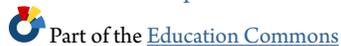

Theses

2006

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

Chris B. Hackett
University of Notre Dame Australia

Follow this and additional works at: <http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theses>



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA
Copyright Regulations 1969

WARNING

The material in this communication may be subject to copyright under the Act. Any further copying or communication of this material by you may be the subject of copyright protection under the Act.
Do not remove this notice.

Publication Details

Hackett, C. B. (2006). A longitudinal study of the personal and professional responses of recently assigned secondary Religious Education teachers to curriculum demands (Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)). University of Notre Dame Australia.
<http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theses/1>

This dissertation/thesis is brought to you by ResearchOnline@ND. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of ResearchOnline@ND. For more information, please contact researchonline@nd.edu.au.



CHAPTER SIX

THE FIRST INTERVIEWS

6.1 Introduction

In Chapter Six, the findings of the first round of interviews about the experiences of recently assigned RE teachers implementing the draft RE Units are described and analysed. The chapter begins by reviewing the interview experience with a sample of recently assigned RE (RARE) teachers. Next, the chapter describes the results of the analysis of the interview transcripts using the QSR NUD•IST version 4.0 (N4) computer software program (QSR International 1996). The findings from the initial coding are then presented. From this analysis, the chapter turns its attention to the themes of concern that emerged from this round of interviews. Lastly, there is a discussion of the issues that arose during these interviews and the need to further explore the perceptions of RARE teachers about the increasing demands on them in implementing the draft RE Units.

6.2 Review of the Interview Experience

Some interviewees were nervous initially about the interview but were comfortable talking about what they did in preparing and organising their lessons in Religious Education. Some teachers spoke at length about what they did; consequently, the first question (Chapter 4, p.129) drew an extended response from them.

The interview questions in the first round of interviews included statements or propositions based on key findings from the survey responses (Chapter 4, pp.129-131). The technique of using a statement or proposition from the survey results provided a concrete context from which the interviewees could make a response. However, most interviewees were surprised by the statement: ‘Develop social justice and tolerance for others in the students’ as the highest priority aim of RE by respondents. This statement seemed to create a dilemma for some interviewees – should they accede to the proposition or should they dispute it? Most respondents disagreed with the statement and proceeded to describe their aims of RE usually in

catechetical terms (see Table 6.1, 'Teaching Approach', p.218). While they seemed willing to describe their views about the aims of RE, they did seem to have difficulty with Question 7 in articulating their personal vision of Religious Education.

Nonetheless, interviewees were able to recover their composure with Question 8 and speak at some length regarding their mentors and influences in their life; not so much with regard to helping them teach RE but about supporting the personal faith formation of the interviewees in their commitment to teaching this learning area.

Interviewees spoke confidently about their personal faith commitment and the need for further professional development as important to teaching RE. They felt that implementing the draft RE Units needed to be done in an enthusiastic and committed way. Interviewees judged their colleagues (and possibly themselves) from this perspective when it came to teaching RE. Table 6.1 (p.218) outlines the pattern of responses that emerged from the initial coding based on the dimensions of curriculum implementation.

The selection of interviewees was drawn to reflect the diversity and commonality of perceptions among the recently assigned RE teacher population. With the selection of very positive, normal and critical sub-groups within the sample cohort (Chapter 4, pp.143-144), there was an expectation that different perceptions would emerge from the groups. However, this was not reflected in the interview conversations. Each sub-group appeared to be focusing on similar perceptions and a pattern of responses began to form in the interviews. The sample cohort tended to be characterised by what they held in common rather than by their differences. This tendency towards commonality in the sample group reflected the survey findings on the Likert items with narrow standard deviations. As a result, a number of key themes emerged from the first round of interviews. These key themes are described in further detail in the next section 'Findings of the First Interview: Key Themes' (p.219).

Table 6.1 Initial Coding of First Interview Transcripts by Curriculum Implementation Dimensions

Dimension and Aspect	Number of Participants referring to the Aspect (n = 28)
Use of Instructional Resources (Questions 1-3)	
• Availability of resources	27 (96%)
• Choice of resources	27 (96%)
• Suitability of resources to student learning	24 (86%)
• Catalyst for further learning	14 (50%)
Teaching Approach (Questions 4-6)	
• Set a positive tone in the classroom	28 (100%)
○ <i>Develop active learning strategies</i>	28 (100%)
○ <i>Relate to student life experience</i>	27 (96%)
○ <i>Modelling to students*</i>	3 (11%)
• Formation of students	28 (100%)
○ <i>Integration of faith into lives of students</i>	25 (89%)
○ <i>Formation of personal human qualities</i>	13 (46%)
• Direct instruction to students	27 (96%)
Underlying Principles (Questions 7-9)	
• Become well-informed in the content	28 (100%)
• Develop professionalism	28 (100%)
○ <i>Self-assurance from experience</i>	25 (89%)
○ <i>Need for teacher commitment</i>	24 (86%)
• Need for further formation of teacher	27 (96%)
○ <i>Professional Development Opportunities</i>	26 (93%)
○ <i>Advantage of an upbringing in faith</i>	24 (86%)
○ <i>Faith Development Opportunities</i>	14 (50%)
• Be a faith witness to students	20 (71%)
• Support and example of other staff*	6 (21%)

Note

* = *These aspects are mentioned as they become important in the Second Round of Interviews (Table 7.1, p.231). Percentages are given in whole numbers.*

6.3 Findings of the First Interviews: Key themes

The themes were focused upon what the interviewees reported they did and what they hoped to do in the future. The generic themes focused upon the qualities of the RE teachers that needed to be developed to cope with the demands of implementing the RE Units as indicated in Table 6.2. The themes were the result of a coding and recoding process that aggregated the data into clusters or patterns that eventually led to the emergence of these themes (Chapter 4, p.132). The strength of the aggregation was demonstrated by the number of participants that directly referred to an aspect of that theme (Table 6.2). However, aggregations of less than 100% reflected a tendency towards participants not directly reporting an aspect rather than a reflection of discrepant data (Chapter 4, p.132).

Table 6.2 Indicator of Support for Themes emerging from First Round of Interviews

Emergent Generic Themes	Number of Participants referring to the Theme (n=28)
<p>The Need to Survive <i>Teachers felt that having a variety of ready-made curriculum materials available to them was important to how they survived the demands of implementing the draft RE Units.</i></p>	27 (96%)
<p>The Desire for Self-Assurance <i>Teachers felt their confidence to teach RE came from the availability of curriculum materials, familiarity with the content of the Units, support from other teachers and from experience of teaching RE (including their expectation to be highly professional).</i></p>	28 (100%)
<p>The Quest to Flourish <i>Recently assigned teachers wanted to be seen as RE teachers of quality. They believed this could be achieved by making the draft RE Units as relevant to the learning needs of their students.</i></p>	28 (100%)
<p>The Desire for Authenticity <i>Interviewees believed RE teachers were credible to their students because of their serious commitment to teaching RE as a 'person of faith'. This led them to see the need for further faith formation.</i></p>	24 (86%)

Note: Percentages are given in whole numbers.

In reading the analysis of each of the themes, it is important to be mindful of the format style of the quotations. Where participants pause, perhaps to reflect on what they said, this was shown by: (pause); where there were incidental phrases or words omitted, then ‘...’ was shown; and where additional or clarifying editorial remarks (that is, not the words of the interviewee) need to be indicated then ‘[]’ brackets were used. Minimal punctuation was used in order to best represent the voice of the interviewee. The minimal punctuation has been included to clarify and remove possible ambiguities that were not present in the spoken dialogue.

The individual quotations were fair representations of the views of the participant quoted. Each quotation was selected to indicate the perception of the individual or group to which it was attributed and was quoted in such a way to present the perception without distortion or addition. As quotations were selected to be indicative, it is inevitable that some interviewees phrased their thoughts in ways that better communicated an idea. As a result, the communication of the same idea expressed by other interviewees was seldom quoted (Appendix 16, p.386). The codings, searching and reporting features of the QSR NUD•IST version 4.0 (N4) computer software program (QSR International 1996) helped ensure that all text was available for analysis and readily accessed as each theme was developed (Chapter 4, p.132).

6.3.1 The Need to Survive

The interviewees affirmed the earlier survey report about the accessibility of instructional resources (Chapter 5, p.176) in the draft Perth Archdiocesan RE Course (PAREC). The recently assigned RE teachers clearly enjoyed the curriculum materials being readily available for them to use in implementing the draft PAREC (Table 6.1, p.218). The teachers tended to use the Mastersheets and the Student Book frequently because they were readily accessible resources, reduced preparation time and acted as a back up for relief classes:

I think teachers use the Mastersheets and the Student Book because they often save time that I know I do not get to do lesson research and preparation.

(Darla)

The accessibility factor was based also on reducing the workload rather than availability alone. Some interviewees pointed out that, as RARE teachers, having the materials available meant they concentrated time and energy on their major learning area because RE was not their first priority (this point is discussed further in the next theme ‘Desire for Self-assurance’ on p.226). Hailey, a Science teacher with RE teaching as a minor part of her teaching load, expressed this attitude towards the curriculum materials:

Sometimes they’re really convenient. Sometimes, like I’ve got Year 11 Chem. and sometimes that tends to have more focus than my RE classes. So, you rush to get something that you can work with the kids, you know what’s going on but you just haven’t got time to prepare that little bit extra.

(Hailey)

At this stage of implementing the draft RE Units, RARE teachers felt very positive towards the curriculum materials because they wanted to keep their students busy while they focused on learning the content themselves:

I believe that mostly teachers or teachers teaching a particular year group for the first time would be more reliant on Mastersheets and the Student Books—I was! Mainly because they are concentrating on content and effective delivery. After about a term, confidence with the content grows and I tended to rely on my own resources.

(Clare)

This need to survive was crucial according to the interviewees. As Tim explained, ‘The advantage of using these materials is that you do not have to prepare in great detail and they provide security especially for recently assigned RE teachers’. By using Mastersheets and the Student Book, interviewees felt secure that the content of the draft Unit was communicated accurately and therefore they were less anxious about being subjected to scrutiny from the school community:

From my own personal experience I used the Student Book because I was confident the material covered was in accordance with Catholic teaching. ... I liked using the Student Book because often it would explain things in a way I couldn’t.

(Amber)

After this initial reliance on the curriculum materials, interviewees began to identify shortcomings with them. Many interviewees were especially concerned about the language and presentation of the Mastersheets and Student Book. In his written

response, Frank summed up the usefulness of the materials as: ‘Easy to use and follow, although some material is of a very high complexity.’ It seemed that trust in the curriculum materials provided by the draft RE Units was quickly supplanted by increasing pressure on the RARE teacher to find alternative resources.

After a term of using the curriculum materials, recently assigned RE teachers found that their students were not responding in ways they would have wished. The interviewees described how the style of language in the materials was beyond the literacy level of students in their classes, particularly students with low academic ability. Brian, for example, felt that ‘... the materials are pitched too high, especially for our community.’ The country students he taught did not possess a strong literacy background. While he did not think all the materials should be made easier, he was concerned that the Student Book was too difficult for many of his students to read by themselves. As a result, teachers found that they had to spend more time and energy on explaining the meanings of words and phrases in the materials to a diverse class of academic backgrounds:

And it takes a lot of work on behalf of the teacher to the point where you have to sit down with the individual kids and say, “Right, what do you think?” and really tease it out with them.

(Nancy)

These explanations slowed down the pace of the lesson and put further pressure on the teacher to manage the class as brighter students became bored or less able students became disruptive because the content matter was too difficult to understand. Recently assigned RE teachers also became further disillusioned with the repetitiveness of the topics presented within the Units and the difficulties they encountered in catering for a diverse range of functional and visual literacy:

And I think a lot of our students today are limited in their reading and therefore, they find the Bible very dry. Because there is no other input. They are so used to a lot of other visual or audio stimulation to go with it. It’s not an easy thing for them to do—whether it be a Bible or a normal book. Books aren’t part of their culture.

(Fran)

Teachers realised that their initial enthusiasm about access to curriculum materials, as reported in the survey (Chapter 5, p.176), was dampened by the experience of using the materials. As a result, as alluded to also in the survey, they had to adapt the materials available or find more suitable activities or resources for their students:

Well I just think, “How can I do this in the class a little better?” (pauses with pensive look) “Can I?” So that’s usually what it is. It’s usually, “What can I?” (pauses with pensive look) How can I do this in class to make it more interesting, more presentable to them, or in a way that they are going to be able to see a reason for wanting, for needing to learn this? Needing to have some understanding of it.

(Gayle)

The teachers seemed to become increasingly concerned about the receptivity of their students and perhaps even pandered towards them. They began to focus their energies on finding or creating resources that were more interesting and relevant to the class:

I prefer to use the Student Book now as an additional teacher reference or opportunities for students to broaden and deepen their individual needs. Mastersheets can be useful but mostly I prefer to develop more ‘hands on’ activities – roleplays, posters, debates and so forth. I often modify Mastersheets to suit individual class need and capabilities.

(Clare)

While most teachers were happy to develop their own resources and strategies, some teachers felt a dilemma in using their initiative when other colleagues were using the draft RE Units as text materials because that was the expectation from the curriculum writers:

The feeling I’ve got from different teachers is that they have to stick to that because they think it’s a text. And they can’t change from there because that’s what’s come out of Catholic Ed. [Office]. That’s what Catholic Ed. [Office] wants and that’s what we have to give. So they use it as a real textbook, read this section, answer these questions, you’ll be tested on this.

Because they're used to the main stream of teaching where they've got a textbook and you do that. I suppose I 'ad lib' more in the classroom and obviously the reason I do that is because I try to make it more comfortable for the kids. Where they can appreciate what's happening. I also do some textual reading because I think it's important they see those aspects of it but that's not the be all and end all of it for me.

(Mark)

The interviewees had learnt from their experiences that they needed to be more flexible in how and what they taught their students. However, the teachers often developed alternatives that reflected strongly their traditional didactic teaching style (Table 6.1, p.218). As Gwen (Table 5.43, p.211) reported, to address the language problem of the Student Books in a Year 8 class, her response was to, '... make up my own worksheets or ... do a lot of talking and using the board.' The flexibility they perceived related to preferring their own teaching approach to implementing the draft RE Units or in choosing strategies they felt most comfortable in using:

So I think that flexibility suits me because I'm not a Social Studies teacher, I'm not an English teacher, I'm not a Science teacher so I don't necessarily have a full on logical development of ideas. I try and look at an idea or a concept first and build something around a concept. ... Because I'm an Art teacher I want the kids to attack it in their own way, just give them guidance on their presentation as well. So ... I'd flick back and look at the Mastersheet here, then go back to the suggested strategies, look for where this Mastersheet appears in the suggested resources to see what objective that I'm attacking, to make sure I'm covering the objectives as I go through. I suppose I use this book backwards. Then again I might just be flicking through here and I might just see an idea that comes straight from the suggested strategies—the highlighted section—and get an idea from there. I might go to the Mastersheets and not like it and then develop my own or just do it totally on the board or just do it totally as a discussion.

(Ian)

On the other hand, this flexibility related to providing more practical or 'hands on' activities for the students:

I use a lot of stories. I use different approaches with different groups of students. Teachers need to be flexible. Try to have a practical component, some sort of 'faith in action' or awareness-raising of those less fortunate.

(Charles)

Teachers recognised that though they were RE teachers they did not necessarily have the same kind of skill repertoire as other teachers from other learning areas. For example, while most of the teachers interviewed were trained as Humanities teachers (Table 5.43, p.211) and were familiar with organising discussions in their classes, other recently assigned teachers from different learning areas were not as confident in this regard. Nonetheless, specialist teachers such as drama or art teachers felt that their specific skills held them in good stead when creative activities like role-play or artwork were called for in the teaching and learning program.

As the teachers became more familiar with the draft RE Units, they also became more discerning with how they used the curriculum materials. Increasingly they began to use their own resources and strategies and used the materials presented in the Units of Work as a starting point or catalyst (Table 6.1, p.218) for students to engage the content or to apply the content to a real-life or relevant context:

Mastersheets are very good. They have good presentation and clarity. Tend to make selective use of them because they are good focus sheets. I tend to modify the Mastersheets. Use them so that kids can do something concrete or use them for personal reflection. Good for students to do work alone rather than only do group work. Use the Student Book as a reference guide or basis for the Unit. Do not use every time. Use the book as an initiator to discussion in class. The Mastersheets and Student Book are crucial in the beginning.

(Ursula)

The teachers interviewed affirmed the survey finding (Chapter 5, p.198) that they found organising a liturgy was a concern. The issue of accessibility to suitable resources and professional background material was highlighted. They reported that access to resources on liturgy was a problem—particularly as they are not provided in the draft RE Units. Even when interviewees mentioned sincerely they went to Mass regularly, they still had few ideas about organising one:

Personally I baulk at the idea because I've had no training in it at all. I go to Mass every day but I have no memory for what comes before what unless I've had to do it myself or I've been taught to do it. I've been taught that nowhere. So there's a booklet we've received from the CEO which I'm intending to use and follow step by step. So I'll tuck that away as a safety belt but I can understand that teachers feel very uncomfortable with it.

(Diana)

On the other hand, the teachers who had access to resources or attended professional development courses on liturgy found these resources and courses to be beneficial. Provided they had assistance from other more experienced teachers, interviewees believed they were able to cope fairly well. They also accessed resources available in their school or on the Internet and sought to attend professional development courses in this area. The difficulties in organising liturgies reported previously in the survey seemed to be due to the lack of prior training and inexperience compounded with a lack of access to resources according to the interviewees. It appeared that recently assigned RE teachers compensated by taking a collaborative role with other more experienced teachers.

6.3.2 Desire for Self-assurance

The theme 'Desire for Self-assurance' refers to the teaching approach recently assigned RE teachers took to ensure they felt comfortable with the students and confident in how they presented the curriculum materials. RARE teachers are anxious teachers and are motivated to be well prepared for their students because, as Diana relates, '... inevitably there are curly questions'. Such anxiety about knowing the content meant that recently assigned RE teachers devoted a large part of their preparation time to becoming acquainted with initially, the Teaching and Learning Program and later, the Teacher Reference Section provided by the draft RE Units.

The issue of time for professional preparation was a common one among the interviewees. For example, Anne was an experienced Technology and Enterprise teacher (Table 5.43, p.211). She sympathized with her RARE colleagues about the amount of preparation time that was required to develop new RE lessons. However, Anne felt that the frequent use of the Mastersheets and Student Books (see pp.220-221) was unhealthy for the professional development of teachers. She believed that such a practice made recently assigned RE teachers too dependent – 'they are lazy'

and a ‘cop out’ for teachers – and made them less inclined to do their research and develop their own resources. Nonetheless, while Anne was critical of such recently assigned RE teachers, she believed there was a need to have more time for preparation to do the job properly:

Beginning RE teachers need time out for preparation. It takes the longest to prepare even if you have one class of RE. It takes more time than other subjects.

(Anne)

Recently assigned RE teachers were faced with competing priorities. Some of the competing priorities were: to focus on their major learning area where they had prior training; to experience and develop good lessons; or, to spend additional time on reading and studying the Teaching Reference Section before preparing good RE lessons. Inevitably, some RARE teachers tried to do both but with Religious Education placed increasingly on the backburner:

[If] they’re teaching mainly Social Studies and one or two RE [classes], their main goal is that, Social Studies. So ... they don’t get handed Mastersheets and Student Book like you do in RE. So, it’s like, “Well thank God that’s planned. I’ll just work on my Social Studies, and I’ll just concentrate on the RE kids in class.” Certainly, and they’re certainly sincere about it but it’s like, “Why would I go and write another Mastersheet when I’ve got” (pauses and points to one of the Mastersheets in the Teacher’s Manual). You know what’s going on there and it’s a time thing.

(Rose)

As teachers became more familiar with the content of the draft RE Units and had successfully taught their prepared lessons, their confidence grew.

Another factor that assisted the confidence of the teachers was prior training in the RE learning area. Unlike the majority of recently assigned RE teachers, a few of the teachers interviewed already possessed training beyond the Accreditation requirements. One teacher, Rose, was a specialist RE teacher (Table 5.43, p.211) and had majored in Theology and Religious Education in her degree. While she still had a lot to learn about teaching in the classroom, Rose saw her background knowledge as a distinct advantage:

Having a degree in Theology and a major in Religious Education method has been a God-send for me. Because I tend to have a lot of background knowledge in my head and I'm only 22 [years old]. I've recently done these things myself, so, that's good. Because often I can just know the text that I use and I can brush up quickly. It's not like I have to go and find the facts for the first time. And I think, I'm just so lucky because some of my colleagues don't have that luxury, I guess. So they're starting – I don't know – with a lot more work in front of them.

(Rose)

However, for the majority of teachers, two areas of difficulty emerged from the survey (Chapter 5, p.188): using the Bible in their lessons and organising liturgies. In the first round of interviews, the teachers were questioned about why they thought these difficulties were the case. In the use of the Bible, Victor reported frankly:

it's hard for me as a teacher to try and translate something [in the Gospels] sometimes when you don't even know yourself. You're finding it difficult yourself to be able to get students to understand that.

(Victor)

Victor had a lack of prior training because he had not finished his study component of Accreditation. However, where interviewees had completed their studies, they were reluctant also to include Scripture references in their own resources because they feared misconstruing its interpretation:

Personally I find it hard using the Scriptures, not because I don't think it is relevant, but because of my own inadequacies and lack of knowledge.

(Amber)

As a result, many avoided organising liturgies and using the Bible. They were afraid or worried about how they coped with the reactions of students or the scrutiny of the school community. When it came to liturgies, the problem was further exacerbated by concerns over how the presiding priest might react:

I'm just always worried about doing something wrong. Organising something wrong, having a priest come in from outside who may have some assumptions about what the school should be doing, or RE is not being taught, or something like that.

(Edward)

Recently assigned RE teachers were concerned about the reaction of the priest to how they organised the liturgy and the manner in which the students conducted

themselves. Some interviewees felt the priest was there to judge them in their role. The teachers thought the priest assumed that, in their role as a religious educator, they were responsible totally for the quality of participation shown by their RE class. They did not see the priest as someone who was supportive and sympathetic to their situation, especially if the priest was not a regular visitor to the school. Such concerns reflected the research work of Tinsey (1999) about the misunderstood relationships between priests and teachers in Catholic secondary schools. The teachers were also concerned about the attitudes of the students to organising and participating in the Mass or other liturgies:

teachers may be afraid that the students will not appreciate the need for liturgy to have silence and reflection because of their entertainment culture. Teachers may be afraid that students will play up. Teachers' perceptions about getting kids involved in organising a Mass may be influenced by them fearing that students couldn't care less.

(Tim)

It was very much a 'fear of the unknown' for experienced and inexperienced teachers alike. Both these areas demonstrated that where the curriculum materials did not provide direct support, then recently assigned RE teachers were uncomfortable about doing it because they lacked the knowledge and confidence to do so in front of their classes:

If you were really familiar with them and you know what you were talking about, fine. But if you're not, then there's a danger because you're going to basically be showing the kids that you don't know what you're going on about. And I think that's a danger because that will turn kids away more than anything else. So if you're confident and done lots of study in it, then yes, fine, use it. (pause) Make sure it relates to them. But if you're not then be very, very picky and not necessarily use it all the time.

(Kate)

Interestingly, one interviewee took the point further about the selective use of Scripture in class to compensate for the lack of knowledge and sufficient training. Barbara, who had completed her Accreditation (Table 5.43, p.211), suggested that the recently assigned teacher was not obliged to do so, they could leave it out altogether! If the teacher did not have sufficient background knowledge, then it was difficult to be confident about using the Bible:

However, not all are [confident], and this may be the reason as to why not a lot of teachers refer to the Scriptures in their teaching (pause) and they shouldn't feel obliged to especially if they feel uncomfortable with the content.

(Barbara)

Contrary to this view, one interviewee saw this matter in a different light. This interviewee was a member of a teaching religious order with a number of years of training in theology and scripture before beginning to teach the draft RE Units. Pat observed that the lack of confidence was a matter also of the personal faith background of the teacher:

So I think the more confident a person is with their faith, whether they agree with everything in the Catholic faith is irrelevant but the more confident they are with their faith, the better they are to adapt the message.

(Pat)

Such an observation was reflected in the thinking of Stead (1994) and Hartley (1999) regarding personal and professional development opportunities in using Scripture (Chapter 3, p.98).

Further professional formation seemed to be undertaken by the recently assigned RE teachers through reading the Teacher Resource Section within the draft RE Units, attending the 'Content of RE' Inservices provided by the CEOWA and by listening to the experiences of other teachers:

Reading through the background notes ... in the [Teacher's] Book [Also] I've been to some of these [Content of] RE inservices. In fact, I have really found them useful. ... And just some staff meetings we've had, people get up and speak about stuff and it's very good stuff that I've picked up.

(Pippa)

One recently assigned RE teacher spoke directly of the wish to discuss and share with colleagues useful ideas, strategies and helpful hints on managing the RE classroom (Table 6.1, p.218). Such a wish seemed to be a newly emerging factor and became a significant response in the second round of interviews (Chapter 7, p.263). Gwen recognised that this collegiality was difficult because RE teachers were not in the one department together. She felt that it would be beneficial to RARE teachers if they had direct support from experienced personnel whether it be the RE Coordinator, experienced RE teachers or consultant from the CEOWA. Recently assigned RE teachers wanted to see practical classroom strategies in action. Gwen

suggested that it would be a good idea if they could access a ‘mentor’ – a qualified and experienced Religious Educator who was renowned as an expert at their craft:

I think they probably need a mentor, a good role model.
Someone who will offer them support and encouragement.
But still allow them to try to do their own things, to do their
own mistakes. They’re there to really model that loving and
openness, that great belief in the value of what they’re doing.
(Gwen)

Gwen commented further upon the value of having someone like this: maybe the Principal, Deputy Principal, RE Coordinator, Priests and others. She felt that by watching what they did and learning their styles of teaching, RARE teachers could enhance their teaching as well. Other RARE teachers wanted to see an ‘expert’ in action translating the content into meaningful and engaging activities for a wide range of students. This form of ongoing professional development was what recently assigned RE teachers appeared to yearn for the most:

every teacher who is going to be taking RE for the first time, second or third time – they’re new teachers, they should be inserviced on the same content across the state. You make sure you have top class facilitators that are not going to just lecture to your participants but make them do activities as if they were the students in the classroom. Show them the different strategies that are available to teach RE. I mean you can get a sheet and have 56 different strategies. Show them how to use those strategies.

(Olivia)

Olivia, along with other RARE teachers (pp.223-225), believed that it was this ‘hands on’, practical approach to teaching RE that they needed rather than be left in a vacuum of uncertainty as to what to do. Having a choice of strategies in the teaching and learning program was useful but for recently assigned RE teachers there needed to be ways to learn how to use these strategies so they could flourish as competent and confident RE teachers. This quest to flourish as RE teachers is the focus of the next theme.

6.3.3 *The Quest to Flourish*

It seemed that once the immediate professional demands of the draft RE Units were met, recently assigned RE teachers turned their attention to the specific learning needs of their students. In the first round of interviews, teachers commented that the change in use of curriculum materials and teaching approach came about because of a greater awareness of (and concern for) relevance to the students. Hailey believed that, in her experience, a variety of activities suited to the abilities of her students was important:

This is my fourth term of teaching the same Unit and I haven't taught it the same twice because of the kids. And also what the kids are experiencing at the time. ... you've got to be aware of the skills that the kids have got. If the kids can't have an open discussion without someone being threatened, then you can't do that. You've got to find some other way of getting the message across. If the kids aren't good at artwork and they hate it, then you find some way different to be creative. You go and make collages rather than drawings, and things like that. You just adapt to the skills that the kids have got.

(Hailey)

It was not just a case of adapting their teaching approach for a diverse range of academic backgrounds, but also a greater sensitivity in the approach of RARE teachers for the personal development of their students:

If you can't relate what you're teaching to their lives, to their own questions now, [then] it's just like the rest of knowledge you leave behind after school. It doesn't make any impact, it doesn't meet them where they're at.

(Diana)

Though recently assigned RE teachers had prior training in the phases of development of secondary students, the responses of the interviewees tended to indicate that only after the experience of teaching the draft RE Units, did they appreciate how important their strategies became in making the content more accessible to the understanding of the students. For example, in using the Bible, interviewees explained how they needed to provide a more experiential approach to assist the understanding of their students:

The use of Scripture is important given the clientele of the students. However, more [direct] use of Scriptures would switch the students off. Better to make constant reference [to Scripture] by ‘e g’ [*interviewee’s term*] the use of roleplay, adapting it to everyday life. Need to make links to modern day life and make the Scriptures relevant to the students. Students like to use drama to Scripture readings in liturgies ‘e g’ as part of Mass.

(Ursula)

It was apparent that difficulties occurred where recently assigned RE teachers did not have prior training in using effective strategies that were in tune with the religious understandings of students. It appeared the difficulties for RARE teachers was not just confined to a lack of knowledge about areas such as Scripture but also a lack of skilling or method in making the ‘link’ between the meaning of the content and the lived experience of the students. Recently assigned RE teachers who had both knowledge and skills were able to appreciate the importance of such a link and made the connections between faith and life for the students. Rose, a specialist RE teacher (p.228), felt very competent in her ability to get the students interested (or what she referred to in her interview as ‘hooked’) in the material she was presenting. She attributed her competence in making the content relevant to the students because she was given ‘a more practical aspect’ in her training. Rose believed that this practical training was what RARE teachers needed to develop the confidence in this important aspect of their teaching:

I think they all should go through a course like what I went through ... [at UNDA] which was the Accreditation [to teach RE] to a certain extent, but over more time and probably with a more practical aspect to it. So I think that they should do something like that. I think they should be involved with like Liturgies and learning about Scripture and that sort of thing. Again, in a practical way.

(Rose)

This change in teaching approach and greater initiative in using a wider range of classroom resources and strategies also seemed to coincide with the teachers wishing to encourage a ‘comfortable’ learning environment as a precursor for concentrating on the spiritual and faith formation of students:

To make a comfortable environment for students to share together their ideas and to enhance their faith involvement and understanding.

(Steven)

Mark suggested such an environment was to be positive and intimate, to create a sanctuary for the students to discuss spirituality, faith and other matters of importance to their lives:

So I try to level it in such a way that they felt comfortable and happy to come into the classroom. They found it as a sanctuary where you could talk about spiritual things, talk about the RE side of it, also talk about real life situations. And using the Catholic perspective how to best to deal with those sorts of things.

(Mark)

In contrast, many interviewees remained focused on teaching the content (Table 6.1, p.218) in spite of the reactions of their students and be pressured to adapt their management to the needs of students. They seemed to view the attitudes of their students and responses as opposing the efforts of the teacher to educate them about Catholic beliefs. The interviewees commented also about the lack of interest by the students in Religious Education or the lack of appreciation for the effort the teacher placed in trying to make strategies work. Worst of all, one teacher believed students were actively sabotaging her attempts to teach:

And certainly when I started in Term 1 with these life issues, when I came up against a fairly large male brick wall in my classes who were very anti-anything I wanted to present to them and they would simply not listen to me. They would ask questions, they were very inquisitive but I think they were trying to set me up.

(Nancy)

In all cases, it seemed that the interviewees were expressing a desire to flourish as RE teachers. They wanted to be competent classroom managers, to provide lessons that were relevant and enjoyable to their students and to be able to create a learning environment that would enable positive opportunities for the students to explore their spirituality and faith. As Hailey, an experienced Science teacher and in her fourth year of teaching RE (Table 5.43, p.211), explained:

Making them [the students] do work without them realising it. If they don't think they've done any work then that's great RE. But that doesn't necessarily mean they haven't ... And giving them the incentive to work so that they get something out of it ... Plus it does cut down on your discipline problems. If kids are doing something they want to do, they can do, then they're so much easier to handle. They enjoy themselves more.

(Hailey)

While the approach of Hailey appeared like pandering to the sense of hedonism advocated by the students, she did feel positive about the affirmation coming from the students. As the students enjoyed completing the tasks, discipline no longer was a problem for Hailey and she felt she was becoming a competent classroom manager in Religious Education. For RARE teachers, this teaching approach meant affirmation for their own sense of identity: as a person and as an RE teacher:

Look, at the end of the day, I mean I teach the same kids for the whole year. I want to have built up a positive relationship with them and I do that through RE because I believe it gives me the scope to get to know them, it gives me the scope to tell them why I choose to be Catholic, why I choose to do certain things.

(Olivia)

The comment by Olivia about 'why I choose to be Catholic' was a common thread that linked in with the need to be familiar with the content of the draft RE Units and be able to relate this content to the students in meaningful ways. The interviewees saw that their confidence and competence was linked to how they saw themselves and particularly their strength of character in presenting a faith witness. A person who believed in the truth of what they were teaching was going to be far more adept at communicating the message across to the students as Pat indicated earlier (p.230).

Recently assigned RE teachers wanted to flourish, to have confidence in their professional competency to teach the content and to be familiar with the curriculum materials. Interviewees believed that they needed to be able to relate the materials in interesting and relevant ways and to be committed to what they doing in both professional and religious terms. Teachers who felt they were confident in these three areas as they implemented the draft RE Units emphasised their belief that their aim in RE was to facilitate the human, spiritual and faith formation of their students. It seemed that the experience of teaching the draft Units, and the support of further

professional development, led to changes in the perceptions RARE teachers had of the aims of Religious Education. Their perceptions were changing from a ‘crusade of delivery’ imposed on the students to a ‘pilgrimage of formation’ with the students. The crusade of delivery seemed to be characterised by prolific use of Mastersheets and Student Book with close coverage of all learning objectives. Alternatively, a pilgrimage of formation focused on the selective use of curriculum materials and strategies that were related to the academic and personal spiritual and religious aptitudes of the students:

The most important aim ... [of RE is] finding out the centre of who they are ... to make contact with who they are spiritually, to have grown personally, to have learnt what the Church teaches and to respect others’ opinions and views.

(Anne)

In relating their teaching to the specific needs of students, the interviewees expressed a belief that their teaching of RE was directed towards firstly (and, in some cases, primarily), the personal and spiritual formation of the students (Table 6.1, p.218). Interviewees, who focused on the spiritual aspects of the formation of their students, tended themselves to be so inclined:

Probably developing the spiritual side of the students and all that goes with it. I’d be the last person to talk about dogma and that’s because I’m not into that sort of thing! So I would hope at the end that they would have their spiritual side of them start to develop.

(Jessica)

The admission by Jessica that she ‘be the last person to talk about dogma ... [because she was] ... not into that sort of thing’ raised the suspicion that the degree of integration in the students desired by the teachers seemed to be related to the degree of integration in the personal spiritual and religious formation of the teacher. Many interviewees spoke about how they wanted their students to grow in their understanding and appreciation of their own (assumed to be Catholic) personal faith as an integral part of their development as a maturing person:

My vision of RE is that the students learn to have a relationship with God. That they learn about our Church. That they learn to love God and to love the Church. And that they know how to apply that to their lives, so that when they're dealing with their friends or they're dealing with their families they can do that in a Christian Catholic sense and try and really live. I want them to live what we are talking about.

(Rose)

Rose assumed that students could and wanted to be like her, to be a committed person of faith. While this assumption may work in catechetical situations, such a viewpoint may prove intimidating to students who are unable or unwilling to follow suit. While not doubting the sincerity expressed by Rose, how she portrayed herself to the students and how well they accepted her was an issue for Rose. Questions of authenticity and relevance were raised and are the focus of the next theme.

6.3.4 Desire for Authenticity

The interviewees spoke about the importance of how RE teachers presented themselves to their students. They believed that teachers should 'practice what they preached' and be a faith witness to their students (Table 6.1, p.218). The teachers wanted to show the students that they empathised with them and understood what the students experienced. One of the interviewees, Brian, commented, '... to show students you were like them and that you are a human being too.' This desire to empathise with students entailed a certain amount of vulnerability because teachers needed to share something of their inner selves with the students. Most of all, according to Jessica, the teacher had to 'ring true' with the students, to be an RE teacher who was genuine as a person with a commitment to a faith stance:

I still think it's really important that you have (pause) you know where you stand, so that you're not reciting something from a book. Because if it doesn't ring true, I think, to the kids for a start because they're pretty (pause) they can usually see through teachers like that pretty easily.

(Jessica)

Jessica went on to say how the authenticity dilemma began from the moment the recently assigned teacher was employed to teach RE. She pointed out that recently assigned teachers feel they had to be compliant because of job opportunity or timetabling issues. Edith, like Jessica, expressed a similar concern and wondered whether RARE teachers should feel compelled to teach RE:

Teachers should *never be forced* [Edith's emphasis] to teach RE because of timetabling or financial constraints. If the world of Catholic education is genuine in its commitment to quality RE instruction in its schools that should come before convenience of timetables.

(Edith)

Both Jessica and Edith also felt that the integrity of the recently assigned RE teacher became compromised when the personal faith stance of the teacher was not completely in tune with the demands of the draft RE Units. They felt uneasy about the perceived gap between their stance and the stance presented in the draft RE Units. In turn, they felt they were not living up to expectations and failed to be authentic to the students, to the curriculum and to themselves. Coupled with the difficulties of inadequate professional formation, teachers became less than enthusiastic about teaching the subject and other teachers became dismayed by the apathy of their colleagues. For instance, Diana, teaching in her second year of Religious Education (Table 5.43, p.211) who claimed she was a devoutly practising Catholic, demonstrated this point well. She wanted to share her passion for her Church. However, Diana felt frustrated with her fellow colleagues who were assigned to teach RE when they were still coming to terms with their own faith commitment. Her comments suggested that there were few recently assigned teachers with the personal faith formation to teach RE and, in turn, had an impact on the faith formation of the students:

I think if you've got a teacher who's been thrown into teaching religion when really they haven't thought deeply about how do you integrate it into your own life then for them it's still textbook material and it's still a series of questions and answers in a penny catechism. And to try and integrate Church teaching into somebody else's life is impossible if you aren't actively seeking that in your own. I think one of the problems we have ... is teachers that are brought into the schools and are asked in the interview, 'Are you prepared to teach religion?' If they are, regardless of where they're at in their own faith journey, they're thrown into one class or two classes per week to fill the timetable gaps.

And they're there dealing with their own questions, trying to convincingly portray the Church's views and try to show it works in real life scenarios when they're still at the point of trying to assimilate that into their lives. So I think in some cases that's why it's difficult. ... I think that to have teachers who aren't in love with or seeking to become more in love with their faith themselves, to have teachers who are only teaching not living religion does more harm than good.

(Diana)

Interestingly, other interviewees also frowned upon this lack of enthusiasm where teachers might not be taking RE seriously. There seemed to be a sense that if the RARE teacher were in such a situation, then the teacher should be allowed to opt out of teaching RE. Such teachers did not have the energy nor the personal commitment to sustain themselves in face of the curriculum demands of the draft RE Units. A professional and personal faith commitment to teaching RE seemed to be the determinant in sustaining the recently assigned RE teacher in meeting the curriculum demands of the draft RE Units. As Edward (Table 5.43, p.211), who had not completed the study component of Accreditation, commented:

If there's a particular teacher that doesn't hold the Church teaching particularly close to their heart, they're not going to relate it to the kids because they don't care about it that much themselves. The teachers that do are going to find ways, they're going to seek to connect with the kids, they're going to seek to connect with the Church's teachings. You got to talk from personal experience, and that's why RE is sharing of yourself. You got to talk about where the Church is teaching or the place it has had in your life and how it has made your life better. And in situations where you haven't used the Church's teachings, it has made your life worse. You just got to relate it back to the personal situation.

... At the same time, the worse thing in the world would be someone who has all the professional development, who may have Accreditation [to teach RE] ... and yet, doesn't really care that much about the faith. That's the worse situation.

(Edward)

Many of the interviewees related the confidence to share their faith with their students because of their own religious upbringing or personal faith experience (Table 6.1, p.218). Some relied on how they were taught about religion and emulated that experience with their own classes. For other interviewees like Diana (p.238), what was more significant was their personal decision to be an actively practising Catholic. They felt that being able to share something of their personal commitment

was important. Interviewees related how their commitment developed while growing up at home, being a part of their parish, joining youth movements or being influenced by significant family members, priests, RE teachers and others:

I suppose having faith being central to my life. My faith is important to who I am and I grew up in a Catholic family. But I never took the faith on myself until I made the decision to. And the things that have flowed from that decision to become consciously Christian have been brilliant. My life has gotten better a million fold. I was involved in youth movements – Catholic youth movements, so Antioch groups, being a part of ‘Team’ and things like that has been really significant for me. Well, there have been people at [this school] whose RE teaching have been fantastic. Who have been at it with a real passion. I’ve learnt a lot from them, just ‘on the job’ learning. It stems from having a personal commitment to being a Christian.

(Edward)

Interviewees believed personal faith formation held them in good stead in meeting the curriculum demands and personal faith witness to the students. In the case of Ursula, who was a young, accredited RE teacher in her fifth year of teaching RE (Table 5.43, p.211), this integration of teacher and witness was something that she felt very comfortable portraying to her students:

Students can see me as a person not just an RE teacher – that’s who I am, a person living out Gospel values. So students respect – I think that’s crucial – me and I am someone to model from. I hope they go out and do the same from what they learn or have built or reinforced from home such as morals and values.

(Ursula)

She saw it as part of her self-identity – ‘that’s who I am’ – and this persona was authentic to the students. Even teachers who did not come from such a background found that their decision to become an ‘active’ rather than a ‘nominal’ Catholic was a significant support for them in teaching the draft RE Units:

My own conversion experience from being a nominal Catholic to an active one. Having seen the results of removing the ‘mystical, supernatural things’ from RE. Students can get that sort of RE from their family and friends. Doing several tertiary units in Theology and Religious Education. From my own prayer life. My own reading and theologising of the Catechism. From my parish experience. From having support from my RE Coordinator.

(Tim)

This did not mean, as far as the interviewees were concerned, that recently assigned RE teachers without this ‘ideal’ background could not teach Religious Education. What was recognised was that there was a gap between their personal commitment and the commitment they perceived was presented in the draft RE Units. To bridge this gap, RARE teachers felt they had to become more deeply committed as a person of faith. The issue of identity and integrity emerged as an important area for recently assigned RE teachers in how they coped with the demands of the draft RE Units. The issue is discussed further in the next section, ‘Issues for Further Exploration’ (p.242).

To help them in coping with the demands of faith witness, a few recently assigned RE teachers commented they looked towards the example of more experienced Religious Educators and most participating teachers commended the professional development opportunities they attended on Religious Education and spirituality (Table 6.1, p.218):

I have to go back to the REC we had at our school. I think he was a very gifted man and he always inspired me. Whenever I had the chance to watch him work with a group of students you could see he had them in the palm of his hand all the way through. And he was very instrumental in making me feel that this was a good subject to teach, this was important. ... The only inservicing I’ve really done as far as RE strictly goes is through the CEO. I can honestly say that I never felt it was a waste of time to come to one.

Whether I use it in the classroom or not may vary but for my own personal growth and understanding I always come away feeling that I learnt a bit more.

(Fran)

Recently assigned RE teachers in this first round of interviews were adamant that, regardless of their prior personal and professional formation, there was a lot more they needed to learn and understand about themselves and about teaching the draft RE Units. They were looking for greater depth to their knowledge of the content of

the Units, greater skill in managing and teaching the students and greater wisdom about themselves and their job. Such a thirst for becoming an accomplished RE teacher went beyond that provided by the Accreditation program to teach RE:

Accreditation [to teach RE] ... is good but teachers need more of it on an ongoing basis. After learning how to teach RE the first time, they need to be able to go back to it again. Their classroom experiences will help them understand how they can teach RE better. Teachers in the country also need access to 'experts' like lecturers on moral issues. Teachers also need to have a retreat for themselves which should be available on an ongoing basis because people grow and change over time. Teachers need to know themselves before they impart anything in RE. They need to have developed their own spirituality and developed a knowledge and appreciation for Scripture.

(Anne)

It was apparent that the recently assigned RE teachers perceived that their role was more than be a teacher and that role was very much linked to a grander vision of why they taught Religious Education. As one interviewee, Gwen, who had not completed her Accreditation but was in her sixth year of teaching RE (Table 5.43, p.211) described, teaching RE was a something she felt was a purpose in her life, it was a 'mission':

And I see my job as a real mission, otherwise I wouldn't be here. If I just wanted to teach, to be a good English teacher, I'd be in a State school. You can be a good teacher in a State school. But I have chosen to be here because I do see it as a mission.

(Gwen)

Teaching RE for Gwen went beyond becoming a 'good teacher'; there was something more than professional competence that was related to how strongly she felt about her faith stance.

6.4 Issues for Further Exploration

Matters of competence had emerged in the first round of interviews. Teachers wanted to be able to implement the draft RE Units confidently. This confidence came from familiarity with the Units and from experience of teaching RE classes. However, there seemed to be something more going on. There was another side to

this confidence that teachers were describing that had more to do with themselves as people. Over time, with familiarity with the Units, teachers became more concerned by the way they portrayed themselves to their students. They seemed to be dealing with a new array of expectations. Did they feel their teaching, as Jessica suggested, ‘ring true’ with the students (p.237)? Was the commitment of the teacher to the faith sincere and authentic to the students? These matters seemed to play on the minds of the teachers. They were anxious about their own identity and integrity as an RE teacher. It seemed possible that as the recently assigned RE teachers implemented the draft RE Units, they in turn were affected personally and professionally by the curriculum and faith witness demands placed on them.

Data had emerged that suggested there was another paradigm to be explored about how recently assigned RE teachers implemented the draft RE Units. This paradigm was the interplay between the journey of personal and professional formation of RARE teachers with the process of curriculum implementation. The study had uncovered a unique perspective on how recently assigned RE teachers coped with the demands of curriculum implementation. Further exploration of this paradigm had the potential to add to the field of knowledge in RE curriculum innovation. This paradigm was investigated further in the second round of interviews with the sample group of RARE teachers. This second round of interviews is the focus of the next chapter.