

Grade 6 National Religious Education Test Report

0. Introduction

This test was offered to Catholic schools throughout South Africa. It aimed to encourage a better quality of teaching and learning in Religious Education in the schools, to signal the importance of assessment in Religious Education and to give participating schools an indication of their learners' state of religious knowledge. For practical purposes¹, the format was limited to multiple choice questions, which is, of course, only one possible assessment strategy.

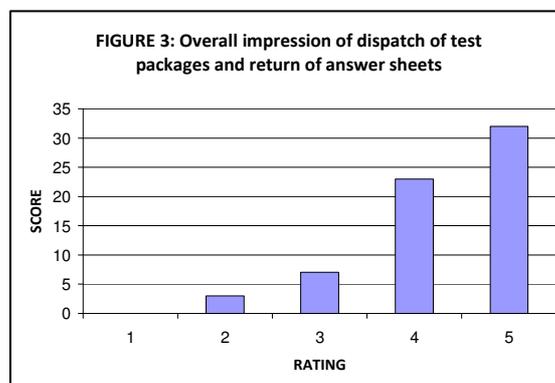
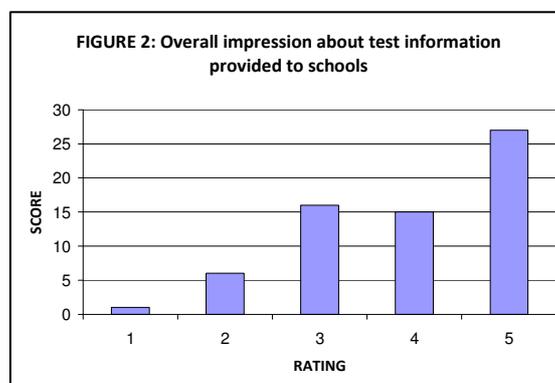
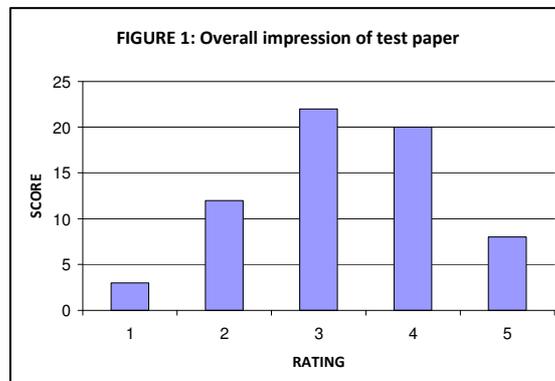
We thank the 87 schools who participated in this pioneering venture, and those who took the time to give us useful feedback². An analysis of this feedback forms the substance of this report. The strongest themes to emerge, together with some items we felt to be important, are presented below under the categories of 'affirmations', 'critiques', and 'suggestions'. 65 respondents completed the rating table questions. Graphs showing the distribution of responses for each area are provided in figures 1-3, where a rating of 1 is poor and 5 excellent..

1. Affirmations

There seemed to be consensus that the test was worthwhile and something that teachers would like to see happen again. A large number of respondents wrote positively that the test was 'challenging' and 'set a standard'. It was recognised that 'it required good preparation', and was 'thought-provoking' for both teachers and learners. It was seen as 'something new for learners' and a means for stimulating 'better teaching and learning' in Religious Education. Many affirmed the inclusion of different religions in the paper. Most were highly satisfied with the processes and logistics involved: the invitation to take part, registration procedure, information packs that went to schools, and dispatch and return of test papers. Many

¹ The marking of the 4671 scripts was done manually. It took approximately 2 minutes per script or 150 hours in total.

² 71 feedback forms and 1 letter were returned after the writing of the test.



expressed a high level of satisfaction with the layout of the paper and its multiple choice format. And a large number of respondents expressed the hope that this test would be presented again, and that similar tests would be developed for other grades across the primary school.

2. Critiques

Critical comment received tended to be concentrated in two areas: those of language and content. Many respondents – including ones highly satisfied with the test – raised one or both of these areas in relation to the level or standard of the test. This was generally thought to be ‘high’ and was also described as being ‘difficult’. However, in relation to content, there was diversity in the responses received. In addition, two smaller foci that emerged concerned those respondents who felt they needed better information on how to guide their learners’ preparation for the test, and some who raised concerns about the limitations of the multiple choice format of the test. We deal with each in turn, offering an outline of the issue as it emerges in the collected responses, but also inviting you to reflect on aspects of the matters raised.

2.1 Issues concerning language

Two issues surface in relation to language: the level of the language of the paper and the question of translation into African languages. We will reflect on these, but also offer a third aspect for your consideration: the distinctive character of language used in any particular learning area – here, Religious Education.

2.1.1 Which language should be used in the test?

The test was available in English or Afrikaans – the two officially recognised mediums of instruction from intermediate phase onwards (see Test information pack). However, many respondents asked that the test be made available in a number of African languages – particularly isiZulu. We recognise the sensitivity around language at home and school – in relation to debates concerning medium of instruction, but also in relation to a language as a repository of religion and culture, a way of seeing and framing lived experience and of offering an orientation towards this. We also acknowledge that recognition of the language a learner speaks can be an important source of affirmation for that learner’s identity. And provision of the test in one or two African languages is certainly something to be considered.

However, without foreclosing an important debate, we offer some thoughts and questions:

- How should the (Catholic) school work with national language policy? Has this ever been discussed in regional principals’ forums, for instance?
- Would participating schools be willing to pay an exam fee – to cover the administrative, printing, and translation costs of the test? If so, this would enable provision of the test in the school’s preferred language.

- Exam papers in any language have a certain formality in their style. In this sense, the challenge will still be to find an appropriate level of language for the learners in the test paper.

Interestingly, respondents from schools who chose the Afrikaans translation of the test did not raise the question of language level. However, the results for these schools (probably in common with learners for whom English is a first language in other schools) did not suggest that learners whose home language was the same as the medium of instruction gained any advantage from this. Indeed, the most significant factors in the performance of a school appear to be the extent to which that school had a strong Grade 6 learning programme in Religious Education *and* the extent to which this learning programme closely followed the sequence of lessons (1-32) in the *Lifebound Grade 6 Teacher Handbook* on which the questions were based.

2.1.2 The language level of the test

There was broad agreement from respondents that the language level of the test paper was too high – certainly for learners for whom English or Afrikaans was a second (or third) language, but this question was also raised with regard to first language speakers. Tests of this nature may, in future, benefit from the help of teachers whose practical experience with the language level of their learners will help to find an appropriate language level.

2.1.3 The question of a ‘religious literacy’ and field-based language

This issue is about the way that textbook, materials, or classroom language used by teachers and learners carry the concepts and terminology of any particular discipline or field. A number of disciplines (e.g. theology, biblical studies, philosophy, and so on) contribute to the learning area we call Religious Education. One way of looking at this in *Lifebound* is to consider the particular contribution each of the Religious Education processes make to the learning programme for each grade and the learning area (Grades R-7) as a whole. One purpose of Religious Education, then, is systematically to introduce learners to the language of religion and religious education. This provides learners with means to engage in listening, talking, thinking, and writing about both religion, in general, and their own faith journey. In this way, Religious Education provides a language that meets the intention of enabling students to learn *about*, *through*, and *for* religion (see ‘Aims of Religious Education’ in the *Lifebound Curriculum Guide*, p 9). It’s possible to argue that developing a basic religious literacy is a key task of the intermediate phase teacher of Religious Education – just as a similar task is required in the other learning areas (subjects) of the National Curriculum.

We raise this because the test results suggest that our learners have a low level of religious literacy. In addition, a few respondents expressed concerns about Catholic terminology in the test, and whether this disadvantaged other Christian learners or learners from other faiths. (This, and related comments, are discussed in 2.1 below.) Here, we would simply ask teachers to consider whether their materials, lessons, activities, and teacher-talk in the RE classroom are actively introducing a language about religion that will encourage religious literacy, and that will enable learners to talk about their own faith as well as the religions and worldviews of others. This challenge remains

the same for whichever language of teaching and learning (medium of instruction) is used for Religious Education.

2.2 Issues concerning content, form, and coverage

2.2.1 Content

While a number of respondents took issue with the content of the test, it is important to recognise that these voices are not in simple agreement. Indeed, they can be clustered into three rough constituencies:

- those describing the content as ‘too Catholic’, ‘too catechetical’, or too concerned with ‘doctrine’;
- those who said there was ‘too much focus on other religions’; and
- those who said there was ‘not enough on the bible.’

The following considerations are offered in response:

- There was a practical need to base the questions on material that all participating schools could have access to – *Lifebound*, Lessons 1-32, which significantly shaped the content and terminology found in the questions.
- The questions on other religions are from lessons that have a proper place in the overall conception of the *Lifebound* RE Programme. In addition, what *Lifebound* provides on culture and religion is largely in alignment with the requirements of Life Orientation. (See the Life Orientation Assessment Foci in the revised edition of *Lifebound* for more on this in each grade.) Low levels of learner knowledge in relation to the ‘other religion’ questions indirectly raises the question of whether this aspect of LO is being adequately addressed. Teachers could consider where cooperation between the RE and Life Orientation learning areas can be found.
- While we hold the concerns about the ‘Catholic’, ‘catechetical’, or ‘doctrine’ form and content of questions that some raised, this feature in the test could be reassessed in a more positive light: the distinctively religious vocabulary in these lessons can serve to promote the development of religious literacy among the learners (as raised in 2.1.3 above).
- With respect to biblical content we point out that 7 questions (14% of the test) were scripture based and that this represents a fair proportion considering the broad scope of the Religious Education curriculum required in Catholic schools. (See *Fostering Hope*, p. 15)
- Appendix 2 shows the breakdown of the test questions per curriculum process (Figure 4) and the national performance per process (Figure 5).

2.2 The multiple-choice format and time-allocation for the test

Some respondents felt that the multiple-choice format was too limiting, and that different forms of questions (true & false, gap-fill, mix-and-match) needed to be included. A few respondents queried the purpose of the test, particularly since it only tested ‘knowledge’ and would require ‘rote’ or ‘off-by-heart’ learning. Then, a few

respondents picked out certain questions which were considered problematic (See Appendix 1: Selected Questions). We also note, here, a comment that the use of negative phrasing should be avoided in multiple-choice questions, and another comment that the sample questions should be of a comparable standard to the test questions. Finally, some respondents felt that the time allocation for the test (given the number of questions involved, the provision of four alternatives, the language level of the questions, and the number of second language learners) should be increased.

We agree that future tests should have a more generous time allocation, and that the sample questions should be of a similar standard to those in the test paper.

With regard to the multiple choice format, we certainly agree that there are limits to what multiple-choice type exams (particularly at Grade 6 level) are able to accomplish. However, we faced very real practical constraints in the marking of these exams (note how long it took for the marking to be completed) – hence our choice of this format. We also recognise that a focus on knowledge at the level of ‘information’ is unfashionable, and that the ‘facts’ and ‘definitions’ questions typical of this format only occupy the first two levels on Bloom’s taxonomy. However, we might observe that it is precisely these two levels that are required if higher order thinking tasks involving analysis, synthesis, or critique are to be engaged in by learners. (For a recent appeal to the importance of memory in RE see Michael Chambers, ‘Memory in the Religious Education Classroom [Part 1: Historical Perspectives, Constructivism and Foundational Content]’, *Journal of Religious Education*, Vol. 58, No. 2, 2010, pp. 58-64; Part 2 forthcoming.)

We also hope that the Grade 6 test was not the only form of assessment done in RE in the participating schools, and we encourage them to experiment with a range of assessment possibilities. The *Lifebound* and LO Assessment Focus in the revised *Lifebound* Teacher Handbooks (Grades 1-7) provides guidance to teachers for a wide range of suitable school-based assessment activities in RE. This test can be seen as an addition to the Grade 7 Common Assessment Task previously developed (see http://www.cie.org.za/areas_of_focus/religious_education/curriculum/).

3. Suggestions

A number of suggestions followed critique offered on the test. Most of these were about the language level of the test and the availability of the test in other languages. Some asked for a better balance in areas of questioning. And many respondents asked for this exercise to be repeated, and for a test of this nature to be made available for other grades across the primary school. These items have already been discussed.

However, many suggestions also touched, in one way or another, on teacher involvement in the test process. Of these, most asked for test information to be available earlier – perhaps at the end of the year prior to the test to enable better planning of the learning programme to ensure better preparation on the part of their learners. Linked to this, were suggestions that teachers from participating schools be able to attend briefing meetings on the test, and, from a few, for workshops covering lesson and test content. Some proposed that teachers be involved in setting the test.

Appendix 1: Selected Questions

Here is a response to some of the feedback received concerning some of the test questions.

2 “more than one correct answer”

The answer is A and not B, since mistakes are not culpable acts. On the other hand sin is deliberate.

7 “too difficult”

A reminder that the major part of the test was based on the Grade 6 *Lifebound* lessons 1-32. These descriptions of the intentions of the four gospel writers are found verbatim in Lesson 5.

8 “more than one correct answer”

While there might be some argument here, the emphasis is on the ‘best description’. The answer is C. Some comments:

A Lazarus came back to normal human life – not resurrected life

B Jesus did not raise himself: his resurrection was his Father’s act (See Acts 3:15),

D The appearances of Jesus are post-resurrection, and not as ‘spirit’. Thomas could touch him and he had breakfast with his disciples.

9 “more than one correct answer”

The key here is the humanity of Jesus. He was like us in all things, except sin. C is the correct answer because Jesus, being fully human, learnt just as you and I do.

15, 16, 17, 18, 35, 38, 39 “too advanced”

This would probably not be general knowledge for the typical Grade 6 learner, it is true. However the questions come directly from the Grade 6 *Lifebound* lessons on which 80% of the test was based. This was communicated to schools in the information pack.

24, 43 “too complex; tricky & confusing”

This we feel, may be a valid criticism for this level. Perhaps we might have included a question with this structure in the sample test.

26 “more than one correct answer”

Again, the emphasis is on ‘best’. C is the best answer since ‘parish community’ is church. Some comments:

A We don’t necessarily have to be in church to pray as a family. Praying as a family can and does happen at church, but it is typically a home-based thing.

B and D may be motivations for going, but they are not the primary reason.

37 uncertain

Is Diwali a new year celebration or a festival of light? Both descriptions are true. There can, however, be no doubt about the correct answer here since the word ‘Hindu’ in A gives the clue.

45, 49 not in syllabus

Here you should note that the information pack contained the following statement: the test will consist of 50 multiple choice questions. 40 of these will be based on the first 32 Grade 6 lessons in *Lifebound*, while the remaining 10 will test general religious knowledge. Questions 41-50 tested general knowledge.

Appendix 2

Figure 4: QUESTIONS PER PROCESS

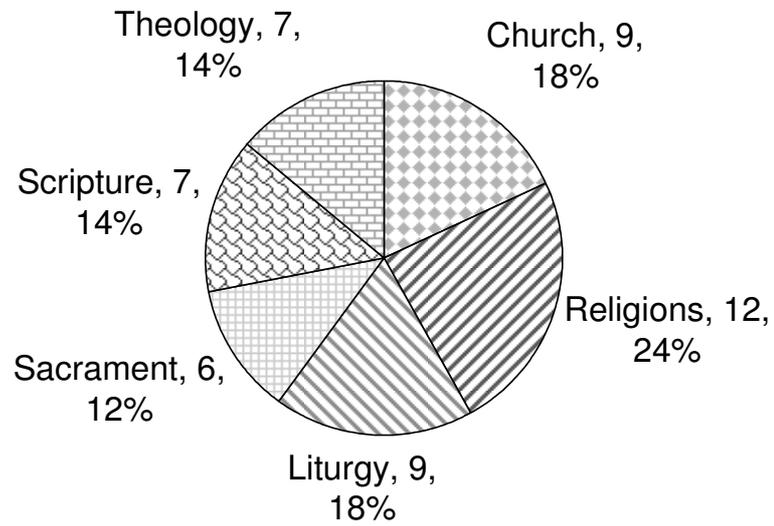


Figure 5: PERFORMANCE BY PROCESS

