-efficacy and collective efficacy. All participants decided this way of working together had such a high impact that another day needed to occur to enable teachers to feel like they could "soar" (as Rebecca described). The religious leaders later liaised with their principals and informed me that each principal supported participants to have one more day working together to build shared understandings and professional trust.

4.7. Meeting 6: Understanding how Children Learn

The final meeting for this team took place on March 9, 2020 from 9.00am to 2.45pm at St Mary Magdalene's school. Rebecca was the sole representative from her school and planned to meet with Gabrielle after this meeting. Teacher release funding was provided by all principals, with

St Huldah's drawing on financing from my scholarship from Brisbane Catholic Education. All participants realised this would be the last day to work together. Therefore, we needed to explore areas of need, such as identifying a learning process for teaching Scripture and investigating how early childhood theory informs pedagogy.

Teachers shared their *Scripture Story Journals* and their analysis, having practised the process with the whole group during the previous meeting. The analysis again yielded significant insights into what correlated closely with age-appropriate pedagogies. Participants spoke positively about the simplicity yet effectiveness of the analysis process. All agreed that the analysis process would make a helpful addition to their planning documents as the evaluation was usually named but frequently not completed on unit plans. Furthermore, the analysis focused on *the why* to ensure that pedagogical practices are informed. Therefore, the analysis process is precursor for an evaluation.

Finally, the team were ready to do justice to the second intervention previously attempted, which one school found so challenging they withdrew from the research. Participants conducted the intervention by reading literature about how children learn, sharing key insights and then explaining the implications for pedagogy. Then, using a whiteboard, participants collaborated to document critical insights about how children learn and summarised the impact on pedagogy. Participants found this a robust process and commented that conducting the process with all their early years teachers would be good. Figure 34 shows a photo of the whiteboard after this activity.

Figure 34

Collaboratively Linking Theory to Practice

To conclude our working time together, we could now reach a shared understanding of the critical steps required for the meaningful teaching of Scripture. These steps identified the crucial components a teacher can employ for teaching Scripture well in the Archdiocese of Brisbane. Figure 35 captures the collective identification of six steps, as well as locating where Scripture fitted into the big picture of the overall teaching and learning documentation and planning:

Figure 35

Mapping a Planning Process for Teachers
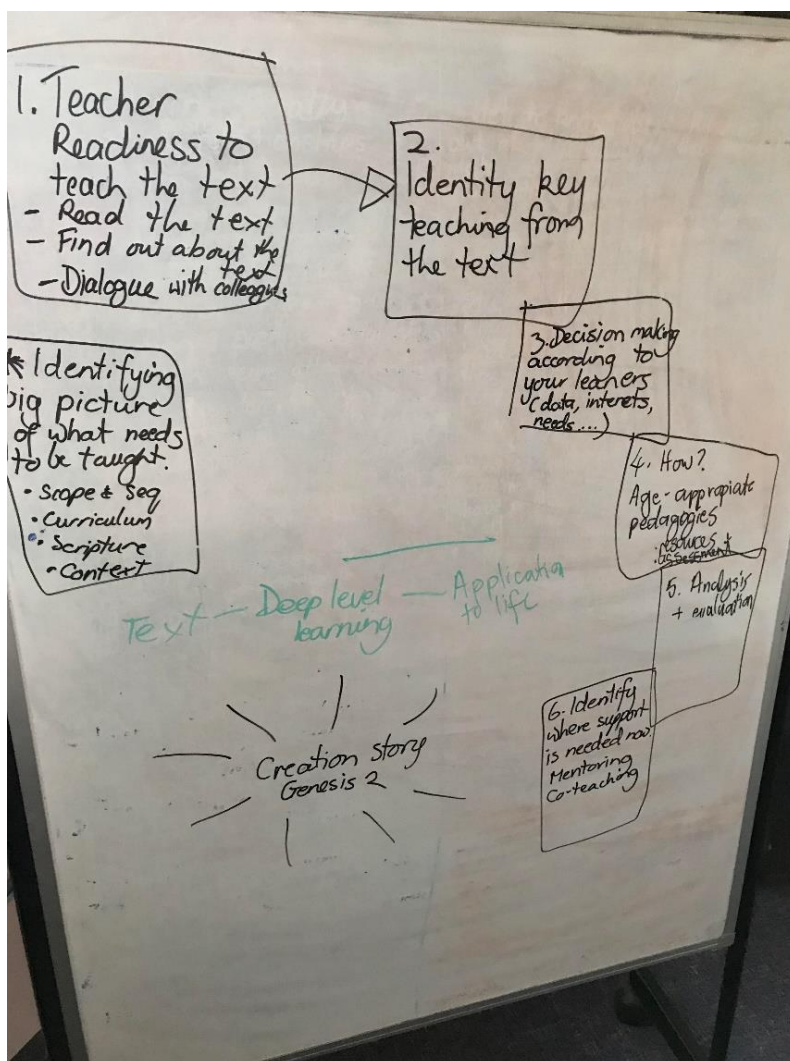
The two days of working with all the participants remaining in the major study reflected the essence of DBR. There was no predetermined destination (i.e. no set plan to be followed without deviation). Instead,

the process required attentive listening in order to find places for closer alignment between theory and practice. Over the two days, the team built shared understandings of *why* particular practices, processes and pedagogies were required and as shown through this chapter, sought evidence-based solutions to complex problems.

Both days strongly reflected the defining characteristics and features of DBR (outlined in Chapter Three), which show that DBR is multi-faceted and complex. Participants advanced theoretical understanding and educational practice throughout each day, systematically building research-informed solutions to educational problems and developing and testing theory in teachers' natural, everyday learning environment. Therefore, the research took place in context and was grounded, flexible, collaborative, driven by analysis and, as a result, highly productive.

Essential questions directed the work of the team. What knowledge already exists about this? What is working well and why? What has not worked and why? What would happen if we did not implement this knowledge, practice or pedagogy? What collective knowledge have we gained that we need to implement into our practice? These types of provocations supported participants in walking away from these meetings with rich learnings to embed into sustainable, innovative teaching.

4.8. Interviews with Practitioners: The Research Impact

The final data collected came from interviews conducted with teachers in two sessions according to the availability of participants. The Prep teachers met on April 17, 2020, from 2pm to 3pm, and Gabrielle (year three) was available on April 19, from 10am to 11am. The semi-structured interviews took place through USQ Zoom. The analysis of the interviews enabled the complete evaluation of the last intervention to identify evidence of the impact on practice. Both interviews revealed twenty-one themes (later reduced through refinement), with two overarching themes.

4.8.1. Key Insights After a Year of Capacity Building

Teachers spoke about how they had grown in confidence and competence in interpreting Scripture through engaging in this DBR inquiry. Their responses also affirmed many of the elements of the conceptual framework. For example, Anna believed that a huge factor in her journey of building capacity and self-efficacy was having "incredible mentors along the way". Rebecca agreed and added, "Unless you've got someone there with you, mentoring you, guiding you, you probably just wouldn't do it. That's the sad thing. You'd just flounder around". Miriam reflected, "Before starting the journey, I was looking in all different places for answers. Not only because I found it difficult to teach the religion curriculum to the young kids in prep".

Rebecca stated that she could not teach Scripture unless she has learnt about the text herself first because otherwise, "…it's impossible to do a good job". Miriam mentioned the historical impact of having limited access to the Bible. "And I think growing up, going to church and with my family, Scripture wasn't a big part." Anna elaborated further on the connection between understanding the text and teaching the text:

> The confidence doesn't come until you've got your head around the content, and once you've got your head around the content and your own understanding of it and what you need to pass on, that's when you become confident in your ability to pass it on, I think.

Gabrielle explained that learning where to access "reliable interpretations of Scripture" was most helpful because "whether or not it's a valid interpretation is probably the thing I had the biggest concerns around". Identifying strategies that made a difference, Anna reflected on the importance of repetition and time for enabling learners to go beyond a surface-level understanding of Scripture. Anna explained that some teachers previously could conduct a Scripture activity and then "...say they've taught it. Whereas if you keep it on the table and you talk about it

for weeks and weeks on end, and you'll urge children to talk about it on their own without you". Anna added the importance of the teacher remaining in the "silent observer" role.

Rebecca outlined that crucial learning for her came through understanding the importance of adults modelling age-appropriate pedagogies, including "different aspects of the play". Rebecca reflected on the impact of not modelling play: "So I wouldn't have given them the language they needed. I might've done a telling of the story once. But it's not enough for them. Like you need to be working in a small group with them modelling that language". Anna elaborated that the age-appropriate pedagogies enabled her to conduct "a little self-audit of which areas I use really well and which areas I was lacking in across my team-teaching practices". Therefore, having a pedagogical framework enabled the identification of high-impact strategies for teaching and learning and a tool for analysing teaching.

4.8.2. *Spirituality: The Silent Partner in Religious Education*

Participants presented evidence that teaching Scripture can impact at a deeply personal, spiritual level of identity. When asked why there would be conversations continued even in the car park about Scripture interpretation and family beliefs, participants gave personal responses, such as Miriam's reflection:

> I think, for me personally, why I like trying to debrief with you is because the Scriptures are so open-ended. No one has a definitive answer for me. And I think, personally, I'm always looking for answers. And it's just so interesting to me because it's now very different to what I thought when I was growing up. So this is more so, I guess, a spiritual journey for myself. Trying to find, navigate my own way through the Scriptures to get some sort of answer for me in my own life now as a mother, as an individual, as a teacher.

Anna stated:

I don't think I started off like that, Beth. I think that I started off wanting to be a better teacher of RE, but one of the benefits of being part of the team is that it has allowed me some extra knowledge that helps me become a more spiritual person.

Gabrielle spoke about going home and having family conversations about Scripture with her husband and son:

And so talking to him, he is like, how long have I been a Catholic and not known these things? And I think…it's allowed me to have conversations with my own children. And my son said to me just two days ago, "*I love talking about religion with you*".

Therefore, the evidence suggested that the research journey and the teaching of Scripture contributed to participants contemplating how Scripture provided pathways for exploring meaning in their lives, deepening spirituality and shaping identity. Miriam noted that there was value in building knowledge about Scripture personally, rather than only thinking about Scripture at a professional level. "If we open ourselves up to what it is in context for us ourselves, then we sort of are a little bit more comfortable delivering the message or the key underlying messages to others perhaps".

Here lies a vital clue as to why teaching Scripture can feel threatening or deeply challenging for some people. Teaching Scripture goes beyond the cognitive realm and opens up people's fragile inner spaces for meaning-making shaped through belief, spirituality, faith, and identity (Pollefeyt, 2020a). Participants in this research never spoke about experiencing the same questions, insights, or challenges with teaching in any other learning area. Miriam reflected on her journey and observed:

Looking back, I can see where initially I would only teach the story, and we'd retell it, and we'd do all sorts of different ways of getting the kids to be able to sort of retell the story in their own words, but I never took the step to go further to get the deeper learnings and get them to pull out the key messages and have them relate it back to their own lives.

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Anna noted that when children have rich conversations about the text between themselves, the teacher becomes "the silent observer" and can hear "the most beautiful, rich things". Anna recounts her experience of listening to two of her "gorgeous boys" sitting at lunch talking:

> And one of them says, 'I really feel like God's here at the moment'. And you know, you sit there, and you think, don't say anything. Don't say anything, just let them talk. And they just talked for, maybe five minutes about God.
> Rebecca replied, "Oh Anna, that brings tears to my eyes because that's what I want. That's where I want to get them".

Anna's experiences suggest that children can appreciate spirituality just as much as some adults and sometimes even more. Rebecca's emotional response indicates that Anna's story touched a place of deep meaning within Rebecca, highlighting that Rebecca deeply values spirituality personally and professionally. Rebecca desires to open her learners' fragile hermeneutical spaces (Pollefeyt, 2020a) and allow them to find meaning in the deepest parts of their interior lives.

Gabrielle's experience of the difference between her year three classes from one year to the next was remarkable. In February 2020, a conversation with Gabrielle highlighted that she was experiencing some challenges. After having such a highly engaged year three class last year, the new group of learners seemingly had low interest and knowledge in religious education. Then Gabrielle gave further consideration to what her learners needed.

Firstly, she realised she needed to "slow down" her learner expectations, remembering that the previous class had taken a year to reach their deep understandings. Secondly, she identified that the previous cohort mostly came from families who "had a stronger faith base at home" and talked about religion. Therefore, Gabrielle asked herself, "But what does this group need to be able to get there?" She hypothesised that this group had an innate spirituality "because when we're writing prayers, or when we do meditation, and all sorts of things,

all the things they come up with are really beautiful". With a change of focus on learner needs and learner expectations, teaching learners to reflect and discover meaning, Gabrielle found her new cohort just as interested and engaged in Scripture learning as the previous class. By the end of the year, some boys in Gabrielle's class loved choosing a Bible for silent reading time. This experience suggests teaching spirituality is a gateway to enable learners to find meaning through religious education.

4.8.3.   Teaching Scripture: A Process for Learning

Miriam highlights a challenge that all participants named at various stages throughout the research: a lack of clarity of the desired destination for learners and how to enable learners to reach this destination. Anna described how accumulative knowledge about how to teach Scripture contributed to confidence and capacity building. "I can't imagine not knowing these things that I know now". Anna identified age-appropriate pedagogies and having the steps in her planning template to "get my students to where I want them to be" as crucial for her growth in teaching Scripture meaningfully. Anna considered it "invaluable" to work as a team to construct questions to extend learners' thinking about texts. "You know, like I feel like I know the steps to get there, and I know a little bit more about how to get the kids there". Miriam added her perspective:

> Going back to look at how our young learners learn, you know, in all other areas we take into consideration their age and how they learn. But with religion and Scripture, it felt like there was such a huge gap because the language in the Scripture felt like it was a barrier, I suppose. And that we didn't see how we could overcome that to be able to deliver it to the young kids.

There was a notable difference in enabling learners to reach deep, relevant meaning from Scripture when the dialogue about the text becomes embedded into ongoing learning. Teachers also discovered that Scripture texts could become a focus for teaching literacy, enabling learners to spend longer learning about the text and embedding the story

into other curriculum areas. Step by step, teachers found ways to scaffold learning and break open meaning from language they previously perceived as a barrier, with the photos in Figures 36 and 37 depicting some strategies viewed in Rebecca's classroom.

Figure 36

Making connections:Teaching Literacy Through Scripture
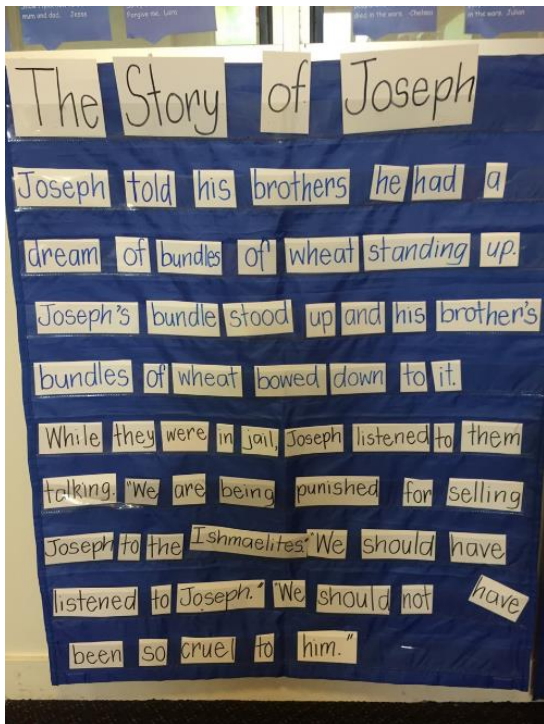
Figure 37

A Timeline: Wow! God has Loved us for a Long Time

Evidence of Learners Finding Rich Meaning From Scripture.

The data suggest that explicitly teaching thinking and literacy skills to identify rich insights from Scripture is hugely important. Rebecca described how one learner told her that the author of the creation story (Genesis 2) wanted people to understand that God created male and female, "So we could both be exactly the same and both are good". Rebecca said, "And I just loved it". When I asked Gabrielle how frequently she was surprised by her year three learners' insights about Scripture, she replied, "Most days". Discovering children's capacity to be Scripture learners contributed considerably to teachers' enthusiasm, motivation, and clarity for teaching Scripture and where they wanted the learning journey to arrive.

One strategy teachers began to use to retain evidence of the meaningful, deep thinking learners shared was creating a *treasure box* (see Figure 38). Teachers recorded the *treasures* that learners shared, placed them into a special treasure box, and collected them throughout the learning cycle. This strategy (Figure 38) also provided teachers with ongoing evidence to support assessment.

Figure 38

Rebecca Collects Treasured Thinking from Learners
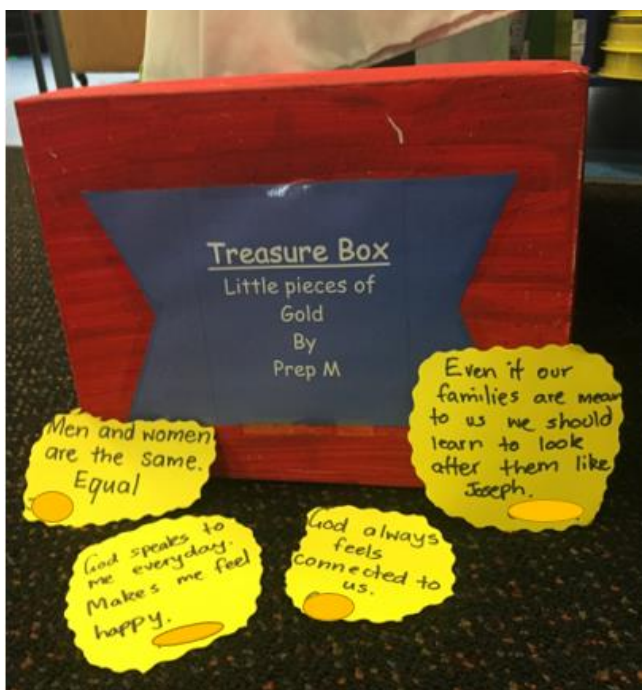
Learning from one another about what did and did not work for teaching Scripture (evaluative knowledge), enabling learners to dialogue about God (theological reflection) and applying insights from Scripture learning to life were all part of the powerful journey for building confidence. The experience of seeing and hearing learners identify rich, and appropriate meaning created clarity about the intended destination. From these learnings the following insight emerges: *Scripture learning needs to be much more than knowledge acquisition* (surface learning). The process of DBR and the social capital built among participants enabled the discovery of approaches and strategies for the meaningful teaching of Scripture.

The Need for Adequate Resourcing. When asked why Scripture learning was not flourishing in some schools, Anna was direct about the influence of teachers. "This is exactly why. *You actually have to have people who are passionate* about *it*…who've become excited about it to be actually in schools. It doesn't work remotely". All three schools present had at least one passionate teacher and religious education leader, demonstrating one reason why these participants experienced success in building capacity.

Miriam realised that her school was "under-resourced" when she looked for a Bible commentary and discovered, "We didn't have one". Rebecca believed her school was "A bit low on good resources for Scripture storytelling" because "…every time I do a new Scripture, I've got to find those resources because there's not a library of them or a bank of them". *The evidence suggests that educational and human resources are critical requirements* for successfully building the capacity to teach Scripture. Anna acknowledged that her Scripture storytelling collection built up over many years but advocated for using everyday resources and being creative (as shown in Figure 39).

Figure 39

Anna's Easter Scene for Scripture Storytelling

4.8.4.   *Evidence of Building Capacity and Self-Efficacy*

Three areas stand out as core factors contributing to building capacity, confidence, and self-efficacy: (a) the power of building substantial social capital, (b) using theory to drive practice, and (c) the process of DBR. *Social capital was a key factor* in many ways driving thinking, practice, and learning improvement changes. Miriam reported that participation in the research group had "sparked interest in others".

An outcome that no one predicted or planned was teachers in each school had growing interest from colleagues in this study, and teaching had changed throughout the whole school (in varying degrees). As teachers heard and witnessed Scripture learning *success stories,* the research participants built credibility and trust among colleagues. Miriam observed that other teachers now approached her, thinking that maybe "…she can give me some ideas to help me instead of, sort of suffering in silence".

Gabrielle identified the most significant factor that enabled her to build confidence: "The ability to talk with people about how you're doing your planning and get other people's involvement…the collaboration was really important". Significantly for Gabrielle, this strong collegial engagement meant that she did not need to unlearn any past teaching

practices as she was in her first year of teaching, leading her to "feel blessed" that this opportunity came about as "I was trying to find my own way of teaching religion". The implications for what level of social capital and leadership are present for early career teachers to build their skills for teaching Scripture are striking. In this project, Gabrielle and Ruth finished their first year of teaching with confidence and competence in teaching Scripture, mainly attributed to the substantial social capital built in their teaching teams with supported planning time.

A characteristic of how the team built social capital was a shared perception of the research group as a team of learners, rather than experts. Therefore, the emphasis was on sharing practice to learn how to strengthen practice. Rebecca stated, "I really enjoyed having that…being part of a team where we did share the things that were helping, progressing us forward".

In terms of early years, participants acknowledged that teacher understandings of pedagogy were widely varied, and some teachers never had early years training in their undergraduate courses. However, Rebecca added, "I had a teaching partner who was an early years teacher…and she didn't believe in play". Rebecca's comment highlights that early years training is no guarantee of automatically having a shared understanding of how to teach young children.

The DBR approach for the research necessitated the use of theory to inform practice, providing a solid platform for building shared understandings as a research team. Miriam pointed out, "And it's the research and the literature that allows us to have that backing in our pedagogy". Anna agreed the theory provided credibility for her input to her teaching team. "I do see that the age-appropriate pedagogies allows them just to believe what I'm saying basically".

Participants named ways that the DBR approach supported their growth. Rebecca stated, "It's not that you get jaded, but you keep doing things often the same way. Whereas this sort of forces you to grow a little bit by trying different things". Miriam said, "I think whenever there's an

opportunity to put an intervention into place and then go back and critically have a look at how it went, that can only ever be a good thing".

Scrutinising teacher practice through the lens of theory led to discovering differences and similarities between the teaching of literature and the teaching of Scripture; the need for effective mentoring; the need to allow learners to have a voice in their learning and to be responsive to learner's interests. Anna observed there is no point in asking learners for their responses "if you're not going to build upon it". Rebecca added, "How can we let them take ownership and direct their own learning if we don't allow any space for that?" *The process of DBR enabled participants to see changes needed*, even if the changes were not an intervention trialled.

4.9. The Power of Effective Leadership for Building Capacity

The interviews with Religious Education leaders took place via video conference using USQ Zoom, from 10.30am to 12.00 pm on Friday 17 April, 2020. All three religious education leaders participated, and due to the familiarity of participants and the interviewer in dialoguing together about learning, the interviews were semi-structured. The initial thematic analysis identified seventeen themes, with the next level of analysis identifying three core themes of (a) leadership; (b) building capacity; and, (c) DBR. Significant insights gained from the data analysis fed directly into the construction and evaluation of the conceptual framework. The following dialogue confirms the critical role that leadership plays at different levels in building capacity:

> Naomi: *It's been given priority. You can't just say in twelve months you're going to achieve everything because you're not. I think with a really strong investment*, though, a priority of that, you can *set up really good structures*, and you can set up a good way forward.
> Tabitha: I also think *you need to have some, a few teachers on staff that are going to be passionate about it as well*. Because

without some of those, I don't think that it would have gone anywhere. I could have pushed, I could have had the support from the leadership team, we could have assurance for the timing, but *it was the passionate teachers that really brought that forward*.

Claudia: You definitely need to have the support of your principal and your fellow members on the leadership team so that it does have that time priority because, without that, nothing can happen.

Tabitha identified a critical point that *the vision of one leader alone is not adequate to drive a journey of capacity building effectively*. Strong leadership support with at least one early years teacher sharing this vision, high commitment, and interest in building capacity meant that the journey continued despite challenges. The data suggest that prioritising capacity building occurs through commitment to resourcing, time and leadership support.

4.9.1.   Evidence of Practice Change and Growth

The role that highly interested and committed teachers play in building capacity throughout the school seemed to be a catalyst for building social capital. Naomi described this phenomenon of "*success breeds success*" as when people saw teachers "having a go and things going well" that "they actually wanted to be part of it". They said, "Oh, you didn't tell me about all of these other great conversations". Even when we were having our meetings onsite, "*Well, that looked like a great meeting. No one told us that it was going to be that good*".

Leaders also acknowledged challenges. Naomi reflected, "*Time is always an issue with planning*. I think *the challenge is that people do want to get in there and get it done*". This challenge reflects the pragmatic, pressured nature of teaching where learners arrive at an appointed time with an expectation of planning learning. Naomi observed,

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"*People want to get it done* but they don't want to have to sit and reflect too much in that planning time".

The same pressure existed at St Huldah's and St Priscilla's schools, where the tension was palpable, and teachers expected to leave the room with a plan for their teaching. As a result, after interpreting the text with a teaching team, I began concept mapping as a strategy for identifying *what* to teach. This approach started to change teacher expectations about planning. Teachers happily departed with a concept map and a higher confidence level in understanding Scripture, but there was usually limited time left to address pedagogy deeply.

The evidence demonstrated that professional, supported planning time could be a highly effective learning environment for teachers. Naomi reflected, "That notion of learning together is a really big thing". Central to this time included sharing and deepening interpretations of the text, cognisant that every text has multiple interpretations. Claudia restated that before this inquiry, *her greatest fear for leading Scripture learning was whether she had identified the correct meaning of the text*. Now, Claudia identified the benefits of having time and multiple people to dialogue about one's interpretation of the text:

> It's something that Miriam speaks of regularly, that how valuable she's found it when she's found the opportunities to discuss that interpretation with different people. Probably not just with me but having a conversation with the PLL (Primary Learning leader) or with her mum - that every conversation has added to that understanding.

Tabitha named the core reason she saw a major shift in pedagogical practice:

> What was happening in the classrooms with age-appropriate pedagogies was excellent. That the complete change of structure for the staff, *realising that really they were working for what their students needed rather than what they knew themselves*. That, to me, to happen in such a short space of time in that

environment at our school is a huge, huge success, I think is the way I'd put it.

However, even pedagogy was not without challenges. Naomi named the characteristic of giving agency to learners as the most challenging one for teachers to implement readily:

I think the biggest thing…is that teachers have to be happy to be able to go into that space. For some that's the last little bit of where they have to be prepared to let children have a voice and to do things differently.

This analysis highlights the need for embedding monitoring strategies into whole school practice. The evidence showed that the pedagogies identified during the first meeting remained the most challenging remained the most difficult at the end of the year. This insight suggests that embedding changes in practice can take a long time and require ongoing attention.

The analysis of the effectiveness of the intervention showed that spending time together to build social capital had contributed a great deal to building teachers' confidence, capacity, self-efficacy and collective efficacy. Any group of early years teachers could undertake the intervention. There was a positive impact on practice, and the interview data showed clear evidence of the effectiveness of the intervention. Returning to the vision for teaching Scripture, presented during the first meeting, participants could show that their practice reflected the vision. Participants had also answered their questions from the first meeting: they had strategies to honour each text's integrity and knew how to inspire interpretation and imagination through their teaching of Scripture.

CHAPTER 5: THE MINOR STUDY

Chapter Five synthesises the data from the minor study, which focused on existing professional learning known within Brisbane Catholic Education as *Scripture twilights*. This chapter provides the context and background to the Scripture twilights and reports on the effectiveness of interventions for the minor study. This inquiry provided an opportunity to investigate whether the professional learning provided through attendance at the Scripture twilights resulted in improved professional practice for early years teachers, or whether there was a need to strengthen processes that lead to improved professional practice.

The Scripture twilights occurred from four o'clock for two hours once a term. Although the Scripture twilights emanated from a need to provide greater support to early years teachers, demand from teachers across all primary year levels led to opening the twilights to interested educators, with attendance voluntary. Initially, a core feature of this professional learning was providing a dual focus on learning about Scripture and learning how to teach Scripture. The initial format of the Scripture twilights included a ninety-minute keynote address and question time, followed by a thirty-minute workshop on teaching Scripture in year level groups. However, as the Scripture twilights opened to all primary teachers, and eventually to all secondary teachers, the format changed over the years to become a two-hour lecture format with question time.

In 2012 the establishment of a steering committee to design and monitor professional learning in Scripture for teachers in the Archdiocese of Brisbane drew from people in multiple roles, including lecturers from Australian Catholic University, education officers, early years teachers, and religious education teachers and leaders from schools in the Archdiocese. The steering committee approved the four topics covered in 2019: *Holy Week in the Gospels*; *Women in the Bible*; *Who wrote the Bible*? , and *Jesus: Prophet, Messiah or neither?* The publication of these

topics through an online registration system enabled participants to search and book into these professional learning opportunities.

I have coordinated the Scripture twilights since 2012. This study allowed evaluation of their impact through DBR, and provided another lens for what teachers need to build capacity through professional learning. However, given that professional learning occurs at system level rather than school level, there are challenges in embedding the learning and monitoring impact.

5.

5.1. The Minor Study Design, Scope and Limitations

At the outset, it is important to state that the scope of the minor study is limited but provided information at deeper levels to explore what teachers need and find effective ways to assist in building capacity and self-efficacy. Some people chose to participate in both studies. The primary study investigated what teachers need to build capacity and self-efficacy to teach Scripture to early learners. The minor study considered the degree to which the existing professional learning *Scripture twilights* meet these needs.

Establishing a Scripture twilights research team ensured a decision-making body for the minor study. Education Officers in Religious Education put forward names of early years participants in the Scripture twilights. Rather than resulting in a long list of potential participants, the exercise generated a small number of people. It became apparent that although participation records existed, they did not reveal what year level teachers taught, and therefore identifying early years participants proved more challenging than anticipated.

After a lengthy process to find eligible participants, an administration officer working for Brisbane Catholic Education sent out the invitations directly to potential participants. Invitations sent included people in multiple roles: five Education Officers (Religious Education), four religious education leaders, four early years teachers and one primary learning leader. Five people returned consent forms in time for the first

meeting, and four were available for the first meeting. A few others indicated they wished to participate but could not due to other commitments. Supervisor advice recommended going ahead and meeting with the four people plus myself, recognising that a group of four enthusiastic people would be able to make appropriate decisions to steer the research for the first meeting. As events unfolded, this group became a team of seven, with two early years teachers, two religious education leaders (including Naomi), two education officers in religious education and myself.

5.2. Meeting 1: The Need to Investigate Beyond the Surface

The early years Scripture research team formed in term three, 2019. The first meeting occurred on July 19, 2019 through the USQ Zoom video conference for two hours after school, with Julia driving to my location. The participants were Julia and Lydia (early years teachers from two different schools), Leah (Education Officer Religious Education), Chloe (religious education leader from a third school), and myself as the researcher.

During the first part of the meeting, I provided an overview of the research and the conceptual framework I was developing from the literature. By this stage of the overall research journey, the conceptual framework was well under development so participants could share their insights into this framework from their own experiences. This strategy throughout the research journey enabled the study to test the theory against the wisdom of practitioners and find where the research and practice aligned and whether there were any gaps (Barab & Squire, 2004; Collins et al., 2004; O'Neill, 2012) .

The Scripture twilights can appear as a highly successful professional learning endeavour with over one thousand voluntary registrations each year. However, enrolment numbers are only one dimension of evaluation. Therefore, to ensure the team considered a deeper analysis, I presented my version of an image of water filling

different cups. However, upon closer inspection, some cups have blocks or holes and therefore the water cannot always go where asummed. I showed this image as an analogy for professional learning to open up the conversation for participants to thoughtfully consider whether the Scripture twilight learning always go where intended (leading to better classroom practice), or can the learning sometimes become blocked? Figure 40 shows the version presented to the team.

Figure 40

Which Cup Will Fill First?
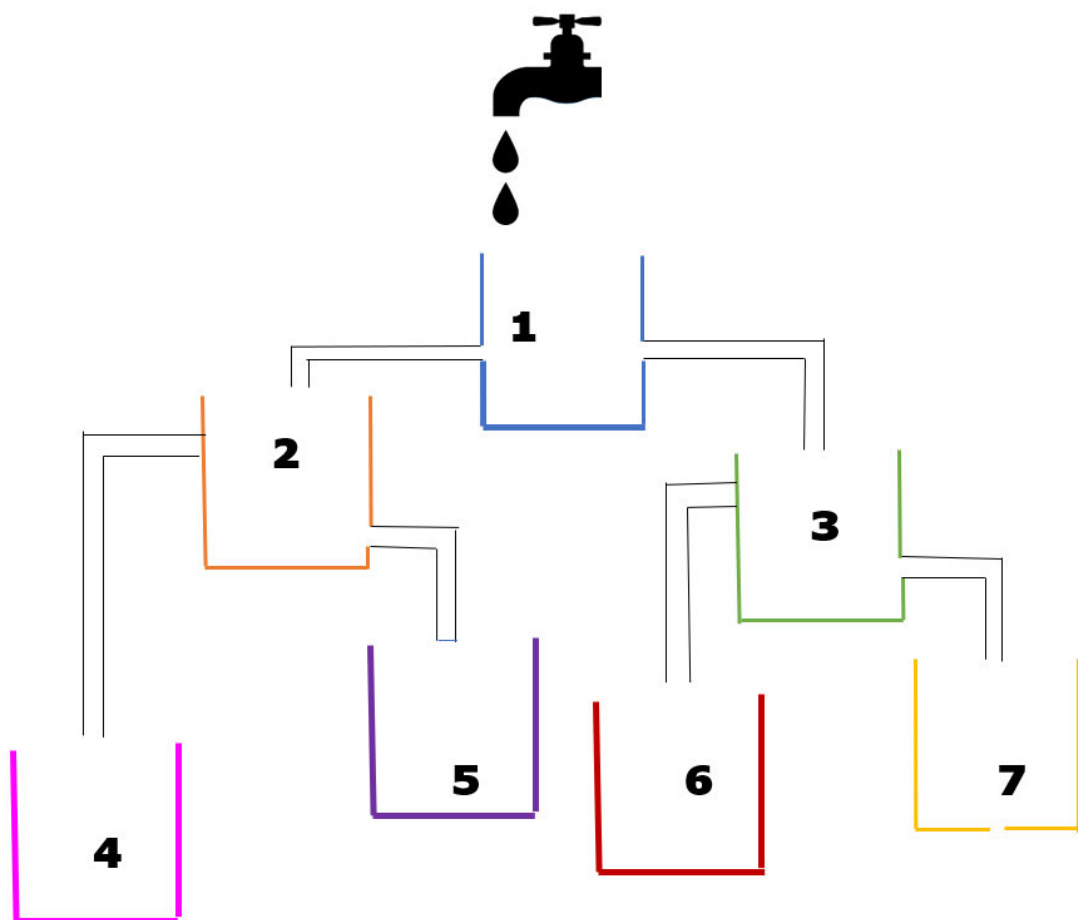
Note. A Tap cup fill puzzle. Adapted from *Which cup will get filled first? (puzzle explained),* by Study Force, 2019. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V4EhfUIZnP0).

Which cup would fill first? It was easy to assume that all cups would fill with a cursory glance. However, deeper inspection reveals blocks and holes, making it impossible for some cups to retain water. Therefore, participants considered whether professional learning for developing teachers' understanding of the text led to quality teaching of Scripture in the classroom, or whether there were blocks that did not allow the learning to flow where intended. Dialogue about the strengths and challenges of professional learning informed the last part of the meeting to discern the intervention needed.

For the record, number one will not fill first because it keeps emptying to serve the others. Number three will not load until number seven fills, but number seven can never fill because there is a hole in the bottom. Number six can never fill because a block from number two prevents the water from going into number six. Number five can never fill because a block in the pipe comes from number two. Number four will never fill because there is a block in the line coming from number two. Therefore, not only will number two be the first cup to fill, it is the only cup with the capacity to fill within this structure.

Leah utilised existing data (gathered by Brisbane Catholic Education) from one topic covered during the Scripture twilights to explain that most people attended the twilights "because they were interested in learning more about Scripture". Leah summarised how the data applied to the analogy of the cups, stating, "I think there is a block…when we drill down to the early years people, there were only a very small number of people, I think about six who said, 'It's radically changed my way of teaching'", and there were only "one or a two" that reported the Scripture twilights "had actually changed their teaching".

Therefore, although participants have engaged in learning about the text through the Scripture twilight, they have not necessarily learnt how to teach Scripture. Leah outlined, "The block was at enabling interpretation and the pedagogy part, to get that deep meaning of, how do I translate this to the classroom?" This insight revealed that there

could be a disconnect for early years teachers between learning about Scripture and knowing how to teach Scripture well. However, this way is not necessarily true for all early years teachers, as Leah explained that about "three others" reported the Scripture twilights had "transformed" the way they taught". Obviously, they fill their cup straight away. All they needed was that background; they understood it. And then they had enough knowledge of the pedagogy to make sense of it for their learners".

Leah's description of the data from an internal survey was insightful. Leah elaborated, "Most of the people who went, especially from the early years, said, 'I just still couldn't find a connection'. It was still blocking at…interpreting…and translating that into effective pedagogy, so that the students got meaning". Leah drew her conclusion about the meaning of these data by stating, "While it's on a good track because people are interested, they want to know more, and they get their own meaning, they still have that big block of how to translate that to the classroom, so that's a problem". Leah's contribution brought immediate clarity that there was a block for some early years teachers who participated in the professional learning, but remained unsure why they needed to know this information about Scripture because they could not find any relevance for their learners. Leah named this a challenge of translating professional learning to the classroom, suggesting that increasing teacher knowledge *about* the text did not automatically ensure teachers knew *how* to teach Scripture.

5.2.1.   *Evaluating the Conceptual Framework: Key Skills*

Participants considered the current version of the conceptual framework (see Figure 41). They decided it highlighted some essential insights, such as the need to understand how children learn and how a teacher's ability to interpret Scripture appropriately is fundamental for teaching Scripture well. It was a good litmus test for the accuracy and clarity of the conceptual framework to see what meaning a new group of

people would discover from the framework when viewing the image shown in Figure 41.

Figure 41

The Next Iteration of the Conceptual Framework
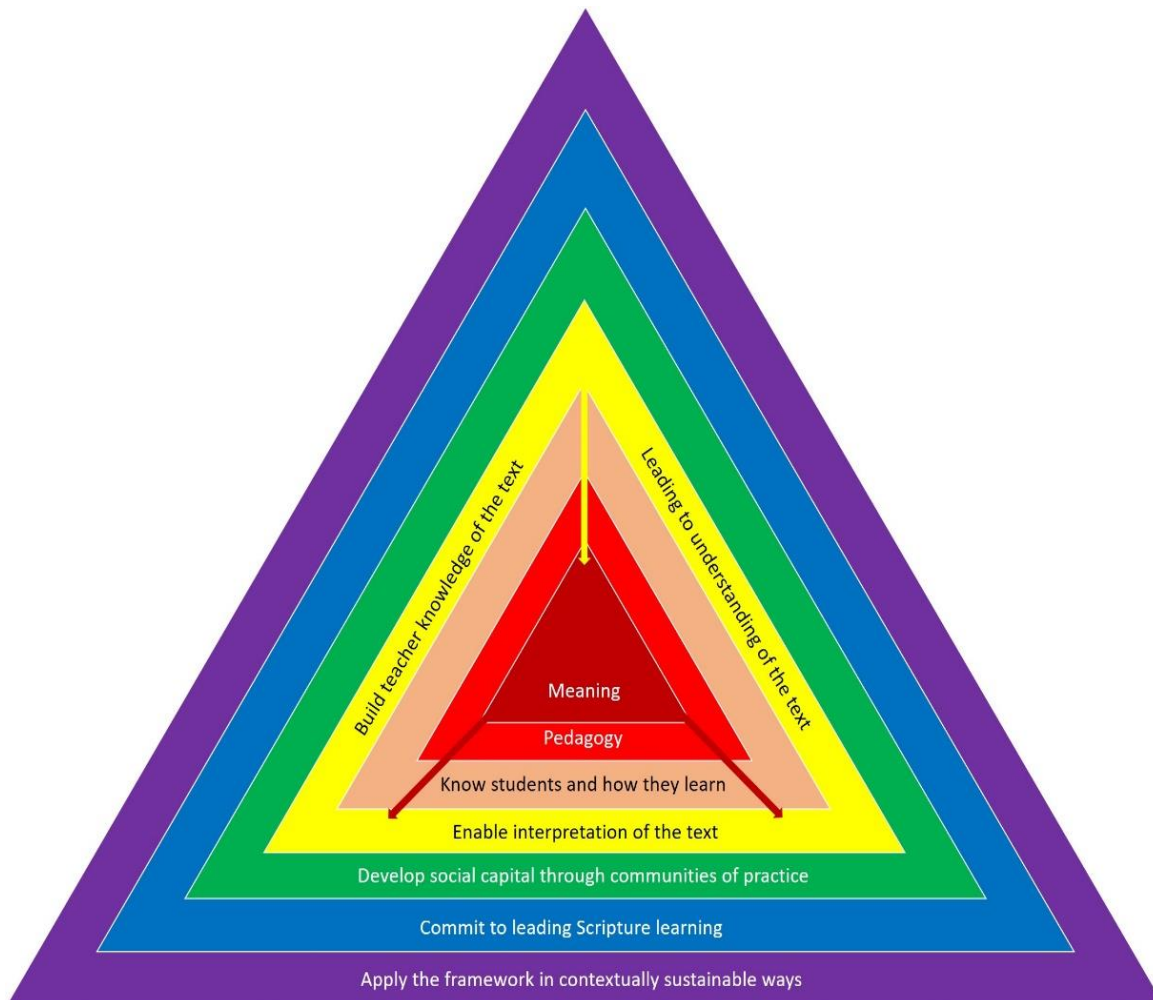
As a religious education leader, Chloe spoke about the connection between teacher understanding of Scripture and teacher decision-making about what content to teach. Chloe described working closely with teachers at her school in year level groups while being supported by Leah as her education officer. Chloe's experiences revealed further insight into how professional learning at the school level could translate into professional practice through sourcing appropriate resources for teachers, including finding approved translations of Scripture and building social capital in exploring the text together. Chole provided a vital insight as she

described what happened when she led teachers through the process of exploring the text before planning activities to teach Scripture:

> It was quite mind-blowing for a lot of the teachers. They brought Scriptures that they were currently or very shortly going to be exploring with their class. They found it very powerful to do an in-depth analysis, a self-analysis of that Scripture, and took some really big insights away.

Chloe described visiting classrooms to support teachers discern "pedagogies that were going to be able to help their students create meaning". Teachers conducted an "expert jigsaw" and read the literature provided to assist them in translating the text, "and it was really powerful for them". Cohort sharing and discussion followed. The teachers "looked at specific strategies of how they could translate that for their students to create meaning". However, Chloe discovered that some teachers had "reverted to something that they felt more comfortable with" when she entered classrooms, departing from the planned pedagogies.

Chloe reflected that it was disheartening but was probably "a matter of supporting co-teaching and refocussing". Leah raised the issue of teachers doubting their ability to teach the text. "They don't want to tell kids the wrong things, and then they sort of doubt themselves a little bit". Julia supported this, describing how this plays out through participation in the Scripture twilights:

> And that's when, as Chloe said, they revert back to comfortable things. They go back to the way that they've always done it. And sometimes if that happens too often, that just becomes a reflex. And when they go to those things and they come back and think, I'll give it a try, but it probably won't work. It's about building teacher capacity, and social capital is really important in that. I would say we've built teacher knowledge, and we're leaning to understanding of the text. In order to enable interpretation, it's the social capital and communities of practice that's underpinning that. I think people lack confidence at times.

They love hearing it, and they love learning it, but then putting
it into practice, they're not one hundred per cent confident, so
it's the social aspect.

Julia and Leah's insights identified the need for supporting people beyond the professional learning event and the importance of building social capital for teaching Scripture. These insights also highlighted that early years teachers could enjoy learning about Scripture and be open to new ideas and ways of thinking about Scripture. However, they could quickly lose confidence if they did not have strong support when they came to teach Scripture. Participants perceived that teachers did not all require the same capacity building as teachers have varying degrees of knowledge and confidence about teaching Scripture.

It is worth noting that the participants in this research group (for the minor study) differ from the major study participants. Yet, both groups independently identified a lack of teacher confidence as a key blocker for teaching Scripture. They also determined that intrinsically linked to teacher confidence in teaching Scripture appeared to be teacher confidence and competence in *interpreting* Scripture texts for appropriate meaning and knowing pedagogies that enabled the meaningful teaching of Scripture.

5.2.2.   *Identifying the Purpose of Teaching Scripture*

Reference was made to the Model of Religious Education by Moran (*Religious Education Curriculum P-12*, 2020, p. 12), who put forward the concept of religious education as the teaching of religion, which is different from teaching people to be religious in a particular way. Brisbane Catholic Education references this model in the Religion Curriculum book as two interlocking circles. In this model (see Figure 42), the left-hand side circle represents the teaching of religion. The right-hand side represents the *religious life of the school* (when learners participate in religious activities such as celebrations, ritual, prayer, and social justice).

Participants spoke of the reconceptualist approach and how they believed that Scripture teaching needed to reach the interlocking space between the two circles, which Chloe termed "the space between". Chloe explained the *space between* was a "critical space for us where we have our students experiencing not just teaching of religion but learning to be religious in a particular way". Leah described this space as "The vision of God's dream. The vision comes true of our curriculum" and acknowledged that "We don't actually talk a lot about the middle space". Chloe replied, "We do in our school now," and added, "The space between has become really important for us as a language and actually has been translated to other curriculum areas as well".

For these participants, to lead learning in the *space between* denoted not simply the quest for a new skill but a belief that teaching Scripture could reach the point of individual and collective challenge about creating and living *God's dream* in our world (Pollefeyt & Bieringer, 2005). When learning arrives at *the space between*, the potential exists to affect the choices made throughout the whole of life positively. Compared to the conceptual framework, the centre of the framework showed that the central purpose of Scripture learning is to obtain meaning.

Participants believed that students' ability to translate the text for meaning depended on adults' knowledge and understanding of Scripture. Such knowledge was to enable teachers to draw meaning from the text themselves. Gaps in teacher knowledge and confidence can also lead to gaps in teaching content, as Chloe outlined:

> I've just been co-teaching in Year Four, and as part of getting to know the Bible, individual students are just making a cover page of books of the Bible. And one of them had James, and they were like, "Did Jesus have brothers?" It was like this massive mind explosion, like *Wow*! Everything I've known to date has been wrong because I thought he was an only child. In terms of the kids processing that, if we don't address that in the

early years, then they kind of get to years four, five and six, and they're like, "*What do you mean?*".

The conversation highlighted the need for using processes that enabled teachers to see the links between finding the treasures in the Scripture text, pedagogy (*what* to teach and *how* to teach) and life application. Effective pedagogies seemed to facilitate the meaning-making process, as the strategy shown in Figure 42 highlights. The strategy in Figure 42 provided another tool for teachers to take from the Scripture twilights and use individually or with other teachers.

Figure 42

Linking Scripture Interpretation and Pedagogy

Finding meaning in Scripture texts		
The text: **What** happens in this text? In dot points record key events; phrases; words…	**Why?** Why might the author have included this event / action / chosen this phrase or word? (What meaning can be found in what is represented / presented / symbolised?)	**How?** (Active learning; agency; collaboration; creative inquiry; explicit teaching; language rich; dialogue for critical thinking; learner focused; Scripture storytelling; playful; responsive; scaffolded)
		Active learning: Agency: Collaboration:

5.2.3.   The Conceptual Framework: Understanding Purpose

Participants considered the accuracy and limitations of the conceptual framework. They affirmed the explicit naming of building teaching knowledge and understanding of the text to build teacher capacity to interpret the text appropriately. There was consensus that this skill was an essential prerequisite for planning how to teach Scripture.

In addition, team members noted the value of the inclusion of social capital (Daly et al., 2021; Leana, 2010; Leana & Pil, 2006) in the conceptual framework. Julia stated, "You don't see that on the other frameworks. They usually only focus on the professional aspect, so that's excellent there". Julia also commented on the inclusion of understanding how children learn and the need for teachers to build knowledge, understanding and skills to interpret the text:

To know students and how they learn - you put that in so many other subjects. I know in English we're doing that with everything, but to have that in Scripture as well, I think, is really important. We don't learn the same way that we always have, that's the main thing. I think some teachers also grew up with the literal interpretation, and that's how they were trained. To have that in there… I like that in, it's a good inclusion.

After analysing the meeting transcript, the purple section of the framework (see Figure 43) expanded to include: *Identify why this journey is needed*. This element expresses the importance of understanding the purpose of building capacity. The analysis affirmed all other aspects of the framework and deepened awareness of the need to show the impact of a teacher's ability for biblical interpretation. The arrows attempted to demonstrate the relationship between biblical interpretation, pedagogy and meaning-making. Figure 43 shows the arrows pointing outwards from the centre showed that learners' insights into the text may influence meaning-making for teachers or other learners and, consequently, contribute new understandings of Scripture.

Figure 43

Building the Conceptual Framework: Understanding why
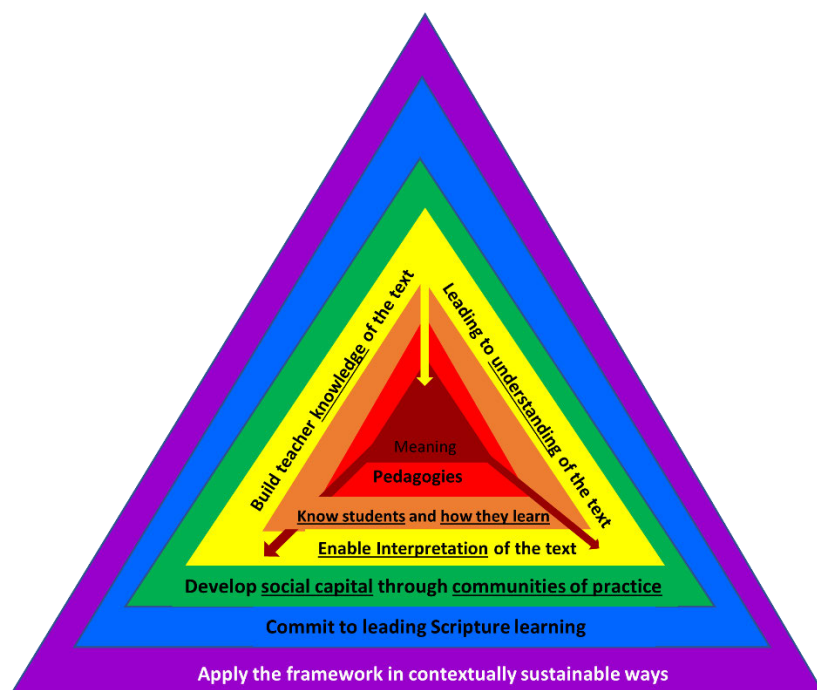
5.2.4.　　　*The First Intervention: Identifying Challenges*

Rich dialogue drove the quest for determining what intervention to begin with for the twilights. One challenge related to the timing of when teachers find opportunities to teach the knowledge presented as the twilights focus on Scripture topics rather than how to teach specific texts, and people teach topics at different times. Lydia stated, "Sometimes there's a gap, just time-wise, between when you have the learning and when you actually get to implement that knowledge". This insight raised the question of how to support teachers in implementing what they learned through the twilights. Participants talked about the need for intentional *communities of practice* in some form. (Note, the term denotes a group that meets to work together to strengthen their practice over time.) Lydia pointed out that while a strength of the twilights was the presenter's knowledge, there are also challenges in processing such a large volume of information presented verbally. Lydia observed:

> I've actually written that in my notes as well, that, there's just so much information that comes through, and it's fantastic. But we do need that time to reflect on it for our own learning and then work out how we're going to translate that into practice for our students.

Chloe expressed regret about the format change and provided reasons why she preferred the workshop at the end of the keynote presentation:

> For me, that workshop time was really hyper critical for working out how I was actually going to come back, take that knowledge and then work out how I was going to help students unpack those insights to lead to that deep learning. I feel like in terms of how busy schools are and how many competing priorities there are - I feel if you give two hours of content without even time for reflection as to drill down to, *What can I take from this, that I can use in my classroom now? What can I take that I can*

use in my next cycle of learning? Unless I think you have dedicated time for that reflection, I feel it's an opportunity missed.

In reflecting on the time demands on educators, Chloe believed that only highly committed teachers would get to the next step of integrating their learning from the Scripture twilights into their teaching of Scripture. Chloe stated, "I think you might take some general ideas and learning", implying that teachers could still gain some benefits from the twilights. Then Chloe went further to bring in the notion of understanding the purpose of teaching Scripture. Chloe reflected that:

Unless teachers are really committed to making meaning for your students because you understand the *why* - and you're committed to excellent teaching and learning in religion because you want your students to connect with the Scripture - you're not going to do it".

As participants voluntarily attended the twilights, challenges of building social capital emerged. Lydia pointed out that this could be an isolated journey. "If I go to the sessions on my own, then when I come back, I don't have anybody to have that processing time with". Chloe described how she brainstormed with her teachers directly after the Scripture twilights to create a one-page resource for other teachers unable to attend, to enable everyone to access information from the twilight.

The challenges of adequately capturing the information presented and translating that knowledge to the classroom led to the team deciding that early years teachers needed a short workshop opportunity of twenty minutes at the end of the next Scripture twilight. A challenge raised was having people available and proficient in being able to lead the workshops, with team members describing the need to identify quality practitioners who were passionate about leading Scripture learning. It was evident from both the dialogue and the data analysis that there was a need to see these professional learning opportunities as part of the bigger

professional learning picture rather than stand-alone sessions. Participants generally agreed that we needed to find a way to integrate the twilight within *communities of practice*.

It was also clear that technology provided a way forward, but required further investigation. The meeting concluded by establishing that the intervention needed to build *communities of practice* to develop safe places for sharing practice and pedagogy. The team agreed that we would begin this by offering a workshop for early years teachers for the last twenty minutes of the professional learning sessions. Furthermore, I agreed to develop a resource for teachers to take away from this workshop in consultation with appropriate education officers. Table 11 provides an overview of core data arising from this meeting.

Table 11

Identification of Strengths and Needs from Scripture Twilights

Strengths identified	Why	Needs identified	Why
Supporting teachers to plan in RE	Can support teachers in interpreting the text well	Teachers can depart from planned pedagogies	Teachers can revert back to "comfortable things".
Presenter knowledge is highly valued	Participants do not have this knowledge	Pedagogies for meaningful teaching of Scripture	Teachers are unsure *how* to teach Scripture
A one page synthesis overview to share with whole staff	Serves as a tool for synthesising information and communicating with staff	Time to process knowledge heard in the Scripture twilight Time to practise skills (with the support of people with expertise)	Challenging to absorb everything heard

5.2.5.   *Encountering Challenges for Intervention One*

While the group came to a consensus about what intervention to trial first to strengthen the impact of the Scripture twilights on classroom practice, debate arose at the following Scripture Steering committee meeting. Some members raised concerns that it could be disruptive for members to leave mid-session to attend a pedagogy workshop, and some teachers may also wish to stay and listen to the presenter's conclusion. One presenter indicated a preference for early years teachers to meet at another time. Other people believed that teachers would not want to give additional voluntary time after having already given two hours. The valid concerns reflected the limitations of the Early Years Scripture twilights team meeting. In two hours, the group covered extensive territory. While the challenges and needs were relatively straightforward by the end of the session, the group needed more time to nuance the intervention. How to best address the needs and challenges remained a question for the group.

In consultation with the presenter, the strategy to move forward was for teachers to leave the group discreetly. Teachers could choose whether to participate in the workshop at that point, arrange another time to conduct the workshop, or remain listening to the keynote presenter. It seemed like a sensible compromise.

In reality, what transpired was that different options happened in various venues. Sometimes a few teachers elected to stay in the keynote presentation, and others participated in the workshop. In one venue, the early years teachers decided they would hold the workshop at another time when they were meeting for an early years workshop. However, the early years workshop never resulted due to the inability to find a date that suited everyone.

For the next Scripture twilight: *Who wrote the Bible?* I developed a resource for teachers that outlined different strategies for teaching this topic from Prep to Year three, which members of the Early Years Research Team and education officers approved. Advice received from a curriculum

education officer recommended using Microsoft TEAMS as a collaboration platform. We hoped this tool would meet the needs for developing social capital and building pedagogical knowledge. Another education officer set up a TEAMS site for early years Scripture teachers who wished to have access.

5.2.6. Analysis Summary and Recommendations

The need for building capacity for teaching Scripture to early years students was evident. The team had evidence that working with teachers post-twilight to synthesise learnings and plan Scripture teaching and learning assisted in building confidence. Still, neither could guarantee the strengthening of pedagogy. As the Scripture twilights were organised and facilitated at the system level, finding ways to effectively follow up with teachers at the school level was challenging, especially if religious education leaders were not confident to lead Scripture learning.

It was also critical to consider how *communities of practice* were developed. There was a need to learn more about what teachers have already found helpful and challenging and what they believed would be beneficial. There was also a need to include all stakeholders in this journey and ensure processes that enabled the wisdom of all voices to shape the future of the form required for building capacity effectively. The success of DBR depended upon reaching all stakeholders effectively. The larger the number of people in the stakeholder group, the more carefully the research team needed to dialogue and discern before they arrived at decision-making.

Participants named pedagogy as a clear blockage for some early years teachers. However, it was unclear why this is a block and what successfully assisted teachers in clearing this block. This feedback may provide rich insights for determining how some form of *communities of practice* can be effectively established, maintained and sustained. Table 12 shows the intervention evaluation.

Table 12

Questions to Evaluate the Intervention Effectiveness

Was there any evidence that the intervention positively impacted practice?	Yes, through teacher feedback and interview data.
Could the intervention be readily implemented for future professional learning?	No, it was disruptive for some people and forced teachers to choose between learning about Scripture or pedagogy.
Is there any adjustment needed to this intervention for increased effectiveness?	Yes.
Is the intervention targeting the area of most need?	Yes, but how to best target the need requires further exploration.

5.3. Interviews With Teachers in the Scripture Twilights.

The recruitment process for the interviews was more challenging than anticipated, with no easy way to determine which early years teachers participated. When I asked the education officers (religious education) to nominate early years teachers who represented a range of factors (experience, participation, context), people were usually unsure. Some education officers then elected to email religious education leaders, requesting nominations of people who met the criteria I required.

The interviews were conducted for one hour each, with the first interview on November 21, at 3.30 pm, involving a year one teacher from a country school (Ruth) and an experienced religious education leader (Rachel) from an inner city school in Brisbane. Both participants presented via video conference from their geographical locations. The second interview was conducted on November 26th, at 3.30 pm, involving a year one teacher (Isabella) who had taught in Catholic schools for several years, having completed her teacher qualifications at a non-

Catholic university. Analysis of the meeting transcript revealed seventeen themes, which condensed into three overarching themes or questions (see Table 13).

Table 13

Summary of Thematic Analysis from Interviews with Teachers

Overarching theme 1: What do early years teachers experience?
1 A personal impact on their own identity and beliefs 2 Frustration and uncertainty in knowing how to translate what they learned to the classroom 3 Challenges in documenting planning 4 Team building through Scripture learning and planning 5 Student excitement when students discover meaning 6 Fear about how students need to interpret the text 7 Teaching Scripture can be exciting, daunting and frustrating 8 The teaching of Scripture has similarities to the teaching of literacy 9 Blocks that prevent further capacity building 10 Early years students as being open-minded, who can articulate insightful questions
Overarching theme 2: What do early years teachers value?
11 Professional learning opportunities that are accessible, build contemporary, deep knowledge and enable peer collaboration 12 Professional learning that builds their capacity and self-efficacy 13 Strategies that enable students to engage in Scripture learning 14 Scripture background resources that teachers can understand 15 Flexibility in planning and pedagogical delivery
Overarching theme 3: What do early years teachers want / need?
16 Wholistic processes that enable capacity building 17 Processes and strategies build an ability to interpret the text 18 Professional learning that models how to plan and teach Scripture

The way people experienced interpreting Scripture in childhood came through multiple comments. Ruth (year one teacher in a country school) stated that growing up she was presented with "*a Scriptural piece or a story and it was, that's what had actually happened*". Dialogue about the *impact of being taught a literal interpretation of the text* revealed that it may not be until teachers participate in professional learning as a teacher, such as through the Scripture twilights, that a literalist view of Scripture is challenged. *Ruth explains how she taught from a literalist interpretation*. "I was doing that I think, to an extent, still in my teaching in grade one this year and the past couple of years".

While Ruth had attended Scripture twilights she had "*found it a little bit tricky to bring it down to my little people's level*". For Ruth, it was the opportunity to participate in a school-based twilight where the text was explored and then *strategies were modelled for identifying* pedagogies *to teach the text and planning the text that provided the breakthrough*. This professional learning led to a change in pedagogical practice for Ruth, who describes that in the past, "I would have initially just dived into the story, presented the text, okay, and then worked off that".

After the professional learning Ruth outlined how she looked at the Scripture story she was going to teach about Jesus choosing his twelve disciples "and applied it to our little people". *Utilising critical thinking questions* Ruth asked students, "What sort of people do you surround yourselves with? What sort of values and things do you hold special or do you think are important to you?" Ruth then experienced that, "*Little people were actually evaluating themselves*" and *identifying what was important* to them.

Finding the courage to try a new approach and then hearing rich dialogue from students led to Ruth identifying that she had taken "a great deal" from the professional learning. "*The way that I will present the texts will be very, very differently to what I have done*." Ruth's experience highlights that the conceptual framework presents a new way of approaching the text for some teachers. It also confirms that *the*

appropriate starting point is understanding the text at adult level rather than planning teaching opportunities based on a limited reading or knowledge of the text.

Isabella (year one teacher from a large school in an outer Brisbane suburb), described a similar journey, outlining that the Scripture twilights "*taught me a lot*".

> Coming from Catholic schools growing up, we were always given quite...it was always one way that we were taught it, and you never question anything that was said to you. And then starting teaching, I sort of started teaching the same way. I didn't realise that you take the concepts and the ideas and talk about it from the inferential sort of view, not the literal.

One point highlighted was that *having a lifetime of being Catholic was not a guarantee of understanding Scripture*. Penelope (Year three teacher who has only attended one Scripture twilight) outlined growing up "with a very Catholic family" and was one of eleven children "so Mum and Dad were always really quite religious". As Penelope had not attended a Catholic university "I didn't have that kind of deeper religious content through my degree". Penelope stated that her experience of participating in the Scripture twilight was "enlightening" and "*made me question everything that I knew about the Scriptures*, which was really great".

Having just taught a unit of work on Jesus the Messiah, Penelope expressed that she would have been able to provide "*that little bit of in-depth knowledge*" if she had been able to participate in the twilight prior to teaching the unit. This reflection highlights Penelope's belief that the professional learning impacted her capacity to teach the text, even though she had not yet had the opportunity to implement her learnings.

For Isabella (year one teacher from a large school in an outer Brisbane suburb), the experience of *learning that the story of the birth of Jesus was drawn from two very different Scripture stories "was almost mind-blowing*". Isabella reflected that participation in the Scripture twilights was "*a good way for me to review my practice*". Without

participation in the Scripture twilights, "I don't think my teaching would be as great". Rachel (religious education leader from an inner-city Brisbane school) articulated the danger of teaching from a literalist interpretation and not adequately understanding how Scripture can be interpreted to obtain appropriate meaning for today. "*You need to be informed - otherwise you're misinforming and you're not passing on a faith. You're passing on versions of faith*."

These insights confirmed one element of the conceptual framework: teaching Scripture needs to enable students to *interpret the text for appropriate meaning in the context of their own lives*. The data implied that *literal learning can be so restrictive, it can affect beliefs for a lifetime and limit ability to obtain contemporary meaning from the text*, unless the person is exposed to opportunities for discovering deeper interpretations of the text that are personally meaningful and appropriate.

Participants spoke of making uninformed judgements about the suitability of teaching some Scripture texts. Ruth (year one teacher from country school) acknowledged that, "In the past, I've been a little bit guilty of, oh, that story has a little bit too much meaning or what's presented in it far-out does little people's minds". When this occurs, teachers may choose not to teach the text, even if there is a professional expectation that they will. Ruth then stated now she believed "any person of any age can appreciate any of the Scripture texts" (that teachers are required to teach). When teachers feel a block in capacity building they experience frustration at not knowing how they can teach Scripture appropriately. Ruth described this as feeling "*a little bit lost*". The need for effective professional learning for teachers to connect to practice appears in Australian research about what teachers want to increase practitioner effectiveness (Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], December 2017)

Planning Scripture can result in challenges that lead to blocks to capacity building or teaching Scripture in meaningful ways, as the process for learning about a text can take significant time for teachers. Rachel

(religious education leader from an inner-city Brisbane school) reflected, "But there's a difficulty in writing that all up in a program and responding to that in a five-week cycle". The "mind mapping" strategy was highlighted as being helpful by both Rachel and Ruth, and Rachel indicated that it reduced the need for "perfection". Rachel identified *the challenge in planning to allow for the teaching of Scripture to be responsive to student needs, interests and insights*. "*If you've got someone who's been trained to be very prescriptive and organised, it can be very frustrating and challenging* to do that, to go off on a direction or to do things differently."

Chloe discovered that *sometimes teachers revert to their comfort zone of known and familiar pedagogical practices*. These insights align with teacher professional learning theories that allow teachers to have opportunities to practice new skills, apply, reflect, refine and share their learning (Timperley, 2015). Embedding teachers' professional learning over time rather than participating in one-off sessions is a challenge for education in Australia (Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], November, 2018).

Participants identified some helpful strategies for capacity building. Ruth (year one teacher in a country school), spoke about *observing the Prep teacher* (who is a participant in the major study for my research) teaching the infancy narratives with her Prep students. "*And just to hear them break that down*", to see that students "*have a really good understanding of the people associated with each story*", "*…it was exciting to see* that *little people at that* age *can really embrace it and understand it*". Therefore, the *strategies of modelling quality teaching and listening to the quality dialogue that then flows from early years students is a key strategy for building capacity*. As the year one teacher in that school, Ruth stated:

> …I can't wait to see how little people will respond to it next year
> when they come to me, because they've already this year got a

great little foundation from Prep so that we can build on that a little bit further next year.

Another strategy previously mentioned is the development of critical thinking questions that assist students in discovering and creating meaning from the text. Ruth outlined how she had taken the *resource* I had created for early years teachers for the topic, 'Understanding the Bible', and it had enabled her to *access some 'new' pedagogical strategies* so she had found it "of benefit". Ruth named *professional dialogue* as a critical strategy as she described "…*talking and having conversations, not daily, but quite regularly with our staff* that you're working with. *I think I'm getting a great deal out of it* and I will take that onboard as I plan for 2020…". *Working with a person who had specific expertise in Scripture* was named as another critical strategy that assisted early years teachers to move forward. Ruth stated, "We've got a very close relationship with our parish priest. …The next time he's coming through that might be something that he can help us to further understand". Rachel (religious education leader from an inner-city Brisbane school) reflected, "*I have found that working with an EO (Education Officer)* or someone who is really honing in on that transference to be the key".

Rachel described building capacity with her staff as *a slow process*, and that it had taken considerable time "…to get to understand the transference and the journey", which is why *the Education Officer's skills were so valued*. "*Webinars*" were named by Ruth as a strategy she found helpful to "*see practical little* examples of things presented", and they were readily accessible for people to view in their own time. Participants valued strategies that enabled them to see how they could transfer their learning to the classroom. In essence, there was a call to move beyond *telling* teachers about the text, to *showing* teachers how they could apply their learnings. Ruth summarised this need succinctly, "*I really love taking something away that I could apply*".

Finally, there was a dialogue about the need for participants and the Scripture steering committee to visualise how the Scripture twilights fit

into the concept of ongoing professional learning, building capacity and promoting a gradual release of responsibility. Rachel commented, "*You've got to have the whole picture and then you've got to break it down*". *Without this whole picture overview "that's when they get lost* in it". Figure 44 shows the impact of this analysis on the framework.

Figure 44

Expanding the Conceptual Framework
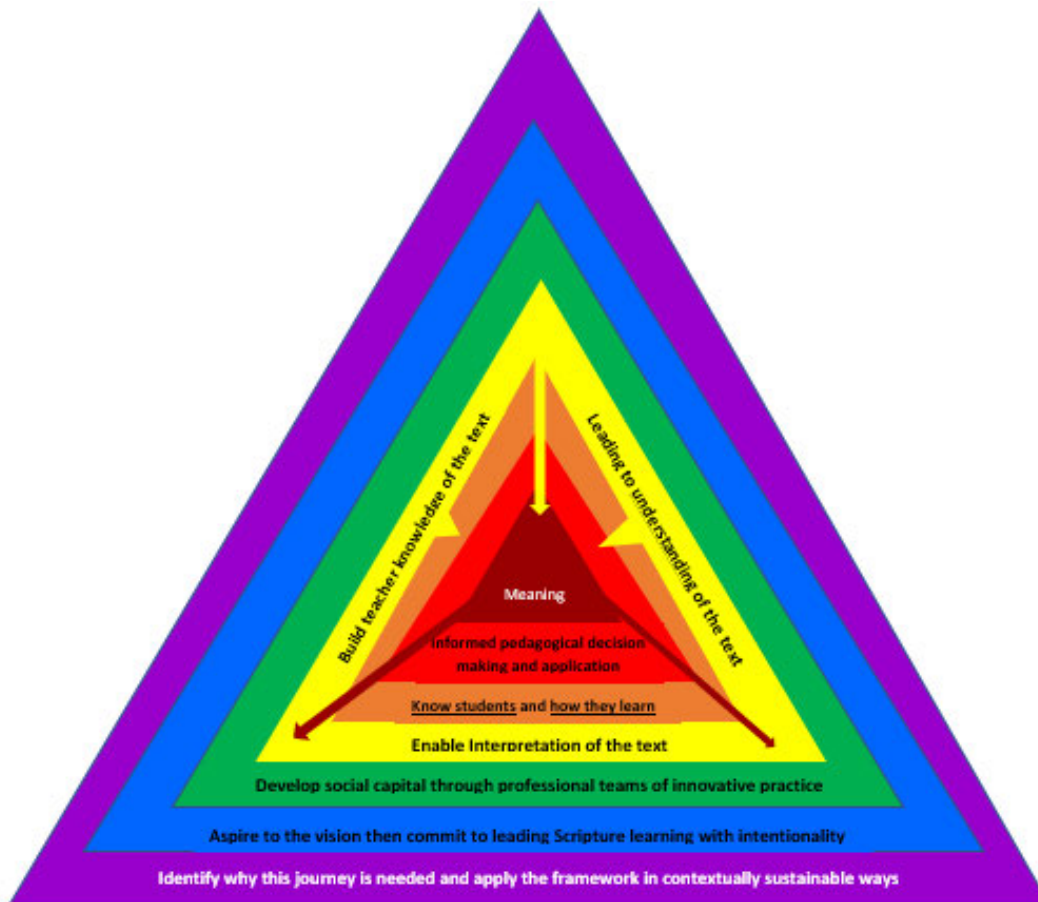
Note. This version of the conceptual framework expands the area of pedagogy to *Informed pedagogical decision-making and application*. All other areas remain the same, as previously shown in Figure 43.

5.3.1. Analysis Insights

A deeper analysis of the interview data reveals six identified places where teachers can experience blocks to build capacity for teaching Scripture for early years students in their journey through various phases.

The first phase is related to *teacher professional learning* (opportunities to learn about the text). When a teacher has not had opportunities to develop their own understanding of the text, they can teach from a literal interpretation or a misinformed understanding of the text. The data suggest that teachers may present Scripture to students as texts that are static in meaning or even devoid of meaning. Evidence from this research highlights how profoundly education about Scripture can impact for a lifetime, and reduce a person's ability to think critically about the text to obtain deeper, relevant, contemporary meaning, from childhood, all through adulthood. This phase of the journey was external, and readily observable.

The second phase could occur once teachers access professional learning, as what they learn may contradict what they learnt in their childhood. For some teachers, this was an empowering experience as suddenly the text became more meaningful at the adult level. However, there was also a risk that, for some teachers, this experience could open the doors to a space of discomfort and disruption, challenging their inner meaning-making systems and identity.

For Catholic teachers, this may challenge their family identity, as they recognise that what they are hearing and are being asked to teach is not the same as what their parents may believe. This experience may disrupt their whole sense of family religious identity that has been foundational for meaning-making. This phase of the journey was internal and occurred silently, unless teachers were in a space where they felt safe to question and dialogued with others about their thoughts.

Third, blocks occured in building capacity when teachers were unable to translate professional learning to the classroom. While every Christian would undertake the first two phases of this process, early years teachers then enter another phase, as their purpose for participating in professional learning is to teach the text. Early years teachers appear to undertake this natural process to question how this adult learning could be made meaningful for students. In this phase, early years teachers

sought to identify the purpose of their learning, and if they cannot find ways to connect their learning to the classroom, they will likely consider their learning a waste of time. This phase of the journey also occurs internally, and silently, unless teachers are in a space where they feel safe to ask questions, dialogue about the challenge and know who they can trust to assist them move forward in this journey.

Fourth, the task of planning may block capacity building. The professional educator is required to document clearly and succinctly what needs to be taught and how it will be taught in a way that enables all students to access the learning. Teacher knowledge and understanding of the text connects tightly with pedagogy knowledge of learning and learners. This phase of the journey was readily observable, when processes were in place for supporting teacher planning and professional accountability for documentation storage.

The fifth phase enabled early years students to find meaning in the text. The data suggest that if a teacher is experiencing a block in the second, third or fourth phase of this journey, they will now have a reduced capacity for high-quality teaching of Scripture. While planning and teaching may amalgamate into one element, the data reflect the need to treat these independently to ascertain more precisely where the block could occur. This phase of the journey is external and therefore readily observable if someone is walking this journey closely with the teacher. If not, the capacity-building journey may go unnoticed, presumed to be on track or even derail.

The sixth phase of the journey was reviewing what has happened and what is needed to keep moving the teacher's learning forward and building confidence. Through this review, religious education leaders can determine if there was a disconnect between the planning and the teaching, and where the teacher experienced the lowest confidence levels in the journey. Openness, support and non-judgemental responses are required for the teacher to identify their needs honestly, to continue moving their journey forward rather than becoming stationary or even

desiring to move backwards. At this point, the data from this research project suggest that teacher confidence is the most significant block to building capacity.

Once teachers are supported adequately on this journey to think critically about the text and have a go at new approaches and pedagogies, they begin to build capacity. The act of building capacity then triggers growth in teacher's self-efficacy. This phase of the journey also occurs externally, but there is a danger that it could be missed entirely. Time pressures on teachers, the pragmatic nature of teaching and whether a key adult is closely supporting the teacher's journey all contribute to the elimination of this phase. If a teacher is to continue developing confidence, leading to building capacity and triggering growth in self-efficacy, then this sixth element is essential.

5.4. Meeting 2: The Teacher Hermeneutical Model Emerges

The second research team meeting for the Scripture twilights met via video conference on February 4, 2020, for two hours after school. All seven members of the team participated in the meeting. Later analysis showed eight themes from the data with two overarching themes of insights about building capacity and links to theory and practice.

During the initial part of the meeting, participants conversed about the previous Scripture twilights and the impact of the intervention. I provided an overview of what analysis of the data revealed from the interviews. The meeting forum provided a place to exercise reflexivity, with participants giving opinions about the trustworthiness of my findings from their own experiences. Therefore, I shared a draft model in construction (see Chapter Seven for the Early years teacher hermeneutical model for teaching Scripture), attempting to put images on a process the data seemed to indicate that early years teachers undertake during Scripture professional learning.

Participants endorsed the previous strategies that emerged during the interviews to build capacity and self-efficacy to teach Scripture and

added some of their insights. *Resources that provide explicit strategies* for teaching Scripture, "*co-teaching* with someone who has high self-efficacy and capacity for teaching Scripture", and opportunities to dialogue with a "*knowledgeable other*" all received agreement. Other highly rated strategies included *online learning that enabled a deeper understanding of content and pedagogy*, "*mentoring*", "*models of effective practice*", *teacher collaboration*, and *creating "story journals"* to record practice, along with *mind-maps of key ideas* with colleagues.

One topic that generated rich dialogue was in response to research from the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) (December 2017), showing that Australian teachers want embedded professional learning that closely connects with their work. The group explored how the Scripture twilights might strengthen this area further, and the need for a model or graphic that shows how the Scripture twilights fit into a bigger picture for professional learning. We used the research from AITSL to appraise the Scripture twilights. The two areas where people wanted to build further included creating models of effective practice and constructing a flow chart graphic to show all the professional learning opportunities available for leading Scripture learning, which we attempted during the meeting. The model represents how Scripture learning may become blocked when people hear information in professional learning that shakes their personal faith journey.

Speaking of having beliefs shaken, Leah stated, "That's one thing I've really experienced is that red level…and I just don't know what to do with it". Leah suggested that people need "access to people they can talk to at that level", to enable them to" work through that". Leah shared that she had seen a lot of people say that "my children have gone home and told their grandparents that the teacher said this, and the grandparents said, *the teacher is lying, that is not true*". For Leah, the red section in the model was "really, really critical" because "I think that's a huge block for people" and "lots of people get stuck at that stage".

The group determined that the next intervention could focus on building strategies for the seven areas of effective practice for professional learning from AITSL (December 2017). Building an innovative team for professional practice could be a further intervention. This team could work together to create some models for effective practice.

5.4.1.　　Analysis insights

The team confirmed multiple links between theory and practice and exposed a theory gap (addressed in Chapter Seven through the Early years teacher hermeneutical model for teaching Scripture). In addition, the team reinforced the notion of Scripture learning occurring beyond the cognitive level and influencing an inner spiritual level of personal meaning-making. This inner space can become triggered negatively or positively through Scripture learning.

Therefore, the recommendations included investigating ways to support teachers after participating in the Scripture twilights and completing the overview of opportunities for Scripture professional learning to address the need to show the twilights as ongoing learning. For the intervention, the team decided to implement a *brain dump* strategy before the end of each twilight, to encourage participants to identify what critical learnings they could take back to share with their staff, assist with brain processing and potentially generate rich questions.

5.5. Meeting 3: Professional Learning Impact

The third research team meeting for the Scripture twilights met via video conference on March 26, 2020, for two hours after school. All seven members of the team participated in the meeting. Later analysis showed ten themes from the data with two overarching themes of transforming Scripture teaching and teaching challenges.

The current Scripture twilight involved breaking open the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). The *brain dump* strategy, trialled as an intervention, appeared to have worked reasonably well and

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generated some good questions for the presenter. Leah recountered a conversation with a participant:

> I know one young man - I asked if he enjoyed the session and found it beneficial and he said, "Great, I can't wait because tomorrow I'm teaching the Good Samaritan. And I'm not going to teach it the same as I planned".

These comments reflect a direct change in practice and evidence of increased confidence and self-efficacy. The twilight directly explored a text that people often think they know but become surprised when they discover insights at deeper levels. Participants observed that practice was more likely to be positively impacted when the Scripture twilight provided opportunities to learn about core Scripture texts that religious education teachers needed to teach, resulting in less need to offer further resources or workshops for pedagogy. The evaluation of the intervention remains limited due to most twilights yet to take place for this term. Table 14 displays the evaluation of the intervention.

Table 14

Questions to Evaluate the Intervention Effectiveness

Was there any evidence that the intervention positively impacted practice?	Yes, through teacher feedback and observation.
Could the intervention be readily implemented for future professional learning?	Yes, as long as people remember to have it ready.
Is there any adjustment needed to this intervention for increased effectiveness?	Not at this stage – need more time to trial further.
Is the intervention targeting the area of most need?	No – pedagogy is the highest area of need currently.

5.5.1.   Analysis Summary and Recommendations

This meeting further confirmed the link between *how to interpret Scripture* with *how to teach Scripture*. When teachers can see both

aspects, they appear to grow in confidence about their ability to assist learners in making meaning from sacred texts. The need for building resources continues to emerge strongly, so building an innovative team of practice is the focus for the next intervention.

5.6. Meeting 4: Determining a way Forward

The fourth research team meeting for the Scripture twilights met on March 20, 2020. Unfortunately, only three members could be present, and Chloe emailed her ideas for the way forward. Most of the meeting time involved working as a *team of innovative practice* to explore what to design to provide an exemplar for Scripture planning. The analysis of the initial part of the meeting showed six themes emerging in the first level of coding. The second level of coding identified two overarching themes of *presenting challenges* and *ways forward.*

The *presenting challenges* included building teacher confidence and capability to interpret Scripture, pedagogy, professional learning, and finding and using appropriate resources. Leah described how some religious education leaders "are saying that the teachers are really coming unstuck with finding information about the world behind the text and the theological underpinnings of the text". Leah named "Old Testament" texts the highest area of need because "Anything from the Old Testament they shy away from". Leah also shared that some teachers had spoken about how their learners "really liked the story of David and Goliath", providing evidence that early years teachers could have a positive experience of teaching the Old Testament. Naomi spoke of the need to offer multiple types of resources for teachers "because if you've got a variety of things I think teachers become more confident".

Naomi described how some teachers viewed age-appropriate pedagogies "as a really exciting landscape" and other teachers initially "find it overwhelming". However, there was a strong endorsement that the age-appropriate pedagogies aligned with the way that early years

teachers instinctively want to teach. Naomi stated, "The great thing about age-appropriate pedagogies is that they make sense".

Naomi shared her experience that when most early years teachers view the age-appropriate pedagogies their response is, "Oh, this is so good because this is really what we want to do". Leah added that the age-appropriate pedagogies "were just part of life for those really good pre-school practitioners". Leah described that "in the crossover from preschool to Prep… I think there's been that crossover time when people have been lost in the wilderness". These comments acknowledged that early years pedagogies had been neglected with the introduction of the Australian Curriculum. Many teachers perceived that they needed to focus on *what* to teach, and consideration of *how* to teach received little professional learning or dialogue time.

Insights about professional learning included Naomi's feedback from staff that "*if you give them too much…they find it really hard to know what to do with it* whereas if you can be really specific…and you really scaffold it…I'm finding that as a more successful way". Naomi also identified the need for ongoing opportunities to deepen learning. "Beth had that amazing resource (written for the last twilight) that's there but it's about unpacking that further for them because *I think they're just nervous that they're going to say and do the wrong thing*".

Naomi's insights made it clear that high impact professional learning at system level requires taking further time at school level to explore the insights and resources shared and collectively move to deeper understandings of what the learning means in the context of teaching practice. Further needs emerged as Naomi described how teachers "*need us to walk with them for a while*", highlighting the importance of mentoring. Namoi reflected on mentoring and said, "…as I'm getting older I'm realising how important that is in so many ways".

An analysis of these insights revealed some *key characteristics* required *for teacher professional learning at system level* to *transfer to deep learning* at practice level. Teachers need opportunities to *share* their

understandings with their colleagues, *apply their learning* to practice, *engage in robust professional dialogue*, *monitor the impact of applying their learning to practice*, be *mentored* and *seek feedback* that deepens learning. When these elements occur, the evidence suggests that strong social capital will build, resulting in high student learning achievement. Consequently, individual teacher capacity and self-efficacy will grow, leading to the development of collective efficacy.

For this intervention, the group created an exemplar to show the processes involved in teaching the story of Abraham and Sarah, using Microsoft Sway as the platform. The resource was then sent to Dr Ian Elmer at Australian Catholic University for feedback, with more background information about the Exodus subsequently added. All religious education leaders in Catholic primary schools in the Archdiocese of Brisbane also received the link to the resource (which can be accessed here: *The story of Abraham and Sarah*). While the data collection ceased after four meetings, ongoing monitoring continued.

5.6.1.   *Building the Conceptual Framework*

As the insights from the major and minor studies continued to reveal what appeared to make the most significant difference in building capacity and self-efficacy, the conceptual framework grew in detail, trustworthiness, and scope (see Figure 45). With every meeting, the importance of closely monitoring Scripture teaching became more apparent. Monitoring Scripture learning included ascertaining teacher needs, the planning of teaching and learning and the needs of religious education leaders to confidently and competently lead Scripture learning. Finally, while the major study continually revealed what teachers needed to do to lead engaging Scripture learning, the minor study pointed to how teachers needed to learn the art of teaching Scripture. This version of the conceptual framework shows extensive development through the major and minor studies. Figure 45 shows an overview of the development of the conceptual framework (with more clarity shown in Chapter Seven).

Figure 45

Building the Conceptual Framework into multiple layers

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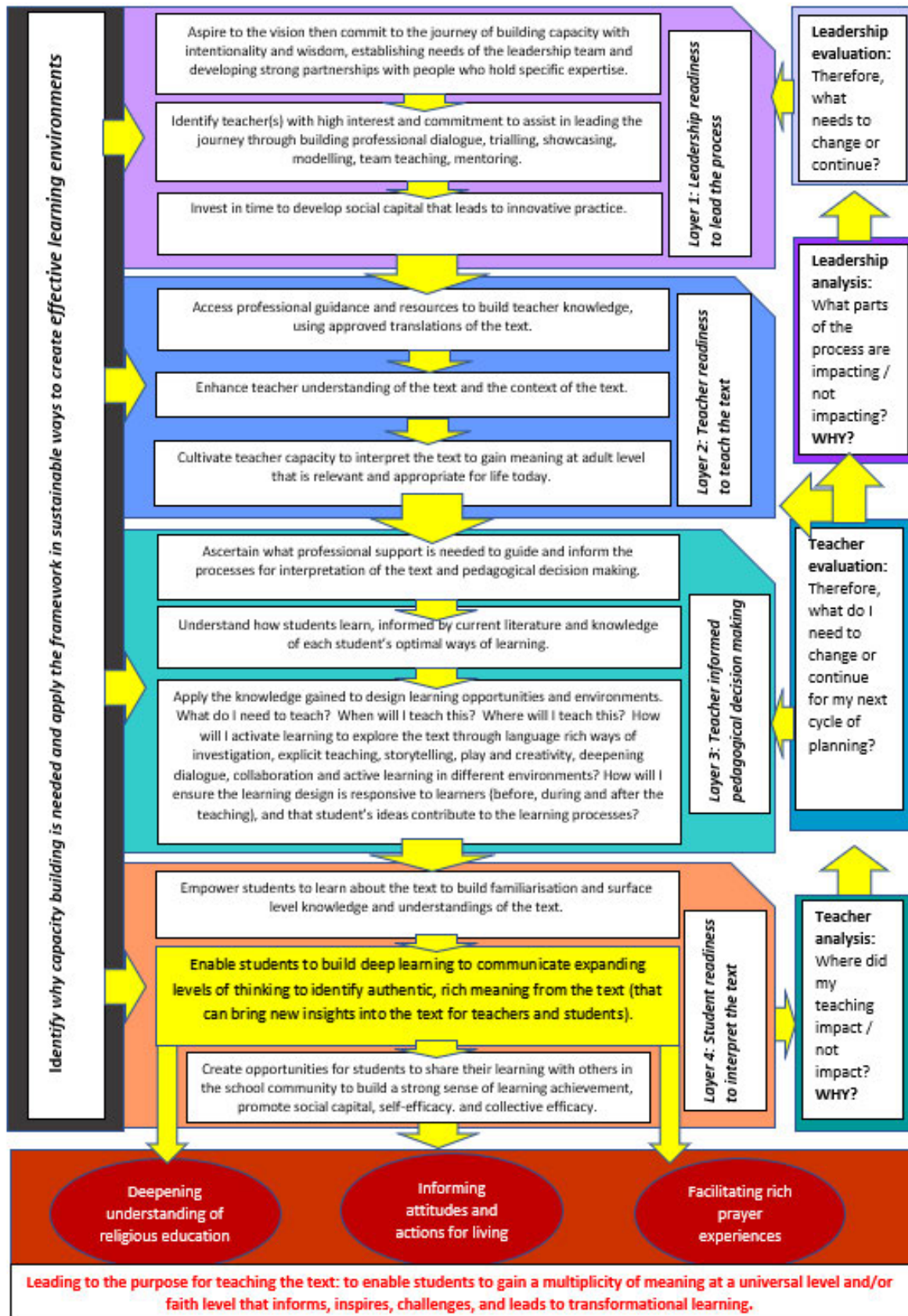
CHAPTER 6: THE FINDINGS

This chapter presents a retrospective analysis of the inquiry's major and minor studies to answer the research questions identified in this inquiry. To summarise the research journey to this point, teaching Scripture underpins the teaching of religious education in every Catholic school (Second Vatican Council, 1965, 18 November, para. 24), giving national and international significance to this study. Currently, little research provides insights into how teachers effectively build capacity and self-efficacy for teaching Scripture to early years learners. For this inquiry, the first research question sought to determine what pedagogical strategies and learning environments support the meaningful teaching of Scripture for young children in the first four years of school. The second research question sought to determine what factors, processes and strategies enable professional learning to transform into professional practice.

For the process of thematic analysis across the whole data, attention focused on the meaning revealed to find answers to the research questions. The data analysis involved assigning codes (names) to each theme that emerged from the data. The meaning arising from the themes determined the headings in the tables used to document the analysis. Tables used a variety of headings and focus questions to probe the data further. Appendix H shows the retrospective analysis of shifts in practice from the start of the data collection to the conclusion.

The following chapter further provides knowledge and insights for others working and teaching in similar contexts. In Chapters Six and Seven, quotes from interviews with participants and journal writing supports the trustworthiness of the findings. Journal writing entries include the exact date wherever participants provided that information. A significant insight that emerged concerning the research questions was that there are two precursors to the findings identified through the process of retrospective analysis. In essence, the strength of teachers'

pedagogical practices and learning environments established for teaching Scripture seemed to reflect the degree to which they achieved the two precursors.

6.1. Precursors to the Findings

The first emerging precursor relates to a teacher's ability to interpret the text. The second precursor relates to a teacher's knowledge of theoretical underpinnings associated with religious education, teaching Scripture, and understanding how children learn.

The following sections present the findings:

1.   Precursor one - teacher readiness to teach the text.

2.   Precursor two - informed pedagogical decision-making.

3.   Pedagogical strategies for meaningful teaching of Scripture, learning environments for meaningful teaching of Scripture, and transforming professional learning into professional practice and teacher capacities for teaching Scripture.

6.1.1.   Precursor 1: Teacher Readiness to Teach the Text

One overarching theme that continually emerged throughout the study was the positive impact on learning when teachers actively investigated and learned about the Scripture texts they needed to teach *before* planning how to teach each text. This finding exposes a theory-practice gap as "A teacher must engage with vital, interpretive study of the Bible before teaching any text to students" (National Catholic Education Commission, 2021, para. 4). However, in the time-pressured reality of teaching, the data suggest that teachers generally went straight to the task of planning how to teach Scripture without allowing time for learning about the text as adults first.

The use of the *Scripture planning tool* seemed to provide teachers with a tangible approach to investigating the texts they had to teach, and is only one way to support building *teacher readiness to teach the text*. Claudia wrote that the tool was "easy to work with", "non-threatening", and "appealing" to teachers and leaders. "Imagine if

we had this document for each of the mandated texts!" (Journal writing, n.d.). Gabrielle wrote**:**

> I found using the Scripture planning tool to assist with teaching Scripture very helpful as it provided prompting questions for me that helped to ensure that I was allowing the students to gain a deep understand of the scripture. Simply reading the Scripture could lead to surface level teaching (Gabrielle, journal writing, April 10, 2020).

Participants in the study consistently commented that through learning about the text as a starting point for their teaching journey, their decisions about what to include in their planning related much more closely to Scripture than developing activities that *kept learners busy*. Essentially, building appropriate skills for interpreting the text at an adult level appeared to lead to teachers growing in confidence and capacity to teach Scripture. Naomi wrote:

> As a tool it provided a well organised and cohesive framework for beginning the journey of unpacking the text to be taught. The ability to spend time preparing to teach this text allowed for reflection, questioning, teacher engagement with Theological background and a think tank opportunity to chat with colleagues before beginning the process (Journal writing, n.d.).

In considering the meaning of the data there seemed to be a significant difference between describing teachers as ready to teach a *text* rather than being ready to teach *Scripture*. Ruth writes, "Scripture and the Bible can seem overwhelming but when broken down into smaller pieces and to look at context and vocabulary each and every one of us can take something away that we can use in our lives" (Ruth, journal writing, 19 February, 2020). Ruth articulates that the thought of teaching Scripture could appear daunting. However, learning about one text at a time and discovering rich insights at an adult level of meaning could readily lead to insights into how to teach that text well.

Therefore, the findings of this study describe the knowledge, skills and processes involved in learning about Scripture at an adult level before planning or teaching Scripture as *teacher readiness to teach the text*. This phrase highlights essential elements identified through the data, showing three different but interrelated components. First, *teacher readiness* emphasised teachers' need to enter the role of learner prior to teaching Scripture because early years teachers are not Scripture scholars. Yet, they needed to understand Scripture enough to interpret it from a Catholic hermeneutical perspective (Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, Section III).

Second, emphasising teaching *the text* reflected that *teacher readiness to teach Scripture* involves investigating one text at a time when required, and participants appeared to find this achievable. In contrast, using terminology about readiness to *teach Scripture* may imply a readiness to teach anything in the Bible, which, as Ruth's previous writing indicates, is a much more extensive challenge. Furthermore, the term *teacher readiness to teach* reveals the purpose of engaging in adult learning (National Catholic Education Commission, 2021) as the starting point, and planning teaching and learning opportunities will follow. This finding is important because it demonstrates that teaching Scripture well is achievable with the appropriate resources, processes and strategies.

Challenges in Achieving Teacher Readiness to Teach. Another insight from the research that was most evident early in the inquiry was that teachers often found reading biblical commentaries challenging. Naomi writes that using the Scripture planning tool still involved the need to use resources that teachers found accessible yet accurate:

> The challenge we have faced previously, in locating and having available teacher background that supports the Catholic perspective continued in this situation. Teachers are interested to have this information however, it often falls upon the APRE (assistant principal religious education) to locate the information

and support in the process of unpacking and translating this to a usable form for teachers of young children. Teachers yearn for the knowledge – the challenge is in enabling this to be relevant and appropriate to different levels of teacher understanding, interest and background (Naomi, journal writing, n.d.).

Using the internet to find resources was problematic due to identifying the appropriateness of the source. In addition, it was time-consuming to document and prepare classroom learning opportunities. Teachers generally had not naturally read biblical commentaries unless it was for assignment writing as part of an official course to gain qualifications. This observation suggests that while *teacher readiness to teach the text* may seem a natural component of teacher preparation, including this preparation phase effectively in schools is likely to represent a significant cultural change.

Across the four school contexts, this challenge of achieving *teacher readiness to* teach *the text* took place differently. For example, Naomi engaged in background reading from commentaries before meeting with teachers and then provided resources in *teacher-friendly* language developed from her learning about Scripture. Naomi also noted that this was a time-consuming process and was only possible due to being in a large school with full-time leadership duties and no classroom teaching responsibilities.

At St Huldah's and St Priscilla's, teachers preferred to hear about the Scripture from my understanding of biblical commentaries rather than read themselves. This preference also reflects the time-pressured situation when teachers have one to two hours of classroom release for *planning and* reasonably expect to finish the session with a plan they can use. Teachers seemed aware that while the Bible is literature, using the Bible in all contexts for education, prayer, or preaching, requires presenting the Bible with respect deserving of a sacred text (Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, Section IV, para. C3). However, sometimes Catholic teachers believed that the Catholic Church advocates a literal

interpretation of the Bible, due to their own Catholic childhood experiences of learning about Scripture literally.

To summarise, in trying to learn more about the Bible as literature, teachers encountered one of their most significant challenges: they frequently found the language of biblical commentaries complicated. They also doubted the accuracy of their personal biblical interpretation. Therefore, the data seem to confirm that teaching Scripture can be a daunting task that teachers will likely feel unprepared to undertake.

Analysis of the impact of teacher readiness to teach the text shows how general and specific strategies undertaken by teachers demonstrate the impact each had on learning. Notably, the impact was not about learners understanding *more* Scripture stories (breadth of knowledge). Instead, the effect was that learners built critical thinking skills for biblical literacy, enabling them to discover meaning at deeper, authentic levels (depth of knowledge) rather than simply retelling a biblical story as they remembered it. Therefore, this study finds a direct correlation between teacher understanding and interpretation of the text and learners' ability to engage in critical biblical literacy.

Findings related to teacher readiness to teach the text. When teachers engaged in processes that developed their capacity and self-efficacy to interpret Scripture texts they needed to teach, analysis of data and teaching observations revealed further insights. These insights shed light on what early years learners can achieve, and the importance of not underestimating the ability young children hold for complex thinking. These findings also suggest that early years teachers needed to achieve teacher readiness to teach the text to prepare them to explore some challenging questions and concepts that came from learners.

Teachers used a Scripture translation from either the New American Bible Revised Edition, the Contemporary English Version or the New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition, depending on which text could enable the richest teaching for meaning-making and reflect age-

appropriate concepts. Teachers discovered that often easier, simplified texts left out critical key words or concepts that provided excellent teaching points for exploring meaning. Teachers also made no adaptations to the texts, only leaving out parts of the text that the religion curriculum did not include (where the curriculum editors excluded some parts of core texts to teach due to the inappropriateness for an age group). While some debate sometimes arose in teaching teams about whether it was appropriate and possible to teach longer texts such as the stories of Abraham (Genesis 12:1-9, Genesis 15:1-6 and Genesis 21:1-3; 6-7), teachers came to conclude they could teach these texts well. A core strategy employed was to break the story into parts and teach a new part of the story each day.

The data in chapter four also showed that young children in Prep could enter into conversations about finding meaning and truth in texts, even if the story was not historically true. However, this occurred when the teacher explicitly taught key concepts and vocabulary from the text (hence the need became apparent to avoid texts simplified for children). Teachers noted that it was their ability to facilitate Scripture learning that led to rich meaning-making rather than using texts rewritten for children. Essentially, teaching focused on building learner capacity to explore symbolism and connections between texts to find deeper meaning in stories. Learners demonstrated they could talk about possible or intended meaning of symbols and symbolism, which reflects how they are already engaged in this skill as learning how to read and write is one example of how young children build capacity to make sense of symbols in their everyday lives.

Furthermore, young children demonstrated they could grow to love biblical stories that may seem questionable, such as David's slewing of the giant Goliath. In a wider context, children already knew many stories of tragedy and fear, such as Little Red Riding Hood and Hansel and Gretel. Therefore, providing stories that enabled them to grapple with issues of loss and betrayal (Joseph's brothers Genesis 37:1-36) and

identity, journey and belonging (Abraham), provided opportunities to explore rich ideas about God and how God calls people to live. Grappling with flawed characters and stories of family challenges provided learners with opportunities to reflect on life and develop an appreciation of the Bible as a collection of stories about faith and life.

6.1.2. Precursor 2: Informed Pedagogical Decision-making

To create learning environments that display effective ways of learning, early years teachers needed to consider the elements required for informed pedagogical decision-making. The data analysis reveals that teachers need to consider essential questions to decide the most appropriate ways to teach Scripture. The challenge of conducting Scripture storytelling is outlined later in this chapter, revealing how participants engaged in informed pedagogical decision-making to determine the most appropriate approaches.

The data suggest that teachers made *informed* pedagogical decisions that led to meaningful, engaged, sustainable teaching of Scripture when they aligned a current knowledge of the following five areas:

1. The purpose of teaching Scripture.
2. Beliefs about learners and learning.
3. How children learn, drawn from current research and educational theories that reveal what learners need.
4. Principles for teaching Scripture and teaching religious education as an academic learning area.
5. Clarity of a learning process for teaching Scripture. Informed pedagogical decisions appeared to reflect all five areas strongly.

6.1.3. Determining the Purpose of Teaching Scripture

One surprise from this research journey was people's pauses when asked about the purpose of teaching Scripture. Few confidently answered

the question. Perhaps because teaching Scripture is always mandatory in teaching religious education in Catholic schools worldwide, considering *why* Scripture requires teaching has not seemed necessary. Stead (1996) concluded from her research that "…the question of *how* to teach will not be resolved until teachers are confident about *what* to teach and *why"* (p. 262).

Authoritative documents state that Scripture is the "driving force of religious education" (National Catholic Education Commission, 2021, para. 1) and, therefore, clearly expected in Catholic schools. Sinek and Halpern (2015) suggest it is not surprising that in education (and other industries), we get so caught up in *doing* what we do that we forget to consider *why* it matters. "Every single one of us knows what we do, and some of us know how we do it. However, very few people, organisations, or even nation states, for that matter, can clearly articulate why they do what they do" (Sinek & Halpern, 2015, p. 370). For participants in the major study, the need to develop a shared understanding of the purpose of teaching Scripture impacted beliefs about learners' intended learning destination, impacting the learning process for children.

Catholic Church documents consistently state that Scripture supports and energises the lives of believers, providing knowledge of God and, consequently, nourishment for spirituality and guidance for daily living (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1997, no. 24). Therefore, biblical knowledge is important for Christian believers (and some other faith traditions) as the Bible provides the stories of faith that led to the development of Christianity. However, for the Bible to function as a guide for living, it is essential to teach people how to think critically about the text and its context. How the author depicts each person / character living in biblical times and what the author presents about God still needs critiquing against the living Tradition of the faith community (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1997, para. 113) to determine what is appropriate for living justly today. Hence, the purpose of teaching the text is to make a positive difference to life, which for a person of faith will relate to

knowing God and nurturing one's relationship with God. Others may be inspired to live justly in the world but not choose to be part of a faith community.

Establishing the purpose of teaching Scripture from Catholic Church documents also directs early years teachers to know how to approach biblical texts with children. Despite the many biblical texts about war, revenge and betrayal, any authentic interpretation of Scripture leads to insights about living positively in the world, navigating life's challenges appropriately, and contributing to the well-being of others (Benedict XVI, 2010). "The biblical authors, no matter how much separated in time, culture, and literary style, share a conviction that God's presence is felt in human history and that God invites the human family to respond with faith and integrity" (Senior, 2016, RG 3-4). This quote also asserts that the Bible is not exclusively for people of faith and can hold meaning across time, cultural and religious boundaries for all humanity. Catholic Church key documentation reveals that teaching Scripture needs to lead to more than knowledge of Bible stories.

Given that learners need to make some sense of texts written in entirely different contexts, the literature also points to the need to teach critical biblical literacy. Therefore, the literature suggests that teaching Scripture needs to be a positive endeavour that builds critical biblical literacy to assist learners in discovering how to interpret the Bible in ways that promote responsible, positive living in the world. This definition does not limit the teaching of Scripture to faith. For a learner with no religious beliefs, biblical texts still hold insights into how to live well in the world. For a learner who identifies as a person of faith, living well in the world will likely include participation in prayer and social justice endeavours over time.

While participants spoke about teaching Scripture before engaging in this study, data analysis identified a shift in what they wanted learners to achieve through the learning process. The evidence seemed to show that previously, Scripture learning was likely to occur, but the focus may

be on familiarisation of texts at surface level, rather than moving the learning to deeper understandings about how the text could be relevant today. Ruth elaborates on this shift of awareness:

> I wanted to start the 2020 school year off differently and change the way I taught/immersed/exposed children to Scripture from the Bible in an effort to make sessions more meaningful and relevant for them as little people today and for their lives in the future (Journal writing, December 12, 2020).

The findings outlined in this chapter highlight the value of having a shared understanding of the purpose of teaching Scripture, which plays a core role in building teacher capacity and self-efficacy for teaching Scripture.

6.1.4.   Beliefs About Learners and Learning

This inquiry found that teachers' beliefs about what children need for effective learning influenced the pedagogies they selected for teaching Scripture. Through this research, it seems that in early childhood education, some competing beliefs centre around what teachers believe young children are capable of, and a strong influence on changing such beliefs is hearing or observing success stories from other early childhood educators. This supports early childhood theory, affirming that teachers' beliefs about child competencies impact learning achievement (Hunt et al., 2023). Furthermore, studies have shown there can be a theory-practice gap between teacher beliefs and teacher pedagogical practices (Smith, 2016).

When participants in the research reflected on the purpose of teaching Scripture as described in the section above, they considered how they could extend and shift learning from retelling Scripture stories, to enable learners to discover deeper meaning from the text relevant to their lives. Miriam explains this phenomenon, "You need to actually believe that you can get your students to this level" (Miriam, interview, April 17, 2020). In short, the evidence suggests that teachers plan

learning opportunities they believe will be achievable, manageable and productive.

The data suggest that when teachers experience children reaching deeper understandings to identify rich meaning from the text, a change occurs, and self-efficacy is positively impacted. Rebecca recounted, "I had a teaching partner who was an early years teacher a couple of years back, and she didn't believe in play. Her kids never played…" (Rebecca, interview, April 17, 2020). As teachers increased their knowledge about different pedagogies and the theory behind them, teacher beliefs about the place of play for early years learners and implementing play became more apparent. Insights from Rebecca demonstrate how learning more about pedagogy led to a change of beliefs about how learning best occurs:

> I've always believed that Prep is meant to be - and not just Prep, but you know - particularly early years are meant to have lots of play. So I've always been conscious of, you know, really making the learning play-based. What I learned from age-appropriate pedagogies though, was different aspects of the play that I might not have included. So I probably, you know, wouldn't have modelled the play, so I wouldn't have modelled the language. I would have just expected them to go off and learn and play on their own (Rebecca, interview, April 17 2020).

Beliefs about learning, including professional expectations, seemed to also override beliefs about learners. As Rebecca reflected, "We want them to be responsive and take ownership of their own learning, but we never give them the opportunities to do that because we plan down to the minute" (Rebecca, interview, April 17, 2020). Rebecca's insight reflected the tension between teachers learning about early childhood theory and holding long-term beliefs that teachers control and lead planning and teaching. The evidence from this study suggests that this approach results in documenting many pages of planning before teaching a unit, with the documentation potentially not reflecting the actual teaching.

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Therefore, the data analysis suggests that beliefs about learners and learning can significantly impact pedagogical decision-making. For participants in this study, when a conflict of beliefs occurred, the strongest belief seemed to rise to the forefront and drive pedagogical decision-making.

How children learn. Throughout the data collection phase of this study teachers gave increasing focus to thinking about and learning about how children learn, which directly correlated with changing pedagogical practices and increased confidence about pedagogical practices. Miriam wrote about "social play contexts" with students interacting with others in the zone of proximal development:

> Children are also more likely to try difficult tasks if they know it is *play time* and have another friend to help them if they get stuck. For example, in my classroom context, when learning the Scripture text *The Good Samaritan* – students were able to use character figures from the story in the sandpit to retell the story. They created the road from Jerusalem to Jericho by building up the sand in a mountain-like structure. In groups, the students used the figures to retell the story in their own words – students were instructed to give different members of the group a chance at being different characters so that a less confident child had the opportunity to see how others used the figures before it was their turn. (Miriam, journal writing, October 28, 2019)

No one had suggested to Miriam that the sandpit was the best learning environment for her to teach the Good Samaritan story, or that she needed to include scaffolding to build learner's confidence and capabilities. Instead, Miriam had applied what she had learnt about early childhood theory. Retrospective analysis (see Appendix M) suggests that growing knowledge of current understandings in early childhood theory led to increased confidence in pedagogical decision-making.

In this study, when participants explored the work of early childhood theorists and identified how it impacted what children needed to learn effectively, this knowledge highlighted critical insights for pedagogies and learning environments. For example, Vygotsky (Moore, 2011) points to the need for scaffolding learning; Bronfenbrenner elevates the importance of the environment (Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY), 2016); Montessori emphasises the need for readiness for learning and sensory learning (Arthur et al., 2020) and Erickson draws attention to the centrality of relationships for effective learning (Arthur et al., 2020).

Constructivist learning theory also played a role in understanding how children learn and, therefore, what children need for effective learning (Grajczonek, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 2016). A belief that children use agency to cultivate and enact their ideas and interests (Zajda, 2021) resulted in a growing realisation among participants that children's opinions and thinking contribute to learning. Constructivist learning theory presents a radically different belief about how children learn from the idea that children are passive recipients of knowledge and the teacher's task is to fill children with knowledge (Zajda, 2021).

The process of retrospective analysis highlights teachers' lack of confidence in using early childhood theory to inform pedagogy. In the major study, the teachers at one school became so overwhelmed and concerned about how to read about early childhood theory and document pedagogy insights that they all decided to withdraw from the research. The teachers in every school launched this intervention differently, and the limited documentation did not reveal shared understandings among participants. However, when everyone in the major study had the opportunity to undertake this task together, shared understandings readily emerged. Participants commented on what a worthwhile activity it was to engage in with their whole teaching staff.

6.1.5.　Scripture and Religious Education Principles

As Brisbane Catholic Education has a strong educational approach to religious education, aligned to the Reconceptualist Model (*Religious Education Curriculum P-12*, 2020), the following insights guide principles. Religious education is a time for educating children *about* faith (and not *in* faith) as "the aim of the Catholic school is knowledge" (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, para. 69). Therefore, prayer or any other expression of faith, is not a focus in religious education unless teaching a religious education unit about prayer and liturgy. Religious education follows the same approaches and academic rigour as other learning areas (*Religious Education Curriculum P-12*, 2020, p. 16). Therefore, educating about faith involves respectfully challenging the learner's misunderstandings and inaccurate interpretations, as in any other learning area.

The primary example from this research is that the need to know principles to follow for religious education and teaching Scripture impacted teachers' pedagogical decision-making for Scripture storytelling. When investigated, the team found conflicts with some principles for teaching religious education (Grajczonek & Truasheim, 2017) that exist in the Archdiocese of Brisbane. However, understanding principles for teaching Scripture and principles for religious education enabled teachers to have clarity about the *rules* they needed to follow for pedagogical decision-making. When teachers could confidently implement these principles (rules) they engaged in *informed pedagogical decision-making.* This issue of Scripture storytelling is further explored later in this chapter.

6.1.6.　Clarity of a Learning Process

The following excerpts from journals provide evidence of teachers' insights about continuing, discontinuing, or strengthening strategies and approaches that participants decided needed to occur within a learning cycle, drawn from their experiences of what led to high-impact teaching. "Looking back now, I realise that I needed to be clearer with my

intentions for the task before beginning" (Ruth, journal writing, February 12, 2020). Ruth's comments reflected that participants could be uncertain about how to begin teaching Scripture.

Sometimes participants recorded responses from learners to demonstrate moments that led to increased self-efficacy. For example, Ruth recorded how she spent time unpacking vocabulary about male, female, man, woman and humankind when one of her learners remarked, "These are just all words to say people" (Ruth, journal writing February 12, 2020). Miriam's analysis included an insight into the importance of the accuracy of the translation, "Don't use children's Bible to read scripture [*sic*] as the version is altered/watered down and pictures … can sometimes go against what is trying to be taught" (Miriam, journal writing, February 25, 2020). In the same journal entry, Miriam followed this up by stating why the change was necessary: "Don't want to have to unteach… at a later stage". Identifying what to change, Miriam wrote, "Pre-teach language and concepts before reading scripture [*sic*] from adult bible". These insights influenced the creation of a learning process for teaching Scripture.

The need for a learning process acknowledges that the pathway to mastering a skill set is less about intelligence and more about finding the best way to learn (Boser, 2020). While Brisbane Catholic Education schools use an inquiry approach for religious education, there is no expectation about which inquiry approach. Typically schools follow the same inquiry process for religious education that they use for other learning areas. However, teachers did not always have clarity about the best way for children to learn Scripture. Planning documentation and teacher feedback indicated Scripture learning could become lost within the general inquiry process for religious education.

A new learning process evolved through teachers analysing their journal writing, meeting as a research team to identify shared understandings about a learning process for Scripture, and conducting

retrospective analysis (see Chapter Seven). The analysis resulted in the identification of four phases through the learning journey.

1. Becoming familiar.

2. Exploring and wondering.

3. Thinking critically.

4. Applying learning.

Typically, participants reported that they previously followed only the first two phases. However, after incorporating the subsequent two phases, teachers conveyed that learners began to move beyond surface learning to deep learning. In the final interviews, teachers identified that one reason for their increased capacity and self-efficacy for teaching Scripture lay in knowing the steps to take. Miriam reflected, "We've got a process to get there all the way to the end…I think this process, it could be used in all year levels. I don't see how it could be just beneficial to the younger years".

Rebecca and Gabrielle wrote their reflections on implementing a learning process for teaching Scripture:

> We agree that it is fantastic to have a formal process/strategy to plan for RE (religious education). The process is very structured and if followed step by step it makes planning easier. Previous planning for RE was at times challenging without expert knowledge to guide scripture [*sic*] understanding.

Essentially, data analysis suggested that aligning the five areas of principles (for religious education and Scripture), purpose, beliefs and understandings about learners led to informed pedagogical decision-making. The emphasis on being *informed* highlights that teachers seemed to make intentional decisions about facilitating learning when considering multiple lenses. Figure 46 provides an overview of these lenses.

Figure 46

A Model for Informed Pedagogical Decision-Making

Clarity about the learning process

The purpose of teaching Scripture

Principles for teaching Scripture

Model for informed pedagogical decision-making for teaching Scripture

Beliefs about learners and learning

Principles for teaching religious education

Understanding how children learn
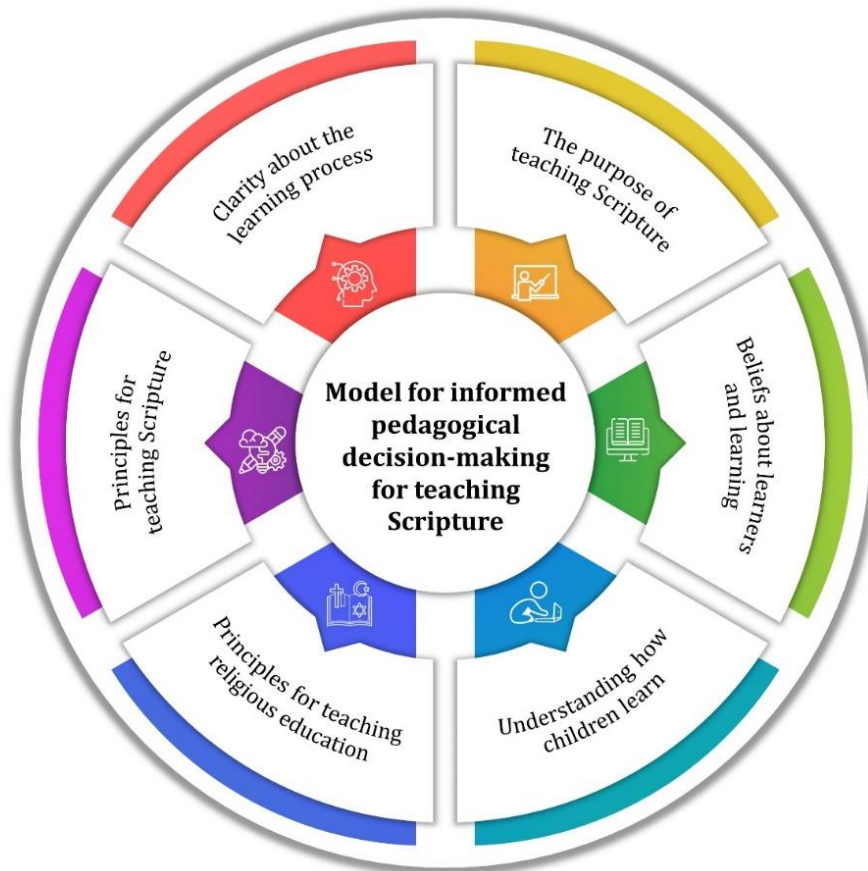
6.1.7.　　Pedagogical Strategies for Teaching Scripture

Participants in this study spoke positively about age-appropriate pedagogies (Fluckiger et al., 2017, August 27) from the first encounter. Over time, as teachers trialled different pedagogies and analysed their teaching, the data about what pedagogies contributed to meaningful Scripture learning increased. When teachers analysed what pedagogies they used or modified to teach Scripture, there appeared to be a direct connection with the age-appropriate pedagogies. Retrospective analysis found that the characteristic of *language-rich* encompassed so much for Scripture learning that it seemed desirable to divide into two elements to include a characteristic of *dialogue,* especially as the call for teaching dialogue as a skill in religious education is rapidly growing (Horner et al.,

2020). Therefore, there seemed to be twelve distinct pedagogical strategies that positively impacted learning.

Further reflection on the pedagogies seemed to suggest that for Scripture learning they could be classified in the following four groups:

1. Learner focussed pedagogies (promoting learner agency; learner individuality and being learner responsive).

2. Literacy rich pedagogies (enabling Scripture storytelling; language immersion and deepening dialogue).

3. Targeted and collaborative pedagogies (activating explicit teaching, collaborative partnerships and scaffolding learning).

4. Innovative and inquiry pedagogies (fostering active engagement, creative investigation, imagination and innovation).

Importantly, these pedagogies also reflect the literature about what children need to learn effectively (Fluckiger et al., 2017, August 27).

Learner Focused Pedagogies. Right from the start of the research journey, teachers identified the learner-focused pedagogies of providing learner agency and being responsive to learners as the two most challenging. The data analysis from this inquiry appears to confirm this observation. Naomi described witnessing a change in pedagogy throughout the inquiry and heard teachers express comments such as, "I can actually teach Scripture in a really different way and it doesn't have to be a worksheet, and it can be something really different, and it's just as powerful if not more powerful" (Naomi, interview, April 17, 2020). Teachers increasingly endeavoured to allow learners to have voice and choice in their learning (which participants named at the first meeting for the major study as the most challenging characteristic to implement). Naomi added, "I'm still getting data about what children learn. I'm actually getting more data about what they wonder about and their perspective and their voice". Naomi also believed that teachers found

giving learners an authentic voice in their learning "…more challenging than we really understand" (Naomi, interview, April 17, 2020).

Tabitha commented on a change of focus with teachers realising their best teaching was providing "…what their students needed rather than what they knew themselves" (Tabitha, interview, April 17, 2020.) Allowing space for learners to engage in their conversations about God, in a time initiated by learners, called for teachers to be silent observers. A focus on learner responsiveness also challenged teachers to avoid overplanning and allow space for learners to take the learning in the directions they wanted to explore further.

Literacy rich pedagogies. There was strong evidence of teachers embedding literacy-rich strategies into Scripture learning for *language immersion*. Pre-teaching unfamiliar words, concepts and contexts all enabled learners to build familiarisation. In my visits to classrooms, learners often delighted in telling me about characters and storylines, identifying biblical places on a map and explaining significant parts of a biblical story. Teachers commented on the development of children's biblical vocabulary and hearing learners communicate sophisticated levels of thinking and interpretation at a young age. Such observations suggest that early years learners are capable and need ongoing opportunities to build their thinking. In fact, throughout the research, teachers continually commented that when children could access high-impact ways of learning, the degree of children's capability constantly surprised and amazed adults.

Most participants engaged in journal writing throughout the inquiry, and evidence began to show what pedagogies made a positive difference. For example, following on from my school visits, Miriam wrote in her journal:

> One of the biggest things I have realised in teaching Religion in a Prep classroom – is that young students need to experience the Scripture story-telling – whether that is to see it virtually with puppets or characters or whether they dramatically roleplay

and retell the story themselves through drama. Their understanding of the text is more thorough when they are able to almost live the story from their own eyes instead of just hearing it (Miriam, journal writing, October 28, 2019).

Gabrielle found that Scripture storytelling was a high impact pedagogy because even her year three learners "were incredibly engaged and continually asked to have more of the scripture [*sic*] stories told to them in this way" (Gabrielle, journal writing September 2019). Gabrielle taught about God's relationship with the Jewish people and enabled her learners to create clay representations of what they had learned. "All of the students did an amazing job and were able to demonstrate a vast depth of knowledge" (Gabrielle, journal writing, September 5 2019).

One of the questions in the Scripture planning tool was about pedagogy. Gabrielle writes, "After looking into the context of the text, I realised that there was another question that I needed to answer: what is the student's prior knowledge in this area?" Using the Scripture planning tool identified a second age-appropriate pedagogy as Gabrielle attempted to discover where to begin her teaching for learners to ensure that she does not assume learners already have high knowledge or no prior knowledge. Gabrielle showed evidence of being *learner responsive*, ensuring the content will meet the needs of all her learners.

Often when I went into classrooms and asked the class what questions they had about the Bible, teachers commented afterwards that some questions indicated thinking well beyond what they expected. This teacher feedback is also another indication of the need to allow space for children to ask questions rather than answer questions, reflecting the need for *deepening dialogue*. Luby (2021, p. 155) asserts that "critical dialogic RE pedagogy would be characterised by students conversing intelligently about ultimate truth claims through analysis of arguments and evidence". Such dialogue may sound quite sophisticated in senior secondary school. However, the findings of this research suggest that the foundations for learning about authentic dialogue can occur in the early

years when children learn critical thinking, reflective listening and respectful responding skills that they can build upon in later years.

Pedagogical Decision-Making for Scripture Storytelling. Anna noted in her journal writing that learning about Scripture storytelling "was a definite ah-ha moment for me as I saw the level of engagement in my young students soar" (Journal writing, August 13, 2019). In addition, Anna described how her confidence in teaching Scripture increased when she witnessed how learners "connected with the reading of the Scripture at a deeper level" and "were open to sharing their wonderings and thoughts with the group" (Anna, journal writing, 13 August 2019). Importantly, Anna identified another enabling factor for building capacity:

> I also credit doing a Graduate Certificate with an increase in
> confidence in the early days of teaching Scripture.
> Understanding the writers, contexts etc., of the Bible helps to
> teach the background of stories well and helps to eliminate the
> literal, one-dimensional teaching of the Scripture stories (Anna,
> journal writing, 13 August 2019).

To demonstrate why informed pedagogical decision-making is a precursor for answering the research questions, the question of how to engage learners in hearing biblical stories in age-appropriate ways reveals the power of the five elements. This question raised multiple challenges throughout the inquiry. Participants held differing understandings and practices, and to grow social capital across the research team, the participants needed to find a process for decision-making.

The Purpose of Teaching Scripture and Scripture Storytelling.

Clarity about the purpose of teaching Scripture impacts how teachers conduct Scripture storytelling. This study found that teacher belief about why Scripture needed teaching significantly influenced teacher expectations about what learners needed to achieve, even if teachers were not consciously aware of this connection. Essentially, greater clarity about the purpose of teaching Scripture led to students being more likely to reach deep understandings about the text, sometimes beyond literal belief.

During the day spent building shared understandings with participants in the major study (February 22, 2022), the group explored the question of the learning destination. Some of the steps included in the resulting Ten steps for teaching Scripture (see Figure 47) directly related to the purpose of teaching Scripture. Therefore, participants decided that teaching Scripture needed to go beyond sharing and responding to the story through wondering questions. While the elements of sharing and responding allow learners to engage in the Scripture story fully, they do not necessarily lead to critical thinking about the text. Therefore, the group determined that further steps for repetition of the story, opportunities for critical thinking to apply insights from the text to life and for learners to share their learning with others allowed the purpose of teaching Scripture to be realised.

Beyond learning Scripture stories, opportunities for faith development and teaching the curriculum, Scripture storytelling that included the steps above could lead to learners developing critical literacy skills for forming and informing perspectives on how to live well in the world. Participants acknowledged that Scripture storytelling did not automatically reach the intended destination. "The ten steps that emerged from this research for teaching in the religious education settings, seems to me the most important next step for our team" (Anna, journal writing). The area of Scripture storytelling is an excellent example

of what the research found participants needed to do for informed pedagogical decision-making.

Drawing on these principles for religious education informed teacher decisions about how to introduce Scripture stories to early years learners. The approach of Godly Play occurs in many Catholic primary classrooms across Australia. However, Godly Play is not endorsed for schools in the Archdiocese of Brisbane because it follows a catechetical approach rather than upholding principles of religious education. Godly Play can hold high appeal to early years educators and learners due to the use of carefully constructed wooden objects and scripts (biblical texts rewritten to make the language of the text more accessible for children of faith) to visually retell Scripture stories. Therefore, unless teachers know how to engage in informed pedagogical decision-making, they could introduce this approach without understanding the deeper issues. McGrath (2020, p. 435) notes that "the distinction between formal Religious Education and the religious life of the school in early childhood and the first years of schooling is appropriately blurry to the point of barely existing". However, this study did not find any blurring of the religious life of the school and religious education. Teachers in the research faithfully taught religious education in the same way they taught every other academic learning area, discerning learner needs and employing age-appropriate pedagogies.

Comparing religious education principles with Godly Play led to identifying some direct clashes. For example, in Godly Play, the teacher does not provide any interpretation of the Scripture story and is not to challenge a child's interpretation of the text (Grajczonek & Truasheim, 2017). This principle directly contradicts what a teacher would do in any other learning area if a child misinterpreted a text. Therefore, in religious education it is important to employ all educational strategies that enable appropriate interpretation of a text, including challenging inappropriate interpretations. Another principle of Godly Play is that the storyteller does not make eye contact with learners, emphasising the power of the story (Hemmings, 2011). For this research project, participants noted that the

literature on early years education emphasised learners and responding to the needs of learners (Fluckiger et al., 2015). Therefore, when teachers engaged in Scripture storytelling they found they could gain valuable information by looking at learners' reactions at various times throughout the story, and learner engagement was not compromised. (Notably, no teacher reported any behaviour challenges over the year when conducting Scripture storytelling.)

Furthermore, Godly Play does not use a Bible with children. However, the National Catholic Education Commission website page about Scripture in religious education (National Catholic Education Commission, 2021, para. 6) explicitly states, "Ensure that the students are working directly with the Biblical text from an approved Catholic edition of the Bible". Instead, Godly Play uses selected, paraphrased Bible stories known as scripts. Therefore, participants readily ascertained that the Godly Play process did not reflect religious education principles in the Archdiocese of Brisbane (or on the National Catholic Education Commission website).

However, teachers could build on the ideas behind the Godly Play approach and modify it to reflect the principles of religious education, while using strategies and processes that honoured how children learn. Essentially, the critique of Godly Play did not reflect negativity about an approach developed and used worldwide to nurture children's spirituality through biblical storytelling. Instead, the critique reflected the need for participants in a DBR project to align their practice closely to theory and the expected principles for teaching religious education as an *educational* endeavour. The critical questions: Is the purpose of this storytelling to provide children of faith with opportunities to deepen their spirituality and knowledge of biblical stories? Or is the purpose of this storytelling to educate children (who may or may not view themselves as a person of faith) in biblical literacy and allow them to discover rich treasures from biblical texts that can inform how they choose to live in the world? The difference is subtle but critical for pedagogical decision-making.

Determining *why* (the purpose of teaching Scripture for religious education is different to the intended purpose of Godly Play) and following principles for religious education and teaching Scripture exposed key reasons why Godly Play was inappropriate in this context. Nevertheless, participants could draw on the principles for teaching Scripture to build on the approach of Godly Play to introduce *Scripture storytelling* to learners. Scripture storytelling enabled teachers to use all biblical texts in the curriculum, ascertain learners' ideas about resources to use for the storytelling, and contribute to telling the story. Using principles for religious education played a significant role in assisting teachers to achieve informed pedagogical decision-making.

Some pedagogy changes reflected the need for clear principles for teaching religious education. Principles govern the actions and decisions made for learning. In the national debate about the place of faith and evangelisation for religious education, data analysis revealed that teachers would benefit from greater knowledge and application of principles for religious education. When pedagogical decision-making became challenging, drawing on principles for religious education could illuminate the most appropriate choice in an educational context. Sometimes quotes from religious education documents provided the guidance required, effectively operating as religious education principles. For example, principles for religious education permitted teachers to use literacy strategies to teach Scripture, leading to identifying high-impact pedagogies. Appendix N shows an analysis of pedagogies teachers in this study drew upon for Scripture storytelling.

Targeted and Collaborative Pedagogies. Each of the pedagogies provided a lens to support learner needs as well as provided direction for teachers to facilitate learning. These pedagogies primarily seemed to provide direct support where needed, allow for learning through socialisation, and be responsive to what Vygotsky names as the zone of proximal development (Grajczonek, 2013; McLeod, 2020; Moore, 2011). Targeted and collaborative pedagogies include activating explicit teaching, collaborative partnerships and scaffolding learning (Fluckiger et al., 2015).

Miriam reflects in her journal that her class Bible is a Children's Bible and therefore, "…the writings are limited to one or two sentences about a large picture to do with the Scripture text; however it is NOT scripture [*sic*]" (Journal writing, November 16, 2019). Consequently, she considers what she needs to change to enable early years learners to hear entire Bible stories rather than heavily reduced and edited stories from Children's Bibles. Miriam draws on her expanding understanding of Scripture. She realises that the accuracy of the text used to teach the story directly aligns with the ability to gain deep meaning from the story. Reflecting on teaching the birth of Jesus, Miriam writes about using paddle pop sticks to introduce key characters, engaging learners' interest right from the start.

> I told them I had two secrets…one was that I know what happened to David from the David and Goliath story they had previously learned. I asked them to guess what happened to him…their eyes lit up when I told them that he became a king and that Jesus was born from the family of King David. One student commented, "*this has just blown my mind*!" (Miriam, journal writing, November 16, 2019).

In the above example, Miriam shows that Scripture storytelling is not simply retelling biblical stories but using stories as a pedagogy to gain learners' interest effectively. The above example also highlights that the process of learning is just as important as the pedagogies used to

facilitate learning. Miriam does not begin her unit of work reading from a Bible while expecting learners to sit still and listen. Instead, Miriam starts with a cognitive challenge, stimulating every learner's interest. Miriam then outlines her second secret: the birth story of Jesus is "a combination of two stories", probably unknown to most parents. She promises to teach her learners "the REAL stories" so learners could "go home to their parents and teach them too". Using the paddle pop stick puppet characters, Miriam retold the biblical stories. She worked with her learners to construct a first-century Mediterranean house from boxes and used a Venn diagram to enable learners visually see the differences and similarities between the two stories. One learner even identified that each story "talked about a King" (King David or King Herod). "Students took great delight in retelling the Scripture to the principal when he visited…informing him of the differences and similarities in the texts."

Miriam demonstrates an example of explicit teaching in how she introduced her learners to the nativity stories by telling them a secret about the little shepherd boy David. With every child giving Miriam their full attention, learners became amazed to discover that David grew up to be a famous King of Israel and that biblical authors wrote about Jesus coming from the family of David.

Miriam also told her learners that their parents probably learned there was one story about the birth of Jesus, but they could take home the knowledge that there are two different stories. Miriam explicitly taught critical knowledge about Scripture to set up the retelling of these stories. Through her approach to explicit teaching, she also gained insights into the strong interest level of learners. Miriam set up a context for learners to work in small groups, sharing crucial insights into the stories and building further knowledge together as they constructed housing artefacts.

In this instance, Miriam's approach to explicit teaching also demonstrates how she considers the scaffolding learners may need to find meaning in the story. Miriam uses a strategy that quickly captures the

interest of all her learners and leaves them excited to find out more. Learners could anticipate going home to their parents to proudly tell them about two stories of the birth of Jesus. Hence, learners recognised that while they initially did not know these stories, they would gain the necessary knowledge and skills. Miriam's pedagogies demonstrate how teachers can ascertain the right starting place for their learners and progressively build a skill set to reach the desired point, reflecting the pedagogy of scaffolding, which is valid at the whole class, small group or individual level. Miriam's pedagogy explicitly focuses on setting up thinking strategies for meaning-making.

Innovative and Inquiry Pedagogies. The pedagogies in this category all involved learning through engagement in thinking, moving and exploring. These pedagogies ensured the provision of opportunities for the types of learning that seem to occur so naturally to learners, and may be extended even further with adult accompaniment. Early years teachers in this research showed general awareness of the need for early years learners to have many opportunities for movement throughout the day. As the interventions progressed the data showed that teachers found increasing ways for learners to learn through active movement, such as Miriam taking her learners to the sandpit to conduct Scripture storytelling for the Good Samaritan story. In Rebecca's class learners had different spaces within the classroom where they could enter into activities that enabled learning through movement. These spaces allow learners to dress up as different characters in a biblical story and use wooden blocks to build artefacts such as a Temple or use an old sheet to create *Abraham's tent*.

The concept of play in early years learning deserves significant attention, especially as the literature review revealed a lack of consensus about the purpose of play and how it needs to take place. This study found that participants did not have shared clarity about these issues either, but through the process of DBR they grew in shared

understandings and practices. The term *play* appeared problematic due to practitioners' different interpretations of this concept. The data shown in the previous two chapters reveal that some of the questions that practitioners grappled with included: To what extent are children learning if they are playing? What will a leadership team member think if they see my class playing? Does incorporating play into religious education mean that I just allow the children free time? Will I have time to teach all the content in the curriculum if I need to allow time for play? How can I equip my class to learn through play? What is my role as a teacher when learners are playing? How would I justify why my learners are outside playing for religious education? Throughout the inquiry, the value of play for Scripture storytelling became apparent.

In investigating how age-appropriate pedagogies contributed to learning through Scripture storytelling, retrospective analysis found evidence of sixteen different learning benefits of play. Given the challenges that emerged during this study to clarify the purpose of play, I have avoided the terms *play* and *playfulness* in naming age-appropriate pedagogies for teaching Scripture. The words chosen instead are *imagination and innovation*. As the findings from this research need to provide usable knowledge for others, it is hoped that the terms *imagination and innovation* will allow early years teachers to view all the possibilities of play broadly. Table 15 shows the different dimensions of play that early years teachers discovered they could use for Scripture storytelling.

Identifying different types of play contributes to the findings of this research and the fields of early years education and religious education. The analysis of pedagogies for Scripture storytelling (see Table 15) shows that play may occur through multiple pedagogies. Table 15 provides insights into what classroom observations, dialogue with teachers and data from transcripts showed that learners did during each type of play.

Table 15

Analysis of Pedagogies used for Scripture Storytelling

What	How
Collaborative partnerships	Early years learners and teacher brainstormed ideas about how to retell Scripture stories: made resources such as a background story scene; select / make characters
Learner agency	Early years learners contributed their ideas about respectful listening and how to tell a Scripture story
Learner responsive	Teachers observed learners' reactions and responses to the story and asked questions for clarification of feelings and thinking
Explicit teaching	Teachers need to challenge any inappropriate interpretations of the text, but notably, teachers reported no challenges (implying there is no need to challenge with effective teaching of Scripture)
Imagination and innovation	Learners engaged in retelling the story in multiple ways including: • using their *creativity* and *imagination* to determine how to retell the story; • *using their senses,* • using *movement* to retell stories through dramatisation • viewing another learner or the teacher retelling the story to see Scripture storytelling *modelled*; • building skills for *socialisation* as they interact with others;

	- *using symbols* (such as water to support the retelling of the story of the baptism of Jesus);
	- *deepening thinking* as they reflected to *engage in peer conversations* and *teacher / learner conversations* to considered questions that stretch imagination, invite wondering and consider why the author wrote the story;
	- engaging in *role-play* to consider life from a character's point of view;
	- *exploring* insights and wonderings about the story; *problem solving* to consider contexts and questions about the story
	- *retelling* the story as it appears in the Bible and *reimagining* the story as the author(s) might write the text today;
	- *interpreting* the text for possible meaning for the intended audience and appropriate meaning for different communities today
Language immersion	Pre-taught vocabulary, concepts and the context to enable learners to find meaning in the story when they hear it for the first time as a class; teachers modelled the use of vocabulary; reading the text; speaking about the story and listening to others speak about the story
Scaffolding	Teacher observations determined where learners needed strategic support to access appropriate or deeper meaning from the story (such as using literacy strategies)
Deepening dialogue	Peer conversations and teacher/learner conversations led to structured and unstructured

	opportunities for communicating deepening levels of thinking about the story; the purpose of the story, and the value of the story for different people today
Creative investigation	Opportunities for both teacher and learner-initiated investigations (such as exploring the type of housing in the first-century Mediterranean world)
Active engagement	Teacher and learners retold Scripture stories through dramatisation; creating artefacts to assist to retell the story; retelling the story in different contexts (such as the sandpit for the Good Samaritan story because the story setting is a desert context); building artefacts
Scripture storytelling	The teacher and learners considered multiple ways for Scripture storytelling (such as white board drawing; painting; using small wooden characters)
Learner individuality	Teacher and learners considered individual interests and family cultural, social and religious connections to the story (What does this story mean for members of my family? Do any of our family members come from this part of the world? Have any family members visited this part of the world? What is most interesting about this story? What is my favourite part of this story? Why? What did I find most challenging? Why?)

Figure 47 shows the knowledge gained from this analysis:

Figure 47

Different Types of Play
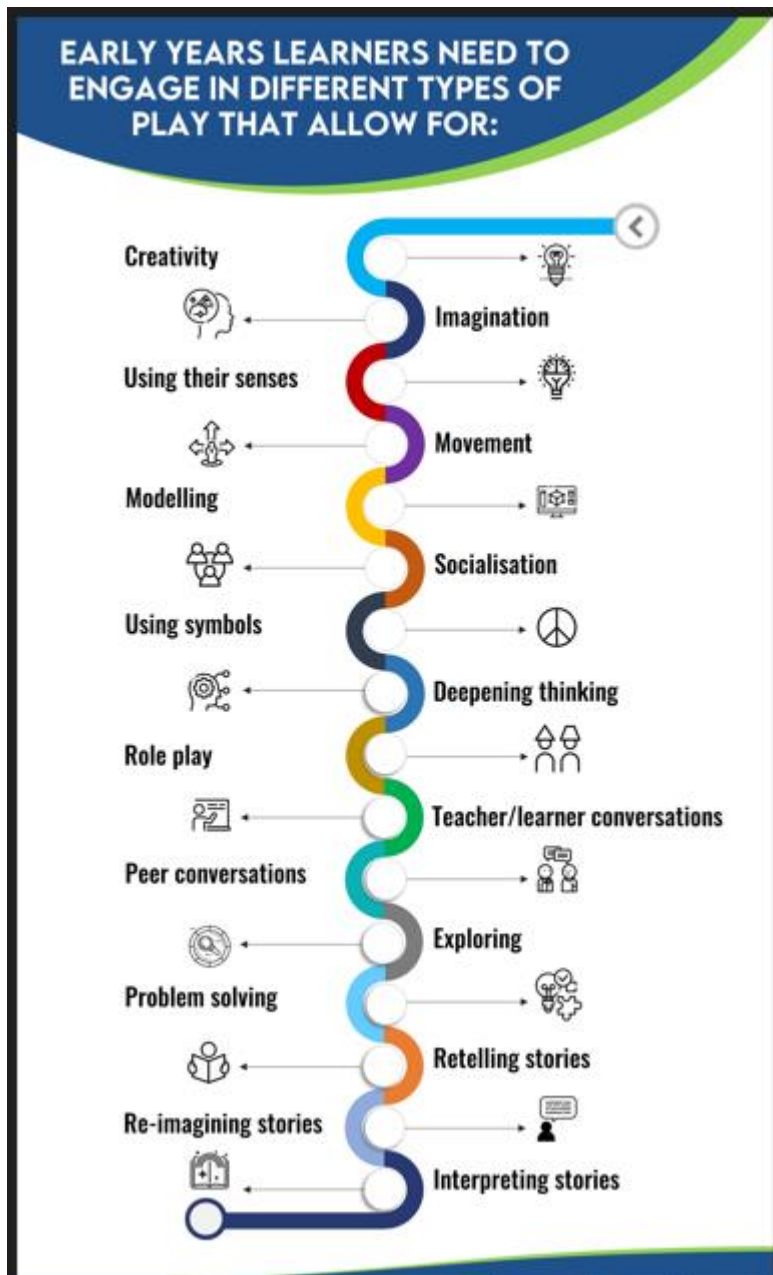
6.2. Learning Environments for Teaching Scripture

Retrospective analysis revealed six characteristics of learning environments that support Scripture teaching for early years learners. These characteristics all reflect the ideas emanating from Reggio Emilia, where the environment operates as a *third teacher*. Furthermore, the

notion of the environment as the third teacher reveals the impact that learning environments can have when established well (Aljabreen, 2020).

The first characteristic of learning environments that seems to support good teaching of Scripture is *promoting knowledge and skill building.* This characteristic also reflects the Reggio Emilia philosophy of the environment as the third teacher, where the space encourages learning when it is a place where children enjoy *being*, because it is aesthetically inviting, inspires learning, and allows engagement with artefacts that represent the interests of children (Aljabreen, 2020; Green & Turner, 2017). Much of Chapters Four and Five data shows that learners need environments where they can build accurate knowledge about the Bible and Bible stories, learn how to infer meaning beyond literal and identify rich meaning from Scripture texts. When learners developed such knowledge and skills, the evidence showed that early years learners could critique resources for biblical and historical accuracy. For example, Miriam's learners showed me a map on their classroom wall and pointed to the area the Philistines lived, explaining that Goliath was a Philistine. They could also point out inaccuracies of a video version of the story of David and Goliath compared to the biblical translation they had explored.

The second characteristic is *fostering communication and respectful relationships.* Data from Chapter Four constantly showed the value of creating language-rich learning environments for early years learners, where they could actively learn critical biblical literacy and share knowledge learned with others. Developing respectful relationships is essential in any environment where genuine dialogue is encouraged and modelled. Such environments also require opportunities for respectful collaboration with partners, groups, and the teacher.

The third characteristic is *engaging in active, creative and innovative learning.* Young children need to experience learning in different environments (indoor, outdoor and a variety of learning spaces within the classroom) (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality

Authority, 2018). Active learning can also provide regular opportunities for developing the different dimensions of play identified through this study. Active learning examples include using movement for learning, such as showing how David would have used a sling to defeat Goliath and Rebecca taking her learners to participate in a nature walk to find God's gifts in the environment. Additionally, active learning seemed to take place through many different forms of play, where learners engage in creative and innovative ways of using imagination, language skills, and memory and can build their sense of agency (Fleer, 2015; Hesterman & Targowska, 2020).

The fourth characteristic is *nurturing spirituality through wonder and natural curiosity*. Naomi and Anna often spoke of creating environments with visual artefacts that children can touch, explore, smell and consider, which they readily did through Scripture storytelling. In my school visits, Naomi described how learners became excited when they saw her entering their classroom with her basket of objects for Scripture storytelling. Fostering children's natural sense of wonder and curiosity provides opportunities for meaning-making through nurturing spirituality.

Significantly, Gabrielle found that she could not engage her second class of year three learners until she invited learners to build their capacity for reflection and mean-making. Only then did they begin to engage in religious education at deeper levels. Gabrielle's experience suggests that wondering questions can spark curiosity and invite learners into new ways of thinking about life, faith and identity.

The fifth characteristic is *valuing ideas and critical, creative thinking*. At first glance this sounds reasonable and aligns with the second goal of the Alice Springs Declaration (Department of Education, 2018) for all young Australians to become confident, creative individuals. However, Naomi's caution (interview, April 17, 2020) that teachers find it challenging to authentically give children a voice in their learning suggests that early years teachers may require significant support in this area. To provide an environment that values ideas and critical creative thinking

requires providing opportunities to show learners their wisdom is valued, and their ideas can contribute to the way that learning best occurs. It also involves valuing creative thinking that inspires, challenges or surprises. The sixth characteristic is *developing a sense of community and understanding diversity within community.* Early years learners begin formal schooling with a group of people who are mostly unknown to them.

Therefore, early years teachers need to support them to grow a sense of belonging and feel safe within the class environment. Early years teachers also need to learn about their learners, building their capacity to respond to individual and class needs. Unpacking biblical stories with early years learners also provides a safe environment for supporting learners to respect differences and challenge indifference. For example, listening to some of Rebecca's learners talk about texts such as the Good Samaritan story, they could articulate that the priest and Levite should have stopped, but most likely, they were scared. However, they also communicated that walking past an injured person was not a great choice. Therefore, biblical stories, taught well, offer opportunities to recognise differences, indifference and the elements that healthy communities need to thrive.

6.2.1.   Teacher Capacities for Teaching Scripture

The study found that building teachers' capacities and confidence for teaching Scripture impacted the ability of learners to move beyond surface-level understandings to deeper interpretations of the text. This involved moving beyond a literal interpretation of the text for some learners. The study found evidence of seven capacities that contributed to facilitating learning from surface to deeper interpretations of the text. The core capacities are knowledge of the following: content, theory, pedagogy, learners, an appropriate learning process, theological reflection and evaluation processes. This chapter shows evidence of the need for building many of these capacities.

Throughout the study, all seven capacities regularly featured in conversations with teachers. Evidence of the need for building capacity for leading theological reflection with learners is found in Miriam's journal writing, along with evidence that postgraduate studies can support capacity building for teaching Scripture:

> I find it very difficult to teach students about *Who/What is God* as my own understanding of God has changed dramatically in the last few years due to my postgraduate religious education studies. Growing up I was taught everything in the Bible was completely all true and that God was a powerful man in the sky who is always watching. Now that I have done some postgraduate studies, my own idea of God has transformed as I no longer believe he is a man in the sky but now an omnipotent being. And I also now know that the Bible was never meant to be taken literally (Miriam, journal writing, February 14, 2020).

This finding is significant for targeting professional learning needs and catering for individual capacity building. Teachers may self-identify where they need most support. Figure 48 outlines the capacities identified through this study:

Figure 48

Teacher Capacities to Create Environments for Scripture Learning
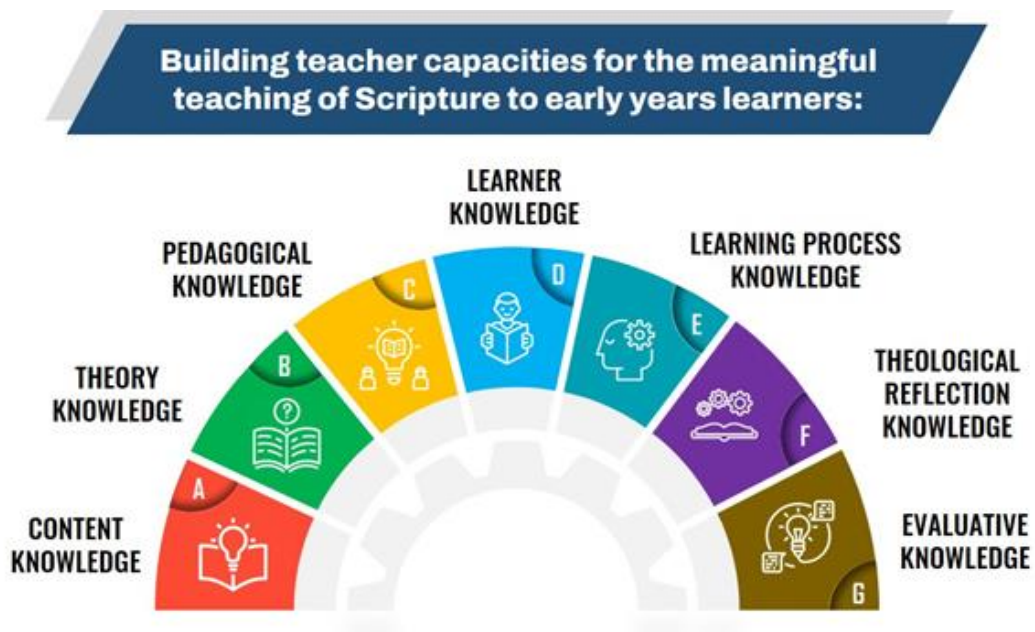
In summary, content knowledge describes the Scripture *knowledge* and understandings that teachers need to lead meaningful teaching of Scripture. Theory *knowledge* describes one's understanding of *the why.* For Scripture teachers, this involved understanding the theories that enabled them to make informed pedagogical decisions based on *knowledge* of what learners need. Pedagogical *knowledge* describes teacher's skill in identifying high-impact ways to facilitate learning. Learner *knowledge* involves finding out about the cultural, religious, social, learning and individual needs and contexts of the learner, to ensure learning is responsive and appropriate. Learning process *knowledge* describes a teacher's ability to know how to begin and continue the learning journey, enabling learners to constantly grow in understanding from surface to deep learning. Theological reflection *knowledge* describes a teacher's skill in being able to dialogue about God with learners. Finally, evaluative *knowledge* describes a teacher's skill to analyse the components of the learning journey to evaluate what to continue, what to stop doing and what to do differently for the next teaching and learning cycle.

This study also found that the ongoing presence of a *knowledgeable other* impacted teachers' ability to build capacity. The definition of a knowledgeable other is a person who can communicate insights from Scripture that reveal a multiplicity of rich meaning, and support teachers to engage in the process of discovering appropriate meaning from the text. Therefore, the knowledgeable other is not identified by their role but by their skills to lead Scripture learning.

Importantly, the study found that most religious education leaders did not feel equipped or confident to lead Scripture learning with teachers, so they needed the presence of a knowledgeable other to support the process of achieving *teacher readiness to teach the text*, planning and analysing Scripture teaching. This finding is important because Scripture underpins the work and life of Catholic schools, so there is a high need to ensure that schools have ongoing access to a knowledgeable other.

6.3. Professional Learning

6.3.1. Factors That Transform Practice

Through the ongoing building, analysis and evaluation of the conceptual framework, this inquiry found three critical factors that assist in transforming professional learning into practice. Ensuring these factors exist requires effective strategies for monitoring and building school processes suitable for the culture and the school context. Implementing these factors also determined the degree of success the different schools in the study experienced in capacity building.

The first factor is that building capacity and self-efficacy for teaching meaningful Scripture requires *committed, effective religious education leadership*. Without the involvement and commitment of the religious education leaders in this study, the participants would not have had three days working together (including two extra days to work together for this research) or the ongoing support for teacher readiness to teach the text; planning and monitoring needs. Notably, the conflicting demands on Bethany's role meant that for three school terms, she could not prioritise religious education leadership and, therefore, be effective in her role. The school building project overtook Bethany's office, and during planning times, other staff continually called her away to respond to different needs. While Bethany remained keen to build her skills in leading Scripture learning, she could not prioritise the time needed to support teachers in this project. Therefore, despite high interest and motivation, Bethany could not provide committed, effective religious education leadership at the time of this inquiry. All participants from Bethany's school consequently left the research project to ensure they did not prevent the research from moving forward.

In all other schools involved in this inquiry, the religious education leader played a prominent role in ensuring the ongoing implementation of each intervention and follow-up meetings. Naomi wrote about her insights on religious education leadership from her participation in this inquiry:

What have I learnt on the journey? Teachers need you to walk with them to learn more about Scripture. Although I think I already knew this, however, after working with a number of staff at a deeper level on the scripture [*sic*] journey I believe this to be so very true – teachers need you to 'walk with them on big learning journeys'. Great learning is achieved when it is done in a supportive and collaborative way, enabling people to feel deeply supported and that someone else will accompany them on this journey of learning.

The second factor reflected the inclusion of a knowledgeable other to support the advancement of Scripture learning. The *knowledgeable other* was someone with expertise and experience in interpreting and teaching Scripture. Miriam describes the role that the *knowledgeable other* played:

I have found my own interpretation can somewhat differ from others due to my own experiences or lack of experience/knowledge – therefore, if I don't discuss it with a number of other people, I may be teaching my students ONLY my interpretation and MY understanding of the text rather than through a wider variety of lenses. Having a 'knowledgable person' who is very thorough in their understanding of the Bible/scripture [*sic*] can be very useful when trying to interpret Scripture. (Miriam, Journal writing, November 16, 2019.)

Naomi played the role of the *knowledgeable other* in her religious education leadership. However, Chloe and Tabitha actively ensured they invited an Education Officer–Religious Education to take on this role. Sometimes the *knowledgeable other* was named as the Education Officer-Religious Education or the religious education leader of the school. Miriam also identified that the parish priest played a valued role in talking about Scripture interpretation with teachers in her school.

Further depthing the finding displayed in the conceptual framework, the ongoing presence of a knowledgeable other impacted teachers' ability

to build capacity. The definition of a knowledgeable other is a person who can communicate insights from Scripture that reveal a multiplicity of rich meaning, and support teachers to engage in the process of discovering appropriate meaning from the text. Therefore, the knowledgeable other is not identified by their role but by their skills to lead Scripture learning.

Importantly, the study found that most religious education leaders did not feel equipped or confident to lead Scripture learning with teachers, so they needed the presence of a knowledgeable other to support the process of achieving teacher readiness to teach the text, planning and analysing Scripture teaching.This finding is important because Scripture underpins the work and life of Catholic schools, so there is a high need to ensure that schools have ongoing access to a knowledgeable other.

The third factor is the need for consistent blocks of *time* for the learning to occur in sustainable ways over a year or more. Religious education leaders indicated in their interview after the data collection that they believed schools needed to plan for the capacity-building journey to take three to five years to change culture, embed practice and bring new teachers into the process. The schools that remained in the study managed to find ongoing blocks of time within their particular contexts where they could continually meet to learn together, analyse, and strengthen practice. The need for sufficient time together is evidenced by all participants requesting two days to work together during the last term of the data collection phase. The inclusion of these days added many insights, built shared understandings and increased trustworthiness of the findings.

6.3.2. Professional Learning Strategies

Identifying processes and strategies are retained together in this section as each process usually requires implementing particular strategies to succeed. In addition, the importance of context is significant here as religious education leaders sometimes brought about these processes differently, according to strategies that worked effectively for

their school community in their geographical, professional and social contexts. The following processes and strategies appeared to have high impact in enabling professional learning to strengthen practice.

A Culture That Prioritised Learning to Improve Practice. While people named this process differently, sometimes suggesting that the group had been a *community of practice* or a *research leadership team;* some core characteristics seemed typical, irrespective of how people named the process. When a culture existed that gave people a sense of being part of a strong learning community, people brought back professional learning experiences to share with the group. In partnership with the group, the emphasis was on continual learning to share wisdom about improving practice.

Participants viewed themselves as learners, building the capacity to provide others with evidence-based, high-impact education. Participants in the group had ongoing opportunities for learning, trialling, monitoring and obtaining feedback. Participants could share their understandings with their colleagues, apply their knowledge to practice, engage in robust professional dialogue, monitor the impact of applying their learning to practice, be mentored, and seek feedback that deepens learning.

Building High Social Capital. Social capital appeared to have a significant impact throughout this study. Achieving teacher readiness to teach the text, building capacity for informed pedagogical decision-making (impacting on the learning environments created) and monitoring (analysing and evaluating) all flourished through strong social capital. As an example of the importance of social capital, Bethany found it difficult to build strong social capital in her context during this investigation. This example demonstrates that external factors can prevent social capital from growing, despite all the goodwill and commitment a religious education leader can bring. (The school now has a new leadership team, and the building project is complete, so Bethany may find the conditions

in her school are now more conducive to building social capital.) The findings from this research may enable religious educators like Bethany to determine if their school is ready to undertake a long-term journey for building capacity and self-efficacy to teach Scripture.

The essential strategy that enabled the social capital to build included finding regular times for teaching teams to meet as learners and professionals who build their ability to interpret Scripture together and share ideas for what to teach, how to teach Scripture and monitor learning progress. The degree to which the journey for building capacity and self-efficacy advanced seemed to correlate with the consistency and degree of time participants had for meeting together.

Ensuring Professional Learning is Relevant to Practice. Some of the data in Chapter Five showed that if teachers could not find how to apply what they learned in the Scripture twilights, they may readily dismiss the learning as irrelevant. A continual theme through the minor study is that early years teachers perceive professional learning as relevant when they have clarity on how it enables them to be more competent facilitators of early years learning. Teachers participate in professional learning to build capacity as a practitioner.

The degree to which early years teachers valued professional learning about Scripture linked closely to their confidence levels about how to teach Scripture and whether the professional learning provided insights for teaching Scripture. In essence, early years teachers seem to value learning that enables them to be better practitioners. If they cannot readily see how the learning benefits them to teach young children, they are less likely to voluntarily attend again.

Supporting Learning Application. The minor study contributed significant insights into what teachers wanted for professional learning effectiveness. The data analysis suggests that early years teachers value

professional learning that responds to the following three core needs for building their capacity and self-efficacy:

1. Processes and strategies that enable early years teachers to *learn* about Scripture and how to teach it well.
2. Processes and strategies that *show* early years teachers how to teach Scripture well.
3. Processes that enable early years teachers to be *supported* to teach Scripture well.

Thematic analysis of the interviews with teachers suggests these are three core processes required for high-impact professional learning as they synthesise what teachers stated they needed.

To *learn* about Scripture early years teachers required strategies that allowed them to have access to knowledgeable others and resources that are accessible and reliable. Early years teachers named the *Scripture twilights* as one process that enabled them to learn about the Bible and how to interpret Scripture. The twilights are ongoing and enable teachers to build knowledge over time and build skills in between each twilight. However, early years teachers identified that they also required strategies that *show* them how to apply what they learn through the Scripture twilights.

Participants in the minor study sometimes spoke about how they found more value in their professional learning when they knew how to apply what they had learnt. Ruth commented, "I really love taking away things I can apply" (Ruth, Minor Study interview). This is significant because it identifies that early years teachers can feel frustrated if they spend time learning about Scripture but cannot find relevance for their own teaching. Therefore, to synthesise what early years teachers need to find professional learning worthwhile, they could say *Show me*, to indicate that they want to see examples and exemplars that show them how to successfully apply their professional learning to their teaching.

The third element could be identified by early years teachers as *Support me*. Participants in the minor study spoke about wanting to

ensure they could access what they needed to experience being able to facilitate engaged, sustainable teaching. Some of the ways teachers named as highly effective included: *Having incredible mentors along the way* (Anna, Journal writing). Other ways included modelling planning and documenting learning in practical, manageable and acceptable ways. Early years teachers named opportunities for co-teaching, observing and listening to learners who are highly articulate about Scripture learning as valuable ways of supporting them to teach Scripture well.

Effective Monitoring Practices. Feedback from participants conveyed the importance of employing consistent, effective ways of monitoring to identify and respond to teacher needs. The analysis and evaluation of the interventions, using strategies that all schools could readily employ, enabled the research team to gain significant insights into teacher successes, challenges and needs during this study. Naomi writes about the need to distinguish between planning intentions and teaching practice:

> The challenge of this has been that we can have conversations at planning about what we believe about learners and learning, and therefore what should be included within the teaching and learning across the curriculum however we discovered that it is sometimes more challenging to move paradigms of practice than we first thought (Naomi, journal writing, n.d.).

6.3.3. *Practice Transformed by Professional Learning.*

To synthesise this final section, the analysis of the whole data seemed to indicate that evidence of professional learning translating into improved practice is readily obtainable. Throughout this study, characteristics of professional learning transforming into practice included early years teachers:

- Using knowledge and understanding of Scripture and pedagogy to drive learning rather than rely on resources

- Implementing pedagogies to focus on learners' needs rather than activities to *keep learners busy*
- Consistently analysing teaching and sharing insights with their teaching team or professional learning team
- Building strong social capital at team level, with teachers having shared understandings about how to interpret, plan and teach Scripture, and building in practices of co-teaching, modeling and planning together
- Self-identifying or team identification of needs (such as Rebecca's plea for assistance to know how to move her learners beyond surface-level Scripture learning)
- Prioritising time for building teacher readiness to teach the text and share interpretations of the text, continually building understanding and finding appropriate meaning
- Having a clear understanding of the knowledge and skills to teach for year levels (and knowing the boundaries)
- Identifying a shift in practice. (Naomi reported that "...they don't want to go back to the mediocre", Interview, April 17, 2020.)
- Self-monitoring and changing approach when the learning is not reaching the intended destination
- Identifying as life-long learners rather than qualified, skilled teaching experts
- School processes acknowledge embedding change occurs over time and require consistent monitoring and support along the way
- Post-teaching documentation of pedagogy and teacher reflections on pedagogy
- Access to skilled personnel and educational resources
- Obtaining evidence of learners finding Scripture teaching meaningful.

The findings from this research are significant due to the paucity of research about what early years teachers need to build capacity and self-efficacy for teaching Scripture well. However, the findings also reveal that

the meaningful teaching of Scripture is achievable and that early years learners can find Scripture learning highly engaging, enjoyable and thought-provoking. The findings and new knowledge obtained through this research (presented in the following chapter) can benefit anyone wanting to know how to effectively build capacity and self-efficacy for teaching Scripture. People most likely to benefit are those working at system level to support early years teachers, make policy directions and write curriculums, and early years teachers and leaders in Catholic primary schools.

6.4. Findings summary

The following two research questions guided this study:

Question One - What pedagogical strategies and learning environments support the meaningful teaching of Scripture for young children in the first four years of school (Prep to Year Three)?

Question Two – What factors, processes and strategies enable professional learning to be transformed into professional practice?

This study found two precursors to the findings of the research questions. Firstly, teachers needed to achieve *readiness to teach the text* before planning or teaching Scripture. Essentially, the study found that meaningful teaching of Scripture only occurs when teachers can find meaning in biblical texts beyond a surface-level, literal understanding of the text, and know how to use multiple processes and strategies to enable learners to discover rich, appropriate meaning. Secondly, teachers needed to engage in informed pedagogical decision-making involving numerous dimensions. Informed pedagogical decision-making encompasses understanding the purpose of teaching Scripture, beliefs about learners and learning, principles for teaching religious education and Scripture, and using a learning process to ensure Scripture teaching moves through different levels of thinking.

The research found a strong alignment between the age-appropriate pedagogies identified by Griffith University (Fluckiger et al., 2015) for

early years learners, with pedagogies that enabled the meaningful teaching of Scripture. Renaming some of the age-appropriate pedagogies allowed for closer identification of their focus for teaching Scripture. Furthermore, data analysis showed that the pedagogies covered four specific areas:

1. Learner focussed pedagogies (promoting learner agency; learner individuality and being learner responsive).

2. Literacy rich pedagogies (enabling Scripture storytelling; language immersion and deepening dialogue).

3. Targeted and collaborative pedagogies (activating explicit teaching, collaborative partnerships and scaffolding learning).

4. Innovative and inquiry pedagogies (fostering active engagement, creative investigation, imagination and innovation).

This study found that learning environments in the early years can foster meaningful Scripture learning when there is an intentional focus on multiple areas. The core areas identified included promoting knowledge and skills, fostering communication and respectful relationships, engaging learners in active, creative and innovative learning, nurturing spirituality through wonder and natural curiosity, valuing ideas and critical, creative thinking and developing a sense of community and understanding of diversity within communities. To successfully lead meaningful Scripture and establish these learning environments, the study found that teachers needed significant knowledge of the following: content, theory, pedagogy, learner needs, learning process, evaluation and theological reflection.

Furthermore, the study identified that the factors that enable professional learning to transform professional practice are having committed, effective religious education leadership, including a *knowledgeable other* to support teachers, and consistent blocks of time for teachers to work together with a *knowledgeable other*. The study also identified the strategies that enabled professional learning to be transformed into practice:

1. Creating a strong culture of learning as a community.

2. Building high social capital.

3. Showing how professional learning is relevant to practice.

4. Supporting learning application (to teach teachers, show teachers how the learning builds better practice and support teachers to develop stronger practice.

5. Effective monitoring practices.

CHAPTER 7: CONTRIBUTIONS

Chapter Seven presents a deeper discussion of the findings from Chapter Six, exploring links to existing theories or exposing gaps in current theory and literature. Chapter Seven evaluates the impact and potential ongoing contribution of the interventions and findings of this study. Finally, in line with the expectations of DBR (Štemberger & Cencic, 2016) and one of the research goals of *developing usable knowledge gained through collaboration to draw together both the theory and practice*, Chapter Seven presents the knowledge gained through this study in ways that are accessible to others.

The evaluation phase recognises that thematic analysis needs to move beyond *describing* data, to the researcher's contribution of interpreting data to provide meaning for others, while employing a systematic and rigorous approach (Mackieson et al., 2019). Although all PhD research needs to contribute to conceptual knowledge (theoretical), procedural knowledge (methodological), and subject knowledge that offers new insights in the field of study (Hodgson, 2020), requirements for a thesis written from a DBR approach goes further. As researchers using DBR assume dual roles of curriculum designers and curriculum theorists (Barab & Squire, 2004), these roles bring responsibility and accountability to provide usable knowledge for others facing similar challenges (Armstrong et al., 2020; Kennedy-Clark, 2015; McKenney & Reeves, 2019).

Therefore, researchers using DBR need to show the alignment and advancement of theory and practice in a way that provides usable knowledge for others (Kennedy-Clark, 2015; McKenney & Reeves, 2019). Knowledge arising from DBR includes outcomes that are tangible and practical, as well as intangible and theoretical (Armstrong et al., 2020). The output from DBR is considered a major contribution of the research (Herrington et al., 2007).

While reading a thesis is one way to discover new knowledge, this research suggests that educators are more likely to use the information presented in concise, distinct, and accessible formats. Therefore, to synthesise crucial findings for others to use in their contexts, Chapter Seven offers multiple innovative models and frameworks, designed so that educators can readily use to share with others, inform practice, and identify effective processes and strategies for building capacity and self-efficacy. While the initial literature review identified potential theories and frameworks to support the design of each intervention, this research phase demands continual reflection on *where* and *how* the theory was supported, absent or emerging, allowing deeper implications to emerge through further analysis. Finally, Chapter Seven presents knowledge that can add value, and contribute to building practice across multiple fields, recognising that this work builds on previous studies and can further develop through ongoing research. DBR "…is both humble and accountable to the design" (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012), with theory driving the contributions from the study.

7.

7.1. Contributions Overview

This study extends upon the limited research in the field of teaching Scripture and is the only study found to:

- Take a holistic view of teaching Scripture that explores what teachers *do* to facilitate meaningful Scripture learning over a twelve-month timeframe and what teachers *need* to ensure that professional learning positively impacts the teaching of Scripture.
- Use the approach of DBR to investigate how to close theory-practice gaps for the meaningful teaching of Scripture in the early years.

Therefore, this research went beyond identifying how teachers taught Scripture or what curriculum and Church documents stated about it, to investigate what teachers needed to do to successfully change how

they taught Scripture to enable meaningful learning to occur. The literature review did not identify any other published research that provides this scope. Therefore, this study offers crucial theoretical and practical insights about what is required to build capacity, self-efficacy and collective efficacy for teaching Scripture to early years learners. Scripture teachers, religious education leaders in Catholic schools and systems at local, state, national and international levels require this knowledge whenever there is a need to improve Scripture teaching.

7.2. Conceptual Contributions

The following section outlines the principal contributions of this research. Each of these contributions adds to the existing body of knowledge of evidence-based practices and theories. The frameworks and models presented arise from this research.

This study is the only known research to identify an overview of the core elements for building capacity and self-efficacy for teaching Scripture and shows that the absence of one or more of these core elements prevents achieving meaningful Scripture learning in the early years. This research provides insights from practice into what early years learners can achieve through meaningful Scripture teaching that honours core principles for religious education. The study shows evidence that meaningful Scripture learning occurs when learners can engage in rich conversations about biblical stories using biblical vocabulary, provide appropriate insights into what the text reveals about God's dream for the world and critique resources for biblical accuracy. Importantly, the study provides direct evidence that early years learners can interpret Scripture beyond a literal understanding when teachers have sufficient skills to lead Scripture learning.

This study found a high correlation between the religious education leader's capacity to interpret Scripture and prioritise religious education leadership in the school and the likelihood of early years teachers providing meaningful Scripture learning for young children.

A Dual-Layer Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for building capacities to teach Scripture is the major output from this study. Chapters Four and Five displayed the evolving nature of the conceptual framework with a continual analysis of the data from the major and minor studies. This process involved drawing on existing theories to find explanations for why interventions did, and did not work, and using theory and thematic analysis to make sense of educators' experiences and insights. As this information grew, the size of the conceptual framework grew, and the shape altered to accommodate new dimensions identified. By the end of the data analysis, a challenge emerged of whether to leave out critical information, or risk including all the salient points and potentially overwhelm educators with details. Therefore, the final version of the conceptual framework is now presented in two layers. Layer one (see Figure 49) displays core information. Layer two (see Figure 50) displays further details about enacting each framework level.

The conceptual framework (see figures 49 and 50) contributes new knowledge that builds on existing theories developed from moving research into practice. The hope is that the knowledge in the conceptual framework will enable educators to make decisions and justifications to build better practice, which is the role of theory in DBR (Leary & Severance, 2020) . A discussion of the theories underpinning the framework follows the presentation of the two layers of the conceptual framework. Note that the second layer is designed to be viewed on A3 size paper or a large screen; therefore the components of Layer 2 are enlarged later in this chapter for clarity of the details in the framework. Figures 49 and 50 present the two layers of the conceptual framework.

Figure 49

A Conceptual Framework: Layer One

A conceptual framework: building professional capacities
to teach Scripture in the early years
Processes that enable the journey to reach the desired destination for learners

Identify why capacity building is needed and apply the framework in sustainable ways to create effective learning environments

Level 1

Leadership readiness to lead the process

Leadership evaluation:
Therefore, what needs to change or continue?

Level 2

Teacher readiness to teach the text

Leadership analysis:
What parts of the process are impacting / not impacting? WHY?

Level 3

Teacher informed pedagogical decision making

Teacher evaluation:
Therefore, what do I need to change or continue for my next cycle of planning?

Level 4

Learner readiness to critically interpret the text

Teacher analysis:
Where did my teaching impact / not impact? WHY?

Deepening understanding of religious education

Informing and transforming perspectives on how to live well in the world

Facilitating rich prayer experiences

Leading to the purpose for teaching the text: to enable learners to gain a multiplicity of meaning at a universal level and/or faith level that informs, inspires, challenges, and leads to transformative learning.

Figure 50

A Conceptual Framework: Layer Two

A conceptual framework: building professional capacities to teach Scripture in the early years
Processes that enable the journey to reach the desired destination for learners
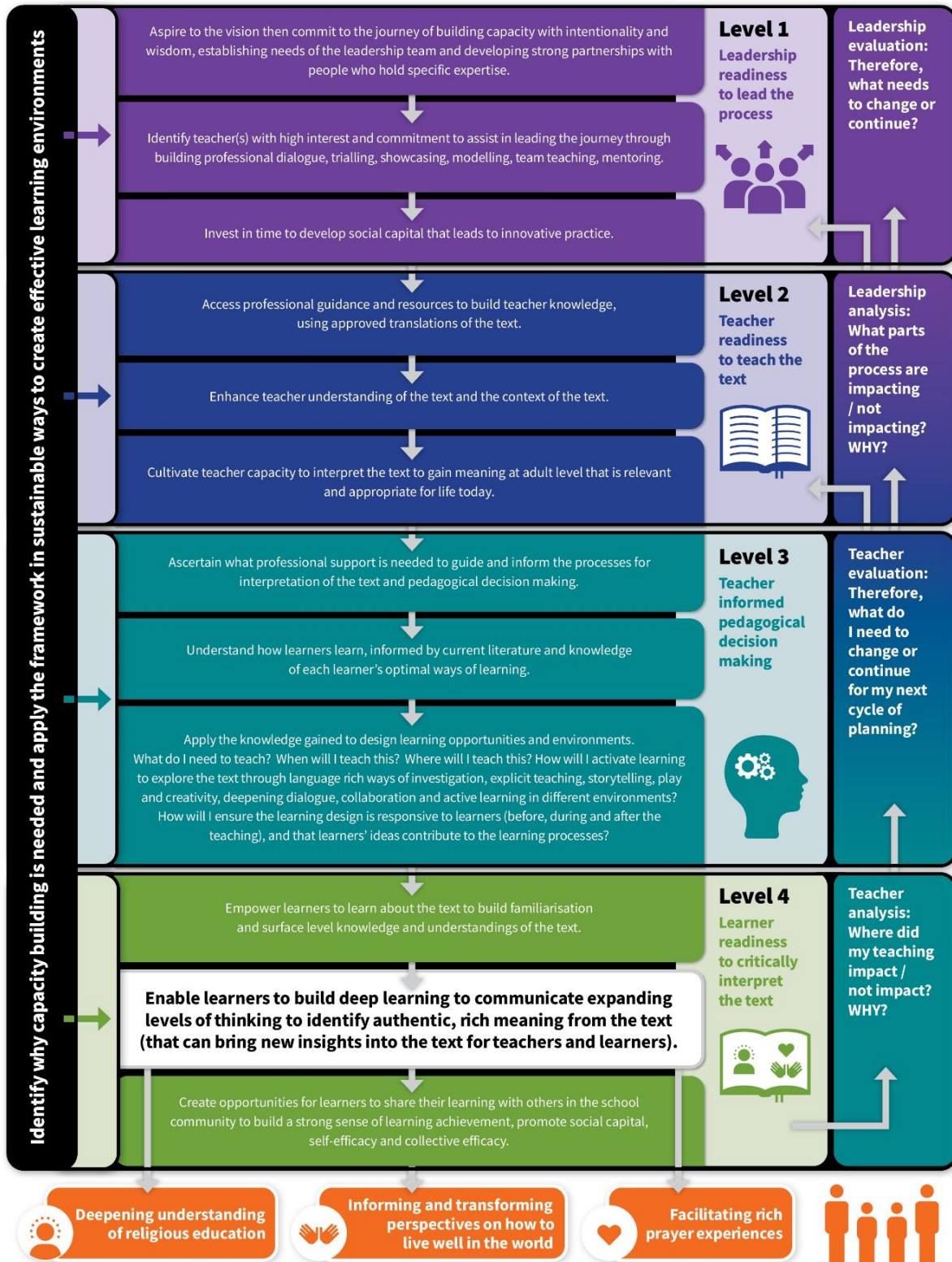
The conceptual framework details some of the findings from this study and, in essence, is like a recipe that others could follow if they want to know how they might build capacity and self-efficacy in their context. The analysis of the data from Chapters Four and Five shows that all elements in the conceptual framework enabled capacity building. Conversely, the absence of any of these elements contributed to the ineffectiveness of the journey for building capacity. Notably, the participants' experiences in this study indicated that sometimes the absence of these elements may be due to factors beyond anyone's control but can point to the school not being able to undertake the capacity-building journey effectively.

Multiple theories underpin this conceptual framework. The work of DBR involved bringing these theories together into one framework to show how all the parts are interrelated. The framework also shows how all components lead to the purpose of teaching Scripture. Sometimes the knowledge gained through this study led to the development of a model that brings further insights into one of the components of the conceptual framework. The following sections present these components and models to provide further elaboration and discussion on the findings of this research.

Layer 2, Level 1: Leadership Readiness to Lead. While the area of leadership is not directly related to the research questions for this study, the findings reveal that leadership readiness to lead the process of capacity building is highly significant and, therefore, is worthy of an evaluation focus on the role of leadership within the research design (see Figure 50). Within the literature, research increasingly shows that school leaders who focus on teaching and learning drive educational change that leads to school improvement (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2013; Harris, 2020; Pont, 2017). More pertinently, far less literature reports on the benefits of teacher leadership in schools that significantly contribute

to building collective efficacy (Derrington & Angelle, 2013). However, the findings from this study suggest that identifying one or more highly committed teachers interested in building capacity can play a vital role in supporting, leading and implementing educational change. Figure 51 shows core components of the conceptual framework Layer 2, for Level 1: Leadership readiness to lead the process.

Figure 51

Layer 2, Level 1:Leadership Readiness

Aspire to the vision then commit to the journey of building capacity with intentionality and wisdom, establishing needs of the leadership team and developing strong partnerships with people who hold specific expertise.

Identify teacher(s) with high interest and commitment to assist in leading the journey through building professional dialogue, trialling, showcasing, modelling, team teaching, mentoring.

Invest in time to develop social capital that leads to innovative practice.

Esther reflected that when she needed to give time to other aspects of leadership rather than religious education, she did not have someone who could readily step in for her. Significantly, Esther's school, St Priscilla's, ended up withdrawing from the research. Buchanan (2018) found that some religious education leaders feel overwhelmed by the expectations of leading the religious education curriculum, the religious life of the school and staff formation. In Esther's case, she was overwhelmed with the challenge of how to find time to focus on religious education leadership amid other competing priorities.

In contrast, as a religious education leader, Tabitha attributed Rebecca and Gabrielle's passionate voices and interest as a critical factor in St Huldah's success in building capacity, especially when Tabitha had lengthy absences over the year for health reasons. Therefore, despite being in her first year of teaching, Gabrielle's influence made a valued contribution.

The conceptual framework names some critical ways teachers could make a difference in driving educational change through strategies such as mentoring and modelling. The research findings suggest that the length of teaching has less impact than a teacher's commitment and the ability of the leadership team to provide the conditions that equip people to assist in leading educational change.

In terms of bringing about educational change, Fullan asserts that "…the strategy is to establish cultures that enable connection—such as use the group to change the group" (Fullan, 2016, p. 544). Evaluating the degree to which the research embedded this theory suggests that three schools in the major study integrated this theory well into practice, as religious education leaders reported positive changes among the whole staff they did not predict would occur so quickly. As a research team, evidence presented throughout the last three chapters suggests that the days of working together significantly contributed to building a culture of connection for deepening learning.

Fullan also suggests there is a growing understanding of the conditions required for "cultures of purposeful learning" (Fullan, 2016, p. 544). Three essential requirements for sustainable educational change are the ability to deeply change the learning culture, have local ownership of the learning journey and build ongoing improvement and innovation from any direction (Fullan, 2016). Unfortunately, St Priscilla's school could not meet these three requirements during this study. However, the other three schools managed to do so. This study did not establish whether it is always possible for schools to know if they meet these three requirements before they embark on the journey of building capacity and creating learning improvement, as this focus is beyond the scope of the study.

The four core areas of Fullan and Quinn's coherence framework (Fullan, 2016; Fullan & Quinn, 2015) for educational change are examined as part of the evaluation phase for this study. First, Fullan and Quinn state the need to focus direction by setting limited goals that strategically focus on the need for learning improvement. This element is

reflected in level one of the conceptual framework, where leaders must embark on the journey with vision, intentionality and commitment.

Second, the coherence framework states the need to create collaborative cultures by cultivating expertise. This involves developing supportive cultures where people can learn from each other. In the conceptual framework, this element closely aligns with some components of level one, ensuring people with appropriate expertise can support the journey, identifying interested teachers who can help lead the journey and build strong social capital.

Third, the coherence framework calls for *deepening learning* by examining pedagogical practices and their impact on learning. The conceptual framework outlines multiple ways that deepening learning needs to occur for building capacity to teach Scripture to early years learners, including analysing the impact of teaching and employing informed pedagogical decision-making. Last, the coherence framework states the need to secure accountability, so the team take individual and collective responsibility for learning improvement. Within the conceptual framework, monitoring the impact of teaching and identifying ongoing needs is an essential task for individual teachers and leaders, which is a core strategy for securing accountability. On balance of the overall evidence, the leadership and accountability components of the research design seemed to have a significant impact in building capacity and self-efficacy for teaching Scripture to early years learners. However, the weakness of the research design in terms of leadership involved the need for further consideration of the *knowledgeable other* to support teachers and school leaders.

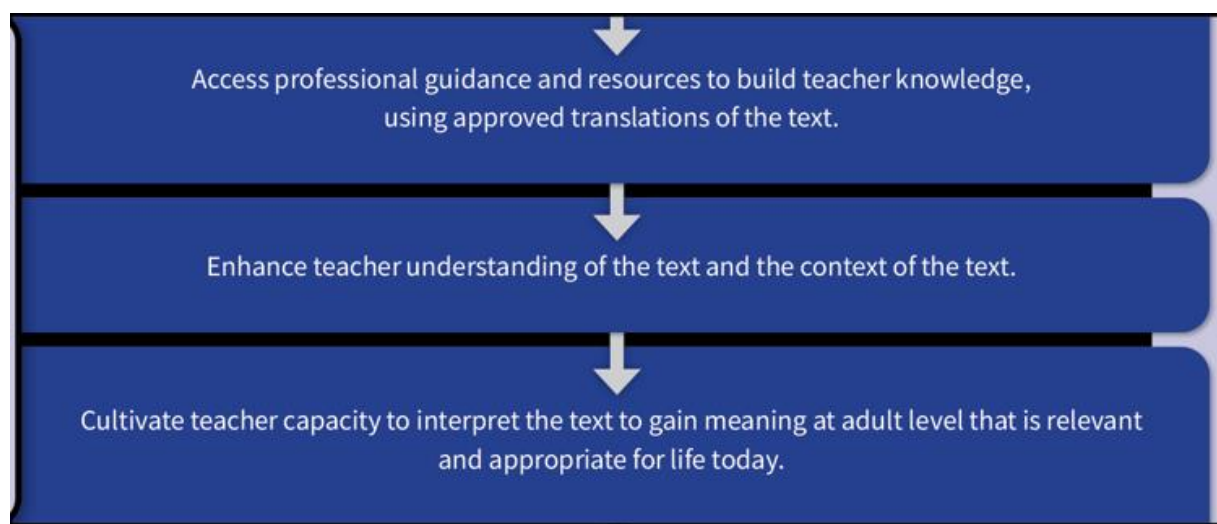While it is impossible to determine with certainty, St Priscilla's school may have continued participating in the study if the research design had changed in two areas. The first is the inclusion of the Education Officer in religious education to provide ongoing, close support (that reflected the strategies trialled through the research) to the religious education leader and teachers. The second is the inclusion of more times

for all research participants to meet to build shared understandings and learn from one another. Esther indicated that she believed she would have been more likely to retain teachers in the research if they had been able to participate in the first meeting for the research team to develop shared understandings. However, Chloe was the only person from her school involved in the research team meetings and it was Chole's ability to find time to meet with her teachers that proved the determining factor for the school to continue participating in the study. Therefore, this part of the evaluation indicates that the conceptual framework reflects all four components of Fullan and Quinn's coherence framework. However, strengthening the research design in two core areas to include more support for the school and increased meetings for all participants may have enabled St Priscilla's school to continue participating in the study.

Teacher Readiness to Teach the Text. Figure 52 displays the next core component of the conceptual framework, focusing on building teacher capacity to interpret the text before planning or teaching Scripture.

Figure 52

Layer 2, Level 2:Teacher Readiness

Access professional guidance and resources to build teacher knowledge, using approved translations of the text.

Enhance teacher understanding of the text and the context of the text.

Cultivate teacher capacity to interpret the text to gain meaning at adult level that is relevant and appropriate for life today.

There is recognition and expectation that teachers need support to interpret Scripture. Pope Francis notes in his Apostolic letter that "Biblical passages are not always immediately accessible" (Francis, 2020, para

32) . Reading the Bible and teaching Scripture in a Catholic school require interpreting, deciphering religious images and messages from ancient cultures into stories that are still relevant for faith and life today (Pollefeyt & Bouwens, 2010). "Everything possible should be done to ensure that Catholic primary schools have adequately trained teachers; it is a fundamental necessity and a legitimate expectation" (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, para. 97).

The data from this inquiry suggest two critical reasons why it is important not to assume that teachers in Catholic schools are confident and competent in interpreting the Bible. The first is that teachers can fear teaching the Bible because they doubt their ability to interpret the Bible appropriately within the expectations of Catholic biblical hermeneutics. For example, teachers in the research often spoke or wrote about the increase in confidence when they worked with a *knowledgeable other* to discuss interpreting Scripture, as they worried that their personal interpretation might not align with a Catholic hermeneutical understanding of Scripture. Second, some teachers who grew up in a Catholic family believed they interpreted Scripture through a Catholic hermeneutical lens. They were surprised to discover strategies to enable them to interpret Scripture meaningfully, beyond literal belief.

These teachers had been teaching in Catholic schools, yet they did not know how to teach Scripture well. But encouragingly, the data showed that teachers could plan and teach the text reasonably well by using strategies to build team knowledge when learning about the Scripture texts they needed to teach before planning their teaching. One of these strategies included using the expertise of knowledgeable others.

Not surprisingly, the issue of biblical interpretation was a constant motif throughout the inquiry. Hermeneutics links closely to understanding the purpose of teaching Scripture. The following section provides a deeper discussion of hermeneutics, leading to a new model that builds on existing knowledge. A deeper investigation into biblical interpretation highlights that hermeneutics is a process that involves more than understanding a

text on historical merit. Taking an ancient text and transferring the same meaning to find relevance for today through art and literature is mimesis (mimicking) (Zimmermann & Zimmermann, 2015). Osbourne (1991) contends that contextualisation is how different cultures make meaning from the text across time. Some academics from Leuven university prefer to use the term recontextualisation to indicate the need for the Catholic faith to be reinterpreted in light of contemporary cultural contexts to retain relevant meaning (Pollefeyt & Bouwens, 2010). The Interpretation of the Bible in the life of the Church document highlights the process of actualisation, which involves reading Scripture texts in light of contemporary issues and challenges. "Actualisation is possible because the richness of meaning contained in the biblical text gives it a value for all time and all cultures" (Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, section IV, para. A, no.1).

The Catholic Church cautions that credibly interpreting biblical texts for appropriate meaning today requires paying attention to multiple areas. The literary forms of the text, the meaning intended by the author, the literary patterns and techniques in the text that depict the author's time and culture, and the place of the text within the whole Bible (Second Vatican Council, 1965, 18 November) are critical aspects to consider for interpretation. Stead (1996) points out that "Interpretation is never neutral; it is influenced by the perspectives, status and concerns of the reader" (p. 2). Furthermore, the bias of the biblical authors needs to be acknowledged. Renowned international biblical scholar Schüssler Fiorenza (1985) writes that all biblical texts need a warning label:

> Caution! Could be dangerous to your health and survival. Not only is Scripture interpreted by a long line of men and proclaimed in patriarchal churches, it is also authored by men, written in androcentric language, reflective of religious male experience, selected and transmitted by male and religious leadership (p. 130).

A synthesis of the issues emerging from the data concerning equipping teachers to confidently and competently lead Scripture learning

reveals that teachers grappled with multiple challenges and questions. One challenge included finding manageable ways to learn about the text. Another challenge was whether Scripture interpretation was a one-off or ongoing activity. At St Mary Magdalene's school, teaching teams changed their approach to planning when they experienced the richness of interpreting Scripture as a team. Previously one person took responsibility for planning religious education (which then reflected one person's interpretation of the Scripture texts included in the planning). Osbourne (Osbourne, 1991) notes, "The task of hermeneutics is never finished with original meaning but can only be complete when its significance is realised" (p. 413). Such insights support the notion that Scripture is an ongoing process with no definitive timeline.

Osbourne's seminal work (1991) introduced the notion of hermeneutics represented by a spiral shape, conveying that biblical hermeneutics is an ongoing process over time. Within the hermeneutical circle process, the reader considers the meaning of the text within its original context, personally, and how to convey that meaning to others. The hermeneutic circle provides explanatory power for the process and the challenges encountered through this study of interpreting the text. However, the limitation of this theory is that it does not hold explanatory power for the entire process teachers of Scripture need to undertake.

Turning attention now to the findings of this study, the process of teachers engaging in building readiness to teach Scripture texts contributed to learning new insights into the text from biblical scholarship, the wisdom of peers and people with some knowledge of biblical interpretation. Osbourne's hermeneutic circle represents this process, indicating that it is an ongoing process of engaging with the text, the context of the text and the context of one's life, which is ever-changing. However, this study found evidence that early years teachers also need to interact in a second process to consider how they might lead children through the same process of interpreting a Scripture text.

Therefore, this research's analysis and evaluation suggests that teachers must engage in a dual hermeneutic process for authentic teaching Scripture. This understanding builds on Osbourne's hermeneutic circle theory and presents a new theory which could be valuable for other Scripture teachers, as illustrated in the figure below. A visual representation of these two processes (See Figure 53) may be helpful to deepen understanding and promote dialogue about what can play a vital role in enabling teachers to facilitate meaningful learning opportunities for early years Scripture. Figure 53 demonstrates that the starting point for teaching Scripture is not planning learning opportunities for children, but interpreting the text at an adult level, which is named *readiness to teach the text* through the findings of this study.

Figure 53

A Dual Hermeneutical Spiral Layer One
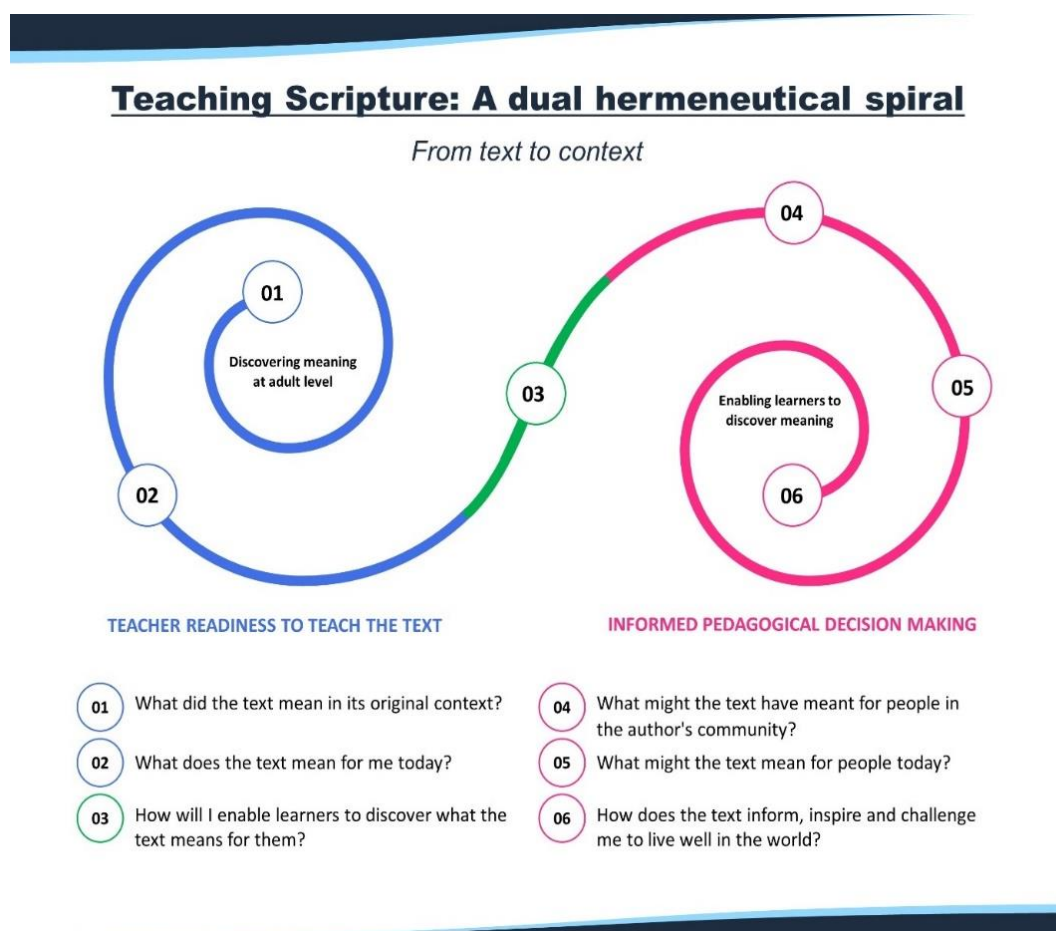
Note. This image builds on the concept of the hermeneutical spiral put forward by Osbourne (1991).

Inherent in this image is the concept of hermeneutics building understanding and insights over time, as determined by the current needs, challenges and insights of teachers and learners. In the dual hermeneutical spiral, the third stage represents the stage that teachers in the minor study identified, where professional learning about Scripture naturally flows into thinking about how they could teach Scripture. The dual hermeneutic spiral represents that teacher readiness to teach the text is a two-part process, and the starting point is to discover how the text could hold meaning in its original context. The dual spirals also shows that biblical hermeneutics is a process that considers meaning for communities of faith in different times, cultures and contexts, as well as personal meaning.

Osbourne advocated that biblical hermeneutics requires remaining open to the text, giving priority to the text rather than the biases of our own lives, to consider the historical biblical background and the semantic and literary dimensions of the text to arrive at insights into the author's intended meaning. Osbourne argues that "The interpreter must not only address the text but must allow the text to address him or her" (1991, p. 413). In this sense, the text has the potential to change the reader.

Essentially, to do this task well requires going below the surface of the text to dig for the treasures (Osborne, 2017), as presented in Figure 54. To illustrate, to explore the creation story in Genesis 2:4b-9 learners could investigate other creation myths written in the ancient world to consider why the author thought it important for the Jewish community to have a sacred creation story. Without engaging in the first hermeneutic spiral a teacher may readily teach the story as God made a man and a woman. Furthermore, without a close reading of the text, the text may well name the man and woman as *Adam* and *Eve* (even though these names are not mentioned in this part of the story). However, if a teacher discovered that the term *man* is best translated as a genderless earth creature in the English language, the meaning changes and the story presents the complementarity of male and female, rather than man as a
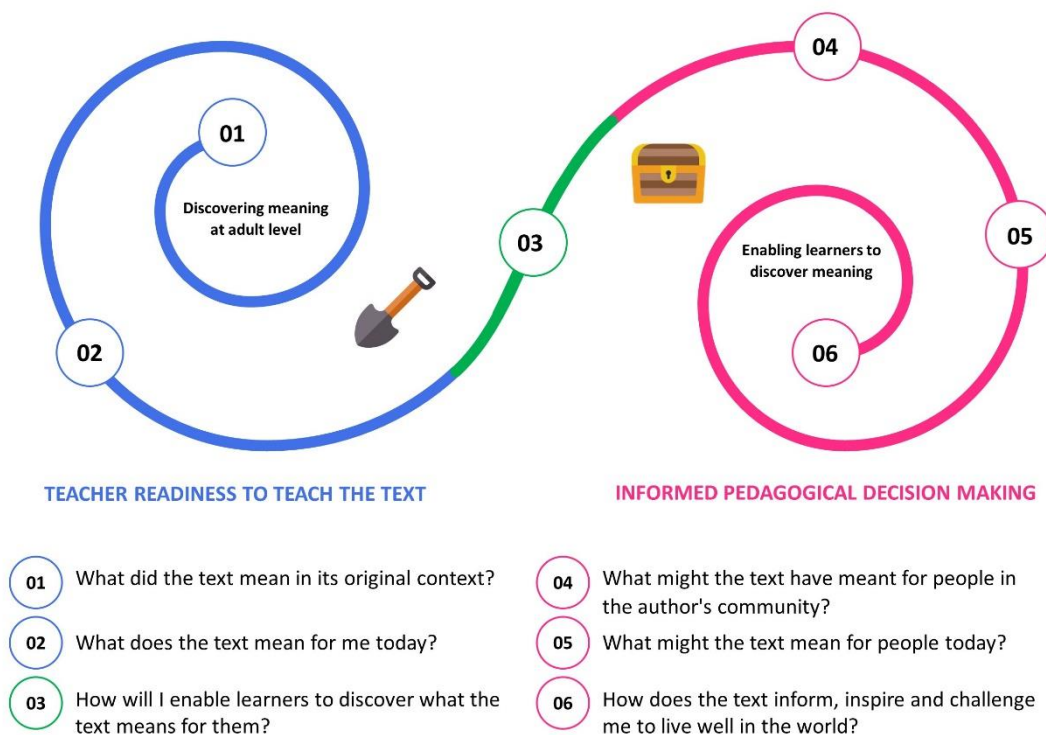
superior being to woman. Teaching young children the term *earth creature* enables them to access deeper, more accurate meaning, to find a treasure from this story (as demonstrated by Rebecca's learners in Chapter Four). Figure 54 shows the dual process.

Figure 54

A Dual Hermeneutical Spiral Layer Two

The additional two images in the dual hermeneutical spiral serve as a reminder that a close reading of the text requires time and effort, to look below the surface until finding the treasures. Essentially, the process is ongoing until the discovery of multiple treasures. Even then, the hermeneutical spiral process implies that as the terrain of our lives changes, new treasures may emerge, as Scripture speaks to people's life experiences, across cultures and time.

Given the challenges in interpreting the Bible appropriately, findings suggest a need to consider the consequences if children are taught the Bible without learning skills to think about the text critically. In that case, there is a high risk that learners will develop a strong literal belief or disregard the Bible as irrelevant for life today. Therefore, within the process of the second spiral (see Figure 54), teaching the text needs to involve supporting learners to develop critical thinking skills to investigate historical and cultural perspectives that inform one's understanding of what it means to live well. The evidence from the literature and the data strongly suggests that early years teachers need to know how to interpret scripture appropriately to teach critical biblical skills to early years learners. Consequently, the purpose of teaching Scripture supports the finding that early years teachers need to achieve *readiness to teach the text* before attempting to teach Scripture.

The need for ensuring teacher readiness to teach the text also reflects Stead's belief (1996), that teachers should not teach a Scripture text "unless they are confident that they can communicate its theological truths in ways that can be developed, rather than denied, later in life" (p. 54). This research suggests that the same challenge has remained over twenty-five years since Stead completed her doctoral thesis. Stead's research (1996) discovered that less than five per cent of teachers in her study used a resource such as a biblical commentary for critical study of the Bible. Stead argued that, "If students are to develop interpretative skills appropriate to their age and stage of development, it would seem essential that they be taught by teachers who themselves engage in critical study" (p. 198). Therefore, there is compelling evidence to suggest that achieving *readiness to teach the text* is a precursor for enabling the teaching of biblical literacy so learners can identify how the text challenges, informs or inspires people to live well in the world.

Layer 2, Level 3: Teacher-Informed Pedagogical Decision-Making. The next layer of the conceptual framework (See Figure 50) addresses how teachers decide the best way to facilitate learning processes. The second precursor named in the previous chapter indicates that teachers built capacity for pedagogical decision-making when they understood the purpose of teaching the text. Teachers drew on current knowledge of their learners and early childhood theories about how children learn to inform their beliefs about learning. They followed principles for teaching Scripture and religious education. Figure 55 presents the next section of the conceptual framework.

Figure 55

Layer 2, Level 3: Pedagogical Decision-Making
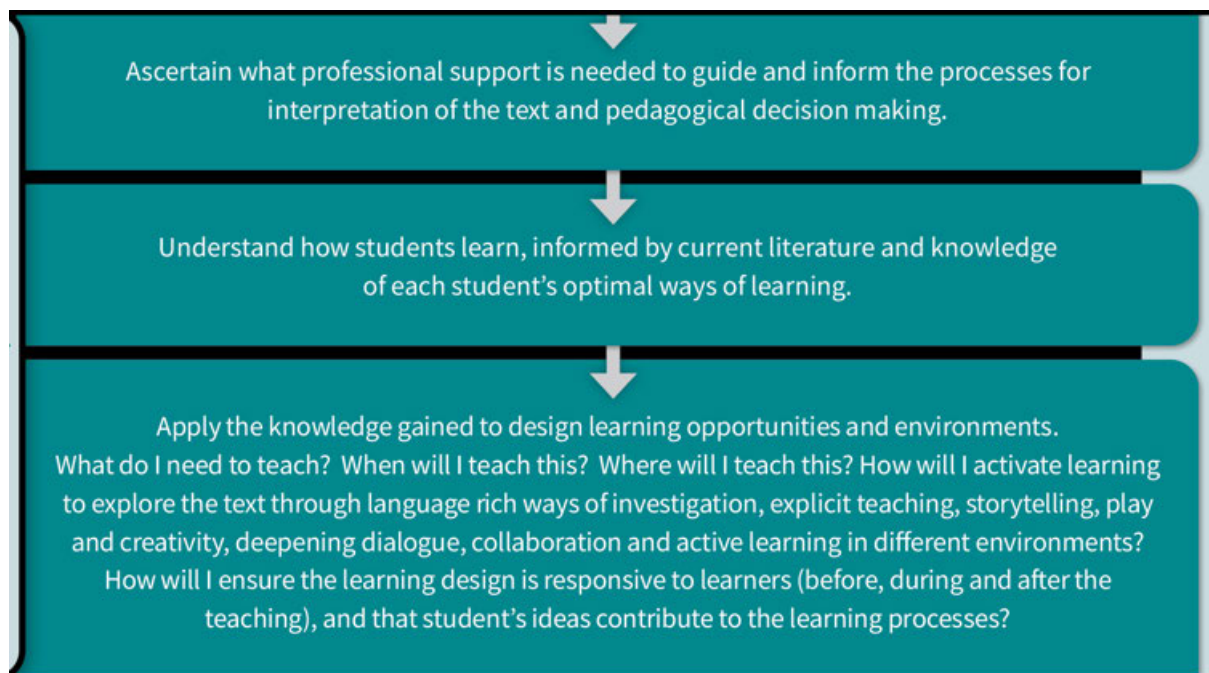
The age-appropriate pedagogies work of researchers at Griffith University (Fluckiger et al., 2015) provides a solid framework to evaluate the impact of informed pedagogical decision-making through this research. In fact, the participants in the research engaged in this evaluation through shared analysis of Scripture teaching journals (as documented in Chapter Four). The extensive literature review of the Griffith University team and subsequent identification of eleven

characteristics of pedagogies for early childhood (Fluckiger et al., 2015) allowed a way of evaluating what learning needs teachers provided for and if there were any gaps. The analysis showed that teachers could readily cover all eleven characteristics (agentic, collaborative, creative, explicit, language rich and dialogic, learner focused, narrative, playful, responsive and scaffolded). However, the data indicated that some characteristics required more intentionality than others.

Grouping the pedagogy characteristics into learner-focused pedagogies; literacy-rich pedagogies; targeted and collaborative pedagogies; and innovative and inquiry pedagogies allowed for further analysis of teaching. Participants reported that the two pedagogies they needed to think most carefully and intentionally about were both learner focused pedagogies. The theoretical framework presented to guide reflection on pedagogical decision-making shows four quadrants: learner initiated versus adult-initiated and planned versus spontaneous (Fluckiger et al., 2017, August 27). Participants reported that learner-initiated activities required the closest attention as this approach required the greatest change in practice. This insight reinforced that teachers had begun moving from curriculum-centred learning or a compliance approach to teaching to learner focussed teaching.

While grouping the pedagogies can occur, they can also operate independently and conjointly. For example, participants found that explicit teaching, play and active learning may all occur within one activity. The analysis of this movement provides evidence of the positive impact of the research design. Any changes to the research design would be, as previously mentioned, to ensure that there are more opportunities for all participants to meet together, learn, and dialogue about practice. Informed pedagogical decision-making needs to reflect research evidence of what pedagogies positively impact learning (Fluckiger et al., 2017, August 27) . For example, research shows that the role of the teacher is central for early years learning (Fluckiger et al., 2015) and that all pedagogies, including play, require active teacher participation and

engagement (Fleer, 2015). Playful learning with teacher involvement provides opportunities for observing and skilfully directing learning opportunities for socialisation, cultural awareness, recognising and appropriately responding to power imbalances and children's interests (MacNevin & Berman, 2017; Sproule et al., 2019; Weisberg et al., 2016).

Visiting classrooms and analysing the data from this study showed evidence that Scripture learning occurred through all the age-appropriate pedagogies. Scripture storytelling, play and active learning readily presented opportunities for learning about imbalances of power (David and Goliath); dealing with sibling rivalry (Jacob and Esau); respectful relationships with others and the environment (creation stories); forgiveness and healing (The forgiving Father, Zacchaeus) and the need for identity and a place to call home (Sarah and Abraham). Some quotes from participants in Chapter Four show that informed pedagogical decision-making also allowed learners to obtain a multiplicity of meaning from Scripture stories and placed Scripture at the forefront of religious education learning. Figure 56 displays the fourth elements of the conceptual framework that outline what learners needed.

Figure 56

Layer 2, Level 4: Student Readiness
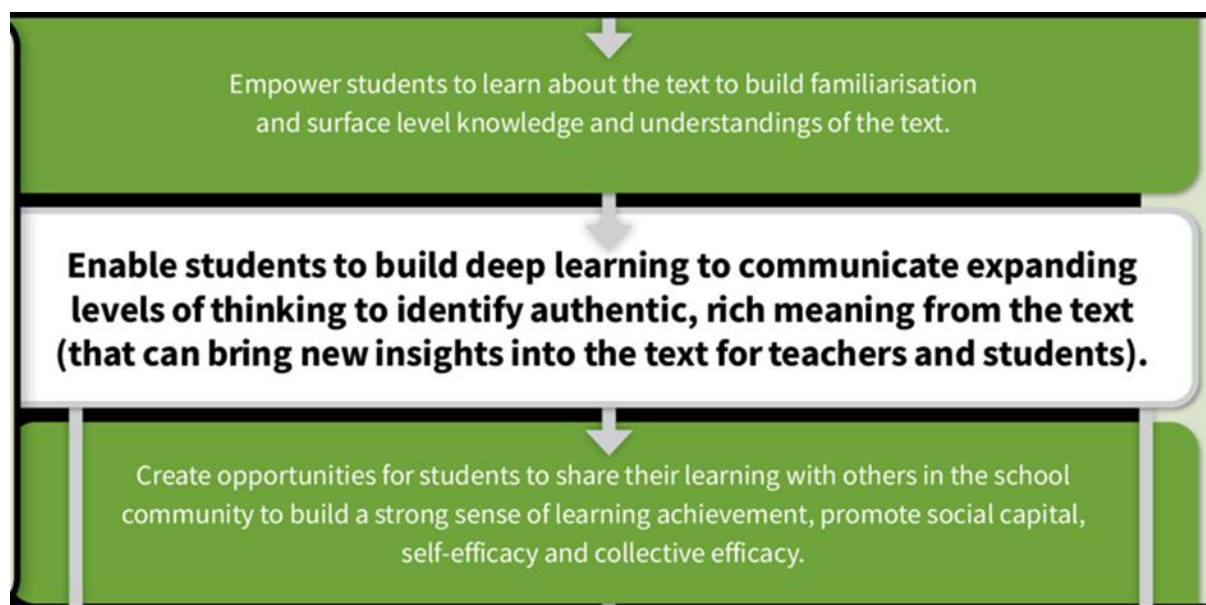
Pedagogies and Processes for Teaching Scripture. While age-appropriate pedagogies (Fluckiger et al., 2017, August 27) linked to every pedagogical strategy employed for teaching Scripture, they could also be further nuanced for teaching Scripture (see Figure 58). For example, *narrative* expresses the need for learning through story. However, *Scripture storytelling* seemed a more accurate name for teaching Scripture stories to early years learners. *Language rich and dialogic* contained so many opportunities for Scripture storytelling it seemed more helpful to split them into two categories to ensure coverage of both elements, especially with increasing emphasis on dialogue as pedagogy at local, national and international levels (Pollefeyt, 2020a).

In conclusion, the findings from this study indicate that building teacher capacity for informed pedagogical decision-making played a significant role in advancing Scripture understanding through providing engaging learning opportunities for early years learners. The twelve pedagogies (see Figure 58) identified also contributed to deepening learning, moving past surface-level knowledge of Scripture stories to an ability to apply appropriate meaning from the story to life today. However, teachers found that they needed clarity about a process for learning to know how to lead the learning journey effectively. Figure 57 shows the last element of the conceptual framework that depicts the destination of the learning journey.

Figure 57

The Purpose of Teaching Scripture

Deepening understanding of religious education

Informing and transforming perspectives on how to live well in the world

Facilitating rich prayer experiences

Leading to the purpose for teaching the text: to enable students to gain a multiplicity of meaning at a universal level and/or faith level that informs, inspires, challenges, and leads to transformative learning.

This title reflects the purpose of Scripture learning to inform and transform perspectives on how to live well in the world, obtained through learning critical biblical literacy. In this area, the study contributes further

knowledge, as analysis of the data led to the development of a process for *transformative learning.* Therefore, the conceptual framework identifies all the critical components that led to the meaningful teaching of Scripture, and provides multiple lenses for analysing and evaluating Scripture teaching and learning. Figure 58 presents the pedagogies that underpinned the learning activities in this study, assisting learners to reach transformative learning.

Figure 58

Pedagogies for Teaching Scripture

Note. Pedagogies adapted from *Age-appropriate pedagogies*, by Flückiger et al., Griffith University, Queensland.

A second major contribution from this study is the identification of the stages, steps and processes that teachers needed to facilitate to enable learners to arrive at transformative learning. This work is an inquiry process for transformative learning (see Figure 59) and it is highly significant. It is the only known inquiry process for teaching Scripture that comes from practice, in collaboration with teachers and religious education leaders. This process also provides teachers with a way to evaluate their current teaching of Scripture, paying careful attention to identifying what different levels of thinking are reflected in the pedagogies provided. Figure 59 outlines the four critical steps that enabled the transformative learning process to lead to the meaningful teaching of Scripture. Figure 60 provides more details for each stage.
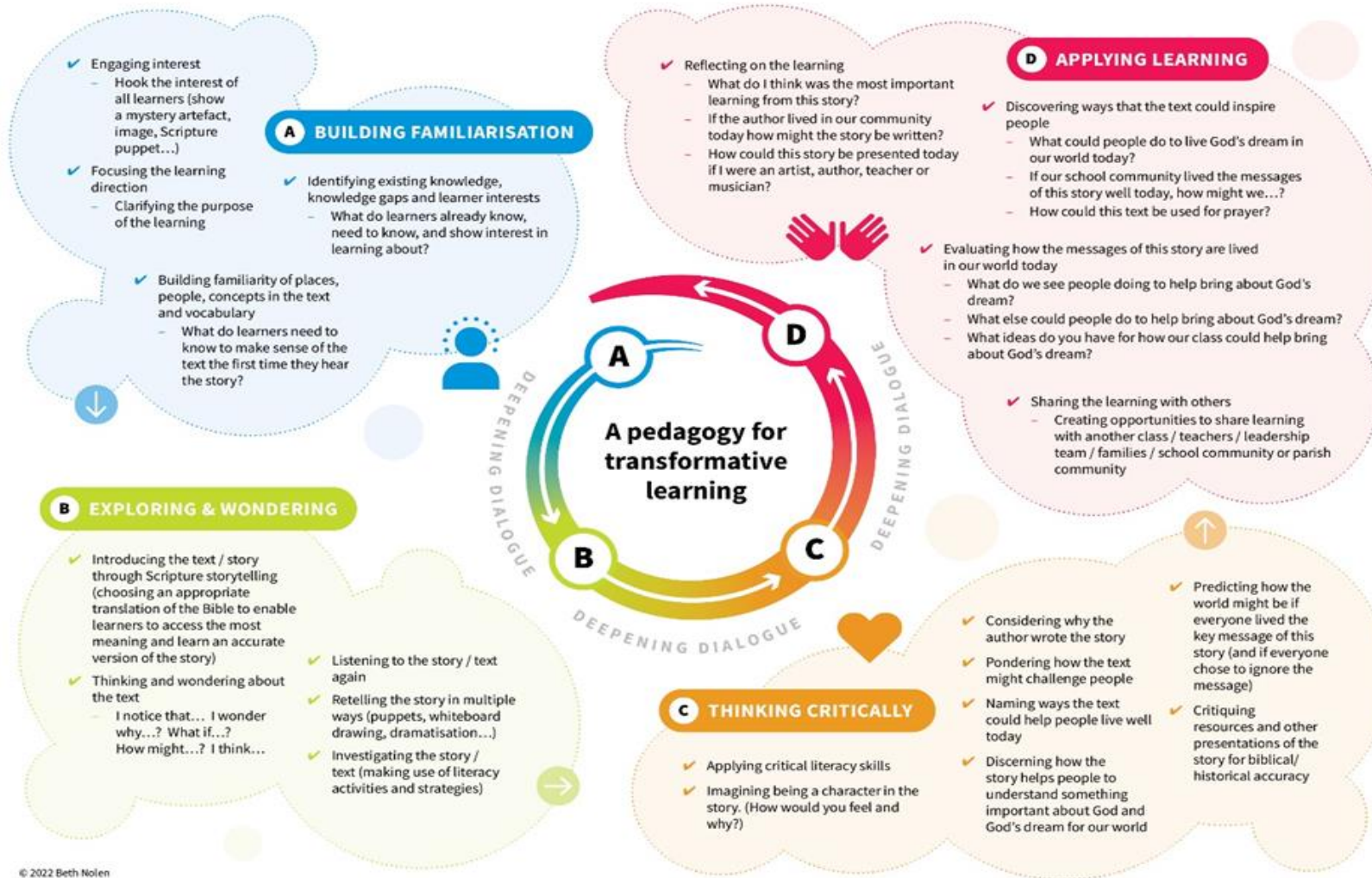
Figure 59

A Process for Transformative Learning: Layer One
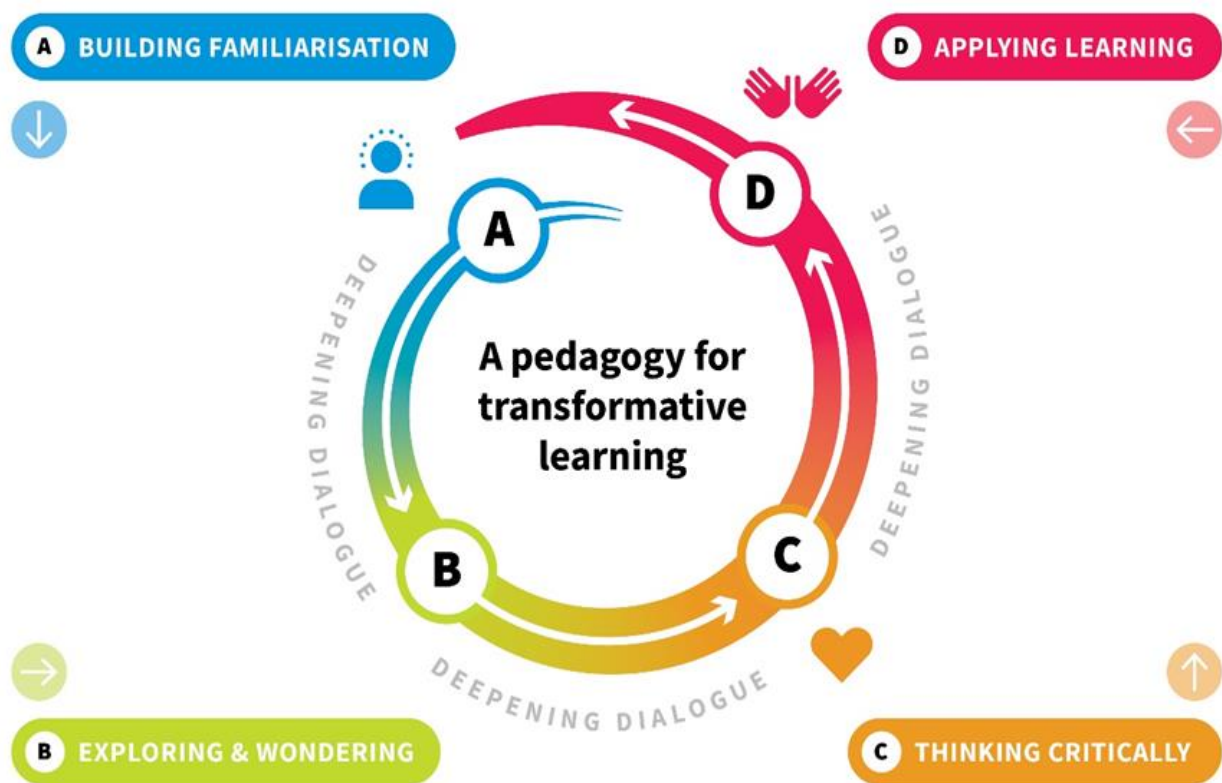
Figure 60

A Process for Transformative Learning: Layer Two

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The spiral in the centre of both figures 59 and 60 mirrors the right-hand side of the dual hermeneutic spiral presented in Figures 53 and 54. The spiral shape reflects that the process of Scripture learning for children is ongoing, with each stage merging into the next stage of learning. Naming the element of *thinking critically* ensures that this component is kept in focus and not neglected, as the data from the study showed that the inclusion of critical thinking and applying learning enabled learners to move from surface level, literal understandings to discover deeper meaning.

The transformative learning process has developed from listening to, observing and analysing what teachers found impacted to enable learning to move from surface level to deeper understandings where they could readily communicate meaning from the text for life today. The call to move beyond surface-level learning goes beyond religious education to other learning areas (Hattie, 2019). The colour changes in the spiral denote that each stage flows into the next stage, where the last part of each stage virtually begins the new emphasis for the next stage.

The symbolism of head, heart and hands represented in Figure 60 shows the movement in understanding from cognitive (knowledge of biblical stories) to affective (building a heart-level love of Scripture stories and ability to empathise with some biblical characters) to action (finding appropriate meaning and applying the learning to life) (Singleton, 2015). David Orr first developed this framework in 1992 (Singleton, 2015). In addition, the framework of head, heart and hands appears on some other documents within Brisbane Catholic Education, providing language teachers already access.

Evidence from this study showed that teachers put significant time and energy into the first two phases of the transformative learning process. However, in the first half of the research, there was little evidence to show that learners moved beyond the first two stages. As the research progressed and participants clarified their understandings about

the purpose of teaching Scripture, evidence of learning reaching the third and fourth stages of the process emerged. Although teachers taught religious education through an inquiry learning approach, it appeared that the process of teaching Scripture could be lost without an intentional focus on how to move learners into communicating deeper levels of thinking about biblical texts.

The notion of transformative learning originates within adult learning, but is arguably relevant to school-aged learners. Importantly, the call to action is invitational and needs to originate from learners. However, the role of teachers is to remain facilitators of learning and support creative, innovative, and appropriate ideas to flourish. Essentially, transformative learning places the focus on learning being purposeful and meaningful. Transformative learning also responds to the challenge put forward by Pollefeyt and Beiringer (2005) to teach the Bible in ways that enable learners to examine it from the perspectives of tradition and human experience, to gain increasing clarity about how to participate in keeping God's dream alive in the world today. Teaching Scripture as a transformative learning process avoids reducing the Bible to predetermined ancient truths (Pollefeyt & Bieringer, 2005) and places the spotlight on finding rich, appropriate meaning for life today.

The call to action does not represent catechesis but reflects that all learning can transform how people choose to live in the world. For example, learning about global warming in science can transform the way a person chooses to live in the world. Learning about the history of Australia's First Nations people has the potential to transform attitudes or lead to actions of mindfulness about culture, racism and community.

Therefore, teaching Scripture can transform the way a person chooses to live in the world today with hope, with compassion for those unable to flourish, with a commitment to environmental sustainability or as a person of faith who knows how to use the Bible to nurture prayer, faith and participation in the faith community. The ideas contained within Layer Two are not definitive but may spark further possibilities for

learning. Transformative learning is a process that allows educators to lead a learning journey and track progress beyond surface learning. The ability of learners to communicate rich, appropriate insights from biblical texts characterises transformative learning. Importantly, transformative learning only assesses a learner's ability to communicate their understanding and interpretation of Scripture and never attempts to assess one's faith or commitment to living biblically in the world (for every believer may fail at various times in life).

Pollefeyt (2021) writes that after conducting extensive research in over fifteen hundred schools across Australia, Europe and the United States, the data show that Catholic schools leave learners with high levels of literal belief, which often remains as students become older. This insight seriously brings into question what is happening for Scripture education in Catholic schools. It also raises the issue of the importance of setting learners up well in the foundational years, so they do not spend the first four years at school teaching Scripture stories at surface levels of understanding, reinforcing literal beliefs. This study suggests that focusing on the areas that will make a difference is readily achievable to provide early years learners with engaging, meaningful Scripture learning.

There was a major difference going into classrooms early in the research compared to the end of the data collection phase, manifested by the thinking learners communicated when engaging in conversations about Scripture. Even in conversations with five-year-old children, learners readily responded to all questions, considered their viewpoints and gave insightful responses. Teachers discovered that assessment became easier because they could readily hear learner's thinking and identify children who capably communicated their ideas about the meaning and significance of Scripture texts they had explored, pondered and critiqued. The hermeneutic-communicative model of religious education (Pollefeyt, 2020a) strongs advocates for the need for teaching Scripture for meaning. The findings of this study suggest that high-impact Scripture learning is characterised by rich meaning-making.
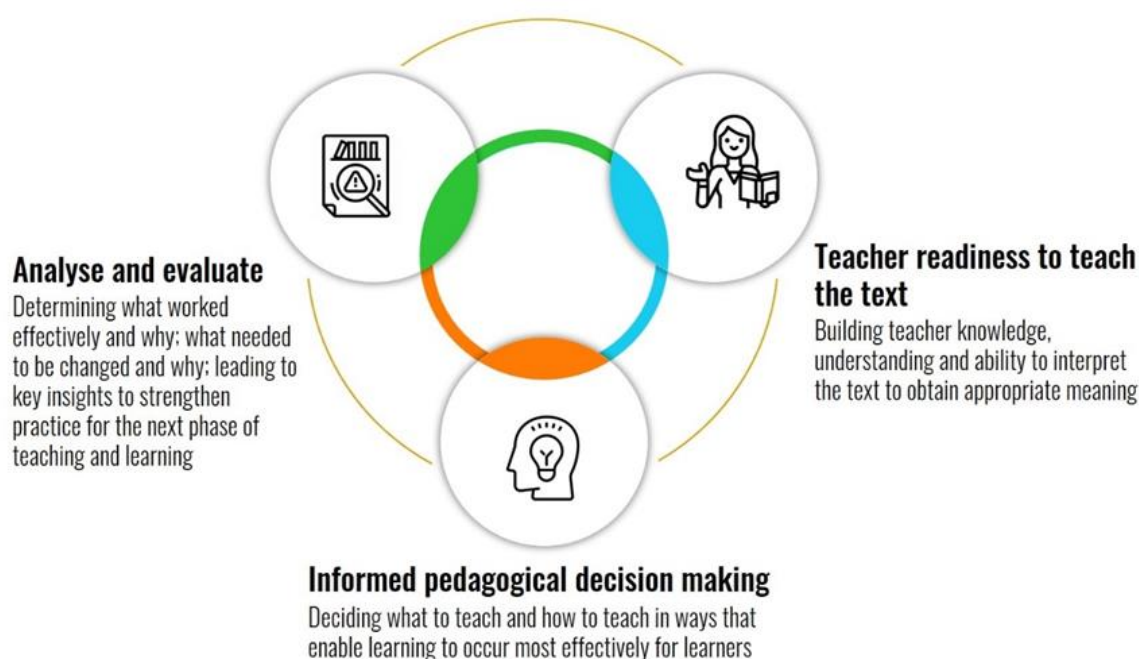
7.3.   Contributions to the Field

One of the research questions focused on identifying learning environments that led to meaningful Scripture teaching. The knowledge gained through answering this question provides rich insights for early years teachers, as the data indicate that learning environments are just as important for teachers as they are for children. In addition, retrospective data analysis revealed that the time provided for teachers, the leadership support and clarity of shared understandings all played a significant role in building effective learning environments for teachers (which the conceptual framework outlines).

As a contribution to both conceptual knowledge and the field of teaching Scripture, the findings of this study highlighted three core processes for high-impact Scripture teaching (see Figure 61). Scripture learning flourished when these three processes received sufficient time and attention. Conversely, neglecting just one of these processes (outlined in Figure 61) impacted learning achievement.

Figure 61

Core Processes for High-Impact Scripture Teaching

Analyse and evaluate
Determining what worked effectively and why; what needed to be changed and why; leading to key insights to strengthen practice for the next phase of teaching and learning

Teacher readiness to teach the text
Building teacher knowledge, understanding and ability to interpret the text to obtain appropriate meaning

Informed pedagogical decision making
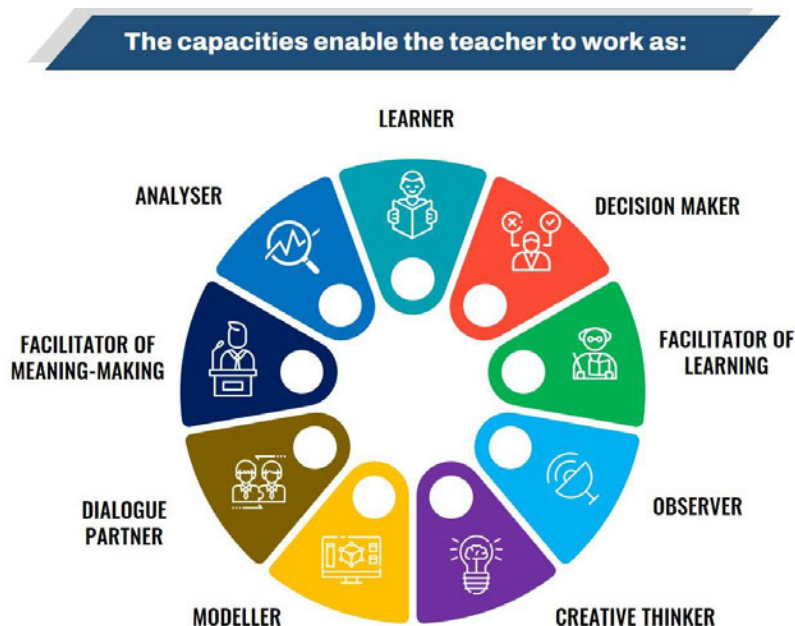Deciding what to teach and how to teach in ways that enable learning to occur most effectively for learners

How each school carried out these processes varied according to opportunities for planning support during school time and teachers' capacity to meet at alternative times. While each of these processes operated independently, they seemed to have flexibility to join with another part of the process if named separately. For example, planning with teachers may begin by analysing and evaluating the last religious education unit of work taught to support informed pedagogical decision-making. The naming of each component assists to clarify the purpose and expectations for what occurs within the entire preparation and planning process to teach Scripture.

7.3.1. Building Core Teacher Capacities

Data analysis contributed two models that reveal further meaning from the findings of this study. Both appear to contribute additional knowledge not found readily for teaching Scripture and show specific areas where teachers may need support for capacity building to teach Scripture to early years learners. Figure 48 shows the teacher capacities needed to create effective learning environments. These capacities (see Figure 62) enable early years teachers to engage in multiple roles, demonstrating that teaching Scripture requires particular skills.

Figure 62

Multiple Roles of an Early Years Scripture Teacher

The capacities enable the teacher to work as:

LEARNER
DECISION MAKER
FACILITATOR OF LEARNING
OBSERVER
CREATIVE THINKER
MODELLER
DIALOGUE PARTNER
FACILITATOR OF MEANING-MAKING
ANALYSER

The findings from this study indicate that the role of the teacher had a significant impact on the learning environments created for the meaningful teaching of Scripture to early years learners. The analysis revealed that the capacities identified in Chapter Six enable the early years teacher to create learning environments where the teacher can operate in multiple roles. These roles involved the teacher working as a learner, decision-maker, facilitator of learning, observer, creative thinker, modeller, dialogue partner, facilitator of meaning-making and analyser. The identification of roles came from the process of retrospective analysis. The nine aspects identified of a teacher's role are named as follows:

Learner: Building content knowledge about what to teach; building knowledge of learners; of pedagogy; of how to improve learning for all. Asking questions that promote teacher learning; using resources that promote teacher learning; and, building shared understandings with colleagues.

Decision Maker: Identifying what to teach; when to teach; how to create learning contexts and environments to enhance learning; how to facilitate learning to ensure all learners can achieve success in their learning journeys and move towards deeper levels of thinking to obtain richer meaning from Bible stories.

Facilitator *of Learning:* Focusing on what is needed to create a learning environment that is conducive to learning; engaging learners; building respectful relationships of trust that honour the dignity of each learner; encouraging learning; affirming learner's achievements; and, providing feedback that empowers the journey for learners.

Observer: Learning what learners need; what strengths learners already have and what skills and strengths learners are building; what learners are enjoying; what learners are finding challenging.

Creative Thinker: Bringing innovative ideas to teaching and learning; and, discovering new ways to promote effective learning.

Modeller: Modelling respectful relationships; engaging in a wide variety of effective processes to model learning through drama; the arts; imaginative play; literacy and pedagogies that enhance and inspire learning.

Dialogue *Partner*:Engaging in authentic communication where deep listening and appropriate responding is valued, sharing knowledge, questions, ideas and thoughts with learners; colleagues; parents; community partners (such as the parish priest), and partners (such as Education Officers).

Facilitator of meaning-making: Supporting learners to find individual and collective meaning from learning, ensuring that learning is purposeful. Facilitating meaning-making enables learners to discover how they can live well in their spaces, within their own stories and evolving contexts, to create a world of tolerance; understanding and appreciation of difference; recognising that learning can contribute to cognitive, spiritual, social, and emotional growth.

Analyser: Identifying evidence for what works and why; what doesn't work and why; identifying the differences and congruence between what learners identify that they want and what they need. Bringing these insights into the feedback and monitoring loop enhances the next learning cycle. Figure 62 synthesises the many roles early years teachers employed during this study, to enable the meaningful teaching of Scripture for early years learners.

### 7.3.2.   *Religious Education, Spirituality, Belief, Identity*

Throughout that data in chapters four and five, participants sometimes spoke of religious education, faith and spirituality as intertwined elements in their lives. While participation in this study was voluntary and part of their professional lives, conversations with teachers could readily move to dialogue about family or personal faith and belief. These elements all seemed significant because they formed part of the person's identity.

Furthermore, Gabrielle found that the way to engage her second year three class in religious education was through teaching learners to reflect and tune in to where they found meaning in life. When this occurred, Gabrielle's learners suddenly became interested in religious education. Participants followed the Model for Religious Education (*Religious Education Curriculum P-12*, 2020), which shows two interlocking circles to represent the two dimensions of teaching people religion and teaching people to be religious in a particular way (see Figure 1). However, the model did not seem to provide explanatory power for the interconnectedness of religious education, faith, spirituality, belief and identity. In analysing what elements of a model could hold explanatory power to show this phenomenon, the following components evolved to the version illustrated in Figure 63:

Figure 63

A Model for Discovering Meaning through Religion
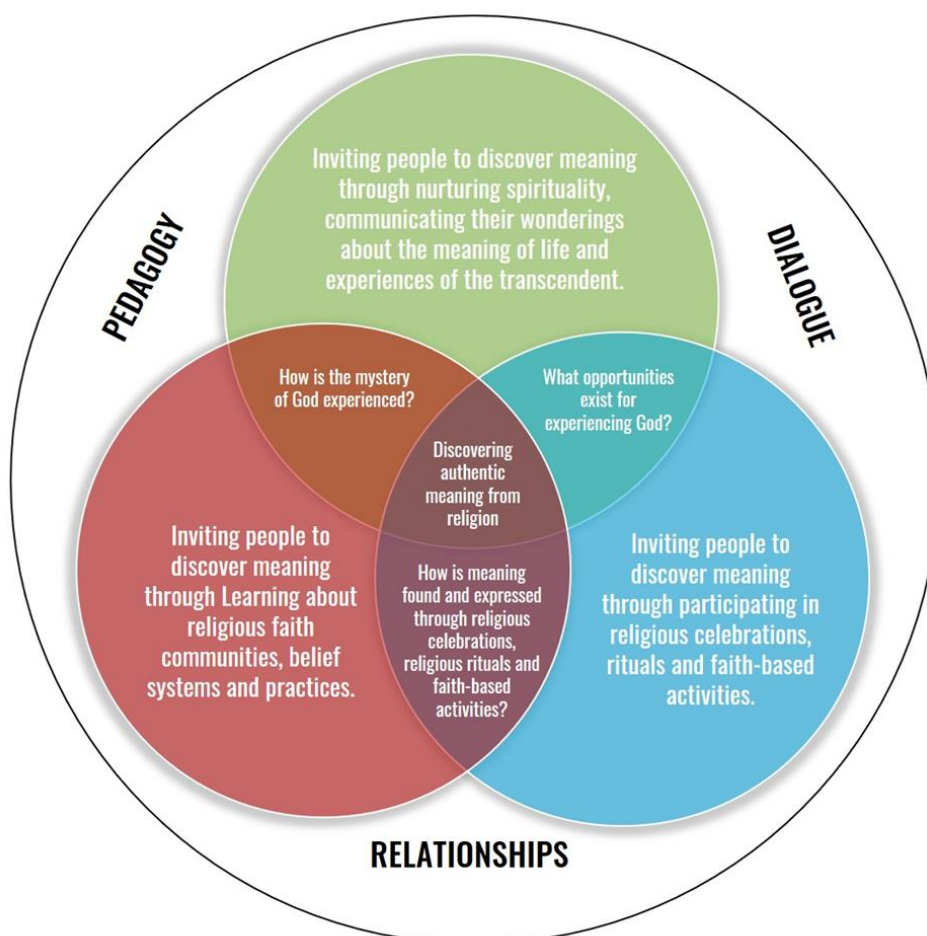
In this model, some components occur externally, and some occur internally. Therefore, this process is not fully visible to an observer. Still, it may be revealed through dialogue if the person chooses to disclose their inner questions and considerations for meaning-making. The questions in the model represent what seem to be wonderings at the deepest level of being human because they impact one's identity. The data from this study indicate that religious education, even when taught as an academic subject with no expectation or mention of personal faith, may still evoke wonderings about spirituality and meaning. This insight suggests religious education can have a direct and indirect impact. The external elements of relationships, pedagogy and dialogue demonstrate that the meaning-making journey exists within a context. The strength of one's relationships, pedagogy experience and authentic dialogue may contribute to enlarging or narrowing any of the spaces shown in this model. These spaces may be different sizes for each individual and expand or contract over time.

It is noteworthy that the Religion Curriculum for schools in the Archdiocese of Brisbane only mentions spirituality in relation to religion. However, early years literature increasingly names spirituality as a key component of learning and living (Adams et al., 2016; Grajczonek, 2012; Sagberg, 2017; Stockinger, 2019; Watson, 2017). "Physical, social, emotional, personal, spiritual, creative, cognitive and linguistic aspects of learning are all intricately interwoven and interrelated" (Australian Government Department of Education and Training [DEET], 2009). Surprisingly, this quote is not from a Church document but a government document. Pollefeyt (2020a, 2021) writes that spirituality is intrinsic to dialogue opportunities and experiences through religious education in Catholic schools. Therefore, the findings from this research may add further consideration to the place of spirituality within religious education and Catholic schools.

7.3.3. Principles for Religious Education

The following principles reflect core insights that emerged through retrospective analysis. Some of these insights played a significant role in driving informed pedagogical decision-making during the data-collection phase of the research. Others became apparent in later stages of the research as retrospective analysis showed they made a difference to informed pedagogical decision-making. Finally, sometimes the principle was not new, but the implications led to changing practice or played a core role in informed pedagogical decision-making.

Employ the same rigour required for teaching any other academic learning area. Therefore, religious education continually employs practices to respond to learners' emerging needs, reflecting educational theories about *how* learners learn and *what* learners need. Treating religious education with the same academic integrity as other learning areas involves teachers respectfully challenging learners' misinterpretations of Scripture, beliefs and religious practices.

Use current research and developmental theories about what learners need to inform pedagogical decision-making. Pedagogies need to be age-appropriate and reflect what learners need for optimal learning. Teachers must be confident in understanding how to use learning theories and current research to select and justify their pedagogies, facilitating learners' high engagement and achievement levels and leading to innovative teaching.

Recognise the difference between pedagogy and hermeneutical approaches for interpreting Scripture. For example, the Three Worlds of the Text is a heuristic tool to enable a deeper understanding of texts (McGrath, 2020). On the other hand, pedagogy refers to how the learning will occur and therefore, both heuristic tools for interpretation and pedagogy are needed as they serve separate functions.

Teach in ways that recognise not all learners are people of faith, but religious education can impact faith (positively or negatively). Although every learner in religious education may not describe themselves as a

person of faith, they may have a sense of spirituality that seeks meaning in life. This endeavour differs from an external expression of spirituality that can result in finding meaning through the rituals and celebrations of a religious faith tradition. Therefore, religious education focuses on teaching learners religion (the beliefs and practices of a faith community), but spirituality is a silent partner in religious education and needs acknowledgement.

Focus on building understandings and skills for metacognition, critical thinking, surface, and deep learning to empower learners to make informed choices about how to live in the world. The purpose of learning is more than the accumulation of knowledge. Therefore, religious education learning needs to have a transformative function to empower learners to live well in the world in the same way as learning about global warming or cultural diversity aims to enable learners to make informed choices about how they live. Transformative learning occurs when learners can identify how their new understandings inform, challenge or inspire them to participate in a world where the earth and the planet's inhabitants can flourish. However, to be transformative, the learning process needs to move beyond surface-level understandings to deeper learning, where learners can develop critical thinking, engage in informed dialogue and apply their insights to life.

7.3.4.   Principles for teaching Scripture

As indicated in Chapter Six, the need to establish principles for teaching Scripture arose throughout the data collection phase. Continued reflection upon these principles throughout the final stages of the DBR process allowed for further refinement. Through retrospective analysis of the data, the following principles have developed:

The primary purpose of teaching Scripture is to enable learners to discover appropriate meaning from the text. Therefore, Scripture teaching needs to move learners beyond a literal or surface-level interpretation of the text to uncover the treasures that the text holds for every generation

(Osborne, 2017). Scripture learning needs to inspire, guide and challenge learners to participate in the task of bringing about God's design for our world (Pollefeyt & Bieringer, 2005), reflecting that learning is a transformative process (Rymarz, 2015). While religious education curricula will change over time, the Bible remains constant. Therefore, learners in Catholic schools have a right to develop critical literacy skills that will enable them to discover appropriate meaning from Scripture beyond a literal or surface-level interpretation of the text.

Only teach the Bible when you can find appropriate meaning beyond a surface-level interpretation. Enabling learners to discover the text's treasures requires structuring learning opportunities to explore meaning conveyed through words, concepts and contexts. Therefore, ensure teacher readiness to teach by being able to communicate insights from the text as written for the intended audience and life today. Then teachers can identify *what* to teach and *how* to teach in ways that learners value and enable them to discover rich, relevant meaning from the text to understand how to live positively in today's world.

The emphasis on '*appropriate*' is important as it implies that meaning-making through biblical interpretation is not simply accepting anything learners put forward. Discovering meaning at deeper levels of interpretation requires an ability to engage with symbolism and metaphors to consider what the text reveals about God and God's relationship with humans. Furthermore, finding appropriate meaning requires developing skills to critique biblical interpretation against the understanding of the faith community over time. When teachers can communicate how sacred texts inform particular faith communities over time, the risk of promoting relativism (Pollefeyt & Bouwens, 2010) is lessened and opportunities for promoting post-critical belief are strengthened.

Identify what level of professional learning and support teachers require by conversing with learners about the meaning they find in biblical texts. Listening to learners' insights shows whether they have a literal

understanding or find meaning in the text at deeper levels. If literal, surface-level interpretations of the text result from Scripture teaching, then something critical needs to change. If learners do not find Scripture learning relevant, valuable or meaningful, then something significant must change to enhance Scripture teaching and learning.

Draw on the wisdom of knowledgeable others. Scripture interpretation is a complex endeavour that is a career for some people. Therefore, draw on this wisdom in biblical commentaries that present current scholarship, and find someone with expertise to support teachers in finding deep, appropriate meaning from ancient, sacred biblical texts. Scripture interpretation is the collective responsibility of each generation of believers and never an individual responsibility. Scripture learning can also nurture, open, disturb, disrupt or interrupt places of spirituality, identity and belief in learners of all ages; therefore, the journey needs appropriate accompaniment, guidance and support. From writing curriculum to planning units of work, drawing on the wisdom of knowledgeable others significantly assists in providing meaningful Scripture learning.

Monitor constantly, *effectively* and *reliably*. Analyse needs by obtaining feedback from learners, teachers and religious education leaders about what they value, understand and experience for Scripture learning. Analyse planning documentation and spend time in classroom learning environments to identify what teachers need to build capacity and self-efficacy for teaching Scripture. Then, continually design and redesign professional learning to respond to needs. In short, avoid assumptions that teachers, religious education leaders, and education officers have the skill set to lead Scripture learning and plan professional learning opportunities according to identified needs.

Measure professional learning effectiveness by mastery of skills rather than time spent learning. This principle recognises that teachers have different needs, learn differently, and it can take years to build the skill set needed. Therefore, a targeted, well-resourced professional

learning project must continue until participants have the required skill set.

Teach *about the Bible* and teach skills *to interpret biblical texts critically and spiritually*. To find meaning in biblical texts beyond a surface level, learners need to grow in understanding of how the Bible developed and functions as a whole story of God's relationship with people (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1997, para. 112). Learners must also build knowledge of people, places, contexts, cultures, communities, vocabulary, genres and Judaism. Biblical interpretation beyond a fundamentalist reading of the text requires critiquing what to reject and what to accept in the text to understand God's dream for our world, recognising that authors may silence or omit marginalised voices from the text (Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, section 1: E, 2). Therefore, interpreting the text calls for a holistic understanding of the Bible that respects how different approaches, such as a historical-critical approach (Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, section I) and a theological approach (Benedict XVI, 2010, para 34), can assist in determining relevant, appropriate meaning for life today.

Teach Scripture in ways that do not limit learners' abilities to discover appropriate meaning from the text. First, teaching Scripture texts without identifying curriculum themes allows religious education content to arise naturally through Scripture learning and avoids limiting the meaning learners may discover. Second, using Scripture to drive religious education acknowledges that Scripture is the foundation for Christian life and all religious education content (National Catholic Education Commission, 2021). Third, selecting a translation of the biblical text that allows learners to access accurate meaning is essential, as it enables explicit teaching of keywords and concepts that reveal significant importance. Finally, ensure that Scripture learning enables learners to move to increasingly deeper levels of thinking about the text.

Scripture learning in the first four years of primary school must provide solid foundations for extending Scripture learning in later years. What happens in the early years sets learners on a trajectory for whether they can value and enjoy Scripture learning, critically think about biblical texts by year four and find meaning beyond a literal interpretation of stories. To focus only on knowledge of biblical stories in the early years is to risk learning texts as historical stories rather than stories of faith. The first four years of education in a Catholic school must be a time to learn key concepts about the Bible, where learners are engaged in Scripture storytelling and other age-appropriate pedagogies that promote critical thinking and enable learners to discover appropriate meaning.

Scripture holds something for everyone yet is revealed fully to no one[1]. Therefore, teaching Scripture in Catholic schools needs to occur in ways that respect that not all learners are people of faith; however, the text can still hold relevant meaning for anyone to determine how to live well in the world. Also, this principle highlights that the interpretation of Scripture is an ongoing process through life, continuously having the potential to reveal new insights over time across all generations, cultures and countries. Therefore, each time a teacher prepares to teach a Scripture text, it is valuable to consider the meaning revealed through the text as new insights may emerge. Finally, learners may offer new insights into the text that enrich the meaning-making process for all involved.

Provide high-impact professional learning for teaching Scripture. Professional learning that positively impacts Scripture teaching includes ongoing opportunities for *learning about Scripture*, how *to teach Scripture* and for being supported to *build and analyse practice*. High-impact professional learning for teaching Scripture is evidenced by improving practice.

Prioritise building a teaching team with strong social capital for teaching Scripture, who value being learners. Increasing teacher

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[1] Archbishop Mark Coleridge expressed this statement to me during a conversation after his presentation at the Broken Bay Institute conference in Sydney, June 17, 2022.

competence, confidence, self-efficacy and collective efficacy will follow when this occurs. Teams with high social capital can work together as learners to improve practice, interpret the text together, share ideas for facilitating high-impact learning and support one another through co-teaching, analysing and evaluating teaching.

Professional Learning

In synthesising all the data from Chapters Four and Five, it seemed that everything early years teachers indicated they needed could be captured in a few words. The meaning from data suggested that early years teachers were saying, *Teach me, show me, support me.* Feedback about the value of the Scripture twilights and enthusiasm for more ways to build Scripture knowledge all fit into the category of *Teach me*.

Comments about teachers wanting to see how to plan and teach Scripture all fit into the category of *Show me.* Other comments about the need for strategies such as mentoring and co-teaching all fit into the category of *Support me*. Adding these elements to what the study found about the strength of learning through creating professional partnerships and the critical need for employing effective monitoring strategies led to the creation of the following model in Figure 64.

Figure 64

High-Impact Strategies and Processes for Professional Learning

Figure 64 is not adapted from any other model but represents the central elements that synthesise the meaning of the data uncovered through retrospective analysis and is a significant contribution from this research. This model is currently being used to continue monitoring and responding to the needs of participants in the Scripture twilights. While the minor study only included four meetings, the creation and implementation of this model will ensure the Scripture twilights continue to evolve in response to need. The movement in the elements above conveys the notion that professional learning needs to be ever-evolving in response to needs. The interrelatedness of all the components highlights the need for embedding effective professional learning over time, allowing time to practise skills and participate in professional partnerships rather than journey alone.

Analysing the results of over thirty-five studies, researchers found the following characteristics of effective professional learning. They are: it is content focused; involves active participation; involves collaboration, coaching, and expert support and is job-embedded; models best practice; includes reflective feedback; occurs over an extended time (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). These characteristics are achievable within the models displayed in Figure 59, and the model shown in Figure 65.

Figure 65

Professional Learning that Transforms Practice

Figure 65 represents how the process of DBR can work as a template for professional learning that transforms into practice. The findings of this study indicate that it was the strength of the DBR approach that enabled capacity building to occur and the growth of self-efficacy and collective efficacy. In addition, participants found that the concept of focusing on one element of change at a time was manageable and achievable. While the model states to *determine one action that could*

improve practice, the possibility of designing a shared intervention that can take place in different ways in different contexts still exists. This model aims to illuminate the critical steps that others working in similar contexts could lead.

Returning to the literature, researchers also found well-designed professional learning can fail due to a lack of resources, time, and shared vision; non-system compliance; an inability to evaluate professional learning effectiveness, and dysfunctional school culture (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). At least one of these factors contributed to participants in one school withdrawing from the research. These factors could provide criteria to determine if the conditions are right for professional learning to commence.

Notably, the characteristics of Continual Professional Development and Learning (CPDL) (Cordingley, 2015), closely mirror the aspects of design-based professional learning (DBPL). Ongoing collaboration with peers, drawing on specialist and peer support, and using enquiry learning and theory, scaffolding and modelling to refine teaching practice can all underpin DBPL, because DBPL by its very nature, is an ongoing, collaborative process over an identified period of time. Additionally, the characteristics of professional learning that lead to transforming professional practice also mirror the elements of strong social capital. Principles for a group learning environment involve teachers having a voice in determining the learning they need and how the learning takes place, and includes reflection, dialogue, application to practice and ensures reciprocal relationships (Stewart, 2014).

The conceptual framework (see Figures 49 and 50) developed through this study highlights the need for leaders to create intentional time for professional learning. Engaging in ongoing professional learning with a team of others requires a commitment to time, people and learning. The model depicted in Figure 66 shows what happens when teachers have opportunities to build their capacity.

Figure 66

A Teacher Hermeneutic Model
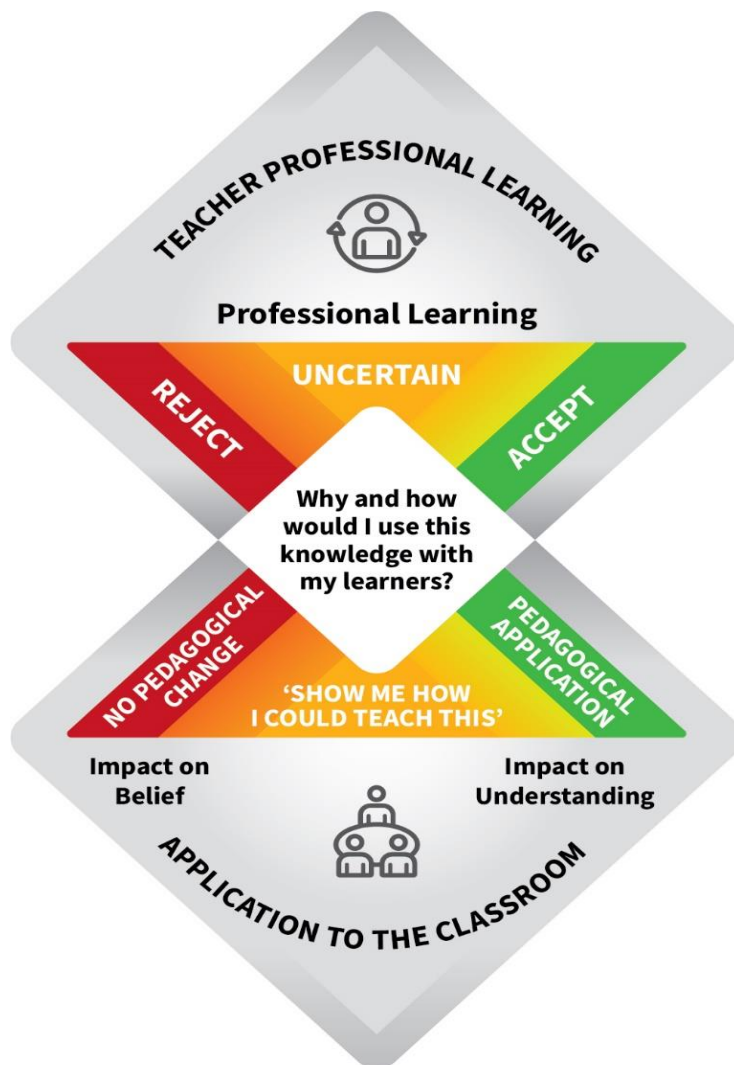
The teacher hermeneutic model represents the process that early years teachers seem to undertake when participating in professional learning about Scripture. First, they appear to engage in professional learning, listening for relevance for how they might use the knowledge in their practice. They metaphorically arrive at the junction in the process at this point, represented by the light-coloured diamond shape in the model's centre.

Conversely, if early years teachers hear information they believe they can readily use in their practice, they silently judge the professional learning as relevant and helpful. The green pathway on the model

represents this journey, and teachers metaphorically move through the junction to strengthen their practice due to the professional learning. However, if early years teachers cannot apply professional learning to their practice, they may silently judge professional learning as irrelevant. On the teacher hermeneutic model, this pathway is coloured red, indicating that the learning journey is blocked. Teachers in this position are unlikely to undertake any pedagogical change because they see no relevance to their practice.

Alternatively, sometimes teachers may suspend judgement about the value of professional learning. In this case, the shades of yellow and orange indicate uncertainty. Talking about professional learning with colleagues is likely to sway judgement towards either the green pathway (that leads to new or strengthened practice) or the red pathway (where no pedagogical change will occur). Observing how teachers implement their learnings in practice is more likely to sway judgement towards the green pathway.

This model aims to demonstrate the difference it may make for early years teachers if professional learning includes application to practice. Simply stated, early years teachers attend professional learning to be more effective teachers. However, suppose they cannot see *why* they need to know what the professional learning opportunity offers, and they cannot see how they could use this learning to be a better teacher. In that case, they will likely judge it as irrelevant and not voluntarily return.

This model also aims to show the importance of following up professional learning with early years teachers. The research data indicated that if an early years teacher strongly disagrees with what is presented through professional learning, they may readily declare they will never return. For Scripture professional learning, teachers may hear interpretations of the text that radically differ from what they grew up believing. This study suggests that such an experience can shake one's faith identity. When this situation occurs, participants in the study

indicated that the wisdom and support of the school community could assist teachers in moving forward.

While the same findings may apply to teachers of any year level and about any professional learning, the data suggest that it is a genuine, ongoing challenge for early years teachers. Perhaps due to the complexities that Scripture scholarship can open up, early years teachers can experience the greatest challenge in finding ways to make adult texts relevant for young children. Therefore, if they are not confident in how to teach Scripture, it seems highly likely they will attend professional learning for Scripture with this need at the forefront of their minds, as presented in Figure 66.

7.3.5.   *Capacity Building*

Retrospective analysis also revealed four core shifts identified through the process of building capacity. These shifts reflect four different stages, only fully apparent analysing the overall data. The model shown in Figure 67 provides valuable knowledge for teams of people in any field who wish to build capacity.

The participants' experience in this study showed that capacity could be built at an individual level, group level, or both. The knowledge presented in Figure 67 provides compelling evidence for viewing capacity-building as a journey for developing skills over time. The time required to achieve those skills can vary between individuals.

The theory behind building self-efficacy explains this journey. Teacher self-efficacy is considered one of the highest motivational factors influencing job satisfaction and achievement (Bandura, 1997), which has strong implications for teachers and learners. Figure 67 outlines the four distinct stages in the journey of building capacity identified through this study.

Figure 67

Stages of Capacity Building
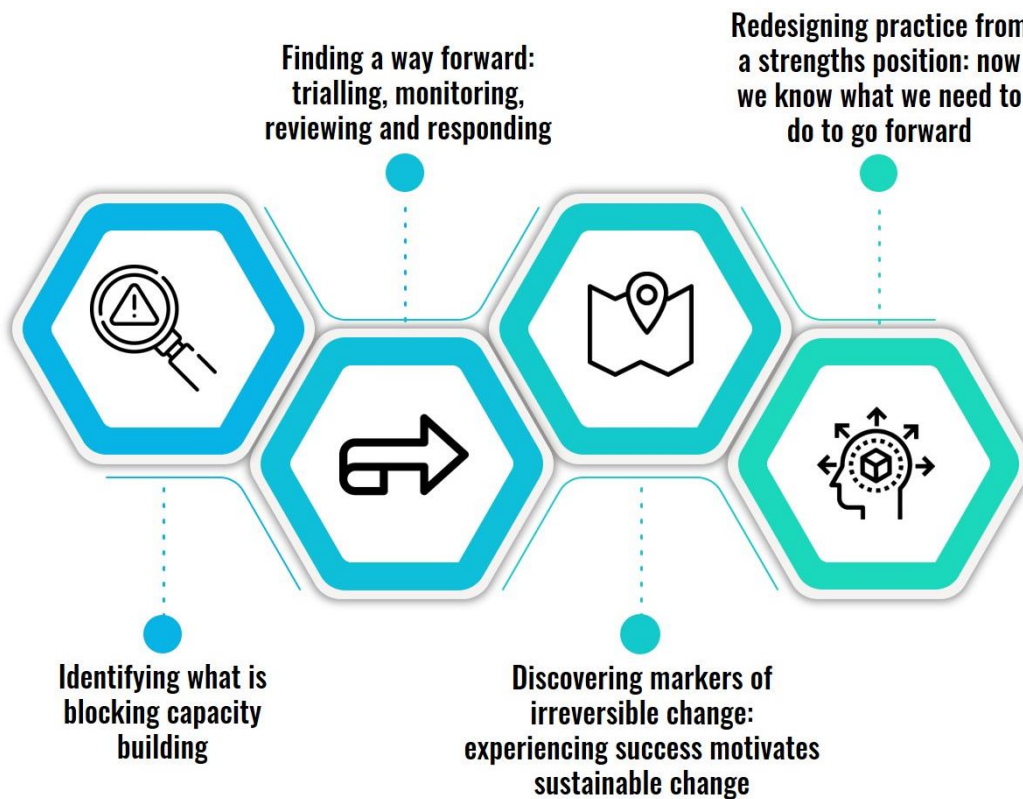
The first stage involved identifying what is *blocking capacity building*, which is the first task the research team undertook for the major and minor studies. Employing a rigorous process at this point enabled the team to identify some deep-seated causes and then target one with a high potential for making a positive difference. This stage was about finding a way forward, trialling to see whether there was a difference; monitoring to find evidence of impact, reviewing what else was needed and responding with the next steps. When people found a discernible difference, they said, *Well, now that I know what works, I don't want to do things the old way again.* People's language and their conversations became markers of irreversible change. The experience of success motivated sustainable change. From that point, leaders and practitioners can redesign practice from a strengths position.

7.4. Contribution to the Methodology

The findings of this study show strong evidence that the DBR process has enabled engagement with theory to build stronger practice and answer all the research goals and questions. The construction of the conceptual framework shows a strong alignment to theory throughout the research journey. The insights from this study have enabled the creation of multiple models and processes that are theoretically supported and can bring new, usable knowledge to others working in similar contexts at a local, national and international level.

However, in reflecting on the research design, not every intervention worked as intended, which is not unexpected when working in real-life situations rather than a sterile scientific setting. As reflected through this study, a question continually underpinning the entire research process is considering *why*. Rather than avoid reporting on what did not work, analysing *why* something did not work can provide rich insights for future designs and other researchers (O'Neill, 2012).

In considering the difference between interventions that worked as expected and those that did not, the main difference seems to be whether the intervention called for participants to trial a potential solution individually or whether the intervention required participants to work together to grow shared understandings. This insight changed the research design after the withdrawal of St Priscilla's school. Participants consequently found such value in working together that they requested a third day. The data from each follow-up meeting then showed evidence of increasing confidence and innovative practice of participants, along with deeper levels of learner engagement and understanding.

These insights reveal that for capacity building and growing self-efficacy, research designs may need to consider *how* to develop the confidence and shared understandings and trust of all participants (social capital), recognising that the research team may not be able to undertake this function. Therefore, returning to DBR and reflecting on the research design, the evaluation and reflection phase of the study also highlighted

that there are two aspects of design in DBR: one is the overall research design, and the other is the design of each intervention.

The development and reflection on design principles play an important role in DBR as they contain historical content knowledge and procedural knowledge drawn from the research experience. The design principles enable transferability to other researchers to determine relevance for their context and study (Herrington et al., 2007). However, the design concept requires further reflection in this concluding chapter. Initially, in discovering DBR, it was unclear whether design principles related to the research design or the design of interventions. Further reading established that design principles ensure the robustness of each intervention (Cobb et al., 2009; Goff & Getenet, 2017; Herrington et al., 2007; McKenney & Reeves, 2019) but also impact on the learning environments in which the research takes place.

Reflecting on the experience from this study indicates that the research design, especially the data collection phase, also requires careful attention and alignment to theory. In other words, finding the way to best conduct the study is an activity in designing. There is a strong need to conduct the research in efficient, effective and attainable ways, or the whole project may be at risk. Therefore, there appears to be merit in creating two sets of design principles to reflect the two major design elements for DBR.

7.4.1.   *Emphasising the Design Element of DBR*

Reflecting on the importance of design for this study raises some pertinent questions through the evaluation of the study. Including these questions may assist other researchers in designing their research journey using a DBR approach. In addition, considering each of these questions prior to commencing the data collection may have strengthened the overall research design to the point where all four schools may have continued for the duration of the year:

1. Where is there a gap between theory and practice?

2. What core insights does the literature provide for robustly designing the research to close the theory-practice gap (leading to developing principles to underpin the overall research design and principles to design the interventions)?

3. Who holds key roles to closely support the implementation of effective iterative cycles to trial potential solutions, and in what ways could these people be involved?

4. When will the iterative cycles occur to ensure the timing suits the research purpose and the participants?

5. Why would anyone benefit from involvement in this research, and how can the research design maximise the benefits?

6. How will participants have input into the research design, communicate feedback to the researcher in timely, manageable ways, and how will the research findings be appropriately communicated to others in usable ways throughout and beyond the research?

7.4.2.   *Evaluation of the Design Principles*

The initial stages of this inquiry involved drafting design principles for this research. After the data collection and analysis, the evaluation of the draft design principles identifies their contribution to ensuring the effectiveness of this DBR inquiry. However, considering that the process of retrospective analysis led to identifying principles for designing both the data collection phase and designing robust interventions, Table 16 outlines design principles that may benefit others considering a DBR approach to research capacity building.

Table 16

Principles for DBR Arising From the Retrospective Analysis

Principles for designing interventions	Principles for designing the data collection phase
1. Religious education leadership support nurtures capacity building and teacher self-efficacy growth.	Identify key roles needed to provide expertise and actively support participants.
2. Capacity building and the growth of teacher self-efficacy is nurtured by having multiple ways of building social capital.	Prioritise ways of building social capital with all participants (for clarity of the research purpose; building trust, and shared understandings)
3. Capacity building and the growth of teacher self-efficacy is nurtured by equipping practitioners to experience success from the start of their research journey.	Establish quick and effective communication strategies for timely feedback (to indicate intervention completion or need for more time and participant immediate needs).
4. Multiple ways of gathering and sharing data are required (for the trustworthiness of findings and to cater to different ways participants will prefer to provide data and learn from one another).	Be responsive to context (recognising that the same intervention may need to occur in different ways to be responsive to diversity within communities, locations, and contexts).
5. Interventions need to reflect both theoretical perspectives and practitioner needs.	
6. Interventions need to target solutions that have the potential for high impact to address key challenge areas.	
7. To achieve high-impact interventions, the research team must engage in critical thinking processes (that enable analysis and evaluation of core causes and essential questions underpinning the problem investigated in the inquiry).	

From the experience and knowledge gained through this study, I found there is tremendous value in having principles for both the overall research design and the intervention design, especially for someone conducting DBR for the first time.

7.5. Contributions Overview

This study extends upon the limited research in the field of teaching Scripture and is the only study found to:

- Take a holistic view of teaching Scripture that explores what teachers *do* to facilitate meaningful Scripture learning over a twelve-month timeframe and what teachers *need* to ensure that professional learning positively impacts the teaching of Scripture.
- Use the approach of DBR to investigate how to close theory-practice gaps for the meaningful teaching of Scripture in the early years.

Therefore, this research went beyond identifying how teachers taught Scripture or what curriculum and Church documents stated about it, to investigate what teachers needed to do to change how they taught Scripture to enable meaningful learning. The literature review did not discover any other published research that provides this scope. Therefore, this study offers crucial theoretical and practical insights about what is required to build capacity, self-efficacy and collective efficacy for teaching Scripture to early years learners. Scripture teachers, religious education leaders in Catholic schools and systems at local, state, national and international levels require this knowledge whenever there is a need to improve Scripture teaching. The following section outlines the principal contributions of this research. Each of these contributions adds to the existing body of knowledge of evidence-based practices and theories.

7.5.1.   Contributions to the Field of Scripture Teaching

1. This study is the only known research to identify an overview of the core elements for building capacity and self-efficacy for teaching Scripture and shows that the absence of one or more of these core elements prevents achieving meaningful Scripture learning in the early years.

2. This research provides insights from practice into what early years learners can achieve through meaningful Scripture teaching that honours core principles for religious education. The study shows evidence that meaningful Scripture learning occurs when learners can engage in rich conversations about biblical stories using biblical vocabulary, provide appropriate insights into what the text reveals about God's dream for the world and critique resources for biblical accuracy. Importantly, the study provides direct evidence that early years learners can interpret Scripture beyond a literal understanding when teachers have sufficient skills to lead Scripture learning.

3. This study found a high correlation between the religious education leader's capacity to interpret Scripture and prioritise religious education leadership in the school and the likelihood of early years teachers providing meaningful Scripture learning for young children.

7.5.2.   Contribution to the Field of Professional Learning

This study provides core insights for ensuring the high efficacy of professional learning for teaching Scripture. This study reveals:

- That building capacity to teach Scripture well is a long-term endeavour that requires careful planning and close monitoring over three to five years to build collective efficacy among staff.

- There is a direct correlation between the degree of social capital among teaching teams and the team's shared focus to improve practice and build self-efficacy and collective efficacy.
- What early years teachers need to value professional learning and build a better practice.

7.5.3.   *Principles for Effective Professional Learning*

The following principles arise from the retrospective analysis of this research. Essentially, they provide *rules* to follow to ensure that professional learning contributes to building stronger educational practice. From this study, these principles continue to guide the professional learning offered through the twilights and offer evidence-based approaches to ensuring effective professional learning in any context.

1. Allow for participants to have opportunities to identify and follow through on their own learning needs.
2. Continually link opportunities to learn, practice skills to embed the learning, and monitor what is needed next.
3. Focus on creating professional learning partnerships, building strong social and professional capital with a core group of people over time.
4. Measure the effectiveness of professional learning by the degree to which participants value the learning opportunities and show ongoing improvement in practice over time.
5. Design professional learning in response to participant needs and continually redesign to respond to participant needs.
6. Honour participant needs for learning to occur in multiple ways (providing opportunities for listening, reading, dialoguing, synthesising, applying learning, questioning, receiving feedback, viewing exemplars / good practice, collaborating, mentoring, modelling, co-teaching).

7.6. Summary of Contribution

This research offers rich insights from theory and practice. It contributes significant usable knowledge through new conceptual frameworks and models that depict evidence-based practice built on existing theories and sometimes provide new theory. This conceptual knowledge assists in filling considerable existing gaps in the knowledge available in current theory and practice. The dual-layered conceptual framework for building capacity to teach Scripture shows all the elements required to achieve meaningful teaching of Scripture. This framework can enable leaders to focus direction, analyse needs and evaluate whether meaningful Scripture learning occurs. The models and frameworks presented in Chapter Seven do not exist elsewhere and therefore provide critical information that will benefit the field of Scripture education and other areas where capacity building is needed.

This study also holds insights for people undertaking DBR, especially to ensure consideration of the design element of DBR for designing the *research* and the *interventions*. This chapter presented usable information to contribute to the approach of DBR. The final chapter moves to conclude the thesis.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

Earlier chapters revisited the research goals and questions and shared critical insights for research questions one and two. This final chapter discusses the implications and recommendations. Finally, Chapter Eight links back to DBR to discuss this research's dissemination and sustainability and concludes the thesis.

8.0

8.1. Implications and Recommendations

Catholic Church documents state the centrality of Scripture for Catholic/Christian life, and religious education (National Catholic Education Commission, 2021). Documentation from the National Catholic Education Commission also states that when implemented holistically, the three worlds of the text approach reflect the principles underpinning Catholic biblical interpretation (National Catholic Education Commission, 2023a). Therefore, this research has implications for every Catholic school and system. These implications also link to some principles for teaching religious education, Scripture and professional learning (outlined in Chapter Seven). The recommendations provide further direction, ideas, and opportunities to advance Scripture learning by building teachers' capacity and self-efficacy for teaching Scripture. Furthermore, the implications and recommendations from this study are for teachers, leaders, policymakers and curriculum writers of religious education.

8.1.1. Implications for Teaching Scripture.

Implication 1: Determine Local Needs. The findings of this study suggest that for learners to interpret Scripture beyond literal, surface-level understandings, teachers and leaders require a significant level of knowledge and skills. Therefore, it is critical to determine the confidence and competencies of teachers, religious education leaders and education officers to lead Scripture learning. Based on the participants' experiences in this study, it is likely that the percentage of people who do

not feel equipped to support and facilitate Scripture learning confidently is higher than employers might expect. Consequently, the implication is that every diocese needs to investigate how effectively Scripture learning occurs and how confident and competent people feel to lead Scripture learning.

Recommendation 1: Analyse Needs. It is recommended that schools and dioceses analyse local needs for Scripture learning. The following questions highlight core areas to investigate and analyse through feedback, planning documentation, conversations with learners and professional conversations with teachers, religious education leaders, principals and religious education officers:

1. How confidently can learners engage in dialogue and critical thinking about Scripture stories?
2. Is Scripture introduced from an accurate translation that will enable learners to discover deeper meaning in the text after being taught about key terminology, concepts, people and places in the story?
3. What literacy strategies do teachers implement to assist learners in discovering meaning from the text beyond a literal interpretation?
4. Does the learning journey enable learners to think critically about the text and appropriately apply it to life?
5. What learning environments are evident for learners?
6. What pedagogies do teachers use? To what extent do these pedagogies reflect current research on child development and what learners need to learn effectively?
7. What analysis of teaching and learning takes place?

The following questions highlight core areas to investigate the confidence and competencies of teachers, religious education leaders and education officers to lead and support Scripture learning:

1. Have teachers obtained *readiness to teach the text* by identifying the treasures in the Scripture text before attempting to plan and facilitate Scripture learning?
2. To what degree are teachers conducting *informed* pedagogical decision-making? What is blocking teacher capacity to engage in *informed* pedagogical decision-making?
3. Where is capacity-building needed for teachers, religious education leaders and education officers to confidently lead Scripture learning in ways that result in meaningful, transformative learning?

Implication 2: Core Elements for Successful Capacity Building. As the participants in this study built capacity across three schools, but the fourth school did not have the conditions present to enable successful capacity building, there is a need to know and understand all the elements for effective capacity building. Therefore, the second implication is to ensure the identification, planning, implementation and monitoring of the core elements for capacity-building. This implication highlights the need for a conceptual framework to provide a *map* for the capacity-building journey to enable learners to experience meaningful teaching of Scripture.

Recommendation 2: Use a conceptual framework. To enable people to identify and support all required elements for building capacity to teach Scripture, schools and dioceses need to use an evidence-based conceptual framework. Using an evidence-based conceptual framework will also increase the likelihood of the capacity-building journey being successful and affirm high-impact processes and practices already occurring. Furthermore, the framework will enable school leaders to identify and commit to ways to support teachers further to achieve higher levels of confidence and competence to teach Scripture, leading to rich, engaging, transformative learning for students.

Implication 3: Resourcing. As this study showed that the time teams spent with the support of a knowledgeable other made a critical difference in successful capacity building, the third implication is the need for adequate resourcing. This implication includes financial resources to provide teaching teams with blocks of time to learn together with a knowledgeable other, plan together and analyse the impact of their teaching, which all contribute to building substantial social capital. The experience of schools in this study demonstrates that ensuring access to adequate resourcing is imperative for implementing the recommendations from this research.

Recommendation 3: Provide the Resources Needed. It is recommended that education systems and schools provide participants with the necessary financial and personnel resources to support and continue the capacity-building journey for the time needed to bring about meaningful teaching of Scripture. To highlight the importance of this recommendation, access to sufficient blocks of time for the learning teams in the research to work with a knowledgeable other was the number one factor that enabled teachers to experience success in the capacity-building journey for teaching Scripture. Furthermore, in responding to requests in the last two years from other schools to undertake the same capacity-building journey, access to ongoing blocks of time to work with participants continues to be the number one factor determining the endeavour's viability.

Implication 4: The Religious Education Curriculum. The findings from this study highlight two core issues: (1) teachers experienced that they required more information about *what* to teach and *how* to teach than the curriculum provided, and (2) that the processes and strategies teachers used to build teacher readiness to teach the text, plan, teach and analyse teaching, all determined whether teaching practice strengthened over time. Therefore, embedding evidence-based

strategies to determine what enhances learning and what else is needed to improve learning achievement will continually strengthen practice and provide critical insights for curriculum writers. In addition, participants in the study required significantly more information about what literacy, biblical knowledge and skills to teach to ensure Scripture learning adequately builds from one year level to the next. Therefore, the findings suggest that education systems and schools need a detailed scope and sequence with details of elements to teach about Judaism, cultural knowledge, contexts of texts, genres, people and places. Without this level of detail, teachers either did not realise what they needed to teach to enable learners to access deeper meaning, or they taught beyond what would be age-appropriate.

Recommendation 4: Embed Evidence-Based Practices. It is recommended that schools and Catholic education systems to determine their own terminology and practices to endorse and embed three critical stages for teaching Scripture:

1. Teacher readiness to teach the text (providing teachers with professional learning and dialogue opportunities for building shared understandings to interpret the text for meaning before teaching the text).

2. Informed pedagogical decision making: Part A: Initial planning (to map the learning journey) and Part B: Responsive planning (during the learning cycle to analyse needs and actively plan how to best respond to learner needs and teacher needs).

3. Analysis and evaluation of teaching (to identify learner and teacher achievements and ongoing needs). This recommendation emphasises _what_ is needed rather than _how_ to name or carry out these practices, recognising that dioceses may have other ways of referring to these critical elements for teaching Scripture well, to strengthen practice continually.

Recommendation 5: Develop a Biblical Scope and Sequence.

It is recommended that highly skilled religious educators work with Scripture scholars (knowledgeable others) to create a scope and sequence document showing explicit Scripture knowledge and interpretation skills to teach across all year levels. Ideally, such a framework could develop at the national level and allow each diocese to incorporate it while retaining responsibility and ownership for writing or determining their religious education curriculum. As learners may reach readiness to move beyond literal interpretations of texts at different stages, it is recommended to divide the framework into early years (the first four years of school), years four to six, years seven to nine and years ten to twelve. This division enables the identification of core interpretation skills it is expected learners will achieve by the end of four different stages of Catholic education.

Recommendation 6: Place Scripture as the Foundation for Curriculum. For religious education curriculum writers to place Scripture as the "driving force" that "infuses each area of study" in the curriculum, to "present what the Church believes, celebrates, lives and prays" (National Catholic Education Commission, 2021, para. 1). Therefore, religious education curricula need to place Scripture as the foundation, with all other learning strands flowing from the teaching of Scripture. Placing and teaching Scripture first in religious education learning (and represented this way in curriculum documents) enables learners to:

1. Discover meaning from biblical texts without being confined by thinking about the texts only in relation to preassigned curriculum and unit themes (Carswell, 2018b; Stead, 1996).
2. Naturally explore and learn about the content covered in the religious education curriculum (as it arises through teaching appropriate Scripture texts, such as exploring texts about the ministry of Jesus can lead to investigating how the Church community functions today).

3. Understand that the beliefs and practices of Catholic communities stem from biblical understandings.

Implication 5: Pedagogy.A key area emerging from the findings is pedagogy. The implications for ensuring that pedagogy meets the needs of early years learners are highly significant, as failing to invest sufficiently in the early years leads to later ramifications (Pascoe & Brennan, 2018). Some of the literature (Barblett et al., 2016; Fluckiger et al., 2015; Grajczonek, 2013; Grajczonek & Truasheim, 2017; Hesterman & Targowska, 2020) and the findings from this study suggest pedagogical decision-making in the early years needs urgent attention. This focus needs to enable teachers to have clarity about how to teach in ways that honour what current research and the literature reveal that learners need.

Furthermore, the early years teachers in this study showed collective evidence that moving from a teacher-centred approach to a learner-centred approach required a year of professional learning, mentoring and building substantial social capital to embed changes in practice. Therefore, the implication is that developing shared understandings among teachers and building capacity for informed pedagogical decision-making is critical. However, it takes significant time and support and needs to be driven by current research and child development theories about what learners need.

Recommendation 7: Review Pedagogy Needs.An audit at the school and system level can ascertain the degree to which educational theories and principles of teaching religious education and Scripture, research and knowledge about how children learn drive teacher pedagogical decision-making in the first four years of school. Furthermore, where gaps are exposed, pedagogies endorsed at the system and school level are recommended to reflect current research and early-childhood development theories that assist in understanding what children need for effective learning. Finally, it is recommended that

teachers have opportunities for building knowledge and skills for informed pedagogical decision-making, with access to mentoring and co-teaching.

Recommendation 8: Early Career Teachers. Identifying a Scripture mentor (knowledgeable other) for people in their first year of teaching is recommended to ensure that teachers do not need to unlearn teaching practices but can build and extend their practice. From the experience of first-year teachers in this study, inclusion in ongoing professional learning teams is challenging. However, mentoring made such an impact that participants in their first year of study moved into leading their teaching team within the first two or three years of teaching.

Implication 6: Religious Education Leadership. Significant implications for the role of religious education leadership arose through this study. Along with the issues of the capability and confidence of the religious education leader to effectively lead Scripture learning, some participants in the study found that the physical and time demands of other duties and positions they held took priority and prevented religious education leadership effectiveness. As Scripture is the foundation for all Christian religious education and liturgy, prayer, social justice and religious education in the school, it is imperative to have leaders who can interpret Scripture confidently and competently to assist in moving teachers and learners beyond literal belief. An ability to lead Scripture learning underpins almost every religious activity in the school. This implication needs much consideration, as it is difficult to see how schools can provide authentic Catholic identity without religious education leaders with strong skills and capacity for interpreting, leading, planning and analysing the use of Scripture in the school.

Recommendation 9: To Review the Role of Religious Education Leaders. A review of the role of the religious education leader is recommended to ensure people in the position can prioritise religious education leadership and have the required skill set or provision for extensive study and mentoring opportunities to lead Scripture learning.

Finally, this recommendation also includes investigating why religious education leaders are generally more qualified than at the time of Barbara Stead's (1996) research but may not be skilled to lead Scripture learning.

Implication 7: The Place of Spirituality. The place of spirituality within religious education and outside of religiosity emerged as an important insight from this study. While religious education remained focused on cognitively learning about stories and beliefs of faith, there was evidence of some adults and children impacted at a spirituality level (meaning-making). As some children only began to value religious education when the focus shifted to individual spirituality (how meaning-making occurs in the lives of learners), the implication is that religious education impacts spirituality, which needs recognition.

Recommendation 10: Integrating Spirituality and Religious Education. It is recommended that religious educators, curriculum writers and policymakers consider spirituality outside of religiosity as a starting point and valuable thread within religious education to enable all learners to experience religious education as a time of meaning-making at an individual, class and school level. Starting religious education with spirituality would invite learners to identify places where they find meaning and build identity, recognising this is an individual journey and may or may not occur within the framework of a religious tradition.

8.1.2. Implications for Professional Learning.

Implication 8: Integrating Learning about Scripture With Learning how to Teach Scripture. A key implication from the findings is that early years teachers need ongoing opportunities to learn *about Scripture* and *how to teach Scripture*, keeping the two integrated. This implication is significant for all those involved in designing courses of study and professional learning opportunities for Scripture teachers. If early years teachers cannot see how professional learning enables them to improve

how they teach Scripture to young children, they will likely find limited or no value in adult learning about the text.

Recommendation 11: Form Partnerships. Catholic education systems (at diocese and university levels) are recommended to consider ways to form active partnerships, and provide financial support to resource ongoing, professional learning opportunities embedded in practice. Professional learning for early years teachers of Scripture is also recommended to draw on the Teacher hermeneutic model (Figure 66) to assist in designing professional learning that teachers will value and use to improve practice.

Implication 9: High-Impact Professional Learning. Several areas emerging from the study have implications for what results in high-impact professional learning that leads to sustainable practice. The first is the impact of creating a strong culture of learning as a team in a climate of trust. Therefore, establishing learning teams that can build high social capital (Leana, 2010; Parlar et al., 2020) where team members develop shared understandings and strong trust enables high learner achievement. The second is that early years teachers need opportunities for learning, to see exemplars of practice and have support through strategies such as mentoring, team teaching or co-teaching. The third is ensuring professional learning allows for the time it takes to embed professional learning and strengthen practice in sustainable ways.

Recommendation 12: Activate Design-Based Professional Learning. It is recommended that dioceses establish a design-based professional learning project that runs for at least three years, to implement strategies for high-impact professional learning to support teachers in providing excellent Scripture learning. This professional learning could occur in one or more schools as a whole staff focus. However, this initiative could also follow the design of this research and begin with a small cohort of schools, including the religious education leader and one or more highly interested teachers from each school.

The professional learning initiative could build yearly according to local capacity and needs. After the first year, members in the initial group could become leaders and mentors for a new intake of schools into the project, continually building capacity across the diocese each year and growing the project as schools indicate readiness to participate. The project needs to be led by personnel with significant research, Scripture and education skills to ensure ongoing analysis of needs and project design. The project design is recommended to follow the model for Professional learning that transforms practice (see Figure 65) or a similar process. This approach promotes strong social capital, is responsive to participant needs and provides ongoing opportunities for participant support and learning at multiple levels.

Recommendation 13: Practice Informs Curriculum. For dioceses to write the next iteration of their religious education curriculum according to what research shows that teachers need for high-impact teaching of Scripture. Following the model for *Professional learning that transforms practice* (Figure 65) would enable collection of critical data to show the explicit skills, gaps and needs that a new iteration of a religious education curriculum can address. This approach turns the process of curriculum writing upside down as the content is determined by what teachers and learners need for meaningful religious education. Furthermore, such a process would avoid lengthy professional learning sessions for all religious education teachers when the new curriculum is published, as teachers would have already trialled the content, provided feedback, and shared rich experiences with colleagues. Given the experience from this DBR approach, this recommendation has the potential to be highly effective and lead to innovative, sustainable, engaging religious education that is relevant and enjoyed by learners and teachers, using data effectively to build excellent practice.

8.1.3.   Recommendations for Brisbane Catholic Education

As the data from this study draws exclusively from the work of some teachers and religious education leaders in Brisbane Catholic Education (BCE) schools, it is recommended:

- Primary schools adopt the twelve pedagogies for teaching Scripture and the transformative learning process for teaching Scripture. It needs noting that although some schools used the Five contexts for learning to drive pedagogy, they did not lead to the same depth of learning or engagement in learning.

- Further research is conducted in some secondary schools to identify what is needed to close the gap between theory and practice that enables increased numbers of secondary students to value Scripture learning.

- Professional learning in religious education follows the model for Professional learning that transforms practice (see Figure 65), whenever capacity building is needed to change and improve practice in areas teachers find challenging.

- This research's findings, models and conceptual frameworks inform the next iteration of the religious education curriculum.

- Early years pedagogies endorsed by BCE need to reflect current research and early childhood theories. Additionally, for early years teachers have increased opportunities to learn how knowledge of early childhood development can positively impact informed pedagogical decision-making, providing rich learning environments that reflect what learners need.

- For BCE to consider this study as the first year of a more extended project to implement over a three to five period. Participants in this research may desire to work as mentors or leaders. The project design can also enable resource development, including creating videos that capture the components of meaningful Scripture learning. This project would link closely to the work of Dialogue schools to build students' capacity to find meaning in Scripture

beyond literal belief. Such a project would be innovative and evidence-based to enable meaningful Scripture teaching that leads to transformative learning. It could be open to other dioceses, especially those who do not have access to the same level of resources and those who already share the same curriculum.

8.1.4. *Recommendations for Further Research*

This study's findings offer considerable insights and raise awareness of existing gaps in knowledge. Given the paucity of research in the field of teaching Scripture, this study exposes some other areas where further research would significantly add to the limited body of knowledge available. Therefore, considering the findings of this study and the ongoing implications for the effective teaching of Scripture, the following recommendations for further research have emerged:

- There is a high need for further research into the role of religious education leaders in leading Scripture learning. Such research could consider the following: To what degree is the ability to interpret Scripture and lead Scripture learning actively valued at the time of appointment in the role? Suppose a panel determines that a candidate with low ability to interpret Scripture and lead Scripture learning is the best person for the role in that context. How is this capacity actively developed within the role? How is the effectiveness of this capacity building monitored? Is there a correlation between the religious education knowledge of a religious education leader and student learning achievement in the area of Scripture? If a diocese has a shortage of skilled religious education leaders with high religious education knowledge, what is the impact on Scripture learning (and religious education) in schools?
- There is a need for more empirical research to investigate effective pedagogies for Scripture learning at all ages in primary and secondary schools. This research about teaching Scripture and pedagogy is urgently needed to ensure that learners are not closed

to spirituality, faith, religion and learning due to a poor experience of Scripture learning. Such research could consider the following: What factors enable learners to value and engage in the teaching of Scripture? When do learners identify the teaching of Scripture as an effective form of transformative learning in their lives?

- As this research focused on building capacity and self-efficacy with early years teachers, further research is needed for all other year levels through to the end of secondary school. Such research could consider what senior secondary and middle school teachers need to build capacity and self-efficacy to teach Scripture. The research could also consider what facilitates the movement from literal belief to a reconceptualised understanding of Scripture.

- Due to the limited data collected from year one and two teachers in this research, there is a need for further research on the impact of teacher capacity for leading Scripture learning in the early years. This research may serve as a springboard for specific year level focus in the early years (or any other year level). Such research could consider the following: What do learners in this year level find meaningful and engaging about Scripture learning? What blocks rich Scripture learning for learners in this year level? What difference does Scripture learning make to the lives of learners in this year level?

- There is a need for further empirical research about the place of spirituality within religious education for students who identify as people of faith and those who do not. Such research could consider the following: In what ways does religious education assist in shaping the spirituality of learners? What questions, strategies and processes enable spirituality nurturing through religious education and participation in a Catholic school community? How does a spirituality focus allow learners to find meaning in religious education, regardless of whether they identify as a person of faith?

8.2. Dissemination and Sustainability

DBR strives to have applicability for others beyond the life of the study, including communicating about interventions that can hold value for others (McKenney & Reeves, 2019). What happens beyond the data collection phase is a test of the sustainability and reliability of the research. Therefore, to begin disseminating the research, I invited the Head of Catholic Identity, the Head of Learning and Teaching services and the Principal Education Officer Religious Education from Brisbane Catholic Education to visit St Huldah's school for a day on the 18th November 2020. The religious education leaders and research participants from St Mary Magdalene's and St Junia's joined the group online. The current principal of St Huldah's and the new principal for 2023 also joined the group for the day.

Visiting Rebecca's preparatory learners, we walked in to find all the learners dressed up as Kings (and they quickly informed us that their correct title was Pharaohs). Learners moved readily into four groups, and I went with a group accompanied by the new religious education leader, who sat down and asked what she needed to do. The learners immediately told her she was not doing anything because *they* were telling a creation story (Genesis 1:1-2:4a). Learners sat in a circle, unpacked storytelling objects from a bag and quickly assigned their pieces of the story, with each learner telling one part of the story and placing objects to depict the story scene in the centre of the circle. These learners were clearly used to having voice and choice and conducted the Scripture storytelling confidently and competently without adult intervention.

Next, I moved to another group retelling the Good Samaritan story (Luke 10:25-37). After confidently retelling the story, the adults began asking questions, and the children responded thoughtfully. Someone asked why the priest and the Levite did not stop to help the injured man. One little girl paused, considered the question and then replied that they were probably scared that they might be in danger too. Jewish scholar Amy-Jill Levine would have been proud of this response, as the text does

not tell us why the men did not stop. Still, a Jewish audience would have expected them to stop to honour the highest Jewish law of the preservation of life, loving God and neighbour (Levine, 2014). As we left, Rebecca announced it was the end of religion time and the head of Catholic Identity heard a little boy groaning, saying: *I just love religion!*

A visit to Gabrielle's classroom resulted in witnessing year three learners unpacking the story of Jacob and Esau (25:19-28). Even as a second-year teacher, Gabrielle calmly and confidently worked with the whole group to revise the story, and then the learners split into groups for an activity of their choice. One group requested to show the adults their interpretation of the story, so they demonstrated how they each took on the voice of a different character in the story to conduct *tap and tell*. As Gabrielle tapped a learner on the shoulder, they reported who they were, how they were feeling and why, and held an insightful dialogue between characters, including a conversation with God as a character. Adults expressed surprise at the depth of the dialogue and the insights of the year three learners.

These teachers confidently allowed the adults into their classrooms and demonstrated their Scripture teaching. The participants from the other schools joined via video conference and communicated their learnings from the study, outlining the changes that consequently occurred in their schools. Unexpectedly, Chloe reported receiving an email from a parent in Miriam's class, who stated that her child was coming home talking excitedly about Bible stories. The parent wanted to join the conversation but lacked knowledge of biblical stories. The parent asked if there was a book she could purchase to assist, so Chloe sent details about a Bible to buy. She included some tips for the parent to consider, including some questions, such as considering why the author wrote the story, to support meaningful conversation that could lead beyond a literal interpretation. Follow-up emails from the same parent stated the Bible had arrived, they loved the stories, and later, the parent disclosed that she had decided to baptise her children into the Catholic Church.

In the last email, the parent also reported that she was Catholic but knew nothing about the Bible before her daughter introduced her to biblical stories. While the goals of this study had nothing to do with baptism, Chloe's story reinforced the findings that spirituality is a silent partner in religious education. The meaning gained from Scripture learning in Miriam's Preparatory class had rippled into home life and deeply impacted this family.

The confidence of all the participants in sharing their practice and learnings was in stark contrast to my initial visits to schools. Naomi reported that her teaching team for Preparatory learners at St Magdalene's had worked together closely and developed high social capital. Consequently, Naomi and the principal separated the team in 2021 to designate each person to a new year level from Prep to year four to lead Scripture learning with their new teaching teams. In mid 2022, Naomi reported that each year level up to year four now confidently and competently taught Scripture with shared understandings. In 2023, Naomi plans to bring the year five and six teachers into the same way of teaching Scripture. Naomi's plan echoed Fullan's theory (2016)of using the group to change the group and build a new culture. The experience of St Magdalene's also reinforces the time it takes to authentically build capacity for teaching Scripture and embed well-informed, sustainable, innovative, engaging practice throughout the whole school.

The spread of learning from the study has moved more slowly at St Huldah's and St Junia's due to teacher and leadership changes. Rebecca has moved to other schools and into short-term religious education leadership positions. Since the data collection began in 2019, St Huldah's has had three different principals, and Gabrielle is now the fifth religious education leader. The current principal has phoned to request my close support as an education officer as "the only consistent person who has worked with the staff in recent years". The feedback also suggests the benefits of developing long-term relationships with knowledgeable others

to bring consistent understandings about practice amidst ongoing leadership changes.

At St Junia's, Chloe has moved into the principal role, and the religious education leader is new to the role. St Huldah's and St Junia's journeys confirm elements of the conceptual framework, highlighting the role of social capital and leadership in building capacity, including having one or more key teachers who can support and assist in leading the journey. With constant leadership change, there is no strong vision and commitment to supporting the journey of capacity building because the leadership team is constantly in a learning phase to ascertain the school's needs.

Evidence shows that teachers involved in this research have continued to embed what they learnt through the study. For example, on a visit to St Junia's a year ago, Ruth came to tell me that her learners had explored a text about looking after those in need in the community. Her year one learners talked about who might be in need in their town, and they spoke about the shelter for women in need. Ruth's learners went home and talked with their families about what they could do, and nearly twenty bags of supplies came in for Ruth to distribute to the women's shelter. Given the low percentage of families at St Junia's who identify as being Catholic or belonging to any faith community, this action demonstrates that Scripture learning can be meaningful and transformative for anyone, not only people of faith.

Regarding the Scripture twilights, ongoing monitoring of needs has seen these professional learning sessions continue to build and develop. In 2021 a new session titled *Deeper dialogue* (about Scripture) emerged, and in 2022, another new session developed titled *How to teach Scripture*. In addition, ongoing analysis of teacher needs revealed so much interest that the *How to teach Scripture sessions* expanded to offer one for each year level throughout 2022. The session format followed the phases of teacher readiness to teach the text and informed pedagogical decision-making. The text chosen to explore reflects the themes from the

Scripture twilight, and for all primary and secondary year levels, the planning follows the transformative learning pedagogy for teaching Scripture. Approximately fifty participants have joined these ninety-minute online sessions each time, growing to the last two-hour Scripture twilight for 2022 having two hundred and fifty-six people registered. Therefore, the Scripture twilights continue to grow and change in response to needs, with almost 950 registrations in term four twilights in 2022.

However, concerns from religious education officers and the presenter for the Scripture twilights about the capacity of a significant number of religious education leaders to confidently lead Scripture deeper dialogue sessions in 2023 led to a revision of plans. Therefore, training sessions for religious education leaders to build their skills for leading Scripture learning are offered each term in 2023. This development adds to the trustworthiness of the findings of this research that the number of religious education leaders who lack the skills and confidence to lead Scripture learning needs careful investigation.

To disseminate some knowledge from the study, I presented at a national religious education conference in Brisbane (2017) and in Sydney (2022) for the Broken Bay Institute. In October 2022, I presented the findings and recommendations from the study to the Catholic Identity and religious education teams of Brisbane Catholic Education. Future plans include writing journal articles and a book to share the insights from this research project. A possible title is *Scripture strategies: A teacher's manual.* Hopefully, the publication of journal articles at a national and international level will produce further usable knowledge for others. Possible topics include: Understanding learners to find pedagogies that work; Professional learning that leads to rewarding teaching; Spirituality: the silent partner in religious education; Social capital: the key to changing practice; Are early years learners capable of moving beyond literal belief?; Discovering keys to enable children to love Scripture learning; Research insights about Scripture storytelling in an educational

context; What's in a text? Interpretation matters; Shattering some myths about teaching Scripture; Transformative learning: a process that can change lives, and Analysis: the unsung strategy for moving to exemplary teaching.

8.3. Concluding Comments

As the writing process for this report concludes, the world is still navigating through a pandemic, and images from Ukraine disturb many people. In recent years in Australia, the dark side of institutions has been exposed, including the need to safeguard our children. Science posits that global warming is no longer a futuristic concept. Thirty years after David Orr's words appeared, they may be even more prophetic today.

Equipping our teachers to see how the world's bestselling book can enable learners to see how they can live positively in their places is just as important as ever. Learning the Bible's relevance is understanding how to be people who live with hope; call out injustice; take responsibility for the earth as our common home (Francis, 30 June, 2015), promote peaceful resolutions and believe in healthy relationships. The Bible suggests that these are all vital for the well-being of our world. Every educational system reflects a philosophy about how to live well (Groome, 2014), and this inquiry demonstrates that Scripture taught well is foundational for conducting this endeavour in a Catholic school. Returning to Orr's vision (1991, p. 4):

> The plain fact is that the planet does not need more 'successful' people. But it does desperately need more peacemakers, healers, restorers, storytellers, and lovers of every kind. It needs people who live well in their places. It needs people of moral courage willing to join the fight to make the world habitable and humane. And these qualities have little to do with success as we have defined it.

However, to ensure that sacred stories are meaningful for our time and places, there is a need to address the issues that block capacity

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building, self-efficacy and collective efficacy for teaching Scripture. Leuven University research shows that in Australia, "Catholic education induces high levels of literal belief in children" (Pollefeyt, 2021, p. 3), revealing the need to ensure excellence in teaching Scripture in the early years is urgent and flows into upper primary and secondary. Given that many Catholic education systems across Australia spend significant financial resources on obtaining this research data through Leuven University, there is an urgent need to allocate substantial resources and professional learning time to enable meaningful Scripture learning. The Bible itself identifies the same core challenge and responsibility arising through this research:

> Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" [31] He replied, "How can I, unless someone instructs me?" So he invited Philip to get in and sit with him (Acts 8:30-31, NABRE translation).

Transformative Scripture learning moves beyond literal belief to enable learners to uncover the treasures in the text to inform their choices about how to participate in bringing about God's dream for our world. Transformative learning fosters individual and collective responsibility, allowing learners to participate in their education actively (Singleton, 2015). This study presents compelling evidence that building robust foundations for transformative Scripture learning in the early years is consequential, achievable and highly beneficial. The evidence from this inquiry posits that when early years teachers become confident to teach Scripture well, learners and teachers can enjoy and value meaningful Scripture learning.

Finally, the determining factor for whether Scripture learning is meaningful is what the learners communicate. To conclude with an example, at the end of 2020, Rebecca asked her prep class to name the best thing they learned during their first year at school. Figure 66 captures the profound significance that Scripture learning had for one learner.

Figure 68

What is the Best Thing you Have Learnt in Prep?
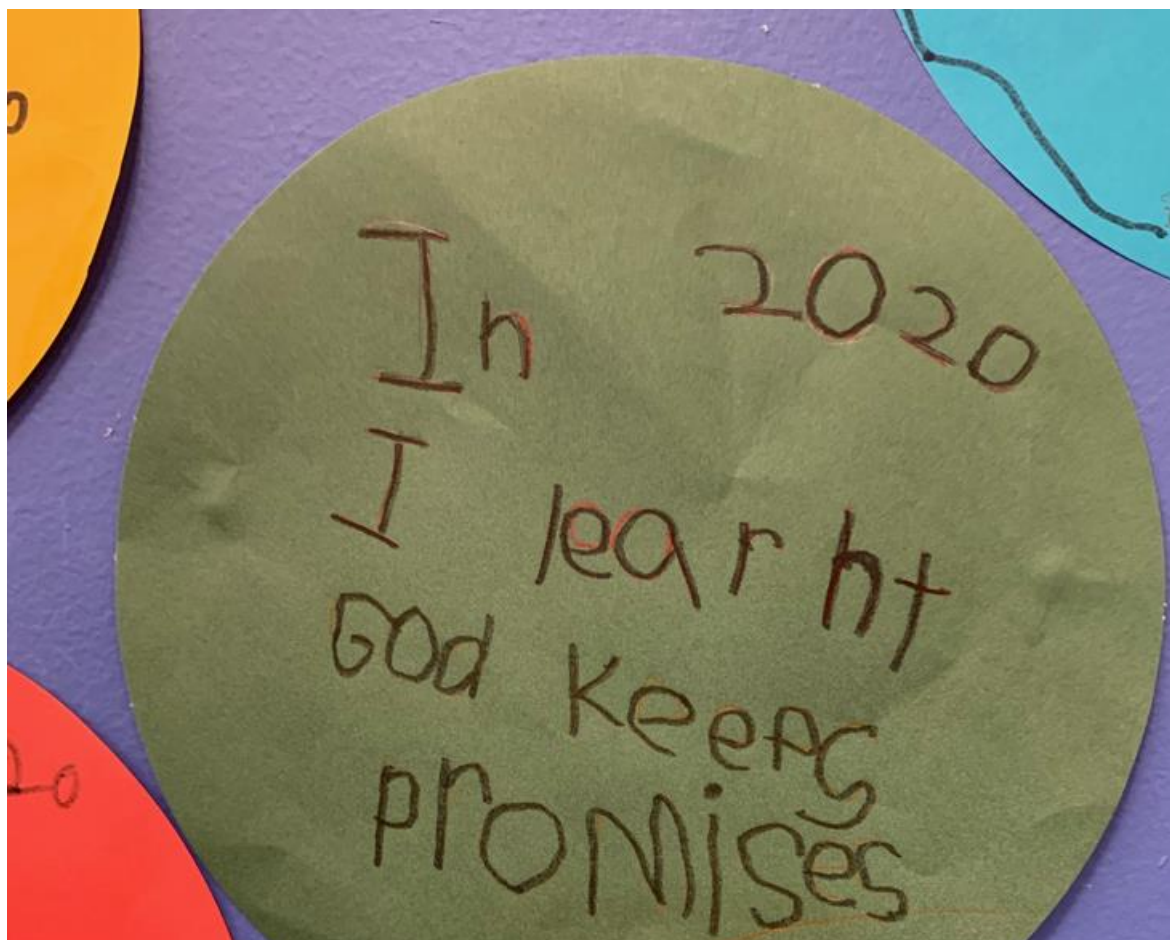
Suppose Catholic schools want to respond to the challenge of ensuring that learners from year four onwards have developed a genuine appreciation and enjoyment of Scripture learning and can interpret texts beyond the literal meaning. In that case, this research offers new insights for determining what is needed, as every generation needs to find ways to discover appropriate meaning from Scripture that nurtures and informs life. Effectively, this research contributes keys to understanding how Scripture learning can be engaging, meaningful and transformational in the first four years of primary school.

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APPENDIX A: The Guiding Principles

The Impact of the Guiding Principles on the Research Design

Guiding principles	Key elements of the research design
1. Capacity building and the growth of teacher self-efficacy is nurtured by having religious education leadership support.	Religious education leaders will need to: be part of the research team (to identify and support teacher needs) dialogue regularly with their principal to ensure research goals align with school goals, and there is ongoing leadership support for teachers
2. Capacity building and the growth of teacher self-efficacy is nurtured by having multiple ways of building social capital.	Religious education leaders will need to: discover ways that teachers in their school can work together to learn about Scripture and plan Scripture teaching, to build shared understandings and partnerships of trust The research design will need to: consider ways that all four schools can work together to learn from one another and build shared understandings and partnerships of trust
3. Capacity building and the growth of teacher self-efficacy is nurtured by equipping practitioners to experience success from the start of their research journey.	The research design will need to: Establish *teacher readiness to teach the text* prior to early years teachers engaging in pedagogical practice. (Design a tool that early years teachers can use during planning to gain key insights into the text and understand how the text supports the curriculum.) Enable participants to begin their research journey by exploring key areas where practice may readily deviate from theory and engage in dialogue about the implications for this study

Guiding principles	Key elements of the research design
4. Interventions need to reflect both theoretical perspectives and practitioner needs.	The research design will need to: Provide participants with key literature and build opportunities for dialoguing about the meaning of the literature to obtain insights relevant for the study. Create opportunities for participants to know the goals of the research
5. Interventions need to target solutions that are perceived to have the potential for high impact to address key challenge areas.	Involve participants in some level of analysis to identify needs and opportunities to listen to the experiences of practitioners Enable participants to build an understanding of DBR to identify ways to close the gap between theory and practice with each intervention Honour the wisdom of practitioners
6. Multiple ways of gathering and sharing data are required for the trustworthiness of findings and to cater to different ways participants will prefer to provide data and learn from one another.	The researcher will need to: Provide participants with secure online journals that can be accessed only by each individual and the researcher to ensure privacy Conduct interviews with participants in teaching or leadership groups to enable people to dialogue together and build on or confirm individual insights Visit early years teachers in their own contexts to observe practice and identify alignment or gaps between practice witnessed and research data gathered (keep field notes) Obtain documentation of pedagogy (including relevant planning; photographs of evidence of teaching; and work produced by participants.

Guiding principles	Key elements of the research design
7. To achieve high-impact interventions, the research team needs to engage in critical thinking processes that enable analysis and evaluation of the core causes and essential questions underpinning the problem investigated in the inquiry.	Begin the first session with each leadership team with a strategy that engages participants in rich, evaluative processes to ask: *Why is this happening? What is really happening? How do we know?* • Use the *5 Whys* strategy (Mind Tool Content Team) to investigate root causes of the problem investigated. • For the minor study use the strategy: *Which cup will fill first?*

APPENDIX B: Sample of Participant Information

University of Southern Queensland

Participant Information
for USQ Research Project
Early Years Teachers

Project Details

Title of Project:	Building capacity and self-efficacy in early childhood educators in the teaching of Scripture: A design-based inquiry.
Human Research Ethics Approval Number:	H19REA011

Research Team Contact Details

Principal Investigator Details	**Supervisor Details**
Beth Nolen	Dr Nicole Green
▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆	▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆
Telephone: (07) 61 7 3490 xxxx	Telephone: (07) 4631 xxxx
Mobile: 04xxxxxxxx	Mobile: 04xxxxxxxx

Description

This project is being undertaken as PhD research.

The purpose of this project is to explore ways that teachers can be supported to feel confident and competent in teaching Scripture to early years students.
This project aims to collaboratively work with early years teachers (P-3) to explore and develop strategies, processes and early learning environments that enable the teaching of meaningful Scripture to young children. Through collaboration the research will seek to discover what teachers find most challenging about teaching Scripture; what teachers need in order to overcome the challenges and what pedagogies can be utilised for the meaningful teaching of Scripture to impact on student learning and enable students to obtain meaning from sacred texts.

A maximum of five schools will be involved in this research, including the Assistant Principal Religious Education (APRE) from each school. Some schools may have virtually all of their early years teachers willing to participate in this research, and other schools may have just a few early years teachers who wish to be involved. There will be a

maximum of thirty people participating in the research, and this group of people will become 'co-researchers' learning and collaborating on this project together.

This study will be conducted through design-based research which aims to bring together theory and practice in order to bring about innovative teaching practice, and provide new information that others working in similar contexts can utilise.

Participation

This research requires early years religious education teachers who:
- are prepared to work with myself as a researcher, to partner in this research to trial particular strategies and pedagogies; collect evidence of student learning (this may be through photographs of student work samples; journal entry notes) and provide feedback;
- would like to be able to further build capacity to teach Scripture to early years students;
  will participate in the research with the mindset of being both a professional and a learner;
  view their participation in this research as a rare opportunity to receive high level support for the teaching of Scripture, and provide a teacher perspective into what early years teachers need in order to feel confident and competent to teach Scripture well;
- have the full support of their Assistant Principal – Religious Education (APRE) and Principal.

Early years teachers will be required to:

1. Keep an online journal (link provided by researcher) to record their thinking (questions, insights), successes and challenges along the way. It is envisaged this will take approximately thirty minutes a week.

2. Trial and pedagogical strategies / potential solutions (determined by the research team) to the research problem, during usual teaching time.

3. Work closely with their APRE through processes designed to build a professional collaborative culture and support their planning and teaching of Scripture, and to evaluate teaching of Scripture and impact of the potential solution trialled. This will also involve participating in professional learning opportunities provided and being prepared to give and receive feedback about your experience of teaching Scripture. The time available for this will depend on your local school context and procedures, as some schools may elect to build this requirement into release time for teachers and other schools may elect to meet after school. It is anticipated that strategies participants find effective for undertaking these tasks will become part of the research findings.

4. Collect relevant documentation (to provide to the APRE) of student learning and any evidence of how you are building capacity and self-belief (self-efficacy) in the teaching of Scripture. Photographs may be taken of student work (ensuring the student cannot be identified) or any appropriate evidence that is not available in digital format. It is envisaged this collection can be done throughout particular lessons or at the end of the week and will only require approximately ten minutes each week.

5. Liaise with other early years teachers to find strategies to support one another, including occasionally observing your colleagues teaching Scripture and providing feedback to assist one another to build capacity and increase confidence for teaching Scripture to early years students. The amount of time this requires will vary between individual teachers, according to the processes in place at your

school and your own interest and capacity for networking. Two hours a term would be considered the minimum amount of time for liaising with and supporting other early years teachers.

6. Be prepared to have colleagues or the researcher observe your classroom teaching of Scripture occasionally (to support your work and develop a strong collaborative team of co-researchers who work in partnership, and to enable the research data to be supported with clear evidence). The amount of times this happens will be determined by teachers in each school.

7. Meet with me (as a researcher) for a focus group interview, either in person or via video conference. This will take place only once a term, for thirty to sixty minutes, and only between one and four times for the duration of the research. Your consent to record these meetings will also be required, for all relevant data to be captured and enable me to ensure that important data is not being missed.

8. Consent to meetings being audio or video recorded in order for the dialogue to be transcribed and analysed to provide valuable data for this research. Please note that all meetings for this research project will be audio or video recorded, for the purpose of obtaining a transcript of the meeting that will enable the data to be analysed.

Participation in this research is voluntary and refusal to participate will not adversely affect you. Participation or non-participation will not adversely impact on your relationship with me (either in my research role or in my professional role of Education Officer – RE) or with access to services normally provided by Brisbane Catholic Education or the University of Southern Queensland. You may choose to withdraw from this research at any time.

Evidence from teachers will be collected by religious education leaders throughout the term, to bring to two meetings each term. The data generated from these meetings, plus the classroom observations and the interviews with teachers, will be analysed by myself to inform future directions for this research.

Expected Benefits

It is expected that educators will benefit from this research by having new knowledge emerge about what early years teachers need in order to know they are positively impacting on young children through engaging them in using sacred texts that are meaningful and appropriate.
- Participants would receive targeted support to achieve high quality teaching of Scripture. (The research will track what you need in order to teach Scripture well, and feel confident about your ability to enable students to gain appropriate meaning from the text.)
- Early years students would experience high level engagement in learning about Scripture, and grow in their ability to communicate how texts could be meaningful for their own lives.
Participants would be provided with different opportunities to grow their own knowledge and understanding of Scripture, and journey with others to discover pedagogies that are helpful for teaching Scripture to early years students. Participation in this study could be a highly significant and informative pathway for professional learning.

Risks

While there are no foreseen risks of harm from involvement in this research, there are general areas in which you need to be aware, which are documented below.

- There is a risk that some people may feel obligated to participate in this research or be coerced into participating. It is vital for the research that people only volunteer to participate if they personally desire to do so, and to ensure this happens participants will be required on the consent forms to explicitly agree that their participation is voluntary.

  In participating in this research there may be times when teachers are asked to try a new pedagogical practice or change their teaching in some way, and some people may not desire to make any changes. However, through the process of this design-based research, teachers will be a co-researcher whose voice will contribute to new insights into the research question and they will be kept informed at every step along the way about why changes are requested, and given support to trial new initiatives. Therefore, it is much less likely that teachers will feel disempowered or unwilling to trial new initiatives.

- At times some teachers may feel their knowledge or pedagogy skills are too low to contribute to the research. However, the trustworthiness of the research depends upon having teachers participating who are at varying degrees of confidence, as all perspectives are needed and offer valuable insights.

- Some participants may underestimate the time needed for involvement in this research (meeting with the APRE; collaborating with other colleagues; journal writing; evaluating teaching and learning), so to reduce the likely stress of this happening, all requirements are listed under 'Participation' on this Information Sheet. Most of what is required are all components of quality teaching and learning and therefore would be tasks teachers would usually do in their role. However, depending on the current school processes for working with the APRE for planning support and feedback, teachers may need to find some extra time for working closely with their APRE and other colleagues in this research and this may require creative thinking to find what will work within each school.

If at any time during your participation in this research you find uncomfortable or distressing feelings emerging, you will have confidential access to Assure Programs:
Phone: 1800 808 374
Email: info@assureprograms.com.au
Website: www.assureprograms.com.au
This is a free service funded by Brisbane Catholic Education and provided by registered psychologists.

Privacy and Confidentiality

This project will be carried out in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.

All comments and responses will be treated confidentially unless required by law. Supervisors of this doctoral study from the University of Southern Queensland will have access to the data, along with my supervisor from Australian Catholic University. The reason for this is to support the research journey and provide point in time feedback. All data collected during the research will only be accessible to the researcher, the three university supervisors and the participants using each particular online space (provided by the researcher).

Any data collected as a part of this project will be stored securely as per University of Southern Queensland's Research Data Management policy. The Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research outlines that data must be kept for a minimum of five years. However, due to the shortage of this type of data, the data will be kept for as long

as practically possible after that. The data will be stored securely online through qriscloud.org.au (which caters for Australian researchers). Consent forms are required to be kept for a minimum of fifteen years, and they will also be kept for as long as practically possible after that time, as the data collected may be used for future research purposes.

You will be unable to withdraw data collected through your participation in this research, but please note that this data is confidential and you will not be personally identified in any publishing of the data. If you do wish to withdraw from this project please contact me and also advise your APRE. Participants in this project will be provided with a summary of the research results, and if anyone withdraws from the research a summary of the research results can still be obtained by emailing this request to me.

Consent to Participate

You will need to complete the Consent Form to demonstrate your willingness to participate in this research.

Questions or Further Information about the Project

Please refer to the Research Team Contact Details at the top of the form to have any questions answered or to request further information about this project.

Concerns or Complaints Regarding the Conduct of the Project

If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the project you may contact the University of Southern Queensland Manager of Research Integrity and Ethics on +61 7 4631 2214 or email researchintegrity@usq.edu.au. The Manager of Research Integrity and Ethics is not connected with the research project and can facilitate a resolution to your concern in an unbiased manner.

Thank you for consideration of participating in this research project. Please keep this sheet for your information if you are interested in participating in this research.

APPENDIX C: Ethics Approval

Dear Beth

I am pleased to confirm your Human Research Ethics (HRE) application has now been reviewed by the University's Expedited Review process. As your research proposal has been deemed to meet the requirements of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007), ethical approval is granted as follows.

Project Title: H19REA011 - Building capacity and self-efficacy in early childhood educators in the teaching of Scripture: A design-based inquiry.
Approval date: 29/01/2019
Expiry date: 29/01/2022
USQ HREC status: Approved with conditions

(a)   responsibly conduct the project strictly in accordance with the proposal submitted and granted ethics approval, including any amendments made to the proposal;
(b)   advise the University (email: ResearchIntegrity@usq.edu.au) immediately of any complaint pertaining to the conduct of the research or any other issues in relation to this project which may warrant review of the ethical approval of this project;
(c)   promptly report any adverse events or unexpected outcomes to the University (email: ResearchIntegrity@usq.edu.au) and take prompt action to deal with any unexpected risks;
(d)   make submission for any amendments to the project and obtain approval prior to implementing such changes;
(e)   provide a progress 'milestone report' when requested and at least for every year of approval;
(f)   provide a final 'milestone report' when the project is complete.
(g)   promptly advise the University if the project has been discontinued, using a final 'milestone report'.

Additional conditionals of approval for this project are:

 (a)   Nil.

Please note that failure to comply with the conditions of this approval or requirements of the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research, 2018, and the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, 2007 may result in withdrawal of approval for the project.

If you have any questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to make contact with an Ethics Officer.

Congratulations on your ethical approval! Wishing you all the best for

success!

Kind regards,

Human Research Ethics

University of Southern Queensland
Toowoomba – Queensland – 4350 – Australia
Ph: 07 4687 5703 – Ph: 07 4631 2690 – Email:
human.ethics@usq.edu.au

APPENDIX D: Ethics Amendment

Dear Beth

The revisions outlined in your HRE Amendment have been deemed by the USQ Human Research Ethics Expedited Review process to meet the requirements of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007). Your project is now granted full ethical approval as follows.

USQ HREC ID: H19REA011 (v3)
Project title: Building capacity and self-efficacy in early childhood educators in the teaching of Scripture: A design-based inquiry.
Approval date: 29/01/2020
Expiry date: 29/01/2022
Project status: Approved with conditions.

The standard conditions of this approval are:

(a) conduct the project strictly in accordance with the proposal submitted and ethics approval, including any amendments made to the proposal required by the USQ HREC, or affiliated University ethical review processes;

(b) advise the USQ HREC (via human.ethics@usq.edu.au) immediately of any complaint or other issue in relation to the conduct of this project which may warrant review of the ethical approval of the project;

(c) make submission for ethical review and approval of any amendments or revision to the approved project prior to implementing any changes;

(d) complete and submit a milestone (progress) report as requested, and at least for every year of approval; and

(e) complete and submit a milestone (final) report when the project does not commence within the first 12 months of approval, is abandoned at any stage, or is completed (whichever is sooner).

Additional conditions of this approval are:

(a) Nil.

Failure to comply with the conditions of approval or the requirements of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) may result in withdrawal of ethical approval for this project.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact an Ethics Officer.

Kind regards

Human Research Ethics

University of Southern Queensland
Toowoomba – Queensland – 4350 – Australia
Phone: (07) 4631 2690
Email: human.ethics@usq.edu.au

APPENDIX E: Ethics Approval BCE

Catholic Education
Archdiocese of Brisbane
teaching · challenging · transforming

Ref: 324

12 February 2019

Ms Beth Nolen
PhD Candidate
School of Teacher Education and Early Childhood
University of Southern Queensland
Toowoomba QLD 4350

Dear Beth

The Brisbane Catholic Education Research Committee has considered your application to conduct the study titled *'Building capacity and self-efficacy in early childhood educators in the teaching of Scripture: A design-based inquiry.'* Approval to approach the principals of target BCE schools and seek their participation in your research was granted by the Research Committee on 12 February 2019.

Please note that participation in your research is at the discretion of the principal. You will need to provide the principal a copy of this approval letter as evidence that your research application has been endorsed by the Research Committee.

A condition of receiving this approval is that the following steps must be completed prior to commencing the research in school:
- applicant to meet personally with each principal or their nominee and seek their approval to proceed
- present this letter to the principal or their nominee.

As a staff member, you are expected to adhere to the BCE Code of Conduct at all times.

This approval is for schools administered by Brisbane Catholic Education only. Religious Institute schools within the Archdiocese of Brisbane are independent of Brisbane Catholic Education. You will need to directly approach the principal of these schools to secure involvement in your research project.

It is a requirement of all researchers to provide the following to Brisbane Catholic Education when the study is finalised:
1. a full research report
2. a one-page infographic highlighting the key findings of the research

Reference Number 324 has been allocated to your project. Please quote this when making contact with this office. If you have any further queries, please email research@bne.catholic.edu.au.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research project.

Yours sincerely

Dr Paul McQuillan
Chair
Research Committee
Office of the Executive Director
Brisbane Catholic Education Office
Archdiocese of Brisbane

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APPENDIX F: The Five Whys Activity

Group 1 Responses

Focus area: Developing capacity and self-efficacy in the teaching of Scripture.

1. Why are teachers not confident in the teaching of Scripture?
   - Doubt their abilities and worry about doing it wrong
   - Question their knowledge
   - Level of theological background
   - Not up to date with pedagogy

(Choose one response and formulate Question Two)

2. Why do teachers not have the knowledge required to teach Scripture well?
   - Their own personal experience is lacking (when they were at school)
   - Lack of PD provided
   - Lack of willingness or professionalism to upskill themselves

3. Why has there been a lack of PD in this area?
   - A lack of funding
   - Limited resources to allow students to access the text
   - Teacher background in easy-to-read information

4. Why are teachers finding it difficult to access teacher background that is user friendly?
   - Too much reliance on the Internet
   - The authors are academics and not teachers

5. Why are teachers placing so much reliance on the Internet?
   - Teachers are time poor and are used to *googling* everything.
   - There is no one *quick fix* Scripture website or resource for teachers to use.

Recommendations:
Finding and supplying a bank of rich resources for teachers to draw upon prior to teaching to build their capacity and understanding of the text.
Create a bank of resources.

Group Two Responses

Focus area: Developing capacity and self-efficacy in the teaching of Scripture.

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1. Why do teachers have low level knowledge about Scripture?
   - Education – knowledge limited or forgotten
   - Priority of funding for RE PD
   - Change of year levels
   - Own spirituality

(Choose one response and formulate Question Two)

2. Why is education / knowledge limited?
   - Different degrees / levels of education and ongoing professional development
   -

3. What PD do teachers have access to?
   - Scripture twilights, staff meetings, further post graduate study

4. How do we engage / encourage teachers to be part of this PD?
   - PD includes formation that activates knowledge and understanding

5. How can we ensure that PD is relevant and linked to specific Scripture?
   - Listen to teacher voice / needs.

Recommendations:
Use the 3T model and / or Scripture planning tool to ensure teachers feel confident in their knowledge and understanding in order to teach Scripture effectively.

Note. After each group presented their Five Whys responses, a discussion followed. Both groups quite quickly came to a consensus to identify that the Scripture planning tool was the most appropriate first intervention to follow through on the recommendation from each group.

APPENDIX G: Thematic Analysis Sample

Meeting Two for the Major Study

Themes and codes	Example quotes
Theme a:	
Insights into practice	We haven't done much at all. We've had a bit
Planning challenges	of an interesting week up here.
Scripture planning considerations	They understand the world behind the text, that's something that most of them are familiar with now. I think there's a few other questions around the text, like lepers and what that meant at that time that they might ask about. But as I say, it's also pedagogy
Pedagogy	because going deeper is a big thing for our team.
Teacher skills	So that was one of the things that our teachers also spoke about, was how can we unpack the Scripture and where can we go to get that information to make sure its reliable and accurate and helpful to everyone? That's where they are in their learning.
Teacher support for planning	(RE leader) was with us today for planning, and we were both trying to hold back because I could do this by myself, but we wanted to see what everyone else would say, and I think we were both

	pleased with how it started. And what we'd like to see happen next is to continue using it (Scripture planning tool).
Leadership needs	And I feel this pressure that I should know so much more than I do because we're considered the experts in our schools. And in many cases, I'm asked questions that I'm not confidently able to answer, and I've got to go away and find out things…

Theme b: Insights into theory and design

Impact of the intervention	We started planning a 3 week cycle. We're doing the creation story for the next 3 or 4 weeks so we used the tool and there were only 2 of us that were planning…but yeah, it was great, really useful.
Evidence of building social capital	And today we've really collaborated on this and even though I took a slightly back seat, the others were really into it, and I think that we could get a really great plan from it. Lots of ideas flying around, everyone involved.

Evidence of capacity building	So when I write the new one up in my lesson plan format – you look at the previous version and I'm hoping that you'll see that the second one will be much more Scripture-based. The other one feels airy fairy now!
The importance of understanding *why*	I have a concern about going into age-appropriate pedagogies without really doing some quality learning about *the why*. And then there are different ways that we can do that.

Note. Theme A: The insights into practice *master narrative* indicates that specifically focusing on building teacher knowledge and understanding of Scripture before planning from the curriculum built shared understandings and enabled deeper learning. Challenges arose in building Scripture understanding, leadership capacity and navigating planning, teaching and learning when interruptions occur. Theme B: The insights into the theory and design *master narrative* reveal the intervention contributed to building teacher confidence and positively changing practice. There is also evidence that theories are positively contributing to building stronger practice through working with team members to learn about Scripture and what informs practice.

APPENDIX H: Analysing the Shifts in Practice

Teaching Scripture	A compliance approach	A learner-focused approach
Common starting point and goal for planning	Goal: To complete documenting the unit of work Starting point: Teachers frequently asked: What activities can I use to teach this text?	Goal: To map a learning pathway (identifying major concepts to teach but not overplanning to leave space to respond to learners' needs and interests). Acknowledging the complexity of interpreting Scripture, teachers asked: What can *I discover* about the text to find meaning? *What* will enable my learners to *find meaning* in the text?
Teacher observations after exploring and learning about Scripture before teaching the text	Teachers described using the Three Worlds of the Text approach but found it challenging to teach Scripture, so they wanted resources to assist. As a result, the focus was on "activities that little kids could do around that particular Scripture" rather than "on the actual Scripture".	"Instead of having superficial ideas", the teacher carefully considered "going deeper and staying open-ended". "We were really able to get more into the Scripture and pull out deeper understandings". The teacher then "read the Scripture with new eyes and straight away had ideas".
Initial pedagogical decision making	A focus on keeping learners "busy" and occupied with learning.	A focus on what learners need. Two key questions: What does research show learners need for successful learning at this age? What have I learnt about the needs of each of my learners?

Teaching Scripture	A compliance approach	A learner-focused approach
Pedagogical decision-making	Focused on exposing learners to core texts. How will I use to activate learning? What resources can I use? What activities worked well last time? The 5 contexts for learning (*Early Years Guidelines*)	Became informed by learner needs and principles for teaching Scripture and RE: What pedagogies will we use to activate learning? How will I move the learning journey through different stages to reach deep learning?
Pedagogical decision-making throughout the teaching and learning cycle (unit of work)	Completion of most or all the unit of work prior to commencing teaching. Changes made throughout the unit were usually not documented. Consequently, teachers often reported that the unit of work was time consuming to produce but did not accurately reflect what and how they taught.	Became informed by a continual focus on learner needs. Multiple pedagogies used and documentation continued throughout the learning cycle to capture what was taught and how it was taught. Some teachers also kept Scripture story journals to document what occurred during the learning process, using photos and professional reflection to record key moments of the learning journey.
Teaching and learning focus	Predominantly teacher-led learning	Moved to a learner-centred focus
Teacher understanding of the place of Scripture in RE	Teachers taught Scripture by the end of the unit, wherever they thought it appropriate in the unit of work – being faithful to the curriculum). Teaching focused on providing knowledge of the text without critical thinking about the text.	Teachers taught Scripture taught first (before the curriculum), resulting in the natural coverage of the curriculum content on most occasions. However, sometimes content descriptions needed explicit inclusion to ensure full coverage of the R.E. curriculum.

Teaching Scripture	A compliance approach	A learner-focused approach
Teaching team approach to planning	Teachers may elect for one person to plan a religious education unit for other team members. Teachers added to the unit taught the year before, which could become so long it was not achievable.	Teachers provided with time to explore Scripture texts, dialogue about possible meaning and ways that their learners could find meaning from the text.
Teaching team focus	Teaching the year level (as a professional responsibility)	Building social capital (and professional capital built as a result)
Approach to assessment	Often considered at the end of a unit when teacher judgement needed to be made about each student's learning achievement.	Ongoing opportunities for assessment for learning and of learning occur throughout the unit of work.
Common teacher feedback about assessment	Assessment of RE is challenging. It is difficult to make a judgement between year level standard or Above or Well Above the year level standard.	"I could really hear the difference" (between learner's level of thinking). "For the first time I could clearly identify the difference…".
Common teacher requests for resources	Resources with *activities* for learners (so teachers gained ideas about *how* to teach the text)	Resources readily comprehended to assist teachers to interpret the text confidently.

Note. Observations and data came from planning with teachers and planning documentation, meetings and interviews with teachers and religious education leader.