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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 EIGHT

REFLECTIONS

8.1 Introduction

This chapter considers the key themes that have emerged from this study and discusses their significance within the context of current educational literature pertaining to the formation and experience of recently assigned teachers. The chapter is called ‘Reflections’ because it presents a synthesis of the thoughts, feelings and research from a range of sources. It reflects, firstly, the thoughts and feelings of the recently assigned RE teachers from the survey and interviews. Secondly, the chapter presents the reflections of the researcher about the significance of the qualitative data that emerged. Thirdly, the chapter describes how the findings mirror other research and Church documents about the experience of recently assigned teachers and especially recently assigned RE (RARE) teachers. Lastly, a model is proposed about the process of change that recently assigned RE teachers experienced, both personally and professionally, as they aspired to become excellent RE teachers.

8.2 Key Concerns

Looking at the various themes to emerge from the survey and two rounds of interviews, a number of key concerns became significant to recently assigned RE teachers. These key concerns were common to the majority of teachers teaching a learning area with which they were unfamiliar (Chapter 3, p.55). The responses to these key concerns were the mechanisms by which RARE teachers learnt to cope with the curriculum exigencies as they implemented the draft RE Units in their RE classroom teaching. The key concerns are described under these headings:

- *Competence in Instruction and Classroom Management:* Recently assigned RE teachers were concerned initially about developing effective knowledgeable instruction and classroom management;
- *Connectivity:* To enhance their competence, RARE teachers wanted to develop a network of positive and professional relationships with students and with other staff members;

- *Authenticity and Spiritual Integrity:* The experience of teaching the draft RE Units led to RARE teachers wanting to present authentic human qualities to their students, to affirm these qualities within themselves and to develop and maintain a balanced, healthy spirituality to cope with the personal and professional demands of teaching the draft RE Units;
- *Vocation of the recently assigned Religious Educator:* RARE teachers began to see their RE teaching in a broader context to their own faith commitment and wanted to discover their vocation in becoming a passionate and committed Religious Educator; and,
- *Holistic and Ongoing Formation:* Recently assigned RE teachers sought to improve themselves personally and professionally and recognised the need for further personal, professional, and religious formation on an ongoing basis.

Each concern is discussed, in turn, and a model is proposed to draw together these concerns and their influences on recently assigned secondary RE teachers.

8.2.1 Competence in Instruction and Classroom Management

One of the concerns to emerge from this research was the importance of gaining experience and familiarity with the RE Units of Work. As recently assigned RE teachers addressed this competence in instruction, the confidence of the teacher developed as a result. In the survey responses, RARE teachers indicated that accessibility to instructional resources was important (Chapter 5, p.176) and frequently, they preferred using the Mastersheets and Student Book as a mainstay to their teaching (Chapter 5, p.178). It seemed to be the case of having ‘activities that worked’ (Appleton and Kindt 1999, p.4) to cope with the immediate task of implementing the draft RE Units into their classroom teaching (Chapter 3, p.61).

The perceptions of the teachers interviewed in the first round were focused on the importance of competence in their classroom teaching of the draft RE Units (Chapter 6, p.234). As Clare mentioned in the first round of interviews (Chapter 6, p.221), she believed that recently assigned RE teachers were very ‘reliant on the Mastersheets and Student Books’ because they wanted to ensure their instruction was effective. Teachers seemed to be more concerned about the pragmatics of implementing the draft Units. At the initial interview, what mattered to the interviewees was a

thorough knowledge of the content of the Unit, having the resources and strategies to keep the students on task and developing a warm rapport with the students. RARE teachers shared with colleagues in other learning areas the challenge of ensuring effective instruction and classroom management. How well they managed this fundamental demand formed their confidence to teach RE in the future. It was a cornerstone trait towards becoming 'highly effective teachers' (McEwan 2002, p.51). Rymarz and Engebretson (2005) have also affirmed similar concerns (Chapter 3, p.67).

Recently assigned RE teachers felt frustrated by their inability to teach students in the ways they perceived they should teach them. Such frustration was typical of teachers faced with teaching a new learning area (Chapter 3, pp.56-57). To cope with this situation, RARE teachers increasingly felt they had to adapt their teaching approach to the needs of their students. In the survey, teachers commented about the need to adapt the curriculum materials provided by the draft RE Units (Chapter 5, p.183) and were using other instructional resources they were able to access themselves (Table 5.18, p.183). The perception was that these materials were more suitable to the needs of students (Chapter 5, p.183).

In turn, the positive response the teachers received from the students helped to restore the sense of self-worth and confidence of the teachers to teach in the future. After a year of teaching the draft RE Units, most teachers saw adapting their use of curriculum materials and teaching approach to be more in tune with the learning needs of their students as crucial to their competence and confidence as an RE teacher (Table 7.1, p.246). Even though Kate (Table 5.43, p.211) had quit teaching RE for other reasons (Chapter 7, p.261), she also recognised that she needed to change how she used the materials and teaching approach if she taught the subject again:

I think if I taught RE again now I'd go about it a totally different way to what I did last year and the year before. Like I stuck to the [Teacher's] Manuals and the [Student] Books and the [Master] sheets because I sort of didn't know where to start with RE. I think in my last interview I mentioned that you have to make it relevant that's what I would be doing.

Like I'd probably look at the [Student] Books and have a look at some of the ideas they'd got but I'd be coming up with my own activities, just really going on my own a lot more, using current newspapers a lot more and TV programs and whatever, stuff like that.

(Kate, second round of interviews)

For most RARE teachers a strict adherence to the use of the materials in the draft RE Units was viewed as a provisional strategy until they became more familiar and comfortable with the content. This sense of ease with the Units was very much oriented towards the capacity of the teachers to understand and accept the presentation of the beliefs and values contained within the content (Chapter 3, pp.81-83).

A sense of ease did not necessarily translate into practice for all recently assigned RE teachers. Recently assigned teachers do not always succeed in achieving the changes mentioned above (Chapter 3, p.58). Such was the case in this study: some recently assigned RE teachers learnt from their experiences and succeeded; some did not and remained frustrated by their failures. Inexperience in teaching did seem to complicate the capacity of beginning teachers to cope with the intensity of the demands placed on them in RE teaching. If recently assigned teachers had difficulties in instruction and classroom management in their main teaching areas (Chapter 3, p.58), then teaching the draft RE Units seemed to make these difficulties worse. Mark, a teacher with many years of teaching experience but a novice to teaching RE (Table 5.43, p.211), made this observation about RARE teachers who in their early career years were called upon to teach this learning area:

I think first and second year out teachers shouldn't be thrust into a RE classroom. Basically, for classroom management more than anything else, I think. The big key to teaching RE is the teacher's ability to manage the classroom in such a way to get responses from them. If you take a too hard a line with kids, especially in RE, you get negativity. If you give them too much scope, too much elasticity you lose them totally. First and second year out teachers don't have these skills. It takes a little time to acquire these skills to be able to read the kids properly.

(Mark, first round of interviews)

Mark believed that teachers new to teaching should ‘cut their teeth’ on their specialist learning area before teaching Religious Education. He felt that novice teachers needed to develop their classroom management skills before engaging appropriate student responses. Such an opinion reflected the point that most novice teachers did not possess sufficient knowledge background or skills even in their specialist areas (Chapter 3, p.58). If this was the case, then recently assigned RE teachers with one or two years of teaching experience had more than enough to cope with in their own specialist learning area before tackling the draft RE Units.

Some interviewees did not readily change their teaching approach and continued to be frustrated in the way they wanted to teach RE because they felt personally challenged by the students. One case in point occurred in the first round of interviews where Nancy related her problems in dealing with her Year 11 ‘naughty boys’ in Religious Education. Nancy felt she had to know her content very closely because of the sorts of students she had in her class:

I guess when I went into start teaching life issues with my Year 11 RE class which has a very high proportion of ‘naughty’ boys, who are not particularly on-side, then it was definitely a consideration. Because I knew that I had to be very, very clear about what I was teaching. There was no way you could bluff your way through in a class like that....

(Nancy, first round of interviews)

As Nancy was earlier quoted (Chapter 6, p.234), she felt the students in her class were ‘wanting to set her up’ because she was enthusiastically teaching them about the position of the Church on certain life issues. She found this conflict difficult to handle and eventually she conceded to modifying her approach, perhaps out of tiredness in trying to cope:

So I do tend to take each day as it comes, and try and respond accordingly. I found that better because going in there with set things I just (pause) kids are so changeable, you know, and these kids have actually changed over the four terms I’ve had them, thank God!

I don't have my program set out for 10 weeks, I know I'm going to do this and use this resource. I try to be very realistic and say, "Okay, Friday last period, I'm not going to be able to do what I want to do. So we'll do something else." I try to be realistic in that way. I don't have set strategies and resources.

(Nancy, first round of interviews)

The enthusiasm Nancy had for her ideal of teaching RE classes (Chapter 6, p.262) had waned because her confidence in relating with students had been tested (Chapter 3, p.57).

Although the recently assigned RE teachers were able to identify the teaching approach (Figure 2.1, p.39), they tended to understate a critical understanding of the principles underlying such an approach. Such an approach paralleled the view of Engebretson (1997) that recently assigned RE teachers lacked a sufficiently developed understanding of the theoretical framework of Religious Education (Chapter 3, pp.95-96). Like Nancy, the research participants studied by Engebretson (1997, p.19) were confused by the interplay between the theory and practice of RE teaching (Chapter 3, p.96). The lack of understanding among RARE teachers about the principles underlying the draft PAREC was also a concern and understanding these principles became a significant part of their professional formation. Furthermore, the RE teachers seemed to behave as Malone (1997, p.14) predicted, they were practitioners and tended to use resources uncritically (Chapter 3, p.65). However, after teaching a Unit, teachers became more confident and began to diversify their use of curriculum materials.

Teachers such as Kate (pp.276-277), commented how they initially had relied heavily on the Mastersheets and Student Book as identified in the survey (Chapter 5, p.178). After teaching the draft Units, the teachers saw that they needed to diversify their resource and strategy repertoire as they became more cognisant of the learning needs of their students. In the first round of interviews, Ursula wrote of her experiences in using the curriculum materials in a country secondary school. She found the Mastersheets and Student Book were crucial in the beginning to get her students working. Later, Ursula used the Mastersheets as a focus towards doing 'something concrete' or using them for 'personal reflection' and the Student Book, she used as a 'reference guide' or 'as an initiator to discussion in class' (Chapter 6, p.225). Such responses appeared to be the proper course of action as teachers

became better acquainted with the curriculum materials. Indeed, it was considered an appropriate professional development for recently assigned teachers to make (Chapter 3, p.67).

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. They expected that, like in their own learning areas, teachers were to 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. Teachers perceived that such a practice was an integral part of their professional formation as RE teachers (Chapter 3, p.67). It was apparent that most recently assigned RE teachers felt they were competent in their instruction and classroom management. However, the challenges and frustrations they experienced had more to do with their personal and professional adequacy in addressing the spiritual and religious formation of students.

Unlike their major learning area where the experience of teaching students led to a sense of accomplishment for the teacher, in teaching RE some teachers did not feel this same sense. What seemed to be different about these experiences was the depth and tone of dissatisfaction and self-doubt recently assigned RE teachers felt in teaching Religious Education. Some students were unresponsive and negative in their attitudes towards Religious Education, a familiar situation for many RE teachers teaching upper secondary students (de Souza 2000, pp.41-42). As Pippa (Table 5.43, p.211) reflected about her experience of negative students, she concluded, 'Why am I doing this?' (Chapter 7, p.268). For teachers like Pippa, the demands of teaching the draft RE Units to disobliging students led them to question the value of what they were doing and, may experience 'a loss of energy when students do not respond [favourably]' (Noddings 1992, p.17). This loss of energy or generativity (Treston 1997, p.69) is a matter of concern for recently assigned RE teachers (Chapter 7, p.266). Such questioning in response to the intense demands of teaching RE was common among RARE teachers with a narrow range of competency (Chapter 3, pp.86-87) and stymied professional formation (Chapter 3, pp.95-96).

Whereas recently assigned RE teachers recognised the need to inform students in relevant ways, they preferred to focus on the personal and spiritual formation of their

students (Chapter 3, p.87). As admirable as this view may be, it was still perhaps a limited view of the potential formation that arose from providing strategies that allowed students to learn how to integrate Catholic culture and spirituality into their lives (Chapter 3, pp.102-103). It seemed that RARE teachers needed to develop a more highly developed expertise in content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge to cope with the demands of implementing the draft PAREC. The professional formation of recently assigned RE teachers required training in *both* content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge to teach Religious Education. Such a formation was related to the Congregation for Catholic Education (CCE) advice that:

With appropriate degrees, and with an adequate preparation in religious pedagogy, they will have the basic training needed for the teaching of religion.

(CCE 1982, par.66).

Survey respondents did indeed comment about the value of prior training and completing *Accreditation to Teach Religious Education* (Chapter 5, p.170). However, the experience of the research participants suggested that the case may be one of depth of training rather than ‘basic training’. Many of the participants had completed the study and inservice components of *Accreditation to Teach RE* (Table 5.43, p.211). Perhaps, like other learning areas, there was an increasing professional expectation about teaching the draft RE Units (Chapter 3, p.66). Religious Education had become a learning area with a highly specialised content and sophisticated pedagogy that, unlike other learning areas, recently assigned RE teachers were expected to implement with insufficient or limited prior training. The findings from research in this study indicated that teaching RE required a breadth and depth of knowledge and skills far exceeding those normally acquired by the teacher. To this extent, RARE teachers mirrored the experience of ‘out-of-field’ teachers (Chapter 3, p.58 and p.60). Such breadth and depth had to cater for a diverse range of spiritual and religious backgrounds in students as noted by Ryan (1997, p.95) and discussed in Chapter 3 (p.66).

This diversity made it very difficult and frustrating for teachers to pitch lessons on common ground. As Ian (Table 5.43, p.211) commented in his second interview, the students in his classroom have different ideas about God, Church and religious practice while some may come from other religions:

I think it's too difficult to expect new teachers to RE, whether they're experienced teachers in other subjects or not, to really understand the diversity of the kids when it comes down to RE. Because you'll have students in there who have such a negative attitude towards RE and you'll have the extreme, you'll have those students who have strong faith. And you'll have everything in between, and you'll have those in the middle somewhere who are totally indifferent.

(Ian, second round of interviews)

Furthermore, not only did recently assigned RE teachers require a broader knowledge background and skills in developing positive rapport with students but they also felt RE teachers required a sincere faith commitment. As Gwen reflected about her teaching of Year 8 students (Chapter 7, p.256), she felt her RE teaching required far more from her than other learning areas. This requirement went beyond delivering content and presenting a faith witness; a focus on affirming and forming the spirituality of the students was also required. All of which needed to be done in an integrated manner by the teacher.

Teaching RE, unlike other learning areas, had additional demands because teachers felt the necessity to be faith witnesses to their students regardless of whether students were receptive to the stance of the teacher. It was possible that the persona of the teacher as a Religious Education teacher was related to being a genuine faith witness. The teacher may be sincere in what they believe but what seemed to count was the ability of the teacher to give a personal account of how they came to believe in their faith tradition. Edward, for example, spoke about wanting to share with students his personal experiences of Church teaching making an impact on his life (Chapter 6, p.239). Engebretson (1992, p.19) also found similar motivations initially among her study group of novice RE teachers. Authenticity was linked here with the willingness of the teacher to share their own personal story with the students about faith. The Congregation for Catholic Education emphasised that:

A teacher who has a clear vision of the Christian milieu and lives in accord with it will be able to help [students] develop a similar vision, and give them the inspiration they need to put it into practice.

(CCE 1988, par.96)

This important aspect of RE teaching is discussed further under the theme of ‘Authenticity and Spiritual Integrity’ later in this chapter (p.288).

The perceptions of the interviewees about their instruction and classroom management style changed from the survey through to first round to the second round of interviews. The teachers believed initially they needed to understand the content and then later the background of their students more deeply. Consequently, the RARE teachers implemented classroom activities that held the interest of their students rather than solely cover the objectives of the RE Units. In tandem with this approach, teachers believed they needed to cultivate a closer relationship with their students that went beyond developing a harmonious learning environment. At the same time, recently assigned RE teachers were seeking assistance and support from their more experienced colleagues. The initial concern of recently assigned RE teachers, when faced with the prospect of implementing a curriculum with which they were unfamiliar, was to develop a level of competence in instruction and maintain confidence in their classroom management. A significant response was the need to connect with their students and with their colleagues to form a network of support relationships. This concern for connectivity is the focus of the next section.

8.2.2 *Connectivity*

Teachers expressed a strong desire for a positive learning environment in RE by developing closer pastoral relationships and dialogue with their students (Chapter 5, p.186 and p.199). Such a ‘genuine dialogue’ (Congregation for Catholic Education 1988, par.96) was considered by Rymarz (1998, p.11) as a hallmark of good RE teachers (Chapter 3, p.97). As a result, teachers were able to provide pertinent answers for the students. This emphasis on the need for dialogue between themselves and their students was akin to the perceptions about the purpose of Religious Education in a consultation document by the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales (CBCEW). Dialogue provided the means for students to connect doctrine with lived experience:

While a systematic presentation of doctrine is considered essential, it is not deemed by itself sufficient. Students need to be able to evaluate their lives, to grow in their sense of their and others' worth and become open to prayer.

(CBCEW 1999, p.3)

Through this genuine dialogue between themselves and their students, recently assigned RE teachers believed they were trying to help their students become better Christian people.

Teachers believed this human and Christian formation occurred by developing social justice and tolerance in their students (as indicated in the survey, Chapter 5, p.201) or through formative activities that focused on character development or personal spirituality (as indicated in the interviews):

By the end of a Unit students need 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, first round of interviews)

They believed that students required this spiritual and religious formation within the context of the Catholic faith tradition. They wanted to pass on the Catholic faith heritage both in terms of knowledge and commitment. Their perceptions tended to be aligned with the catechetical emphasis of the teaching approach in the draft RE Units (Figure 2.1, p.39). Contrary to the view of de Souza (2005) outlined previously in Chapter 3 (p.62), RARE teachers in Western Australia focused more on strategies with a personal character or faith commitment aspect to them rather than cognitive strategies dealing with doctrinal subject matter. Interviewees like Rose wanted students to form a Christian spirituality, to 'learn to love God and to love the Church' (Chapter 6, p.237). In so doing, she believed that her students could then apply these loving relationships to their relationships with friends and family.

In this study, recently assigned RE teachers preferred to focus on the personal development of students rather than enabling students to achieve a mastery of the content (Chapter 3, pp.104-105). Such a focus was similar also to the observations made by English (1999) of RE teachers in Newfoundland, Canada (Chapter 3, p.95). In the second round of interviews, Diana (Table 5.43, p.211) realised that this choice between formation and mastery took 'time and energy and forethought and planning to do both' but, were she given a choice, she would 'rather meet the students ...

where they are at' (Chapter 7, p.252). Like Diana, RARE teachers became more immersed in the personal and spiritual lives of their students. So much so, that some teachers saw themselves as significant role models and carers for their students. Ursula recounted the story of her encounter with a Year 8 student feeling depressed after his parents had recently divorced. The student had asked her a question in the middle of a busy lesson and Ursula was worried that she had not answered his personal question fully enough before the lesson finished:

With Religion [teaching], ... you're hit with a problem [from a student to address] because for that one student, even for one student in that class, that could mean (pause) well something could happen to that kid over the weekend and personally I'd feel responsible.

(Ursula, second round of interviews)

Such was the seemingly strong conviction of recently assigned RE teachers about this aspect of classroom teaching that one wonders whether they were over-zealous in feeling responsible for the personal formation of their students. The ability of teachers to develop a relational approach to teaching RE, termed 'pastoral rapport' in this study, was crucial to whether they wanted to continue to teach the subject in the future. The quality of this rapport is reflective of many teachers who feel passionate about teaching (Chapter 3, p.80).

In teaching the draft RE Units, the interviewed teachers believed they had to focus on the personal development of the students rather than provide 'empty vessels' with information about the Catholic faith tradition. Such a key belief was affirmed by research into how secondary students view Religious Education (Chapter 3, pp.104-105). It was not surprising to find that recently assigned RE teachers preferred a teaching approach that emphasised a pastoral response to the personal and spiritual development of students. However, such an emphasis was possibly more about the needs of the teachers rather than about the students. Survey responses indicated that teachers had difficulties dealing with enriching the faith needs of their students (Table 5.19, p.186). The anomaly appeared to be that recently assigned RE teachers themselves lacked personal and spiritual formation to cope with the demands of teaching RE when they claimed this formation is what the students needed to receive (Table 5.25, p.190). Religious Education is a learning area, not the sole pastoral care or personal development vehicle of the school. While a pastoral approach was

valuable, the proper direction of RE was towards another more important purpose, evangelisation (Holohan 1999). It appeared that recently assigned RE teachers needed guidance and support during this phase of their professional formation to understand their role and the purposes of Religious Education in the classroom. It was quite possible that, for some recently assigned RE teachers, an emphasis on the students' personal and spiritual development distracted them from having to implement the content of the draft RE Units fully – a form of implementation avoidance (Chapter 3, p.61). Without further professional formation, RARE teachers were culpable of repeating the mistake of inculcating a 'secular, humanist philosophy' in Religious Education (Chapter 3, p.102).

The teachers interviewed often spoke of their concerns about how the students in their class received their teaching and how RARE teachers wanted their teaching colleagues to share their ideas and thoughts with them. Such concerns about student expectations and collegiality were not uncommon and vital to the professional formation of young recently assigned teachers (Chapter 3, p.107). It was not surprising then to hear that recently assigned RE teachers wanted to belong, to fit in with the school community. Perhaps it had more to do with wanting to be accepted as a person and as a professional, competent RE teacher by peers and students alike (p.282). One example recounted by several recently assigned RE teachers was the desire to have a close affiliation with an RE department where ideas and information were communicated between colleagues (Chapter 7, pp.264-265). Such a desire, if left unfulfilled, frustrated teachers in their professional formation (Chapter 3, p.107).

In Catholic secondary schools in Western Australia, most teachers in the RE department taught Religious Education as a minor part of their teaching load. The teachers were affiliated with their specialist learning area, leaving the RE Coordinator to keep in touch with the fragments of personnel scattered around the school. The fragmentary structure of an RE department exacerbated the feelings of isolation experienced by recently assigned secondary RE teachers and heightened their need to be supported by peers associated with the teaching of Religious Education. This fragmentation created problems not only in teaching the draft RE Units but also in other areas that recently assigned RE teachers found difficulties in managing, such as liturgies:

RE teachers do not belong in one department i.e. in the one room, makes it difficult to coordinate and plan liturgies with other teachers. These teachers have other demands or priorities in their own subject areas....

The RE Coordinator needs to work closely with recently assigned RE teachers and be there for them. Need to have an *actual* [interviewee's emphasis] RE department and be given the same if not more priority in the school.... Time to reflect and share ideas with other RE teachers.... Have time in our own RE department, to plan out ideas together.

(Ursula, first round of interviews)

Like Ursula, many recently assigned RE teachers interviewed related their wish to have closer interaction with and support from the RE Coordinator. This wish was as much a need for affirmation for the amount of work RARE teachers do (along with the demands from their own subject areas) as it was for advice from an experienced RE teacher. Recently assigned RE teachers wanted to have regular RE staff meetings to exchange ideas and resources about teaching the draft RE Units, to assist their professional formation. Jessica, for example, appreciated the opportunities to exchange ideas with her colleagues in Religious Education because, as it was not her major teaching area, she was uncertain about what she was doing (Chapter 7, p.264). Interviewees valued the collegial exchange in this way and the opportunities to share their feelings and experiences of teaching RE with their peers (Chapter 3, pp.107-108).

Crucial amongst this group of peers was the positive support they received from the RE Coordinator, the Principal and other experienced and talented RE teachers. This finding paralleled that of the study by Healy (2003) of the professional development of religious educators. The teachers interviewed in this study felt they needed that mentor, an experienced colleague they could talk to about teaching Religious Education. The notion of a mentoring program for recently assigned teachers is well documented (Chapter 3, pp.108-109). Mentoring is very much in keeping with the philosophy of Catholic education. The Congregation for Catholic Education (CCE) has encouraged teachers to have close collegial relationships and to 'work together as a team' (CCE 1982, par.34). In the first round of interviews, Ian remarked how such a mentor – a knowledgeable and experienced RE teacher – could be available for recently assigned RE teachers to 'sit' with them:

Whereas maybe it could be that once a term they could go off to another school to sit with an experienced RE teacher and some sort of a mentor program. That might be another way of approaching it or even just within your own school you could organise that.

... I would have liked to been sitting in a classroom watching other RE teachers because it certainly wasn't part of my teacher training at all to be involved in RE teaching. I know basically what other people teach but I don't actually ever, I never actually seen how they go about doing that....

(Ian, first round of interviews)

Ian felt that recently assigned teachers wanted affirmation and guidance about what they were doing as well as clarification about why they did what they were doing. He went on to say, however, that recently assigned RE teachers should not be forced into a mentoring program. The program was to be a dialogue or sharing process rather than some form of formal teacher appraisal for these teachers.

To sum up, recently assigned RE teachers actively sought to develop a network of positive relationships with students and colleagues alike. They believed that by developing a pastoral rapport with their students, they were able to relate the draft RE Units to the personal and spiritual needs of their students. This ability to connect subject matter with the needs of students became the uppermost concern for RARE teachers as they related more closely with their students. Teachers also needed to be affirmed by their students, to know that their teaching was relevant and meaningful to the lives of their students. To further assist them in this endeavour, teachers sought support from their more experienced colleagues, especially the RE Coordinator and other significant personnel. Such collegial support provided RARE teachers with further knowledge and skills that enhanced their professional prowess and confidence. They were able to observe and model from experienced Religious Educators who taught with authenticity and spiritual integrity.

8.2.3 Authenticity and Spiritual Integrity

Recently assigned RE teachers were drawn towards a close pastoral rapport with their students. Teachers saw themselves as becoming significant role models for the personal spiritual formation of their students. As a result, RARE teachers felt an increasing expectation that they should be authentic models of a mature adult person to their students. In the first round of interviews, Mark highlighted the situation where there had been a recent tragedy at the school and he and the students in his

class were upset. He wanted the class to understand that it was okay to express their feelings, and he thanked the students for appreciating that he was upset as well, by what had happened. He believed that, during the class discussion, the students wanted some guidance on how to behave in the circumstances and he felt his responses were examples of good modelling:

when you model what you expect from them they understand. I've had kids come up to me and say, 'Mr [Teacher's Name], we've never met a person like you who's thanked us for everything'. And one of the Year 10s, 'Mr [Teacher's Name], you're a very caring person'. And they're the sorts of things I want them to see. Then they start to be caring as well. They realise it's not that bad, 'Mr [Teacher's Name] is an 'okay bloke'. He's coping with it well. I think we can too.'

(Mark, first round of interviews)

Mark used the colloquial phrase 'okay bloke' to describe this type of 'model' person. The Congregation for Catholic Education has recognised this personal integration of authentically human and spiritual qualities (Chapter 3, pp.100-101) and the capacity to share aspects of their personal humanity and its impact on students should not be underestimated (Rymarz 2001, p.24). Such authenticity went beyond personal identity to include personal faith witness. Interviewees discussed this faith witness as crucial to how they presented themselves authentically to their students. Like Mark, Ursula wanted the students to respect her as a person of faith. She felt that this perception by the students was significant. Ursula believed she was a model of a 'person living out Gospel values' (Chapter 6, p.240) who encouraged the students to do likewise. To give of themselves in this way meant the teachers also needed to become something more themselves.

Recently assigned RE teachers felt that they had to present a Christ-like presence to their students. In the survey, teachers were very positive towards their support of key religious dimensions in the school such as missions, prayers and retreats (Table 5.31, p.197). However, there were some misgivings about liturgical celebrations that may have involved their leadership or direct participation as a person of faith (Chapter 5, p.198). The findings in this study reflected the thinking of Crawford and Rossiter (1985) that such a response was fraught with feelings of confusion and self-doubt (Chapter 3, p.101) as RARE teachers tried to work out the authenticity of being such devout witnesses for the faith (Chapter 5, p.209).

Perhaps there was a much deeper significance to this faith witness. The faith commitment of the teacher was an important factor for RARE teachers. Recently assigned RE teachers, like Ursula, believed that the authenticity of their faith influenced their students, even if the students did not agree with what the teachers believed. The impression left on the students was not only the actions of ‘living out Gospel values’ (p.289) but also how Ursula recounted her own personal experiences of faith. Authenticity here was linked to personal experience. Ursula had experienced the love and mercy of God and she wanted to share this personal faith experience with others too. Similarly, teachers who had experienced injustice or unhealthy lifestyles understood the power of redemption in their lives and wanted to share their personal experiences of such events. Witness here meant that teachers had an understanding and appreciation for a particular lived experience or what may be termed as ‘experiential content knowledge’ (p.314). They had a knowledge and empathy of what it really felt like to become a believer and accept the grace of God. After all, ‘it is difficult, if not impossible, to meaningfully teach what one does not know’ (Fisher 1999, p.35) in matters dealing with spirituality and faith. It was this form of personal authenticity or genuineness espoused by Holohan (1996b), that impressed the students because the teachers had the religious integrity – to integrate faith and life – as part of their RE teaching (Chapter 3, p.99).

Recently assigned RE teachers not only felt the dilemma of whether they were good enough as professional educators but also the dilemma of whether they were good enough as mature, adult persons of faith; especially, as many of them were still in their young adult years (Chapter 5, p.159). This latter dilemma was not easily resolved and proved to be highly draining for some recently assigned RE teachers. Such a dilemma had the possibility of leading to a heightened sense of guilt (Curtis 2000). Most teachers felt at some stage that they were inadequate both personally and professionally in teaching Religious Education. Perhaps RARE teachers expected too much of themselves or they felt the Perth Archdiocesan RE Course (PAREC) expected too much of them (Chapter 3, pp.99-101). Di Giacomo (1989) observed that there were benefits and costs when it came to teaching RE and teachers would be wise to consider these factors in their situation:

Anyone brave or idealistic enough to attempt religious instruction in high school soon learns that while the rewards and satisfactions can be high, so can the costs from time to time. These go beyond the hard work, dedication, and drudgery that accompany almost any kind of teaching at this level. They may involve tension, frustration, and guilt that sap energy, drain enthusiasm, and sometimes lead to burnout.

(Di Giacomo 1989, p.58)

From the second round of interviews it appeared that recently assigned RE teachers did reach a point of decision that helped them to clarify their commitment to teaching Religious Education. For some teachers, like Kate and Jessica (Chapter 7, p.261 and p.270), the personal cost was too high and they decided to discontinue teaching RE classes. For most recently assigned RE teachers, the experience of implementing the draft RE Units had led towards a deeper appreciation of their vocation as RE teachers. This deepening appreciation seemed to be an important aspect to the formation of RARE teachers. For some recently assigned RE teachers, although they did not realise it, it was possible they were influenced personally, professionally and spiritually by the demands of implementing the RE Units.

From the two rounds of interviews, the interviewees commented about the value of reflecting upon their RE teaching. Such a reflection was an important aspect to the personal and professional formation of teachers (Chapter 3, p.63, p.95, and p.105). For some interviewees, the actual interviews were the first time anyone had asked what they thought or even felt about their teaching. For a few interviewees, it was a highly emotive experience. Perhaps opportunities for reflection on their professional practice are an important dimension to their professional formation. Certainly the interviewees were passionate about what they were doing (or wanted to do). They sensed a feeling of vulnerability in teaching RE because it put them on the line about their faith commitment. For example, Nancy spoke about the challenge of male students in her Year 11 RE class and their apparent behaviour in trying to prove her wrong. She found it difficult to cope with the challenges from the largely recalcitrant male class (Chapter 6, p.234), especially because Nancy had recently made an adult commitment to the Church and was offended by the disrespect and ignorance these students displayed.

This 'hyper-sensitivity' felt by some recently assigned RE teachers may have led them to losing a balanced perspective about the needs of secondary students and

what students were realistically able to achieve in Religious Education. Some interviewees, like Nancy and Pippa (Chapter 7, pp.267-270), were not coping well with these challenges and most interviewees felt that teaching RE well was difficult to do (Table 7.1, p.246). The resolution to the inner turmoil these challenges presented was a part of the personal formation of RARE teachers:

Most religion teachers are idealistic people who care about their students and want very much to enrich their lives. That's a beautiful combination of qualities, but it is also the prescription for a potentially vulnerable person. The prevention or the cure for tension, frustration, and guilt lies not in diminishing idealism or denying vulnerability, but in keeping a sense of balance and perspective. There are no guarantees that one will never be hurt, but they will help one heal faster, last longer, and do a lot more good.

(Di Giacomo 1989, p.62)

Keeping a 'sense of balance and perspective' was not easy to achieve. In this study, interviewees were still searching for this perspective. Some teachers decided that it was better to give RE teaching away because the personal changes involved were too great. Those recently assigned RE teachers who did decide to continue to teach RE came to find a degree of spiritual integrity in their lives. This integrity provided the foundation for placing their personal and professional commitment into practice. As Anne recounted, she felt she had to integrate her personal and professional roles, to be 'versatile, flexible, aware and available' to her students. For Anne, her spiritual integrity – 'a responsibility to be real to the students at a deeper, spiritual level' – was what really counted in teaching Religious Education (Chapter 7, p.258). It seemed that recently assigned RE teachers needed a spiritual formation, one of journeying towards personal integrity.

Personal integrity is at the heart of becoming a good teacher (Chapter 3, p.80). It refers to how teachers relate to how they see themselves as a teacher and their relationship with others in their immediate learning community as well as to the subject matter. This personal sense of self or spirituality of the teacher is 'the eternal human yearning to be connected with something larger than our own egos' (Palmer 2004). Personal integrity provides the energy or drive for teachers to continue to teach at three levels: intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually (Chapter 3, p.81). How this integrity influences these three aspects of teaching are described subsequently.

Intellectually: Recently assigned RE teachers wanted to be familiar with the background material in the draft Units and to be able to pass on their own understanding of this material to their students. They needed to feel secure and confident in their own content knowledge. The focus for the teachers was upon their intellectual integrity as a teacher with a sound knowledge background. RARE teachers selected resources and activities which they thought were relevant and of interest to students. In so doing, they were 'filling in' the knowledge of the students or correcting misunderstandings about a particular topic or issue.

Emotionally: Recently assigned RE teachers wanted to develop a close pastoral rapport with their students. They were eager to discover the background and issues of young people in their RE class. They wanted the emotional integrity to be a respected person by their students about matters concerning faith and life in a modern world. The teachers were particularly concerned about how their students reacted to the lessons they provided.

Spiritually: Recently assigned RE teachers were concerned about how they came across as a 'model' RE teacher. They felt that when students disagreed or were insolent, the students were challenging them as an RE teacher on a personal level. Teachers also felt their personal integrity was challenged when they made their own decisions about what they thought was best for their students when other more experienced teachers closely followed the Unit program. Some teachers were worried that because they did not agree with all the content of the draft RE Units, it meant that they were not good enough to be the type of RE teacher they believed was demanded.

Without a positive outlook to these three aspects of integrity, teachers questioned themselves about their efficacy as a teacher. Like other teachers in similar situations (Chapter 3, p.81), they became fatigued. The interviewees in this study felt strongly about their commitment to RE teaching both personally and professionally as well as about preserving their sense of authenticity and integrity as part of the decision to continue or discontinue RE teaching. For some teachers there was an evident need for them to attend to their personal religious and spiritual formation or else further distress and perhaps harm might accrue (Chapter 3, p.81).

On the other hand, there were recently assigned RE teachers interviewed in this study who appeared to rise above the challenges by developing a positive outlook. Edward, in the first round of interviews, felt very strongly about how he shared his personal experiences of faith with students (p.282). He believed that this type of approach in implementing the draft RE Units was important for the faith formation of the students. Consequently, Edward was very critical of teachers who did not have a similar evangelical approach as he did (Chapter 6, p.239) even though he lacked the professional background to teach Religious Education (Table 5.43, p.211). In his view, along with many of the other teachers interviewed, RE was not so much a learning area but rather an opportunity to evangelise, to go beyond human and spiritual formation to formation in the Christian faith. Perhaps for RARE teachers to cope with the demands of implementing the draft RE Units a balanced and ongoing formation for teachers was required. This formation needed to include not only personal and professional development but also a deepening understanding of the role of the RE teacher as a faith witness and Religious Education as a Ministry of the Word within Evangelisation (Holohan 1999).

Summary: Authenticity and Spiritual Integrity

In summary, recently assigned RE teachers realised that they needed to present an authentic persona, one that reflected them as a decent human being and a person of integrity and faith. Such a persona was demanding both personally and professionally but was a necessary part of implementing the draft RE Units. Teachers who felt comfortable with such a persona drew their strength from their personal faith commitment. Recently assigned RE teachers felt it was this personal faith commitment and a balanced, healthy spirituality that impressed their students and became a hallmark of their vocation as a Religious Educator.

8.2.4 Vocation of the recently assigned Religious Educator

A repeated theme throughout the study was the conviction of recently assigned RE teachers that to teach the draft RE Units, one had to be an authentic person of faith and a mentor to their students. Initially, RARE teachers were keen to teach RE and optimistically viewed the personal and professional challenges placed upon them by the draft RE Units. However, others experienced a loss of enthusiasm for the learning area that stemmed from a lack of prior personal or professional formation.

Some recently assigned RE teachers had undertaken studies in Theology and Religious Education units to fulfil *Accreditation to Teach RE* during their pre-service training as evidenced in the survey (Chapter 5, p.167). However, it would be misleading to assume that Accreditation, a mandatory professional requirement to teach RE in Catholic schools in Western Australia, was a guarantee of a deeper commitment to this learning area. While it may be the case that some recently assigned RE teachers were prepared to teach RE as a ‘filler’ (Chapter 3, p.88), the personal and professional demands of the curriculum seemed to have had an impact on whether they should continue to teach RE in the future.

Apart from their personal reasons for teaching RE, inexperienced recently assigned RE teachers were faced with a question of professional priorities in order to survive their first years of teaching. Victor taught in a remote Catholic secondary school. A recent graduate, he was employed as a Physical Education teacher with one RE class to make up his teaching load. Victor was candid about where his priorities lie:

It’s not your priority, my main teaching area is Phys. Ed. and that’s where everyone sees you, see yourself and that’s where you dedicate most of your energies too. But it’s nice to have that one RE class, I think it’s important to have a variety of teaching areas for your own motivation yourself. And it’s good to teach RE just for your own faith.

(Victor, first round of interviews)

Like many RARE teachers, Victor was faced with developing his professional competence in his specialist learning area. Teaching RE was a part of his minor teaching load. Why would he want to demonstrate a deeper commitment to teaching RE when he had more than enough to handle with his specialist learning area? While Victor placed his energies into ‘Phys. Ed.’, he acknowledged RE as good to teach ‘just for your faith’. He also made the point of how valuable he found the professional development inservices in RE that the school provided (mostly over the weekend):

I think ongoing professional development is important. ... doing Accreditation [to teach RE] and doing [inservices on] a new [draft RE] Unit every couple of months over the last two years has really kept me on track. And then I've developed from there.

(Victor, first round of interviews)

It was possible that, if recently assigned RE teachers were naïve enough to think they could teach RE and not be affected by its expectations, they were mistaken (Chapter 3, pp.58-59). Like Victor, they seemed to be affected both personally and professionally as they taught the draft Units and wanted to receive further training. Some of the RARE teachers interviewed seemed to experience a significant juncture in teaching RE after a few years. They began to realise that in order to continue to teach RE, they needed to form a deeper personal commitment towards its teaching. Such a realisation or 'passion' for the subject was a crucial part of their personal and professional formation. Such a passion was often framed in terms of calling or vocation (Chapter 3, p.80). However, some of the interviewees felt so strongly about the division in their integrity between their fundamental aspirations as a teacher and their own assimilation of Catholic beliefs and practices that they stopped teaching RE altogether.

It was apparent from the interviews that the recently assigned RE teachers were on the cusp of deciding to continue to teach RE or not to teach the subject any longer. Interviewees like Jessica and Edith felt that RE teachers required a choice as to whether they continued to teach the subject, especially if they felt they did not agree with the content (Chapter 6, p.237). The feelings of these interviewees towards the subject were largely the result of their experiences of teaching RE and its impact on their personal authenticity and spiritual integrity. In a sense, some teachers believed that they were called to live their faith by teaching RE whereas others felt that the personal dissonance was too much for them. Perhaps, today, young adult Catholics value integrity over acquiescence. To expect these young adult, inexperienced RE teachers to continue a career in teaching RE was too difficult without further access to personal and professional faith formation opportunities.

It was surprising to hear from the interviewees how they had never spoken, if ever, to anyone about their motivation or reasons for why they would continue to teach Religious Education. While reflections about materials and strategies were

communicated with others, the more important discussion of self-knowledge and integrity was ignored or suppressed. This lack of discourse seemed to be typical of the teaching profession. Teachers talked about what they do but rarely discussed how they saw themselves and the qualities that made them a good teacher (Banner and Cannon 1997, p.4).

For recently assigned RE teachers such a discussion was crucial to whether they continued to teach RE classes. Where they felt they truly put themselves ‘on the line’ with their students, to be teachers of strong character (Chapter 3, p.99), they needed to have the affirmation and support from their colleagues, the administration and the students themselves. Considering the emotive reactions expressed when asked about what they believed was ‘best about RE’, the teachers remained a ‘bubbling pot’ of feelings that, left unattended, desiccated their emotional and psychological energy. While Banner and Cannon (1997) referred to the pressures of teaching in general, the responsibilities recently assigned RE teachers felt with regard to the personal and spiritual formation of their students escalated the intensity of the pressure experienced.

The vocation of the recently assigned RE teacher is not a smooth or easy path. It is a journey of formation and entails personal and professional challenges. As much as the draft RE Units assisted RARE teachers in teaching RE confidently, the Units also challenged teachers in regard to their own personal and religious character as well as their conviction in RE teaching. Recently assigned RE teachers felt pressures to conform to an image of a Religious Educator that had yet to be attained by experience or training. There was a danger that these teachers became burnt out before acquiring the kind of formation that was vital in teaching RE well. Recently assigned RE teachers needed time to develop and they needed opportunities to explore their personality and passions for RE teaching. In short, they required a holistic and ongoing formation as an RE teacher which is the focus of the next section.

8.2.5 Holistic and Ongoing Formation

Recently assigned RE teachers rely not only on their professional expertise but also, and more importantly, upon their vocation as a person of faith (Chapter 3, pp.87-88). The personal upbringing and life experiences of RARE teachers like Edward,

coupled with his ‘pilgrimage’ of personal faith formation, led him to feel very deeply about the importance of the faith witness of the recently assigned teacher:

Most special thing for me is that it’s a way that I can... well I’m trying to follow the Lord in my life. And then there’s one way I can do that and that’s teaching RE. Because I’m not off helping the poor in Africa... .

(Edward, second round of interviews)

The ‘follow the Lord in my life’ by Edward heralded the sentiments of the advice of Congregation of Catholic Education (1982) about the importance of developing Religious Educators with appropriate religious and professional formation (Chapter 3, pp.100-101). It became apparent over the duration of this study that assumptions about RARE teachers being at the same point in their professional, spiritual and religious formation were inaccurate; nor was it possible to assume that their formation was in alignment with faith stances presented in the draft RE Units. Recently assigned RE teachers required an extended period of time to develop a deeper level of personal, professional and religious commitment. The first five years of teaching Religious Education were significant to RARE teachers. Over this period of time, they made fundamental decisions about their RE teaching. The less training and personal spiritual and faith formation they received before teaching RE, the more they needed training and personal spiritual and faith formation *after* they began teaching the learning area. It is significant that the demands of teaching the draft RE Units have had an important part to play upon challenging and forming the teacher’s own sense of identity and spirituality. As recently assigned RE teachers taught, they were also learners. Ursula made this same point as she remembered how she came to teach RE:

I remember [the Principal at the last school] asked me, not so much asked but told me that I was teaching RE and I was scared, I was really, really scared. Where do I start? I don’t have anything, I don’t even (pause) I mean, I know that I’ve got faith myself, I knew that I had faith and I knew that I’d been brought up you know in a certain way.

I was petrified and I think looking back now, now I can walk into it – an RE classroom – and actually be very, very confident. And confident not so much because I know a little bit more about what I'm teaching but confident because I feel enriched myself, like it's helped me personally.

(Ursula, second round of interviews)

However, teaching the draft RE units had a detrimental impact upon some teachers which 'incidental formation' of the teaching experience cannot overcome (Chapter 3, p.93).

Recently assigned RE teachers possibly felt they were alone and unworthy to teach RE because of their apparent lack of formation. These teachers felt they needed 'time out' and space to reflect on what they were doing and wanted to do. They wanted to be affirmed and supported in their efforts by students and colleagues. The danger was that they could have felt emotionally and spiritually drained after a few years of teaching Religious Education. To continue to teach RE, RARE teachers yearned for a professional and religious formation that was an integral and ongoing part of their development as an authentic and competent RE teacher. Anne made this point quite succinctly:

I think recently assigned RE teachers need more knowledge background of the Catholic faith in terms of doctrine. 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 ... 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, first round of interviews)

It seemed that both the content and the responses from the students forced RARE teachers to reflect upon not only 'what' they were teaching but also 'why' they were teaching the subject. The demands of teaching the draft RE Units were a catalyst themselves to initiate the formation of the recently assigned RE teacher. Teaching the draft RE Units also contributed to the spiritual and religious formation of the

teacher in becoming an excellent RE teacher. Such formation occurred with teaching experience over an extended period (Chapter 3, pp.92-93).

It is possible that some RARE teachers experienced a depth of formation tantamount to a personal conversion (Chapter 3, p.99 and pp.103-104). Recently assigned RE teachers soon realised that the content of the draft RE Units needed to be made relevant to the learning needs of the students in the class. Furthermore, the relationships to be developed between the teachers and the students was perceived by the RARE teachers as demanding a closeness and quality far superior to the relationships that were established in other learning areas. As recently assigned RE teachers developed a closer pastoral rapport with their class, the teachers, in turn, began to examine their personal qualities and authenticity as mentors. The more experience and familiarity the recently assigned teachers had with the draft RE Units, the more they felt the personal, professional and religious demands upon themselves. As the demands increased, so too was the response from some teachers to either avoid teaching RE (or not teach its content fully) or for others to seek further professional and religious formation.

The teachers in the interviews recognised the value of further formation in content knowledge as an adjunct to teaching the draft RE Units. Some commented on the value of attending 'Content of RE' inservices run by Catholic Education Office of Western Australia (CEOWA) or completing tertiary units in Theology and Religious Education. Such recognition of the value of formation in content knowledge was reflective of trends elsewhere (Chapter 3, p.103). Yet, as the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales (1999) highlighted in its Consultation on the teaching of RE, there was also formation needed in spirituality, ministry and pedagogy. Teachers in the first round of interviews also commented on the value of formation in pedagogical content knowledge by having opportunities to attend inservices on specific year groups or draft Units and exchange ideas, strategies and resources with other like-minded teachers. Teachers, like Anne, further expressed the value of attending retreats for teachers for their own personal spiritual and faith formation (Chapter 6, pp.241-242).

While most recently assigned RE teachers were able to respond positively to the curriculum and personal faith demands placed on them, others felt they were unable to continue to aspire to such high expectations. Kate, for example, found the

personal faith demands expected of her were too much (Chapter 7, p.261). Kate's decision not to continue to teach RE was based on preserving her own personal spiritual and religious integrity. She was not able to commit herself to the degree of expectation she felt was presented in the draft PAREC. Like Kate, some recently assigned RE teachers found themselves seemingly at odds with the direction of the Bishops. The emphasis on 'life witness' and 'intensely lived spirituality' (Chapter 3, p.100) went far beyond the basic training of these RARE teachers and, in teaching the draft RE Units, possibly became an overwhelming challenge. Furthermore, the advice of the WA Director of Religious Education (Chapter 3, p.99) had the potential to be interpreted as RE teachers needing to seek a personal conversion of a nature that some recently assigned RE teachers felt was beyond them to achieve. Recently assigned RE teachers, like Kate, believed they had some formation towards 'personal identification with Christ' (Chapter 3, p.101); however, they felt the expectation of the draft PAREC was an unequivocal accomplished commitment rather than a pilgrimage over a teaching career.

Teachers interviewed in the second round of interviews (Chapter 7, pp.264-265) reflected the encouragement teachers received when they saw their formation as an ongoing pilgrimage over their teaching career (Treston 1991). They expressed the difficulties of teaching RE and the struggles they undertook to meet the professional and spiritual demands of the draft RE Units. Recently assigned RE teachers perhaps needed to be affirmed in their difficulties and struggles and to be made aware that their trials are a part of a 'religious journey' (Chapter 3, p.95) that becomes a pilgrimage of formation rather than a crusade of delivery. Furthermore, the sharing of a personal faith witness became an increasingly significant cornerstone to these teachers in teaching Religious Education. RARE teachers who were able to offer themselves in this way felt more comfortable in teaching Religious Education. Pat, a member of a religious congregation for many years who had only recently taken up RE teaching, also spoke about teaching RE in similar terms:

I think it's passing on the Catholic faith. My personal belief of why we have Catholic schools is to pass on that faith and my basic belief is that at the end of the time, whatever period of time a child has spent, that if they are going to reject the message of Jesus that they know what they are saying 'no' to.

(Pat, first round of interviews)

Benson and Guerra (1985) had reported that teachers with a lay vocation did not have the same capacity as religious congregation teachers to teach RE in this way because of a lack of religious formation. As a result, they believed lay teachers skewed their teaching towards a humanistic approach (Chapter 3, p.102). This skewness in their RE teaching is also evident in this study. In the initial survey, recently assigned teachers consistently placed tolerance and compassion as a high priority but they were divided about the placement of other priorities such as 'develop a closer relationship with God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit' (Chapter 5, pp.201-202). When teachers were confronted in the first interview with the notion of tolerance and compassion as rated the highest, many interviewees queried such a suggestion. While, as a group of teachers, they were convinced tolerance and compassion were important, individually, they felt that there were other, more important, priorities as well. Many recently assigned RE teachers in this study demonstrated a preference for the personal and spiritual formation of their students but they also believed there was more to be considered. Perhaps the severity of the criticisms of Benson and Guerra (1985) have become dated because many RARE teachers in this study had completed their accreditation, were increasingly familiar with the content, and were inclined to present a strong faith witness.

Lay teachers in this study did consider that the faith formation of students was important but they did feel insecure in teaching faith aspects, such as organising liturgies or the use of Scripture (Chapter 5, p.188 and Chapter 6, p.228). The tentativeness with which recently assigned RE teachers approached these aspects is a matter of great concern. The need for further training in liturgy, for example, could alleviate the tensions between celebrating priests and teachers. Such tensions reflected the research work of Tinsey (1999) about the misunderstood relationships between priests and teachers in Catholic secondary schools. The lack of confidence in using the Scriptures appropriately seemed to be due to a lack of prior training (Chapter 3, p.98). Otherwise, recently assigned RE teachers avoided these faith

aspects and focused their attention on what they believed they knew more about, in this case, human formation. In the second round of interviews, most RARE teachers saw the majority of their students as needing ‘life-skilling’ and human formation before religious formation (Chapter 7, pp.254-255). Recently assigned RE teachers felt more comfortable with assisting the personal development of their students and were able to give encouragement wherever possible as well as feel valued by their students (Chapter 7, p.257-258).

What did appear to emerge from the interviews were different perspectives as to what the recently assigned RE teacher should be trying to do next. Some interviewees believed that knowledge about Church teaching was appropriate when such teaching related to the personal and spiritual formation of students. Some interviewees believed that knowledge and appreciation of God and the Church was appropriate to encourage a Christian spirituality to be lived out within a faith community (pp.280-281). One suspects that the choice as to what to do next was related to the personal spiritual and faith formation of the RARE teacher. Diana observed that the personal faith stance of the teacher had to be taken into account when implementing the draft RE Units. She made the point that ‘... to try and integrate Church teaching into somebody else’s life is impossible if you aren’t actively seeking that in your own’ (Chapter 6, p.238). The implication seemed to be that the faith position espoused by the draft RE Units was not fully implemented if the teacher did not hold a similar position. As Jessica commented about her personal faith stance:

Yes, I think it’s important to have a strong faith but it does not necessarily mean it’s the same as that espoused by the Pope. I still think you need to have a strong faith.

(Jessica, first round of interviews)

Similarly, other interviewees in this study considered themselves to have a ‘strong faith’ but this faith was not necessarily commensurate with the stance presented by the draft RE Units. This disparity in faith stances raises questions about heterodoxy. One wonders whether these teachers felt that, as authentic and committed as they were, their personal faith stance was suited to implementing the PAREC, as mandated by the Catholic Bishops of Western Australia (CECWA 2001, par.79). For some RARE teachers the disparity was resolved by choosing to avoid teaching aspects of the RE Units with which they disagreed or found personally too

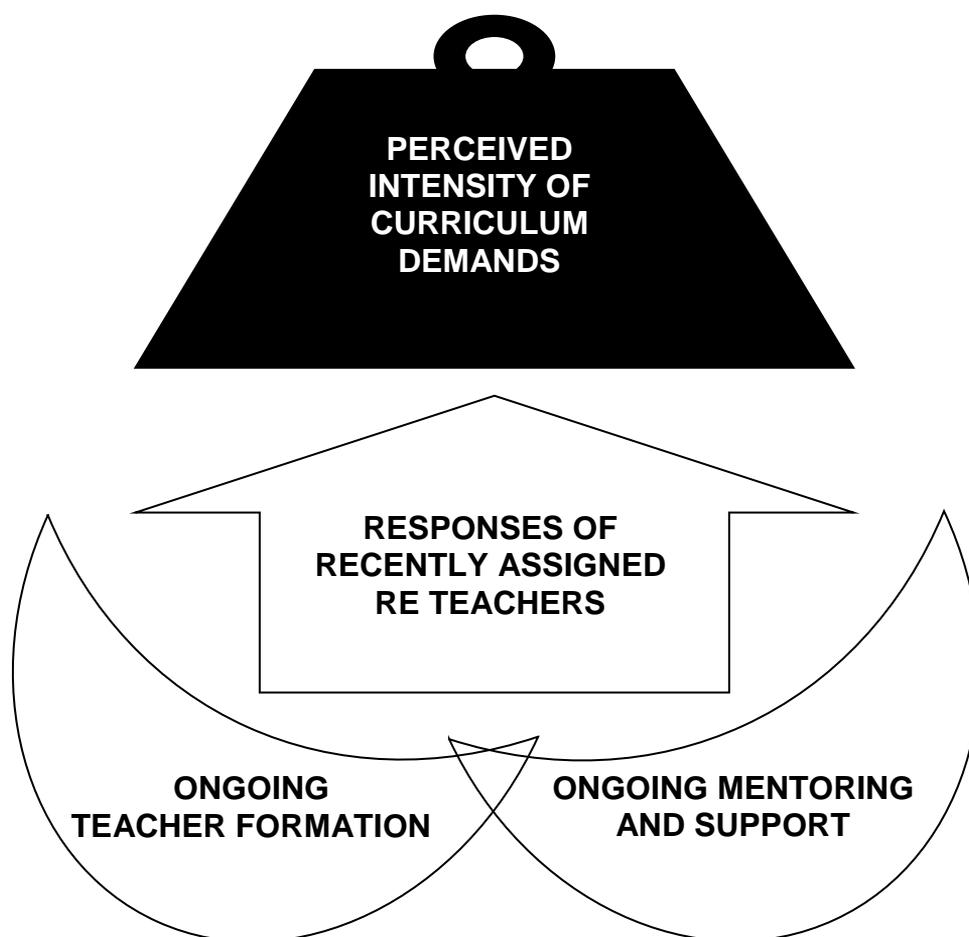
challenging. It was also possible that only those aspects of the Units that were in tune with the spiritual and faith formation of the teacher were implemented in a heartfelt manner. Concerns about the consequences of such an approach related to the idiosyncrasy of the faith development of students (Chapter 3, p.102) warrants further investigation.

Many of the recently assigned RE teachers had undertaken studies towards their Accreditation as an RE teacher. Yet to know the religious content was not the same as having a disposition to heartily proclaim it (Chapter 3, p.103). In this research, the teachers interviewed believed their ‘personal faith commitment’ was of paramount importance to teaching the draft RE Units but not necessarily reflective of the stance taken in the RE Units. As the teachers interviewed in the first round spoke about their personal development (p.295), they believed they would benefit from retreats and similar activities to assist their spiritual and faith formation. Perhaps these activities are a step in the right direction in providing further grounding in the religious and spiritual formation of recently assigned RE teachers (Chapter 3, pp.102-103).

Summary: Holistic and Ongoing Formation

To summarise this section, recently assigned RE teachers felt the press of the exigencies in implementing the draft RE Units. The context-view expressed by these RARE teachers is portrayed in Figure 8.1, (p.305). Figure 8.1 represents a model of the situation that the teachers have reported. The intensity of the curriculum demands perceived by the teachers is represented as a great weight that applies an ongoing pressure on them. This pressure is countered by the exertions recently assigned teachers make in their responses to cope with the curriculum demands. The support (represented by stylised cupped helping hands) teachers received from their formative experiences provide the assistance and security they need to manage the circumstances.

Figure 8.1 Diagrammatic Summary of how recently assigned RE teachers cope with the curriculum demands of the draft RE Units



Recently assigned RE teachers realised that the curriculum demanded further understanding and skills that were far more diverse than earlier anticipated. The teachers sought further opportunities for ongoing spiritual and religious formation at the school and system level. These opportunities needed to be systematic and sustained with particular support from experienced colleagues. Furthermore, RARE teachers recognised that they needed this ongoing formation in order to follow their mission to become a person of integrity and faith.

The concerns raised here suggested that recently assigned RE teachers were on a journey of formation, a pilgrimage. This pilgrimage led them through different experiences and insights into what it means to become an excellent RE teacher as described in the next section 'Towards Excellence in RE Teaching: A Model'. The implementation of the draft RE units was but one part of this pilgrimage. Recently assigned RE teachers were faced with challenges or forces that were to make or

break them personally and professionally as an RE teacher. In response to these challenges, the next section proposes a model of the dimensions to be considered in the formation of RARE teachers as these teachers implemented the draft Units.

8.3 Towards Excellence in RE Teaching: A Model

Over the two years of research on how recently assigned RE teachers coped with implementing the draft RE units, it became apparent that the teachers were themselves being informed and formed by the experience (Figure 8.2, p.307). The enthusiasm of RARE teachers to become good RE teachers developed into a search for authenticity, integrity and motivation. There were changes in the ways these teachers used the curriculum materials and in their teaching approach (pp.275-276). There were also changes in their beliefs about their role as an RE teacher and why they taught Religious Education (pp.279-280). Recently assigned RE teachers reached a point of asking themselves, “Why am I doing this?” (p.280). Wanting to teach RE was very much related to the conditions the RARE teachers experienced (Chapter 3, p.59). These teachers were beginning or recently assigned teachers (Chapter 3, p.56) but the question may be true for experienced teachers faced with teaching an unfamiliar learning area in their first few years (Chapter 3, p.60). The point is, if the curriculum and personal demands of the draft RE Units were so great, to continue to teach RE was possibly too much for recently assigned RE teachers. The efficacy of the RE teachers was connected to the disposition they felt towards RE teaching due to their formative experiences.

Figure 8.2 Integrated Model of Teacher Formation in response to Curriculum Exigencies

<i>Layer</i>	Key Concerns	<i>Formative Experiences</i>	Key Dispositions
1	<p><i>Instruction</i></p> <p>Concerns for self (survival): due to demands of getting ready, finding resources and meeting expectations.</p>	<p><i>initial content knowledge with prior training and background & developing content knowledge</i></p>	<p><i>Surety</i></p> <p>Changes in perceptions about the use of curriculum materials to cope with these demands.</p>
		↓	
2	<p><i>Prowess</i></p> <p>Concerns for the tasks: due to demands of organising lessons, covering the content and developing repertoire of strategies.</p>	<p><i>ongoing content knowledge & developing pedagogical content knowledge</i></p>	<p><i>Confidence</i></p> <p>Changes in perceptions about the use of teaching strategies to cope with these demands.</p>
		↓	
3	<p><i>Empathy</i></p> <p>Concerns for impact of teaching on students: due to demands of evaluating outcomes, rapport with students and growing awareness of students' learning needs.</p>	<p><i>ongoing content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge & developing experiential content knowledge</i></p>	<p><i>Insight</i></p> <p>Changes in beliefs or understandings about the nature and purpose of the curriculum to cope with these demands.</p>
		↓	
4	<p><i>Modelling</i></p> <p>Concerns for efficacy: due to demands for authenticity, commitment, example, and integrity.</p>	<p><i>ongoing content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge & experiential content knowledge</i></p>	<p><i>Vocation</i></p> <p>Changes in professional character and deepening reflection of personal beliefs, values, and spirituality to cope with these demands.</p>

In looking at the changes the teachers experienced (Figure 8.2, p.307), as they dealt with the personal and curriculum demands of teaching the draft RE Units, a pattern of experiences in teacher formation emerged. The emergence of such a pattern indicated that teachers required a period of adjustment to the demands of curriculum implementation. Teachers needed time to understand and appreciate the personal and professional demands of curriculum implementation (Chapter 3, pp.93-94). The amounts of time varied between different concerns. Whereas adjustments to initial concerns were immediate with accessibility to curriculum materials, later concerns required a longer period of reflection, great effort, and careful consideration. Without supportive formative experiences, dissatisfaction, exhaustion and poorer teaching became evident (Chapter 3, p.96).

Formative experiences that were positive and ongoing were able to assist teachers to develop a positive and sustainable disposition towards managing the subjective realities of curriculum implementation (Fullan 2001, p.32). The subjective realities experienced were divided between dealing with the feelings of concern raised by the phenomenon of implementation and the changes in perception in response to managing the implementation. Over time, the experience of teaching; collegiality; professional development opportunities; and, reflection may lead to a reassessment of current subjective implementation practices. Each formative experience was a catalyst to enhance a positive and sustainable disposition towards concerns about a curriculum demand. Each layer of key concern, type of formative experience and key disposition is not clear-cut. Rather there are emphases that focus on a particular concern, formative experience or disposition. Recently assigned teachers were trying to cope with simultaneous pairs of subjective realities.

Instruction and Surety: In the survey and the first round of the interviews, teachers were very concerned about their preparation for teaching the draft Units. They planned what they were going to teach by becoming familiar with the content of the Units and the strategies and resources available in the Teacher's Manuals. In these initial stages, the focus was on ensuring they were familiar with as much of the content as possible and had enough activities and materials to keep the students occupied. In large measure, this involved the frequent use of Mastersheets and Student Books. After a year of teaching the Units, teachers felt more secure about the structure and sequence of the teaching and learning program in the Units. A

sense of surety developed as they had access to a range of activities and resources. Recently assigned RE teachers began to re-assess the quality of the curriculum materials that were offered in the draft Units. This reassessment was due in large measure by how teachers perceived the reactions of their students to the language and relevance of the content.

Prowess and Confidence: The frustration of the classroom experiences that resulted from the shortcomings of using the Mastersheets and Student Books forced the recently assigned RE teachers to rethink what they were doing. They recognised that they needed to accommodate more closely the learning needs of their students with a wider variety of accessible and relevant resources and strategies (p.276). Most teachers grew in confidence when they chose to follow this path by expanding their repertoire of teaching skills with collegial support (p.287). The more competent teachers felt they became with the content and strategies, the more assured they were in dealing with diverse backgrounds of their students. Some recently assigned RE teachers continued to be challenged by their students and felt frustrated in not being able to teach the way they believed RE should be taught.

Empathy and Insight: A significant development for the recently assigned teachers was the realisation that a direct pastoral rapport with their students was a key ingredient in successfully implementing the draft RE Units (p.285). Teachers became more engaged in dialogue with their students. In so doing, they were able to gain insights into the learning needs of their students. Teachers became more concerned about the personal spiritual and religious formation of their students (pp.284-285). As a result, RARE teachers were more critical of their selection of the content and how this content was to be taught in interesting and relevant ways to students (p.276). Such critical judgements heightened tensions within some teachers about their loyalties towards the perceived expectations of how the Units were supposed to be implemented. For others, there was a growing turmoil about their personal integrity in relation to the beliefs and value presented.

Modelling and Vocation: By the second round of interviews, recently assigned RE teachers related their belief that it was important to be a model person to their students (pp.288-289). This modelling was not only in terms of the human qualities they possessed but also in the faith witness they presented (pp.289-290). For most recently assigned RE teachers, it was this strong faith commitment that was

significant to continuing their RE teaching. For some teachers, the nature of the faith commitment espoused by the draft PAREC proved too challenging to their sense of identity and integrity (pp.290-291).

It was possible that such a self-knowledge and awakening to the inner call to serve as an RE teacher had led RARE teachers to a critical point in their RE teaching career. How they addressed this critical point led to their continuation or termination of RE teaching. Perhaps RE is one of the *first* subjects these teachers dropped as a part of their teaching load because of the personal, professional, and religious challenges the draft PAREC presented to them.

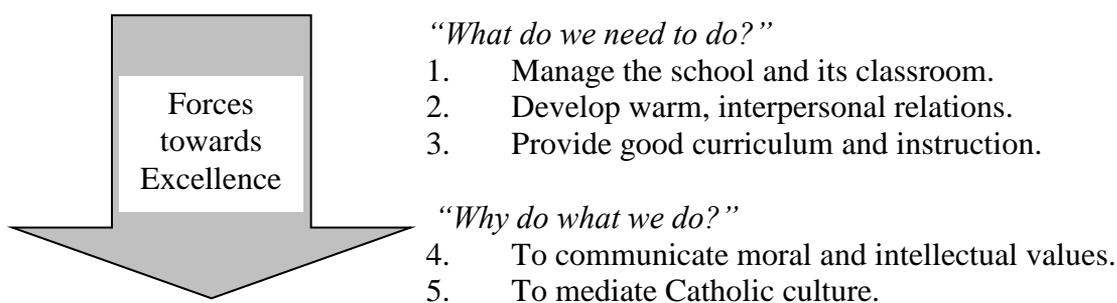
This pattern in the personal and professional formation of recently assigned RE teachers was reflected in the work of Jacobs (1996) on the formation of Catholic educators. Jacobs saw that the energy recently assigned teachers placed in teaching RE went into developing their competence as good RE teachers:

For the most part, the greater majority of novice teachers need to develop competence in at least three skills: classroom management, human relations, as well as the pedagogical skills associated with good curriculum and effective instruction. Throughout the course of their first five years on the job, neophyte teachers spend much of their time and energy focusing upon and developing competence in these important skills as they struggle through their successes and failures to become good teachers

(Jacobs 1996, p.5)

Jacobs (1996, p.15) has developed a model of the forces of educational excellence applied to Catholic education (Figure 8.3, p.311). Jacobs (1996) believed that Catholic teachers progressed from being competent (to become good classroom teachers) to excellent (to become authentic, purpose-minded teachers) when they moved from asking the question ‘What do we need to do?’ to ‘Why do what we do?’ The latter question led to a sense of calling or vocation as part of the necessary inspiration for teaching in a Catholic school.

Figure 8.3: The Five Forces of Catholic Educational Excellence



Adapted from Jacobs (1996, p.15)

It appeared that the latter question, ‘Why do what we do?’ was the question recently assigned RE teachers were asking themselves in the second round of interviews.

When teachers were mindful of such a question in their teaching lives then they were beginning the journey from being a competent teacher to an excellent teacher (Jacobs 1996). It was a process typical of recently assigned teachers in their quest to consolidate their pedagogical content knowledge (Manuel 2003, p.35). There was a ‘turnabout’ (Hansen 1995, p.24) or defining moment when recently assigned teachers experienced a change in outlook about the purposes of their teaching. Excellent teachers were the ones who articulated to others the importance of Catholic moral and intellectual values in their teaching and were able to draw upon their understanding of the Catholic school culture to contextualise the purpose of their teaching (Jacobs 1996).

In the second round of interviews, some of the interviewees seemed to be beginning this process from seeing themselves as good RE teachers to becoming excellent RE teachers. With teaching experience and direct pastoral rapport with their students, recently assigned RE teachers were able to develop their pedagogical content knowledge. They were able to recognise and develop the links between the concepts and values of the draft RE Units and the personal and spiritual values of their students. In doing so, the teachers drew upon a wider range of curriculum materials (content knowledge) that conveyed a sense of what it was to be human (like Jesus) and how to live a meaningful and responsible life. At the same time, the teachers saw that their own example was significant in their lives of their students. Increasingly, they evaluated their own identity and sense of spiritual balance. The teachers understood that excellent RE teachers were not only the ones who were able to

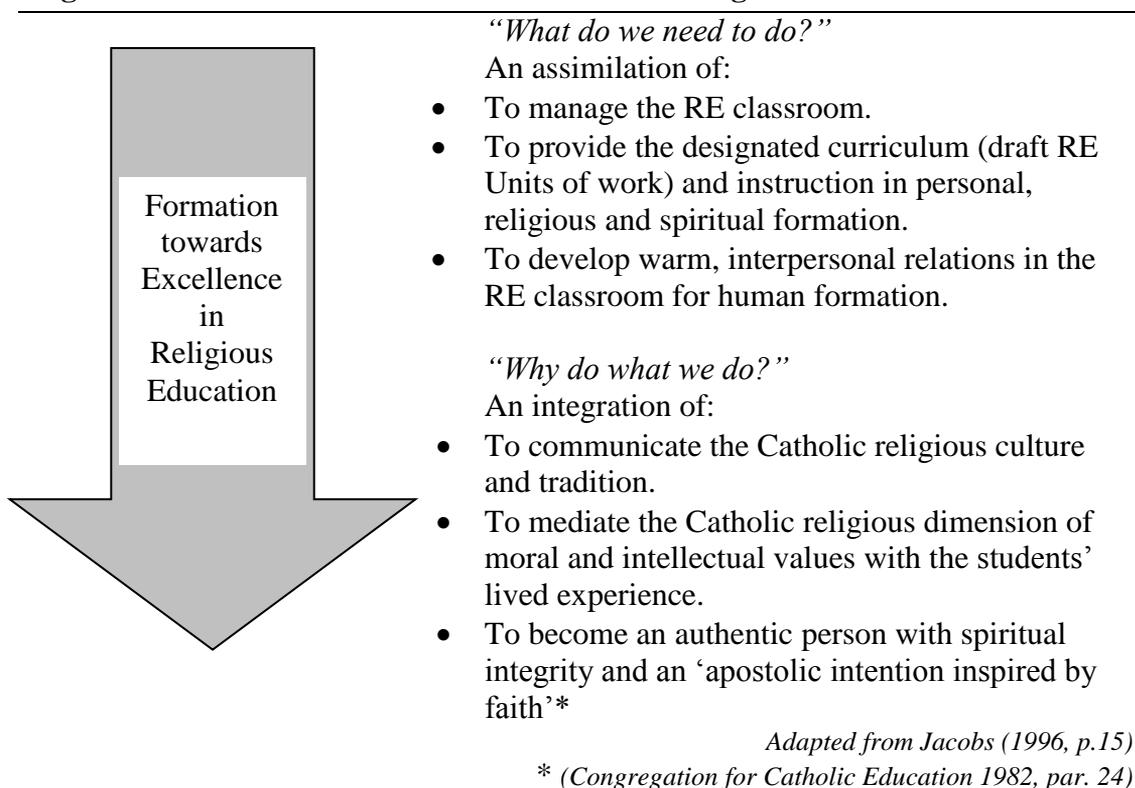
deepen their skills and understandings but also the ones who lived as authentic and balanced adults with a strong faith commitment.

Figure 8.4 (p.313) adapts Jacob's (1996) model in the light of the findings that emerged from this research and represented in Figure 8.2 (p.307). Recently assigned RE teachers initially focused their concerns on assimilating four key aspects or layers to their personal and professional formation. Each of these layers complements the forces in Jacob's (1996) model of excellence (Figure 8.3, p.311). In their quest to become competent RE teachers, the teachers in this study declared that they spent much of their preparation time in learning the content themselves and working out how they were going to teach the draft RE Units. Within a year of teaching the draft RE Units, recently assigned teachers had commented in the survey and in the first round of interviews that they needed to modify their teaching practices (p.279). The first two layers of 'Instruction-Surety' and 'Prowess-Confidence' (Figure 8.2, p.307) reflected the forces within the 'What do we need to do?' portion of Jacob's model (Figure 8.3, p.311). Once these forces are operational then teachers have the capacity to consider the next set of forces within 'Why do what we do?' sections they transform their teaching.

The change in teaching practices was focused on ascertaining and accommodating the academic and spiritual learning needs of their students. It was not just enough to provide a warm, friendly learning environment but also to be a sincere and balanced model to students. To do so, recently assigned RE teachers believed that a direct pastoral rapport with their students was paramount in assisting the human formation of their students. As the teacher interacted with the class and took a keen interest in individual students, the students were influenced by the example of the teacher as a person with admirable human qualities. In the process of acting as a mentor or role model to their students, the teachers were confronted by the worth of their own sense of identity as a person of faith. These changes are summarised in the next two layers of teacher formation: 'Empathy-Insight' and 'Modelling-Vocation' (Figure 8.2, p.307). The next two layers may be considered part of the forces engaged in the 'Why do what we do?' sections of Jacob's model (Figure 8.3, p.311). The impact of these forces become fully realised once teachers have developed the reflective skills to evaluate their teaching as part of the professional formation. As a result, as

indicated in Figure 8.4, excellence in RE teaching is enhanced by an integration of formative experiences.

Figure 8.4: The Dimensions of Excellence in Religious Education



The curriculum and personal demands placed on the RARE teachers to teach the draft RE Units meant that they had to consider seriously whether they wished to continue to teach RE after a few years. The teachers had approached a crossroad in their RE teaching career about their commitment to teaching RE as a person of faith and the ongoing demands of instructing and reaching out to students. Their focus shifted from ‘how and what do I teach in RE?’ to ‘why should I teach RE?’ and a personal search intensified for an integrated rationale for wanting to continue to teach Religious Education.

This change in focus seemed to have begun for many of the recently assigned RE teachers over the duration of the study. The comments from the teachers interviewed seemed to suggest that they had reached an important moment in their RE teaching career. This moment of insight about their own purposes and principles of teaching Religious Education sustained their enthusiasm to teach RE and defined them personally as passionate, committed teachers of faith. As Edward reflected about his RE teaching and his faith commitment:

A calling? It's more a deliberate action to make, to give evidence that I'm living a Christian life on earth. Having all the faith in the world is good but also you've got to make use of it. So that's what my RE teaching is, making use of my faith for God's service.

(Edward, second round of interviews)

In this study, many recently assigned RE teachers were in agreement with Edward that they are making use of their 'faith for God's service'. It was the development towards such a disposition that energised and sustained them through the rigours of the personal and professional demands placed on them in implementing the draft RE Units. They were able to share their personal experiences of living the faith or what may be otherwise called 'experiential content knowledge'. In this respect, the recently assigned RE teachers saw their witness more significantly than their teaching (Chapter 3, pp.99-100).

The teachers who had made the decision that their RE teaching was a vocation reflected the exhortation of an 'apostolic intention inspired by faith' (Chapter 3, p.100). While Nancy recounted in her first interview how she struggled with her 'naughty boys' (p.278), a conviction to teach RE appeared to be emerging in the second interview:

I think God has called me to love and to bring other people to an awareness of [God's] reality and [God's] love for them. At the moment, my life has led me to be teaching RE and I have to say that I think that I'd find few positions more fulfilling. That's not to say I won't in time move on but for now I couldn't imagine anything I'd rather be doing.

(Diana, second round of interviews)

This disposition in teaching RE as a vocation helped RARE teachers, as faith witnesses, to articulate a deeper understanding of Catholic beliefs and practices (experiential content knowledge), to relate the draft RE Units to the personal, spiritual and religious development of their students (pedagogical content knowledge) and to impart the content of the draft RE Units (content knowledge). Figure 8.4 (p.313) highlights these aspects of the formation of RARE teachers in becoming excellent RE teachers. While the faith witness or experiential content knowledge, content knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge of teachers were identified, the comments from the recently assigned RE teachers suggested that these aspects were interrelated and operated concurrently with each other.

The concurrence of these knowledge forms may be deemed as the makings of RE teachers with a vision towards excellence in RE teaching. An excellent RE teacher required personal authenticity, spiritual integrity with an apostolic zeal to teach the ‘Good News’ and a commitment to ongoing professional and faith formation in teaching Religious Education as a vocation. Educational reform needs to consider these dimensions or ‘forces’ (Jacobs 1996). These forces are a part of the formation (or conversion) of recently assigned RE teachers, as competent RE teachers, to becoming excellent RE teachers. The process of conversion is ongoing and teachers need to reflect personally on how to improve their teaching practice, to become lifelong learners as a way of coping with curriculum exigencies (O’Donoghue 1997). There are three levels of reflection to be developed: ‘technical rationality’, ‘practical reflection’ and ‘critical reflection’ (O’Donoghue 1997, pp.32-33). Firstly, in the case of technical rationality, teachers improve their practice when they learn to consider alternative ways of teaching in the classroom. Secondly, with practical reflection, teachers clarify the assumptions about the value of their teaching and thirdly, with critical reflection, teachers examine critically the contexts of their teaching. Recently assigned RE teachers did reflect upon their teaching, albeit both positively and negatively. The more comprehensive they became in their reflection for improvement and renewal (as the teachers themselves suggested on pp.298-299), then the more likely they were able to see RE teaching as a worthwhile profession deserving of teachers of excellence.

8.4 Chapter Summary

Key concerns emerged about the competence and character of recently assigned RE teachers. The survey responses indicated a number of important issues in relation to accessibility and frequency in use of resources as well how teachers adjusted their teaching strategies to suit the needs of their students. Furthermore, there were a number of initial concerns about what teachers perceived as the catechetical expectations of the curriculum. Over the course of the two rounds of interviews, the perceptions of teachers focused less on resources and strategies to a re-evaluation of their persona as a teacher and their faith witness to their students.

The data collected provided evidence that recently assigned teachers experienced deepening layers of personal and professional formation. They wanted to be competent classroom managers and they also wanted to be highly respected RE

teachers. While experience and familiarity with the draft Units was important, it was the positive social relationships that teachers developed with students and colleagues alike that were invaluable to their personal and professional esteem. If recently assigned RE teachers were going to implement the draft RE Units in effective and inspiring ways in their classroom, addressing the needs of these teachers for ongoing personal and professional formation was vital.

Recently assigned teachers needed practical support and affirmation from their more experienced colleagues. They needed to be able to access a wide range of formative programs in content and pedagogy as well as opportunities for personal and spiritual renewal. Such needs formed the basis for recommendations that will be discussed as part of the focus of the next chapter.