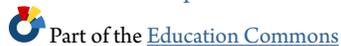Theses

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A longitudinal study of the personal and professional responses of recently assigned secondary Religious Education teachers to curriculum demands

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CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH DESIGN

4.1 Introduction

The focus of this study is recently assigned RE (RARE) teachers and their responses to the curriculum demands placed upon them in implementing the draft Perth Archdiocesan RE Course (PAREC). The purpose of this chapter is to describe how the study gathered data about these teachers, their professional and demographic backgrounds as well as their concerns and responses to the implementation of the new RE curriculum. As this research deals with the individual perceptions of RARE teachers about curriculum implementation, the research approach adopted was substantially qualitative.

The chapter begins by describing the context of the research design and its relationship to the research question. The section also includes a review of research designs that incorporate a mixture of qualitative and quantitative techniques to assist the researcher in clarifying the means of data gathering and analysis. Next, the chapter turns its attention towards describing the data collection strategies incorporated in the research design. Following this description of the survey instrument and the interview procedures is an outline of the process of identifying the participants for the interview phase of the research. The next section provides an account of the ethical considerations that needed approval. Lastly, the chapter presents a summary and a diagrammatic representation of the steps involved in the development of the research design.

4.2 The Research Design

The research centred around recently assigned RE teachers and permitted their responses without the encumbrance of pre-conceived theories, a form of inquiry known as symbolic interactionism (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2000, p.25). The benefit of emphasising such a qualitative research method, as distinct from a quantitative one, was that the qualitative method focused on the participants in a sociological or behavioural

context (Bogdan and Biklen 1992, p.9). Qualitative research serves four basic functions – to initiate, reformulate, refocus and clarify an understanding of the behaviour of a group (Hutchinson 1988, p.124). The approach employed in this study has a naturalistic paradigm that assumes that the explanation of events or experiences is as 'real' (or as true) for the participants as they express it (Guba and Lincoln 1988, pp.81–85).

The study also followed the premise that whatever research methods were used they should be guided by the type of research questions being asked rather than be '… slavishly committed to some particular method' (Shulman 1981, p.12). Hence, educational research as in this study was open to using a variety of research methods because education is 'empirical, interpretative, normative and critical' (Soltis 1984, p.5). The interrelationship of both qualitative and quantitative processes was recognition of the 'epistemological unity of educational research' and based on the 'pragmatic relations between theory and practice' (Walker and Evers 1988, pp.28 and 35). In this study, the research question dealt with the subjective realities of recently assigned RE (RARE) teachers in implementing an unfamiliar curriculum:

What are the perceptions of recently assigned secondary RE teachers about the demands of implementing the draft Perth Archdiocesan Religious Education Course?

Using the model of curriculum implementation (Fullan 2001) – use of instructional resources, appropriateness of teaching approach and understanding of underlying curriculum principles – three subsidiary questions were developed. These were:

1. *What are the perceptions of recently assigned secondary RE teachers about the usefulness of instructional resources from the PAREC in their classroom teaching?*

2. *What are the perceptions of recently assigned secondary RE teachers about the appropriateness of the teaching approach conveyed by the draft PAREC in their classroom teaching?*

3. *What are the perceptions of recently assigned secondary RE teachers about supporting the curriculum principles underpinning the PAREC in their classroom teaching?*

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Later in the study as new data emerged, there was a re-examination of the primary research question and the development of an additional subsidiary question:

> 4. *What perceptions do recently assigned secondary RE teachers possess about the interplay between their personal and professional formation and the demands of implementing the draft Perth Archdiocesan Religious Education Course?*

Therefore, qualitative research methods offered a useful means of connecting the subsidiary research questions to the processes for gathering and analysing the responses from the participants.

The way in which RARE teachers interpreted the subjective realities of curriculum implementation was significant to the success of coping with the curriculum exigencies and for sustaining their confidence in teaching the learning area. The interpretivist approach used in this study drew upon the spoken and written word of RARE teachers to communicate their personal and professional experience when curriculum development decisions had relied upon second-hand anecdotal evidence about these teachers (Chapter 2, p.46). The participants themselves suggested the reasons for their actions, behaviours, and perceptions. This became the 'raw' data for analysis and during the study, distinctive patterns, or themes began to emerge. These themes allowed a comparison with and review of other research.

The research work of Fuller (1969) and Veenman (1984) into the concerns of neophyte teachers is a good illustration of such an approach. Using survey and indepth interviews, Fuller (1969) was able to gather data about how the teachers felt about their experiences of teaching and how these experiences influenced their perceptions over time. From the data she collected in the surveys, distinctive patterns of concerns emerged and were explored further in the interviews (Chapter 3, pp.71-72). Veenman (1984) also used survey techniques to gather data from beginning teachers about their perceptions of teaching. From his data, Veenman was able to discern particular themes or issues that were uppermost in the minds of these teachers (Chapter 3, p.72). One of the purposes of surveys in research is to establish, at a certain time, a knowledge base about a target group and to identify key issues or themes as well as possible relationships between data

categories. To establish a database of the target population of RARE teachers in WA Catholic secondary schools, the survey instrument was an important strategy for the collection of baseline data for this study. The knowledge gained from surveys is useful in a number of ways. Three significant ways are described below.

Firstly, baseline data can be used to inform decision-makers about a particular cohort of teachers where limited data exists about these teachers. Hanlon (1989) used such an approach in his study of RE teachers (Chapter 3 p.97) and so did Astley, Francis, Burton and Wilcox (1997) as described previously in Chapter 3, p.83. Astley et al (1997) developed a questionnaire with items having a 7 point rating scale to assess how 27 different methodological components achieved the five aims of RE from the Model Syllabuses issued by the British School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA). This questionnaire was mailed to 207 secondary schools in the north of England. They received 210 responses from 125 schools (60.4% of the target schools) that they believed was a representative sample. Quantitative techniques were used also to analyse the data from the responses (Astley et al 1997, p.173).

Another way of using surveys is to conduct a series of them and detect the changes in attitude over time. Flynn (1975, 1979, 1985, and 1993), and Flynn and Mok (2002) investigated the religious and educational influence of Catholic schools on secondary students in New South Wales. Flynn and Mok (2002) surveyed 8,310 Year 12 students and their parents and teachers across New South Wales and compared the findings of this survey with data collected in previous works by Flynn (1975, 1979, 1985, and 1993). As a result, they were able to identify the factors that contributed to the religious development of students and, because of the nature of the longitudinal study, how the importance of these factors changed over time (Chapter 3, p.95).

A third use of surveys is to use them as a contextual basis upon which to explore further the significant issues in finer detail. The survey results provided both issues to examine and a basis from which to derive a sample group that typically reflected concerns for these issues. The survey becomes a context for more indepth studies as illustrated by Leavey, Hetherton, Britt and O'Neill (1992). Leavey et al (1992) studied the quality of faith development and formation among young Catholic women according to the faith

development theory of James Fowler. They used a nested case study approach to conduct an indepth examination of the faith development of a small number of adolescents from a representative group. A comparatively large but manageable sample was identified and its members invited to complete a questionnaire. From this questionnaire, responses were coded and defined according to pre-conceived categories of 'faith-types'. From each category, one person who typified that category was invited to participate in a series of on-going indepth interviews. The transcripts of these interviews were analysed to draw out a profile of that particular 'faith-type'. In using this technique, Leavey et al (1992) concluded that the religious development of young people needed the 'sponsorship' or 'mentorship' of adults such as teachers.

Bezzina, Chesterton, Johnston, and Sanber (1993) demonstrated how the combination of qualitative and quantitative research techniques can be mutually enriching. They investigated the evaluation practices of RE teachers in the Archdiocese of Sydney. The design of the study wanted to:

> yield generalisable results and … to depict in some detail the reality of the evaluation of religious education curriculum for particular teachers in particular schools. To this end, a combination of interview, survey and case study methodologies was chosen.
>
> (Bezzina et al, 1993, p.103)

They conducted their study in three phases. The first phase was composed of a series of interviews with a small group of RE teachers who volunteered to respond to the questions of the researchers. These interviews were thematic and conducted on a loosely structured basis. From these interviews, they used teacher perceptions about RE evaluation as a focus for the second phase. In the second phase, RE teachers from Catholic secondary schools in Sydney completed a questionnaire. The selection of schools from a stratified random sample occurred based on school size and region categories. The questionnaire included rating scale items for statistical analysis. From the responses to the questionnaire, there were three schools chosen based upon the range of responses received in phase two and their willingness to continue to participate in the study. These three schools became case studies for further investigation in the third phase. The case studies were also useful in comparing the questionnaire responses with

the perceptions of those interviewed in phase one to check the consistency and coherence of the data.

The studies of Leavey et al (1992) and Bezzina et al (1993) demonstrated the benefits of using a mixed method approach – using both quantitative and qualitative research techniques. Their works were congruent with the view of Shulman (1981) in using a research approach that combines quantitative techniques that maximise the '… generalizability of the findings to the widest possible population' with qualitative techniques that portray the '… workings of circumstances that differ dramatically from what typically presents itself in the "natural" functioning' of phenomena (Shulman, 1981, p.11). Leavey et al (1992) and Bezzina et al (1993) used these techniques to study the behaviour and perceptions of their subjects. Apart from the gathering of quantitative data, Flynn (1975, 1979, 1985, 1993 and with Mok 2002) also included qualitative data such as responses to open-ended questions. He drew upon the responses to these questions to complement the statistical data. This research project also used the survey as a data gathering technique and included opportunities for participants to respond to open-ended questions.

4.3   Data Collection Techniques

In this research project, there was a particular mixed method approach employed. A quantitative approach helped establish a context, then a qualitative approach was emphasised in the presentation of the findings. Initially, the study relied upon a survey to establish a data baseline and applied this data as a context for an indepth examination of the issues recently assigned RE teachers perceived as important to their teaching of the draft RE Units. Furthermore, the survey helped to define the target population from which the selection of a purposive sample was possible. This sample was characterised as a group of RE teachers whose responses reflected the range of typical responses in the survey (Leavey et al 1992). In this sample, there were participants who reflected the average of responses to items in the survey and there were participants who reflected the 'outliers' of responses. As a result, the study moved attention from the target population to the sample cohort under the assumption that further examination of the experiences of the sample cohort was transferable to the experiences of the target population. The study

focused on exploring what RARE teachers held in common, as direct knowledge about this group was limited. Furthermore, closer study of the differences between the categories of RARE teachers was to become the subject of a recommendation for later investigation (Chapter 9, p.345).

Guided by the findings that emerged from the survey, the next step was to examine in closer detail the perceptions of the sample cohort in implementing the draft Units. An interview approach was used because interviews have the potential to '… go deeper into the motivations of respondents and their reasons for responding as they do' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2000, p.268). There was an expectation that complex and personal concerns could have a significant bearing on the perceptions of the changes recently assigned RE teachers experienced, personally and professionally, in implementing the draft Perth Archdiocesan RE Course (PAREC).

Interviewing teachers in the first years of teaching RE about their perceptions of implementing RE curricula in the classroom is not new. Engebretson (1997) reported using this approach with her research of novice RE teachers and their experiences of teaching Religious Education. She was able to describe how these teachers envisioned teaching RE and provided an opportunity for them to reflect on their subsequent experiences of teaching in the learning area. Engebretson concluded that unless novice RE teachers developed a coherent understanding of the pedagogical and theological aims of RE, then the experience of teaching RE would be disheartening (Chapter 3, pp.95-96). Likewise, this study explored this significant aspect of curriculum implementation and whether recently assigned RE teachers in WA had similar experiences and if they changed their beliefs about the purposes of RE teaching.

Interviews also allowed the possibility for unexpected responses to emerge (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2000, p.268). In this study, it was possible for significant findings to come to the fore that, according to the practice of qualitative research, would mean a re-examination of the primary research question. Recently assigned teachers experienced not only changes in teaching practice in response to implementing the draft Units but also significant changes in their motivation towards teaching Religious Education. As changes were emerging, the research project had the flexibility to become a longitudinal

study to track these changes and to explore further, the motivation of the RE teachers for teaching in this learning area. Longitudinal studies that track changes in perceptions about RE curricula are also not new. Flynn (1975, 1979, 1985, 1993) and Flynn and Mok (2002) were able to track the changes in attitudes towards RE by students, principals, teachers and parents over a substantial period (p.95). This study, too, conducted more than one round of interviews. These interviews explored the changes in personal and professional responses of the sample cohort to the ongoing and possibly intense demands of implementing the draft PAREC (see Section 4.5 'First Round of Interviews, p.127 and Section 4.6 'Second Round of Interviews', p.133).

Semi-structured interviews offered greater benefits to the research than what could be achieved by another survey or approach (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2000, p.269). Through the interview, participants were able to reflect on and discuss their perceptions about implementing the draft RE Units in greater depth. They had more time (than in the case of the survey) to consider their perceptions and feelings towards their RE teaching. This was an important part to understanding the rationale of the recently assigned teachers for managing the implementation process.

As a result, an indepth study developed and insights emerged about the teaching practice of recently assigned RE teachers using the PAREC documents. As a form of mixed method research with a qualitative emphasis, the study used a variety of methods such as document analysis, surveys, and indepth interviews to gather data. These methods were used together to increase the legitimacy and dependability of the findings. The following sections describe the development and execution of these research methods.

4.4 Survey Instrument

This section describes the instigation of the survey instrument to collect the initial data for this study. Firstly, it describes the preliminary analysis of RE curriculum documents using the three dimensions of instructional resources, teaching approach and underlying curriculum principles. Secondly, this analysis became the basis for the development of the pilot survey instrument that was then trialled and modified. Thirdly, there is a discussion of the process for distributing this modified survey to schools as well as describing the manner of collecting and collating the data from the survey.

4.4.1 Preliminary Document Analysis

Before the research collected data, a context for studying the perceptions of recently assigned secondary RE teachers was established. A preliminary document analysis of the draft PAREC and related documents, for example, the *Draft Accreditation to Teach RE Inservice Participants' File* (CEOWA 1997b) was conducted using the dimensions of curriculum implementation (Fullan 2001). This analysis indicated what the PAREC documents make available to RE teachers by way of instructional resources, teaching approach and pedagogical and theological principles. Of assistance to this analysis was the examination by Lenihan (1994) of the predecessor of PAREC, the *Perth Archdiocesan Guidelines for Religious Educators* (PAGRE). The examination of the underlying principles and themes within PAGRE revealed an emphasis upon published Vatican II conciliar and post conciliar documents from *Gravissimum Educationis,* in 1965, through to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* in 1994.

4.4.2 Developing the Pilot Survey

The information collected from the document analysis of the PAREC provided a basis for a survey of the target group of RE teachers. Other sources, such as the findings of the 1994/95 Pilot RE Project by the CEOWA/CSPA working party, were useful also in the construction of the survey. The purpose of the survey design was to assist the researcher in gathering preliminary data about how recently assigned secondary RE teachers implemented the PAREC as part of their classroom teaching. Specifically, the survey explored how these teachers implemented the instructional resources and teaching approach of the PAREC and their understanding of the pedagogical and theological principles underlying this RE curriculum.

A pilot survey was developed the previous school term before the administration of the final survey to recently assigned RE teachers. The purpose of the pilot survey was to test the quality of the question items and the ease of the completion of the survey (Ary, Jacobs and Razavieh 1990, p.422). The pilot survey was administered to a selected group of 25 experienced and trained RE teachers. In this survey, some of the rank order items had limited choices to evoke additional alternatives from the sample group of respondents (Ary, Jacobs and Razavieh 1990, p.423). In the final survey, ranking items

were limited in keeping with the advice of Ary et al (1990, p.425) that 'six options …
becomes too difficult to make comparisons'. However, respondents felt that a voluntary
'other' option should be retained. Respondents had the opportunity also to comment
upon the efficacy of the questions, the format, and duration of the survey as well as offer
advice about how best to administer the survey to a wider group.

Some modifications to the survey were necessary because of the feedback and responses
from teachers. Firstly, there was a reduction in the number of questions and the
placement of easier questions related to demographic and professional background
towards the end of the survey. The feeling was that the survey should not take more than
twenty minutes if the survey was to be completed during a RE department meeting.
Furthermore, if the administration of the survey occurred at the conclusion of the
working day, then easier questions in the last part of the survey would help avoid the
teachers becoming tired or bored. In addition, there would likely be less reluctance to
provide personal and professional information if left at the end (Ary et al 1990, p.426).
Secondly, respondents suggested that the majority of survey items should remain in the
affirmative to avoid confusion in responses when there was a mixture of positive and
negative responses. However, a 'run' or sequence of positive or negatives responses was
considered appropriate as in the case of items 7 to 15 in the section on teaching approach
(Appendix 5, p.357). Thirdly, the wording of some items seemed cumbersome and
overly jargon laden; the recommendation was to simplify these items as much as
possible. This recommendation particularly applied to the section on the understanding
of the teachers about the underlying RE curriculum principles in the draft PAREC. The
feeling was that this section should focus on the responses of the teacher to religious
commitment in RE and their understanding of the aims of the learning area.

Through the pilot survey, the researcher was able to ascertain whether the questions
were relevant to the target teacher population and whether they were likely to evoke
information that addressed the problem and the research questions. Such a pilot survey
allowed the researcher to define the parameters of the statistical data to be collected.
However, there was the possibility that the perceptions of this pilot group may be
different from those of the target population. Therefore, a sample of five recently
assigned RE teachers was approached to trial the appropriateness of the survey items

after the pilot phase. The modified questions were then delivered to the target teacher population as part of the survey (Appendix 5, pp.357-364). The next section describes the procedure for conducting the survey.

4.4.3   Conducting the Survey

For the purposes of this study, the secondary Catholic schools approached were those implementing the PAREC Units of Work within the Archdiocese of Perth and the Dioceses of Bunbury and Geraldton. This decision occurred after consulting with the Director of the CEOWA and the Director of Religious Education (Appendix 1, pp.349-350). A letter was sent to Secondary Principals in these schools outlining the nature of the study, its purpose and how the data was to be collected (Appendix 2, pp.351-352). The letter requested permission for the researcher to approach the Coordinator of Religious Education (REC) and recently assigned RE teachers about the study. Principals had the opportunity to reply to this request within the fortnight. The researcher was available by email, telephone or where possible, in person, to explain further the details of the study to the Principal, RE Coordinator and others seeking clarification and reassurance. Ten days after the posting of the letter, those Principals who had not replied were contacted by phone, and permission was sought to approach, in the first place, the RE Coordinator within the school and later, recently assigned RE teachers.

Once the Principal had given permission, the RE Coordinator was contacted by phone and explained the purpose of the research. At this time, the researcher made an inquiry as to the number of recently assigned RE teachers in the school who did fit the criteria of the target population. The RE Coordinator either gave an immediate response on the phone or given a week to reply either by phone or email to follow up the inquiry. This reply formed the basis for the number of surveys to be sent with an attached letter (see Appendix 3, pp.353-354) to the RE Coordinator for distribution to recently assigned RE teachers. The Appendices also contains the letter and survey distributed by the RE Coordinators to recently assigned RE teachers (see Appendices 4 and 5, pp.355-364).

The RE Coordinator handed out the survey document to those recently assigned RE teachers who wished to participate. Each survey document had a one-page covering

letter addressed to the prospective participants explaining the survey and the survey items. The survey included a code to identify schools and participants while maintaining the confidentiality of responses. The Archdiocesan or Diocesan region became the basis for the school code and remained confidential to the researcher. The source of the participant code came from the day and month of the birth-date of the participant and remained confidential as well. Later, selected birth-date codes were used to identify a much smaller sample of the target population surveyed for the interview phases of the research. As a result, the survey responses of participants remained anonymous to the researcher. While the researcher knew which school the responses came from, at this point, only the RE Coordinator who administered the survey had access to the individual respondents.

Participants were invited to complete the survey within a week. As a guide, participants were informed that the survey would take approximately 20 to 25 minutes to complete. Once they completed the survey, participants placed it into an envelope provided by the researcher via the RE Coordinator. The RE Coordinator was encouraged to collect the completed surveys in the sealed envelopes and place them into a large return-addressed envelope provided by the researcher. If after a week, RE Coordinators had not returned the surveys, a reminder letter, facsimile or email was sent to encourage participants to return the surveys by the end of that week. If by the end of this third week RE Coordinators had not returned the surveys then the researcher contacted them by phone and endeavoured to have participants complete the survey at a suitably arranged time. The aim was to obtain a return response of more than 65% of participants and a response rate of more than 80% was deemed excellent (Anderson 1990, pp.203–204; Greeley, McCready, and McCourt 1976, p.19). In this study, a very good return response of 73% was achieved (Table 5.2, p.157).

4.4.4 Procedure for the analysis of responses

The survey responses were recorded and analysed statistically using the *Statistical Package for Social Sciences* (SPSS) version 7.5 (SPSS Inc. 1997). The scores to each Likert scale item in the survey were collated and the average score and standard deviation for each item was calculated. Separately, responses to open-ended questions in the survey were transcribed in full, and later were analysed for common themes or topics using content analysis (Cohen and Manion 1994, pp.55-56). Further statistical analysis considered parametric assumptions (Wiersma 1995, p.372-273) about the data. A comparison of mean scores across teacher sub-groups was conducted according to demographic and professional variables. A one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and Post Hoc test (Scheffé) was used for determining whether and what significant differences in responses existed between sub-groups of teachers. The ANOVA was 'used to determine whether there is a significant difference between two or more means at a selected probability level [*p*-value]' (Gay and Airasian 2003, p.467), in this case, the *p*-value was based on a two-tailed test set at 0.05. The Post Hoc test (Scheffé) of serial comparisons was chosen as a conservative estimation of Type II errors, errors in 'failing to reject a false hypothesis' (Wiersma, 1995, p.371). A Post Hoc test allows 'multiple comparison procedures to be used to determine which means are significantly different from which other means' (Gay and Airasian 2003, p.471). Again, a *p*-value of 0.05 was set to determine the level of significance. As a result of this analysis, particular traits emerged that described subgroups within the larger survey sample according to the three categories of instructional resources, teaching approach and underlying principles. Furthermore, the analysis presented a range of teacher perceptions about implementing the draft PAREC. These traits are discussed in Chapter 5 (p.156).

4.5 First Round of Interviews

The survey provided contextual data from which to identify a sample group and to develop a set of interview questions exploring the experiences of the recently assigned teachers. This section focuses the procedures for instigating the first round of interviews and the development of the interview questions. The intention in the first round of interviews was to explore more deeply how these teachers, with such diverse

professional and demographic backgrounds, related their perceptions and their experiences of implementing the draft PAREC.

By using the results from the survey as the basis for the first round of interviews, participants had a perspective from which to consider their own responses. Interviewer and interviewee were able to have a consistently focused conversation (albeit, initiated by the interviewer) around semi-structured questions (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2000 p.269, p.271). Furthermore, this context reduced concerns about reliability and bias. The survey provided the context for the interviews and the responses from the participants were compared with the responses from the survey. Since the questions emerged from the results of the survey, the integrity of the interviewer was enhanced.

4.5.1   Interview Procedure

The use of semi-structured interviews provided further details about the teaching practice and understandings of sample participants within each category. During the interviews, participants were asked to explain in their own words three aspects of their teaching. These three aspects are now discussed.

Firstly, how they used the instructional resources in the Units of Work; secondly, how they described their teaching approach and thirdly, how they evaluated their teaching practice in terms of their understanding of the theological and educational principles underpinning the PAREC. The researcher also made field notes during the interview about points raised during the interview or observations of the temperament and interest of the interviewees. The interviews were recorded on a mini-cassette recorder, and later transcribed by the researcher. As a validation procedure, copies of the interview transcripts were given to the interviewees for clarification. If changes to the transcript were needed, due to an error in transcription, then the change was made. If due to a change of perception (such as, a negative remark to a positive remark), then the original comment was retained and the change of perception was noted for clarification in the second round of interviews (Chapter 7, p. 247).

4.5.2   Development of the Interview Questions

The schedule of interview questions (Appendix 9, pp.371-373) was developed from the results of the survey. Each question was related to an aspect that emerged from the categories of curriculum materials, teaching approach, and underlying principles. These questions were trialled with a small group of experienced and inexperienced religious educators. Two issues emerged, firstly, to structure the questions around significant findings from the survey; and secondly, to provide an opportunity for interviewees to relate their own personal experiences where possible. As a result, the interview questions provided a structure for interviewer and interviewee to follow and yet allow the interviewee to reflect and comment on their concerns and responses to the implementation of the draft PAREC.

Question 1:

Refer to an RE Unit you taught last term. Before you started, what considerations were uppermost in your mind about teaching this Unit to your students?

In the survey, respondents were concerned about the time for preparation and familiarizing themselves with the content of the Units. This question intended to 'break the ice' between interviewer and interviewee by focusing on a practical teaching question. The question also explored what priorities were uppermost for these teachers in preparing their lessons.

Question 2:

Many teachers indicated that they used the Mastersheets and the Student Book frequently in their lessons. Why do you think this is the case? How do you feel about using these materials?

Respondents in the survey indicated they frequently used the Mastersheets and Student Book. This question sought to explore why recently assigned RE teachers relied on the Mastersheets and Student Book, what changes they made in the use of these resources, and how they justified these changes.

Question 3:

A number of teachers commented that the curriculum materials in the Units should be matched or modified to the background or experiences of students. Why should this be the case? How do you respond to the view that such an approach avoids students learning about Catholic beliefs and practices?

Survey responses indicated teachers preferred a student-centred approach but found making links between the life experiences of students and faith understandings in the Units were difficult to do. This question explored how recently assigned RE teachers used this teaching approach and how they attempted to make links between the experiences of the students and the content of the draft Units.

Question 4:

A number of teachers found linking students' experiences with the Gospels difficult. Why would that be the case? Should recently assigned RE teachers make more use of the Scriptures in their lessons? Please explain your response.

In the survey, respondents reported that they found linking student experiences with the Gospels was a difficult task to do. On the other hand, they indicated their preference for student-centred approaches to their teaching. The intention of this question was to explore why teachers have difficulties with using Scripture and what they did to cope with the situation.

Question 5:

A number of teachers indicated that organising liturgies was difficult. What difficulties are they referring to here? Why do think many recently assigned RE teachers find organising class liturgies difficult?

Recently assigned RE teachers reported they had difficulties in organising liturgies even though they were supportive of being involved in such activities. Like the previous question, this question explored why they have these difficulties and how they coped with the situation.

Question 6:

Many teachers mentioned that developing social justice and tolerance for others was the most important aim of RE. How do you feel about this being the most important aim? What do you expect your students to have achieved by the end of a RE Unit and why?

There were diverse responses in the survey about the aims of Religious Education. By taking the resultant highest priority from the survey, the intention here was to clarify the understanding of the teachers about the aims and expectations in RE for students.

Question 7:

Can you describe for me the principles you follow or the vision you have in mind about the teaching of RE?

This question explored the personal vision or perceptions of teachers about teaching Religious Education. In the survey, many respondents saw RE as fulfilling a catechetical task rather than an educational one.

Question 8:

How did you come to follow these principles (or vision)? What influences were significant to you in developing your understanding of these principles (or this vision)?

A follow up question to Question 7, the intention here was to investigate the personal and professional bases teachers relied upon in developing their philosophy of Religious Education.

Question 9:

Many teachers commented that having a sufficient professional background and strong faith witness was important to teaching RE. What would you like to see happen in the future to the formation of RE teachers?

Two key aspects to emerge from the survey about RE teaching were the importance of prior tertiary study and the possession of a strong faith commitment. This question explored the extent to which recently assigned teachers needed these requirements themselves.

4.5.3 Analysis of First Round of Interviews

After the interviews were conducted, the recordings were transcribed then collated and coded using the *QSR NUD•IST* version 4.0 (N4) computer software program (QSR International 1996) into the three categories of instructional resources, teaching approach and underlying principles. This 'open coding' process was used and the identification of patterns or themes was possible (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh and Sorensen 2006, p.492). A comparison and analysis of these coded themes called the 'constant comparative method' led to further recoding and created a series of generic themes that became the basis for the findings of this round of interviews (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh and Sorensen 2006, p.499). The generic themes tend to have three essential characteristics, namely, recurrence, linkage and explanation of the data (Hutchinson 1988, p.133). The generic themes are those that are identified frequently within the data, linked the data together and explained differences that occur across the data. Furthermore, the aggregation of data into these themes minimised the occurrence of 'discrepant data' or data that did not fit well with the themes identified (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh and Sorensen 2006, p.499). The findings to emerge from the interviews were reported under these themes. The researcher was cognisant of the interplay between the presentation of data and its interpretation:

> In qualitative data the data analysis ... is almost inevitably interpretive, hence the data analysis is less a completely accurate representation (as in the numerical, positivist tradition) but more of a reflexive, reactive interaction between the researcher and the decontextualized data that are already interpretations of a social encounter.
>
> (Cohen, Manion, Morrison 2000, p.282)

While it was possible to count the number of participants that referred to an aspect of the initial coding categories (Table 6.1, p.218 and Table 7.1, p.246), direct quotations were used to illustrate the importance and richness of the emerging themes. Furthermore, these quotations were drawn upon in a balanced way from across the research participants (Appendix 16, p.386) to reduce the likelihood of bias towards particular participants. The generic themes provided further insight into how recently assigned RE teachers viewed the use of instructional resources, their teaching approach and understandings of the curriculum principles underlying the draft PAREC documents.

4.5.4   Return of Transcripts from First Round of Interviews

Before interviewing the participants again, it was necessary to affirm the transcripts from the first interviews with them and invite the participants to be involved in a second round of interviews. A letter of acknowledgement (Appendix 11, p.380) and a transcription of the first interviews were mailed to each interviewee. The letter thanked the interviewees for their participation, and then asked them to consider a second interview since they were midway into teaching a new school year. As part of the integrity of the interviewing process, the interviewees were asked to review the transcript and to qualify or change their responses if they wished. The intention was to create ownership for the interviewees for what they had said and, secondly, to engender confidence in the interviewer that what they had said had been recorded accurately. Only two interviewees wanted to comment on their responses in their transcript (Chapter 7, p.247). The remaining potential interviewees from the first round cohort accepted the accuracy of their transcript record and agreed to participate in a second round of interviews.

4.6   Second Round of Interviews

A second round of interviews was conducted because the emerging themes from the first round of interviews suggested that recently assigned RE teachers were experiencing a significant change in their perceptions about implementing the draft RE Units (Chapter 6, p.242). This section describes the development of the interview questions from a re-examination of the primary research question and then outlines the findings from the second round of interviews. From the findings of the second interviews, a further series of themes emerged and are discussed that provide further insights into the experiences of recently assigned RE teachers as they implemented the draft RE Units. Lastly, there is a description of the procedures for the second round of interviews and the subsequent reappraisal of the research question leading to the development of another set of interview questions. The second round of interviews explored the perceptions of the teachers about the changes that had taken place in teaching RE and their reflections about what RE teaching meant to them after another year of teaching this subject. With a new school year, there were also circumstantial changes for the teachers in the sample

group. Teachers had a new class, perhaps a different year group (and hence, new Units to teach) and, for some, a new school to teach at. Teachers had the opportunity to review their responses in the first round of interviews from 1998 and discuss their perceptions of teaching RE within the context of their new experiences in 1999.

4.6.1   *Re-clarification of the Research Question*

During the course of the first round of interviews, there emerged key findings that influenced how the research would proceed. Certainly, how recently assigned RE teachers coped with the demands of implementing the draft PAREC Units was important, and this was underpinned by an appreciation for the theological and pedagogical principles of the Units. However, what seemed to become an increasingly greater imperative for recently assigned RE teachers was their outlook towards teaching RE and their continuance in this learning area. To investigate this emerging theme, the primary research question needed to be re-focused.

The original research question focused on how recently assigned RE teachers handled the demands of implementing the draft RE Units using the curriculum materials, their teaching approach and their understanding of the theological and pedagogical principles that underpinned the Units. The research question was:

> **What are the perceptions of recently assigned secondary RE teachers about the demands of implementing the draft Perth Archdiocesan Religious Education Course?**

The key factors to emerge from the first round of interviews were *experience* and *familiarity* in teaching the PAREC Units to the students (Chapter 6, p.219). It was these factors that recently assigned RE teachers believed helped them to meet the demands of implementing the draft PAREC Units. While an understanding of the principles underpinning the Units was appreciated, the teachers described their own 'code of practice' and rationale for teaching RE as a part of their faith witness. What seemed to be emerging was an expectation that the demands of teaching RE were going to change for them; many hoped that it was for the better. Such an expectation was a substantive issue as it indicated that this too was a major factor in the implementation process of the

Units. The research question thus extended beyond exploring how recently assigned RE teachers coped with the demands of implementing the draft PAREC Units into their RE teaching. The research focus now included an investigation into how the demands of implementing the draft Units affected the outlook of teachers towards teaching Religious Education. Specifically, the feelings of the interviewees about the value of their teaching RE were investigated as well their reflections about their personal and professional formation as RE teachers. A fourth subsidiary question to the primary research question was developed:

> 4. *What perceptions do recently assigned secondary RE*
>   *teachers possess about the interplay between their personal*
>   *and professional formation and the demands of implementing*
>   *the draft Perth Archdiocesan Religious Education Course?*

The implementation of the draft RE Units was demanding because there was a perceived expectation that recently assigned teachers required a level of personal, spiritual and faith formation beyond that expected from other learning areas. An investigation into this issue would make a valuable contribution to understanding the impact of curriculum implementation on recently assigned teachers not only in terms of their professional competence but also in terms of their personal teacher formation. The purpose of the second round of interviews was to find out what changes in their perceptions of the demands of teaching RE had occurred and to examine more closely the interplay between the teaching of classroom RE and their personal and professional formation.

4.6.2   Conducting the Second Round of Interviews

The interviews were handled in a similar manner to the first round protocol. Two teachers agreed to complete written responses to the interview questions as they were located in remote country schools while the remainder agreed to face-to-face interviews. They were conducted either during or after school in a comfortable venue and at an appropriate time for interviewees. The interviewees appeared less apprehensive and, indeed, seemed eager to expand on their experiences of teaching RE over the past year. Similar to the protocol established in the first round of interviews (pp.128-129), the interviewees were taped and a transcription was made. The transcript of their second

interview was sent later to them for validation (Appendix 14, p.384). Although the opportunity was available, interviewees made no further comment regarding their transcript or the study. As in the first round of interviews, the responses of the interviewees were analysed using the QSR NUD•IST version 4.0 (N4) computer software program (QSR International 1996).

4.6.3   Development of the Second Interview Questions

With a number of crucial issues emerging from the first round of interviews, the research question was re-evaluated and interview questions were created to allow scrutiny of these issues. Firstly, did recently assigned RE teachers believe experience and familiarity would facilitate how they coped with the demands of teaching RE? Secondly, could recently assigned RE teachers draw upon their experience and familiarity of teaching their main subject area in coping with the demands of teaching RE? Thirdly, what were the demands of teaching RE on the personal faith of the teacher and fourthly, how did they envisage their teaching of RE – was teaching RE important to them personally and professionally as an RE teacher?

For the second round of interviews, an interview schedule with a new set of questions was created (Appendices 12 and 13, pp.381-383). As in the case of the first round, the questions were trialled with a small group of religious educators. The new questions focused on whether the perceptions of the teachers about teaching RE had changed over the previous school year and how their aspirations for teaching RE had evolved since they were last interviewed. With a new school year, the sample group faced a different scenario to that of the previous year. The experiences of the teachers over this time may have influenced their outlook on teaching Religious Education. The design of the questions was to be more open-ended to allow teachers to reflect on their experiences since the first round of interviews.

4.6.4 The Second Interview Questions

The second interviews gave recently assigned RE teachers an occasion to discuss their feelings and concerns about RE teaching. Four key questions were developed to promote deeper levels of reflection in the participants about the experience of teaching the draft PAREC Units and their outlook towards teaching RE. Each question paralleled the key findings to emerge from the first round of interviews. The teachers were informed of the purposes of the second round of interviews as an opportunity for them to explore further their perceptions of teaching the draft PAREC, particularly when a school year had recently passed. The questions presented during the second interview and the rationale for these questions from the findings of the first round of interviews is outlined below:

Question1:

Where do you stand now in relation to your RE teaching? Is it the same, different, worse, or better?

One of the findings from the first round of interviews was the importance of experience and familiarity with the RE Units of Work in improving the quality of RE teaching and how the confidence of the teacher developed as a result. This first question was designed to investigate if the value of experience and familiarity remained a priority in the perception of the teacher within the new scenario of the following school year – new class, perhaps a new Year group or even a new school.

Question 2:

To what extent do you feel teaching RE is similar to the other subjects you teach? Can you use an example to explain your response?

Teachers saw the curriculum materials and teaching approach in the draft RE Units as useful tools comparable to those available in their major learning area. This question sought to investigate whether teachers expected that, like their own learning areas, they would have the flexibility to choose from a wider range of resources and to go beyond the teaching strategies advised in the draft RE Units to suit the needs of their students.

Question 3:

To what extent do you feel teaching RE is different to the other subjects you teach? Can you use an example to explain your response?

There were clear differences between RE and their own learning area in terms of the classroom dynamics which required different or additional skills of the teacher. These skills were needed to engage the students both personally and academically. The focus of this question was to explore whether teachers felt Religious Education, unlike other learning areas, had additional demands on their teaching persona. To see if teachers perceived the necessity to be faith witnesses to their students even though students might or might not be receptive to the stance of the teacher.

Question 4:

What is best and most special about teaching RE for you?

Teachers expressed a strong passion for teaching RE but the motivation to do so was not clear. They saw their RE teaching as an important extension of their personal faith and professional formation. The strong passion or 'generativity' expressed by teachers warranted further investigation as a possible factor in teachers sustaining a positive outlook towards implementing the draft RE Units.

4.6.5 Analysis and Return of Second Interview Transcripts

In similar fashion to the analysis of the first round of interviews, the interviews were transcribed, collated and coded (p.132). The coding protocol was implemented once more, and generic themes emerged. These themes either replicated or affirmed the themes in the first round of interviews or were new themes to emerge. The findings of the second round of interviews were reported according to these themes. The transcripts of the second interviews were returned to the interviewees for their perusal and were given the option to comment if they felt it was necessary. No further comments were returned.

The instigation of the first and second round of interviews was possible because the survey had provided initial data about particular concerns or issues. The survey also offered a means of identifying a sample group of recently assigned RE teachers to interview. The next section describes the criteria and process for selecting this group of RARE teachers.

4.7   Research Participants

In the past, the data regarding the perceptions of recently assigned RE teachers were anecdotal (Chapter 2, p.46). However, this research project sought to substantiate the perceptions of recently assigned RE teachers with primary data. Recently assigned RE teachers needed to be defined as a distinct cohort. A baseline or contextual data was gathered about their demographic and professional backgrounds and their perceptions of implementing the draft Units in terms of usefulness of instructional resources, appropriateness of teaching approach and level of commitment (Chapter 5, p.156). To establish a baseline, where none coherently existed before, a survey approach was used because of the range of data that could be gathered at one point in time (Cohen and Manion 1989). Such an approach is well documented in research in Religious Education (for example, Flynn 1975, 1979, 1985, 1993; Hanlon 1989; Leavey, Hetherton, Britt and O'Neill 1992; Astley, Francis, Burton and Wilcox 1997; Flynn and Mok 2002).

Before the research proceeded, it was necessary to identify the cohort of teachers that would fit the term of 'recently assigned secondary RE teacher'. The Catholic Education Office of WA (CEOWA) and the Catholic Secondary Principals Association (CSPAWA) described this group of teachers as inexperienced and inadequately trained teachers. They had been largely identified anecdotally or indirectly through data on *Accreditation to Teach RE*. The CSPAWA (1992) considered recently assigned RE teachers to have limited experience in teaching RE and possibly inadequate formal training in RE content and methods. The CEOWA identified groups of RE teachers according to their mandatory professional status to teach RE called *Accreditation to Teach Religious Education*. The policy of the Catholic Education Commission of WA (CECWA) was that secondary RE teachers completed the tertiary study and inservice components of *Accreditation to Teach Religious Education* within five years of teaching

Religious Education (CEOWA 1997c, pp.10-11). Recently assigned RE teachers were teachers who were in their first five years of teaching RE and were some way towards completing the study and inservice requirements of *Accreditation to Teach RE*. This group of teachers became the focus for the target population of the study.

4.7.1   *Defining the target population*

The next step was to develop a set of criteria for what constituted a recently assigned RE teacher. These criteria contributed towards providing a profile to describe these people. Furthermore, the criteria assisted in identifying the number of RE teachers who matched this profile for the survey phase of the research.

In 1997, the CEOWA again collated data on the number of RE teachers in Catholic secondary schools, along with their years of experience in teaching RE and their accreditation status (Table 4.1, p.141)**.** The accreditation status of these teachers was determined by the completion of study and inservice requirements as part of *Accreditation to Teach RE* in a Catholic school. Unlike the previous table showing the Accreditation to Teach RE Status (Table 2.1, p.48), data was collated according to three categories of teaching experience (Table 4.1, p.141). The categories of RE teaching experience were divided into three five-year increments, namely, RE teachers with less than 6 years experience in teaching RE, RE teachers with 6 to 10 years experience and RE teachers with more than 10 years. These categories identify the number of years teachers have taught RE regardless of their actual teaching load in Religious Education. RE teachers with less than 6 years RE teaching experience were required to complete *Accreditation to Teach RE* during the first five years of their RE teaching.

Table 4.1   Accreditation to Teach RE Status of RE Personnel in Catholic secondary schools in the Archdiocese of Perth and the Dioceses of Bunbury and Geraldton in 1997

Teaching experience of RE Personnel	0-5 Years (%)	6-10 Years (%)	>10 Years (%)	Total RE Teachers (%)
Number of RE Personnel	243 *(46%)*	106 *(20%)*	183 *(34%)*	532 *(100%)*

Accreditation to Teach RE Status	0-5 Years (%)	6-10 Years (%)	>10 Years (%)	Total RE Teachers (%)
Accreditation components fully completed	91 *(37%)*	73 *(69%)*	130 *(71%)*	294 *(55%)*
1. Study component only	10 (4%)	2 (2%)	7 (4%)	19 (4%)
2. Inservice component only	98 (40%)	25 (24%)	29 (16%)	152 (29%)
3. No components completed	44 (18%)	6 (6%)	17 (9%)	67 (13%)
Partial or non-completion of Accreditation (Totals of 1, 2 and 3)	152 *(63%)*	33 *(31%)*	53 *(29%)*	238 *(45%)*
Total *(%)* of RE teachers	243 *(100%)*	106 *(100%)*	183 *(100%)*	532 *(100%)*

Note:

Partial or non-completion of Accreditation to teach RE represents the summation of teachers who have either completed only one or none of the component requirements. Percentages are rounded to whole numbers. No data from the Diocese of Broome was collected because schools were not using the draft PAREC.

Source: Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 1997, Accreditation to Teach RE Data 1997. Used with permission of the CEOWA.

Table 4.1 (p.141) indicates that, out of the three categories of RE teaching experience, the largest group of RE teachers is the category with teachers who have less than 6 years RE teaching experience (46% of the total number of RE teachers). Recently assigned RE teachers are required to complete the *Accreditation to Teach RE* study component by the end of their fifth year of teaching RE (CEOWA 1997c, pp.10-11). However, this group has the smallest proportion of teachers by category with *Accreditation to Teach RE* status (37%). It was also the group that had the largest number of RE teachers in that category that had completed only one of the components of *Accreditation to Teach RE*: study or inservice component (44%) or had not completed either component (18%). These teachers were the most inexperienced or least professionally trained group of RE teachers.

Inexperienced and inexpert teachers were the cohort that concerns were expressed earlier about their vulnerability in using RE curriculum materials (Chapter 2, pp.46-47). As a result, these teachers became the target population of recently assigned RE teachers for this research project. However, not all of the recently assigned RE teachers were involved in the project. Teachers in their first year of full time teaching experience were trying to 'survive' their new teaching situation and did not have the time to articulate their perceptions or to relate their experiences of teaching very well (Schools Council 1990, p.105). For this reason, these 'first year' teachers were excluded from the target population.

The target population consisted of those teachers who had completed more than one but less than six years RE teaching experience. This group was chosen to highlight the recently assigned RE teachers under scrutiny in this study for a number of reasons. Firstly, teachers with two to five years experience were more likely to focus on the quality of their teaching practice rather than just their classroom management. Secondly, they were likely to be able to reflect upon their practice and have a desire to articulate the significance of their experiences (Schools Council 1990, p.106). These reasons were very much in accord with the interpretivist approach used in this study (p.117).

4.7.2   Selection of the Sample Group for the First Round of Interviews

The responses from the survey suggested that many teachers held common perceptions about different aspects of implementing the draft PAREC. To identify a sample group, there needed to be a transparent selection process. Purposive sampling was used as a means of selecting a sample group that reflected the range and diversity of feelings about the main survey areas. This form of sampling was the means by which:

> researchers handpick the cases to be included in the sample on the basis of the typicality. In this way, they build up a sample that is satisfactory to their specific needs.
>
> (Cohen and Manion 1994, p.89)

Therefore, the sample group of recently assigned RE teachers to be invited to participate in a round of interviews was indicative of the range of teachers who responded to the survey. The sample consisted of subgroups of teachers, who reflected similar and diverse perceptions in the three categories – use of instructional resources, teaching approach and underlying principles. The process for selecting these teachers is described in the next section.

Process for Identifying the Sample Group

The selection of interviewees began by using the Likert scale item responses in the three categories of the survey, namely, use of instructional resources, teaching approach and underlying principles. In each item there was a range of possible responses from strongly agree, agree and uncertain to disagree and strongly disagree. Each of these responses was numbered from 1 to 5 respectively so that a mean and a standard deviation was calculated. On many items, the standard deviation was narrow, so it was concluded that the mean score mirrored the perceptions of a significant number of teachers. By adding the mean scores on each item, it was possible to get the *total* mean score for each category. Once the total mean score was calculated for each category, the total score of each teacher for each category was ranked according to who was closest to the total mean score. As a result, this formed one subgroup of teachers called the mean score or 'normal' group for each category.

The same procedure was applied to teachers with the most divergent responses from the total mean scores. These teachers were included to access the diversity of responses and to be sensitive to the minor differences that existed. Some teachers scored items higher than the total mean score, others scored lower. These formed two other subgroups – a high score or 'critical' group and a low score or 'very positive' group. Figure 4.1 illustrates these groupings of low, mean and high score groups. The 'high score' group of teachers had responses which reflected a lesser agreement with the Likert scale item statements. The 'low score' group had responses that reflected a greater agreement with the Likert scale item statements. These subgroups are summarised according to item statements within the categories of instructional resources, teaching approach and underlying principles in Table 4.2 (p.145). Appendix 6 provides a more detailed summary (pp.365-367).

Figure 4.1   Sample Selections across Likert Item Scores
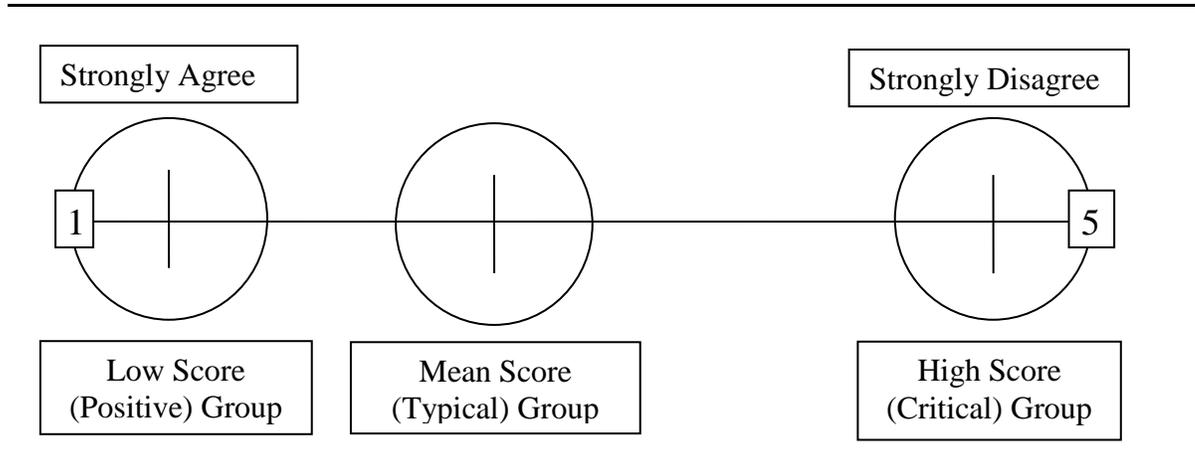
Table 4.2   Initial Criteria for Selection of the Sample Sub-Groups

Categories	Likert Scale Items from Survey	Total Lowest Scores	Total Mean Scores	Total Highest Scores
Instructional Resources (IRES)	1 to 4	4.0	8.5	20.0
Teaching Approach (TAPP)	7 to 15	9.0	19.2	45.0
Underlying Principles (UPRI)	18 to 28	11.0	21.0	55.0

Note:

- *Scores are given to the nearest first decimal place.*

- *Total Lowest Score is based on participants' total score on Likert scale items that have the lowest total score in this category.*

- *Total Mean Score is based on participants' total score on Likert scale items that match the mean total score in this category.*

- *Total Highest Score is based on participants' total score on Likert scale items that have the highest total score in this category.*

The number of participants that could be interviewed was drawn from each of the subgroups. Sowden and Keeves (1988) suggest that a sample size of 15 to 20 people for one researcher to study is recommended. Initially, a balance across the curriculum implementation categories was attempted with 15 to 18 interviewees selected from each of the categories. However, it became apparent that the number of potential interviewees should be focused upon the cluster of scores of the teachers closest to the highest, mean and lowest scores (Figure 4.1, p.144). Small groupings of teachers closest to these scores were more indicative of the subgroups compared to those teachers further from the scores. As a result, cluster groupings were favoured in each subgroup to make up the pool of potential interviewees as shown in Table 4.3 (p.146). By returning to the birth-date code reference in the survey, it was possible to allocate a code reference to each potential interviewee. After checking back to this code, it was realised that some teachers had been selected across the categories with two teachers being selected in the mean score group across the three categories. This checking back on the codes reduced the pool of potential interviewees to 37 actual teachers. The result was a sample cohort

of recently assigned RE teachers who were representative of the diversity within the target population.

There were some distinct advantages to having a restricted pool of participants. Firstly, the teachers selected were teachers who scored closest to the lower, mean, and higher scores within the categories defined in the survey. These responses of the teachers reflected the responses in the category sub-groups – they were teachers typical of that category sub-group. Secondly, limiting the number of potential interviewees would reduce the amount of time to get the interviews done while the survey was still fresh in the minds of the interviewees. Thirdly, as these teachers were the most typical within the category sub-groups, the selection of additional teachers would mean a wider range of perceptions from the total lower, mean, and higher total scores and not necessarily reflect the predominant perceptions of the target population. Furthermore, this participant sample may be limited by the 'amount of data that can be processed and by the costs involved' for this research project (Sowden and Keeves, 1988, p.516). With these advantages in mind, the RE Coordinators (RECs) were contacted again to begin the process of identifying the potential interviewees.

Table 4.3   Potential Pool of Interviewees in each Curriculum Implementation Category

Sub-Groups	Instructional Resources (IRES)	Teaching Approach (TAPP)	Underlying Principles (UPRI)	Total
Low Score or Positive Group	2*	4	5	11
Mean Score or Typical Group	7	6	6	19
High Score or Critical Group	7	5	7	19
Total	16	15	18	49

Note:

* The mean scores for Instructional Resources were very low (i.e. many teachers responded with agree or strongly agree) and the standard deviation was narrow. As a result, the low score cluster grouping was small in comparison to other groupings.

The RECs were contacted initially by telephone and thanked for their support for the research. An outline of the survey results was discussed and they were then informed that one or more recently assigned RE teachers from their school would be invaluable participants to the interview phase of the research. The RECs were given a limited description of these potential interviewees based on demographic and professional criteria from the survey: birth-date code (day and month interviewee was born), the gender and age range of the teacher, the years of teaching RE and the specialist (main) subject area of the teacher. A letter was sent to the RE Coordinators as a follow up to this telephone conversation (Appendix 7, p.368). At the time of the telephone conversation, they were informed to refrain from disclosing the identity of the teachers to the researcher to maintain anonymity. Instead, the RECs were asked to approach the teachers concerned and pass on a letter from the researcher inviting them to be involved in the interviews (Appendix 8, pp.369-370). The letter to the teachers commended them for their involvement in the survey and for the quality of their responses. The teachers were asked whether they would be involved in the interview phase of the study. If they accepted, they could choose to do a face-to-face interview, a telephone interview or written responses to the interview questions (Appendices 9 and 10, pp.371-379). The last two alternatives were available especially to teachers in remote country schools as it was not possible for the researcher to meet them in person.

From a pool of 37 possible candidates, 28 recently assigned RE teachers accepted the invitation to participate in the first round of interviews. The nine teachers who declined the invitation to be involved stated that they were either too busy or did not wish to be further involved in the research project. The majority of teachers agreed to be involved in face-to-face interviews with two teachers agreeing to extended telephone interviews. Several teachers agreed to give extended written responses and these teachers were followed up with a telephone call to discuss their responses (most of these teachers were located in remote country schools). To preserve their confidentiality (p.151), the participants were given pseudonyms in the study. Appendix 15 (p.385) lists the pseudonyms of the participants and their involvement in the interviews.

4.7.3   The Sample Group Revisited for Second Round of Interviews

For the second round of interviews, contact with the sample group members was renewed by telephone and then by letter. As Appendix 15 (p.385) illustrates, most members had remained at their school but three interviewees – Clare, Jessica, and Ursula – had moved to another school. In addition, two interviewees when contacted again, Jessica and Kate, indicated they had discontinued teaching RE but agreed to be involved in the second round of interviews. They were interviewed to investigate why they had discontinued and whether there were links between this decision and their reflections about their experiences of teaching Religious Education.

There were also changes to the situations of the interviewees. Gayle had left the Catholic school system and did not take part in the second round of interviews. Clare had moved from a country school to a metropolitan one. While she had given a telephone response in the previous round of interviews, she was now able to do a face-to-face interview. Some interviewees, like Steven, agreed to be interviewed personally the second time around after providing written responses in the previous interview round. A further six teachers declined any further involvement in the interview process due to heavy work commitments such as management responsibilities or study. As a result, there were 21 teachers available to be interviewed for the second round of interviews. Again, the distribution of quotations in reporting the findings of the second round of interviews were monitored (Appendix 16, p.386).

During the first round of interviews, the interviewees were drawn from subgroups within the three curriculum implementation categories identified in the initial survey (pp.144-145). There were those teachers who were very positive in their responses (low score group); those teachers who reflected the normal responses of recently assigned RE teachers in the target population (mean score group); and, those teachers who were critical in their responses (high score group). This categorisation meant the sample group could be seen as reflective of the diversity of recently assigned RE teachers within Catholic schools in Western Australia. Since responses from the categories within the sample group tended to be similar in the first round of interviews, it was felt that this distinction no longer needed to be a factor. However, in the initial phases of the second

round of interviews this distinction between groups was monitored to see if there were any appreciable differences. There were no appreciable differences detected and notably they once again held much in common with each other, as will be explored in Chapter 7 (p.244).

4.8 Ethical Considerations

The procedures of this research project have conformed, at all times, to the highest levels of ethics requirements and the research ethics guidelines of the University of Notre Dame Australia were strictly employed. Strategies that ensured adequate provision for confidentiality were an important ethical consideration in conducting the study (Cohen and Manion 1989). It was emphasised to Principals, RE Coordinators and teachers that the study was neither an assessment of the competence of a teacher in teaching RE nor an evaluation of the school or the PAREC Units of Work. A conscious effort was made to highlight that it was the perceptions of the recently assigned RE teachers that were important. This researcher did not wish to offer pre-conceived ideas about the likely findings of the study to these teachers or to Principals and RE Coordinators. As an incentive to participate in the study, the overall findings from the survey were offered to RE Coordinators for perusal and discussion with RE staff.

Furthermore, the participants needed to feel comfortable with answering the questions provided without feeling stressed or embarrassed. Rather, the intention was that the research be valuable to them after they reflected on their experiences of implementing the draft Units and perhaps open up a healthy discussion between themselves and their colleagues. Therefore, it was important to put into place a set of procedures that requested, informed, and reassured each level of the Catholic education system in their involvement in the research project (for example, see pp.125-126).

Of utmost importance was to ensure that the privacy and reputation of schools and teachers was respected. The Catholic education system in Western Australia is comparatively small and it was necessary that neither individuals nor schools were recognised by the responses that were given. To preserve confidentiality, a coding system was applied to schools and participants (p.126). The participants involved in the interviews were given aliases to protect their identities. This alias was especially

necessary, particularly as it relates to the professional competence of RE teachers and the personal nature of responses from individual teachers. Furthermore, an alias allowed the reader to identify more easily with the participant as a person rather than as a code number. One further point concerns RE teachers belonging to a religious congregation. Since a comparatively small number of people from religious congregations are teaching in the Western Australian Catholic education system, such persons are not identified as a brother, priest or sister in this research project to maintain their privacy. Otherwise, the person, religious congregation, or school could possibly be identified.

Another important consideration was the position of the researcher within the Catholic education system and the role to be played in dealing with analysis of the data and possible bias. At the time of the research project, the researcher was involved as a CEOWA RE consultant in the development of the draft PAREC. While working with other consultants on the production of the Units, the researcher also began this research project on a part-time doctoral research basis. Hence, it was necessary to emphasise that the research project was not an evaluation of the draft RE Units, nor was it to be an evaluation of the capacity of recently assigned RE teachers in using these Units. Therefore, letters sent to Principals, RE Coordinators and teachers stressed these points and were signed by the researcher as a doctoral student from the University of Notre Dame Australia (Appendix 2 pp.351-352). Furthermore, to preserve anonymity and encourage goodwill among the teachers, the researcher asked the RE Coordinators to administer the survey so that, at this stage of the research, the researcher was unaware of the identities of the recently assigned RE teachers (p.126). In analysing the responses from the surveys, the priority was to allow the data to speak for itself while recognising that the researcher had many years involvement in RE with which he could reflect upon to discern the significance of the data. However, to reduce interference by bias, the findings were reviewed according to what emerged not only from the survey but also from the subsequent rounds of interviews. Therefore, a triangulation approach was used to support the reliability of the findings (Cohen and Manion 1989; Denzin 1988, p.511).

To encourage involvement by the participants, confidentiality about their personal background was paramount. After contact had been made with the participants, the interviewer organised a suitable time and private venue suitable to the participants. The participants were thanked for their decision to be involved and for their time. They were then informed about the purpose of the interview and how the interview was to be recorded. After the interview, they were thanked again for their involvement and informed that a transcript of the interview would be given to them for their perusal and comment. Importantly, they were reassured that in the reporting of the interview, aliases would be used to protect their privacy and no specific mention would be made of their school.

4.9   Research Design Summary

This chapter provides a detailed description and rationale of the research design that was instigated in this study. The exploration of the difficulties that recently assigned RE teachers faced as they encountered the exigencies of implementing the draft PAREC was addressed by researching the primary research question:

> **What perceptions do recently assigned secondary RE**
> **teachers possess about the demands of teaching the draft**
> **Perth Archdiocesan Religious Education Course?**

Such a question indicated a mixed method approach to the research problem in similar vein to the research designs of other studies (p.120). Figure 4.2 (p.152) illustrates the steps and procedures that were taken in implementing the research techniques and in collecting and analysing the data.

Figure 4.2   Diagrammatic Summary of the Research Design

STEPS	PROCEDURES
Preliminary Document Analysis	Content analysis of curriculum documents to identify key resources and curriculum principles.
	Application of Fullan's (2001) dimensions of instructional resources, teaching approach and underlying curriculum principles to pilot survey categories.
Pilot Survey	Pilot survey modified, representations made to Director of CEOWA, Principals and RE Coordinators to be involved in research.
Survey to Target Population	Target population defined. RE Coordinator contacted to distribute surveys and collect completed surveys.
	Surveys returned to researcher. Confidentiality of responses maintained with allocation of school code and birth date code of teachers.
	Responses collated and analysed. Mean, mode and standard deviation for each Likert item calculated. Open-ended questions analysed and tabulated. Analysis of variance and Schettè tests used to identify significant differences within the survey population.
Purposive Sample	Mean and outlier scores for Likert items used for selection of purposive sample of teachers identified around high, mean and low scores.
First Round of Interviews	Identified teachers approached though RE Coordinator to do an interview. Suitable time and place for interviewed arranged with participant.
	First round of interview questions developed. Questions trialled and modified to focus on survey results and allow opportunity for personal recount of RE teaching experience.
	Interviews recorded and transcribed. Transcription sent to participants for verification. Transcripts collated and analysed using N4.
Reappraisal of Research Question	Themes emerge that lead to reappraisal of research question and the inclusion of a fourth subsidiary question. Consequently, another round of interviews is conducted.
Second Round of Interviews	Participants approached again a year later to do another interview. Protocols established in first round are repeated. Transcripts analysed by using N4. Changes in themes emerge.

The focus of the study was on a particular group of teachers and their perceptions about their experiences of implementing a new curriculum. Such perceptions formed their subjective reality of the concerns and responses to curriculum implementation. In turn, three subsidiary research questions were initially developed:

1. *What are the perceptions of recently assigned secondary RE teachers about the usefulness of instructional resources from the PAREC in their classroom teaching?*

2. *What are the perceptions of recently assigned secondary RE teachers about the appropriateness of the teaching approach conveyed by the draft PAREC in their classroom teaching?*

3. *What are the perceptions of recently assigned secondary RE teachers about supporting the curriculum principles underpinning the PAREC in their classroom teaching?*

As there was a lack of contextual data on the target population, a mixture of qualitative and quantitative techniques were incorporated in a survey. The development of the survey included a preliminary analysis of RE curriculum documents and the trialling of a pilot survey. As a result, a modified survey was developed and disseminated to schools. The survey gathered information identifying the target population and their demographic and professional background. Furthermore, a series of Likert scaling and rank ordering items as well as open-ended questions were used, based on the three aspects of curriculum implementation. Next, the trialling of the survey was described, followed by the procedure for conducting the survey in participant schools. The collation and analysis of the responses using the computer software *Statistical Package for Social Sciences* (SPSS) version 7.5 (SPSS Inc. 1997) were then described.

The collation of responses led to the development of a database to be used as a springboard from which a more indepth analysis of the responses of recently assigned RE teachers to the implementation of the draft PAREC were explored. Since the subsidiary research questions were qualitative in nature, an interview approach was used to further explore the perceptions recently assigned RE teachers have about their experiences of dealing with the demands of implementing the draft RE Units. To

maintain the integrity of the interview questions, significant findings from the survey were posed to the interviewees for their reflection and comment. Their responses were recorded on audio-cassette and a transcription of the interview was created. A copy of the transcript was given to the interviewees for their perusal and comment. This process further enhanced the integrity of the research methodology. The transcripts were then analysed for patterns or themes using the *QSR NUD•IST* version 4.0 (N4) computer software program (QSR International 1996).

As a result, new insights emerged from this first round of interviews that warranted a re-examination of the primary research question and the development of an additional subsidiary question:

> 4. *What perceptions do recently assigned secondary RE teachers possess about the interplay between their personal and professional formation and the demands of implementing the draft Perth Archdiocesan Religious Education Course?*

This led to a second round of interviews with the sample cohort in the following year and consequently, the research project became a longitudinal study. The protocols for the first round of interviews were followed in the second round as well. The transcripts of the interviews were again analysed using N4 (QSR International 1996). The emerging responses suggested that recently assigned RE teachers make changes to teaching RE as they become more familiar with the content of the Units and discern from their classroom experiences how best to teach RE (Chapter 6, p.216).

The survey also provided the contextual data from which a sample cohort was identified that typified the responses from the target population of recently assigned secondary RE teachers. The sample group chosen represented three groups of teachers that ranged from very supportive (positive), supportive (typical), and less supportive (critical) of the experience of implementing the draft RE curriculum. Furthermore, the chapter included a discussion of the ethical considerations about respecting the privacy and reputation of schools and teachers involved and the possible biases or influences the researcher may have in the survey.

With the research design in place, it was possible to collect initial baseline data; select a sample of recently assigned RE teachers and explore the subjective realities of these teachers during the two rounds of interviews. In the next chapter, the findings of the survey instrument are presented, analysed, and discussed. These findings also became the base from which the first round of interview questions are constructed and discussed.