

*'I think my religious experience was a much better way of describing it than RE
...it didn't feel like it was formally taught... it was an experience... you went in
and you didn't know what to expect... but you came out having gotten an
experience... or having learned a lesson... for life...'*

**The significance of a pre-service RE course, which
recognizes the importance of a focus on the inner life:
Exploring the experience of primary teacher education
students in a small teacher education college in Dublin.**

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as a thesis for the degree of **Doctor of Education in Education**

August 2014

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Thesis Abstract

This thesis reports the findings of a research study conducted in an initial primary teacher education college in Dublin, exploring how teacher education students experienced and constructed meaning from a pre-service RE course which recognized the importance of a focus on their inner lives. The study, which adopted a qualitative interpretive approach, was conducted using semi-structured interviews with twelve past students from a recently-graduated year group of one hundred students.

The study hoped to uncover how a focus on the inner life was taken up by the research participants in relation to their personal and professional wellbeing and their role as educators in general and religious educators in particular. While it did not seek to generalise as a result of the findings, confined as it is by time and circumstance, nevertheless aspects deemed worthwhile by the research participants may also be deemed worthwhile by the reader and indeed may not be confined to the domain of RE.

The findings have been framed *generally* against the three themes of 'particularity', 'inner-ness' and 'ongoing-ness'. The theme of 'particularity' relates to the participants' epistemological journey, as it is concerned with how concrete elements of the course supported inner life work. The theme of 'inner-ness' relates to the participants' ontological journey, as it is concerned with how participants experienced and made meaning from the space provided by the course for inner life work. The theme of 'ongoingness' relates to the total RE journey from primary and secondary school to college and into their teaching lives and its impact on participants' inner lives.

What is clear from participants' responses is that the RE course, and particularly the elements of the RE course that had a focus on the inner life, had a significant impact on participants' identity, both personal and professional, at an important stage of their development and personal story. The study demonstrates the importance of inner life work for teacher education students and contributes a level of insight into how students appropriate and construct meaning from a created and creative space that supports a focus on that inner life.

Acknowledgements

As I approach the end of this Ed.D. journey, I would like to acknowledge a number of people who have supported and encouraged me along the way.

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr. Karen Walshe and Dr. Sue Jones. Their exemplary supervision and support has been fundamental to the success of my endeavours, while their wisdom and insight has been instrumental in producing a research study of which I am very proud. To each of them I am extremely grateful. I would also like to express my gratitude to Dr. Cheryl Hunt whose insightful supervision was invaluable in the initial phase of the research.

Secondly, I would like to thank all of the academics who shared their wisdom with us during the taught phase of the Ed.D., both lecturers and fellow students. The weekends and summer schools, under the wise guidance of Dr. Cheryl Hunt and Dr. Deborah Osberg, never failed to inspire.

Thirdly, I am indebted to the research participants for their generosity in sharing their time and their rich insights with me in the midst of their busy lives as beginning teachers and I know that they are just as generous with their lives in the classroom.

Fourthly, I would like to thank my friends and colleagues who have supported me. Professor Anne O’Gara, my College President, has been a constant source of affirmation and encouragement on the journey, while Michael, Annie, Seán and Gene and my other colleagues have walked every step of the road with me. I would also like to thank our librarian Miriam and also Mary, Donna and Clare who have provided invaluable library support. My running friends have endured much in seeking to keep me grounded, in particular Chris Carroll and Steve Reenan but also Gerry Rooney, Dingo, Nutty and The Bird. In undertaking the Ed.D. in Exeter, I was following in the footsteps of Dr. Michael Hayes, whose friendship and wisdom has been a constant pillar upon which my learning has been built and I acknowledge my gratitude to Michael for scaffolding my journey.

Fifthly, I would like to thank my children John, Annie and Claire, and John’s partner Po, for their understanding and encouragement and all-round brilliance.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to Frances, the love of my life. Without her blessing, support and critical reflection skills, this thesis would not have been written.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Beginning with an Image



The Twin Oaks (Photo by Denise Linden)

This thesis begins with an image of twin oak trees. The image represents Religious Education (RE) in the pre-service primary teacher education college in Dublin where I teach. These oak trees were planted over a hundred years ago when the college was founded. The entrance roadway was originally intended to sweep between them up to the door of the college but the plan was changed. Instead, the new entrance roadway left the twin oaks abandoned to one side and quite unnoticed by visitors and students alike.

Like those twin oaks, RE exists on the margins. Even though named as one of the four core subjects in the College, along with English, Irish and Mathematics, it often appears, as has been said about RE in the English context, 'something of a Cinderella subject' (Baumfield 2004, p.116). It could be argued for example that RE does not seem to hold the same level of importance as the other three core subjects, even in concrete ways such as having fewer lecturing staff and less contact hours with students than, for example, the teaching of the Irish language. I believe that what O'Sullivan says about contemporary education, that it 'suffers deeply by its eclipse of the spiritual dimension of our world and universe' (O'Sullivan 1999, p.259), is also true for RE. My own teaching of RE has been a humble attempt to prevent a total eclipse of that spiritual dimension in my own place and to help Cinderella to get to the ball! Just like the twin oaks which, though on the margins, continue to thrive year by year, RE continues to seem important to the students, as evidenced by this study, and to meet a real need in their lives.

For me, the planned entrance roadway, between the twin oaks, also symbolises the student's journey in RE. The twin oaks represent the epistemological and ontological aspects of that journey, the concurrent journeys of learning by acquiring new knowledge from exterior sources and learning by developing an interior reflective awareness of the self and its unique giftedness. The roadway emerges from wherever the journey began and leads into an unknowable future, illustrating the continuity of the journey. The student's present experience is not uninfluenced by previous experience and future possibilities.

An aspect of that journey, that has emerged both from my own experience in teacher education and also from the research, is that it takes a significant length of time for RE to become meaningful for any particular student year group. I

found this to be especially true in relation to one group some time back. It seemed as if I was going to fail in my attempt to engage the group and I found myself struggling to remain positive and hopeful. Yet, as I wrote in this verse, it was hope that saved the day.

The Agony and the Essay.

Three years we've wrestled now

Some of us alone

Some of us together

Some of us with one another

With RE

With TP

With assignments

With attendance

With presence

With this moment

Outside

In here

Elsewhere

Like the twin oaks growing in now and now

Like the seasons in constant state of flux

Like the brent geese resting for shortest time

Too many breaths unnoticed in haste and fuss

Too many dreams lost in lack of sleep

Too many days unwanted and unloved and unaware

Never

Once

Feeling

Steeped

In

The

*Prayer
Of
One
Who
Nearly
Choked
On
Hope.*

For the first two years that I taught this group, it did indeed seem like a wrestling match and I found myself regularly de-skilled by their perceived ambivalence. Then, in their third year, they suddenly metamorphosed into the most engaged group that I have ever taught. That engagement was a factor in my decision to interview a subsequent year group for the purposes of this research project. At my final lecture, when the group were speaking of their regret that a course they found so difficult to become part of was ending, a tearful student thanked me for not giving up on them (Learning Journal, April 7th, 2009: See Appendix XII, Excerpt 1).

When I read a verse like *'The Agony and the Essay'* to my students, I don't need to explain it. They come from the top quatrain of Leaving Certificate results (the Irish equivalent of 'A' Levels, from which candidates qualify for Third Level). My students rarely require lengthy explanations. To explain the verse would be to 'kill' it. It works best in its ability to occupy a space and be worked with in the light of their own experience by the readers or the hearers. I believe that that is also how RE in teacher education should be. I came to teacher education with a sense of that, but after a few years, I realised that I needed to expand my own educational horizons in order to enrich my practice and so I embarked on my EdD journey.

That EdD journey began fittingly enough at Hallowe'en 2008. I say fittingly because it was a scary enterprise. Why would someone approaching a half-century of years take on the burden of doctoral level study alongside an already overly busy schedule? I had completed my Masters degree with first class honours in 2003 and thought myself finished with my own education. After two years back at school I found myself, with no previous experience of third level

lecturing, securing a job in teacher education. Suddenly, after twenty-five years as a primary school teacher, I was teaching my favourite subject, RE, to primary teacher education students. Three years later, just as I was beginning to find my feet in pre-service teacher education, a doctoral journey beckoned.

For the first two years of the journey, the taught phase, I was part of a supportive cohort of EdD students who seemed to struggle along happily together through written assignments and weekend seminars. I remember lots of critical reflection and questioning and discussion and advice, not only in the sessions but at break-times and meal-times and even on long walks. Many seemed to undertake the EdD with an already well-formed plan for the thesis stage. Others, like myself, understood the area or discipline in which they intended to conduct their research, but had not yet come to the specifics. As a result, when lecturers would present on their area of research, I would find myself wondering about the possibility of conducting the same type of research in RE. I thought about writing a historical study of the teaching of RE in pre-service primary teacher education in Ireland. I thought about taking a leave of absence to return to college and conduct ethnographic research on the life of the mature student. I thought about interviewing primary school children and their teachers. As the course progressed, however, I began to understand that I needed to research where my heart was – my own practice in RE in teacher education and the impact of the course on pre-service teacher education students.

Because I was going to explore my own practice in RE in teacher education and because I knew that there was a focus in the practice on the inner lives of students, that extra-rational elements were used and that my own life-long learning influences were playing a part, the literature review needed to acknowledge such influences. It also needed to acknowledge the context of RE in teacher education in the Republic of Ireland and in my own college, a small pre-service teacher education college in Dublin. This is something that is explored in chapter two.

I wanted to know why pre-service teacher education students seemed so positive about their experience of the RE practice that I was facilitating. That would necessitate having in depth conversations with them when they had

finished the course in order to discern the reasons for that positivity. I also needed to be open to the possibility that I was mistaken and that for some students it may not have been a positive experience. As a way to engage in such research, I examined action research and grounded theory. I explored phenomenology and complexity. In the end though, it seemed as if the research that I wanted to do selected the methodology itself. Because I would be involved in the conversation it was clear that hermeneutics would need to be employed as the methodology. This is explored along with other methodological issues in chapter three.

What would emerge from the research was always going to be of interest to me professionally. The question remained about whether anything of value could emerge that might inform a wider field. I remember being quite dispirited at the early stage of the analysis, which is outlined in chapter four. Even though it was clear that rich data had been obtained and that themes were emerging from the data, doubts began to surface in me about the value of it all. An email arrived from Australia from a past-student who had belonged to the same year group as my research participants. It was just a simple email but it encouraged me to redouble my efforts. She was home-schooling some children on a cattle station in the outback and had taken them outside to be mindful of the blue sky and then emailed me to tell me how much moments such as those meant to herself and her peers as busy students in college. The space provided by the course for such inner work is one of the outcomes discussed in chapter five, where the little story of the research project intersects with the larger story of RE in pre-service teacher education and teacher education in general.

As I begin to move towards conclusion, I have received another email from a past-student and again from the same year group as my research participants. One of her colleagues has just tragically died and she has emailed to look for advice in regard to working with this experience with the children and other staff members in her school, having recalled sessions in college where students worked with their experience of death and hope. This email reminds me why RE is so worthwhile, why it matters and why it is worth telling the story of this research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will outline the context of RE in pre-service teacher education in Ireland and my own practice within that context, and review the literature relevant to the research that I have undertaken.

The research question, which has undergone what Miles and Huberman refer to as a 'continuous iterative enterprise' (Miles & Huberman 1994, p.12), is:

'In what ways, personally and professionally, have teacher education students experienced a pre-service RE course, which recognizes the importance of a focus on their inner lives?'

This research question shifts the focus of this literature review away from the obvious field of RE itself into approaches to learning that are concerned with the inner life of teacher education students themselves and the kinds of conditions under which such inner life work thrives, as well as spirituality and holistic education. Nonetheless, it is important to begin with an understanding of the context within which RE in pre-service teacher education is set.

2.2 The Irish Scene – RE in Pre-Service Primary Teacher Education

Pre-Service Teacher Education programmes in Ireland are reviewed and accredited by the Teaching Council, which is the statutory body that sets and upholds the standards for entry to the profession. The Council has established criteria and guidelines that such programmes must meet. In reviewing the Post-Graduate course in my own college, one of the findings that emerged from the Council's observations at various sessions including RE was related to the way that subjects are taught in the college generally.

The panel noted the College's strong commitment to the practical and methodological dimensions of the programme and a high quality delivery of the practical education studies. During its visit, the team experienced outstanding examples of pedagogical thinking and practice among staff members. (Teaching Council Review June 2011)

This is the closest that any teaching council reviews came to commenting on the process undertaken in teacher education. RE was not mentioned specifically in any of the reviews of the teacher education colleges, with the exception of one particular college which was advised to examine the large number of hours devoted to the subject.

In their guidelines document which seemed to endorse an holistic approach, the Council emphasised the need to provide for 'students' personal and social development', but added the qualifier, 'having regard to teachers' pastoral role'. The document, which initially might seem broadly based, is in fact rather narrowly focussed on students as future teachers, rather than as individuals with learning needs of their own.

Specific to my own practice however, the Council's Review Panel, in their final report on the reconceptualised degree programme submitted for accreditation by my own college, seemed to depart from such a narrow base, commending the focus on the inner life of students.

The Panel commends the approach to religious education which addresses understanding and appreciation of diverse religions and belief systems, strategies for inclusive practice, and students' own spiritual, religious, and moral development. (Teaching Council Review May 2013)

My comment in the Introduction, following Baumfield, that RE is 'something of a Cinderella subject' can be further verified in the national context, by visiting the Department of Education and Skills (DES) website. Accessing the Irish primary curriculum online, if one clicks on any subject title one finds a definition of that subject. Tellingly, if one clicks on RE however, instead of a definition, the following sentence appears:

'The development and implementation of the curriculum in religious education in primary schools remains the responsibility of the relevant patron bodies' (DES Irish Primary School Curriculum Online).

RE in primary schools in Ireland differs hugely from the rest of Europe. Over 90% of Irish primary schools are church owned and so RE retains a strong catechetical focus for the most part, which aims to promote and develop the faith of the children, while simultaneously striving for an inclusivity that can be both challenging and elusive. Because of the context of RE in primary schools, RE in pre-service primary teacher education in Ireland has been mainly

concerned with training students in Christian theology (and for the most part Catholic Christian theology) and methodology in order to teach RE with just such a catechetical focus.

Looking elsewhere for a definition of RE in the Irish context, Anne Hession and Patricia Kieran offer the following:

Religious Education is the educational process by which people are invited to explore the human religious traditions that protect and illuminate the religious dimension of their lives. Religious education invites people to acquire the knowledge, forms of knowing, attitudes, values, skills and sensibilities that being religious involves. It also invites people to think critically about religion: to study religion objectively from a distance, and to examine their own religion in relation to other religious and non-religious options (Hession & Kieran 2005, p.381).

This definition seems to capture something of the struggle for RE in the Republic of Ireland to move beyond what might be regarded as its traditionally narrow confines. Vivienne Baumfield has written that educators in the area of RE in the UK 'have tended to focus almost exclusively on the subject matter' (Baumfield 2007, p.125). Whether or not that still pertains to the UK, it certainly seems to be the case in Ireland, where much of RE in teacher education colleges seems to be content-based, in that it focuses on what Kieran and Hession call inviting people to 'acquire the knowledge' and ignores all of the other aspects listed in the above quotation. It also ignores the possibilities inherent in the contemplative space that has been one of the focuses of this research study.

Sheridan, whose research on teacher identity involved interviews with student teachers who were contemporaries of my own research participants, suggests as a first recommendation that RE courses in teacher education in Ireland 'should assist student teachers in expanding their own knowledge' (Sheridan 2012). By 'knowledge', he means knowledge related to 'theology' and 'catechetics'. Such a recommendation seems to add weight to the argument that the focus in RE in teacher education in Ireland still appears to remain on what is 'given' to students in terms of content. How it is given (the 'process' involved), seems to depend on each individual lecturer who engages with it in their own imaginative way.

Three books, written by educators from the two largest teacher education colleges in Ireland, while hugely informative in relation to the content knowledge expected from student teachers, make no mention of the 'process' involved in RE for the same student teachers (Kieran and Hession, 2005, 2007, 2008). In other words, Kieran and Hession write about the 'what' (content) of RE in teacher education but not about the 'how' (process). The case for the importance of 'process' will, I hope, be made by the findings of this research study. 'Process', in the context of my practice, is a particular way of working experientially with small groups of students, as detailed below. This extends beyond pedagogy into a much broader space, where meaningful reflection can take place.

2.3 The RE Course Process

This section of the Literature Review is about the process or the 'how' of the RE course, rather than the content or the 'what'. The content can be seen in Appendix XIII, where the module specifications are detailed, but here I describe the 'how'.

I teach each year group as a large group, which is then sub-divided for three small group sessions. However, both sessions are experiential. By that I mean that I try to engage with the students' experience and have them work with the subject in an experiential way.

In the British context, Hay writes of experiential learning in the RE curriculum having three tasks – helping students to keep an open mind, exploring different ways of seeing and encouraging immediacy of awareness (Hay 2000, p.73-77). He defines the latter as living in the present moment or the here-and-now, what has come to be known as mindfulness, a crucial part of the experiential working process that is central to the RE course in this research study.

Kolb says that it is the emphasis on process that distinguishes experiential learning from other approaches (Kolb 1984, p.26) and Hunt, in her reflections on the 'Researching Spirituality' seminars, suggests that while the content had been rich, 'the process had been even more significant'. She writes: 'We saw the seminars as 'unfettered spaces' in which participants had been free to re-

view and, if they wished, share their own embodied knowledge; and, with others, to co-create new meanings' (Hunt 2009, p.9). What Hunt describes as the sharing of embodied knowledge is an example of working with the subject, in her case spirituality, experientially or using the participants' lived experience. The 'unfettered spaces' were important as a context within which to do such work. The RE seeks to value such 'unfettered spaces'.

A typical RE session generally includes seven elements. These elements are not fixed. They do not always appear in a particular order nor do they all necessarily need to appear within the one session. Each however contributes to the process. This is the order in which they most commonly appear:

1. Waiting and Wondering

This is an important stage for the students who are welcomed into silence and the sense of never quite knowing what will unfold. I insist on welcoming latecomers to class, knowing that they take a risk to arrive late. I also take a risk in waiting for silence at the beginning even though it sometimes takes time, because this results in real engagement with the session, not a forced engagement. I sometimes wonder aloud about the centrepiece, which always contains a symbol related to the day's subject, as well as candles and incense. I have always considered it important to have a rich centrepiece as part of every session as it helps focus attention in some way on the work at hand that day.

2. Threshold Experience

Since the students may be coming to RE from another subject, such as maths or PE, I deliberately set out to make this space different, to change the context in a meaningful way, to enable the students to move, as it were, across the threshold into this different space. This may be done by going outside to change the context physically, or by changing the context metaphorically, using a transition exercise such as mindfulness or meditation, verse, song, music, a YouTube clip, story or other.

3. Asking the Question

We bring who we are into the classroom. This stage tries to honour that, acknowledging that how the students are, affects how the day's work will be for them. It also acknowledges that their presence, and their contribution, is not only welcome, but life-giving and vital to the group. It is often enfolded by

simply asking the group how they are. Recognising the importance of a question, even one as simple and mundane as 'How are you?' is recognition of the importance of each learner to the group as a whole. I frequently ask students if there are any questions, not with the intention of answering them but just wondering what's happening in the group at that moment. I also frequently ask, following Rilke, what question students are 'living' at this moment in time.

I also sometimes wonder about questions that have arisen from the previous week, not providing answers but, as Rilke says, just 'loving the questions' (Rilke 1934, p.27).

4. Gathering around the Subject

The session continues by working with the students' experience of the subject - whether in pairs, small groups, whole group, via journal work, or by using insights from past students' reflections or even my own personal experience from the primary school classroom.

5. Journaling

Journaling is rooted in the student's own experience of that day's work, often by engaging with these three questions:

- What did I learn?
- What does it say to where I am?
- What am I going to do about it?

The students are reminded that these questions are directed at their experience of what has been happening for them in the group emotionally.

6. Pushing back the Horizon

In working with a particular subject I try to connect the content to the experience of the students and/or the primary school classroom, while aiming to push back the horizon, opening up new territories to left and right.

7. Concluding Ritual

The small group session generally ends with a ritual. This gives the students an opportunity to reflect, while also helping create that sense of what Jarvis describes as 'disjuncture' where students leave knowing that they have more to learn (Jarvis 2008, p.565). Students comment that the ritual is often the most

meaningful and memorable part of the session. Ritual can happen inside or outside; it can involve movement or dance; it can include song or verse; it can be meditative or contemplative; but always, seeks to arise out of, and give expression to, the work of that day.

2.4 A Changing Context

Since the commencement of this research study, RE in pre-service primary teacher education in Ireland has begun to change. This is primarily due to two parallel developments – the introduction of a four year full-time B.Ed. and the demand for change contained in the report of the Forum on Patronage of Primary Schools. These developments will necessitate a new approach to RE in pre-service teacher education and new emphases to meet the kinds of changing needs noted by Grimmitt, which while written in relation to the British context, could equally apply to the context of a rapidly changing Ireland.

The ability of RE to continue to address and meet the changing needs of children and young people and to make a significant contribution to their development as persons depends on both teachers and researchers being open to exploring new options and possibilities for the subject, however challenging they may be. (Grimmitt 2000, p.49)

But, for me, this external demand for change must also be balanced by taking account of the concerns of students regarding the significance of the RE course heretofore. To date, RE in the B.Ed. was classified as one of the four core subjects with a significant number of hours of contact time with students – two hours per week for three years. In the newly reconfigured B.Ed., RE has been allocated two hours per week for one year – a 5 E.C.T.S. (European Credit Transfer System) course requiring a qualification in RE, which is transferrable with the student to another institution within the EU. The course has been influenced by the new reality in Irish Primary Schools. The positivity of participants towards the old course poses a dilemma for the new course, however. Specifically, how will it be possible to retain the positives from the old course, while also preparing students for the new context of RE in Irish Schools, and all within a much constricted timeframe? However, since the majority of the students will teach in faith schools they voluntarily engage with RE for a further three years to obtain certification, as required by the various school patrons.

This in effect means that, like before, they continue to receive two hours RE per week over the duration of their B.Ed.

I teach students who appear positively disposed to the subject. Practising teachers also appear well-disposed, as evidenced by a recent survey of the teaching of RE in Ireland, conducted by the Equality Committee of the Irish National Teachers Organisation. This survey showed that only 2.2% of teachers would opt out of teaching RE as opposed to 5% in a corresponding study ten years previously (INTO 2013, p.8). Anne Looney, Chief Executive of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, a body that may soon be taking responsibility for primary RE to at least some extent, is another who is hugely positive about the possibilities for RE. She sees it as a 'catalyst in the public space'. But not just any kind of RE. The kind of RE that Looney has in mind is 'passionate' and 'engaged' (Looney 2006, p.965), something which may be difficult to imagine unless teacher education students can experience such RE in college.

2.5 RE in Pre-Service Teacher Education

In the literature that I have explored in relation to RE in teacher education, little would appear to have been written about the actual RE of teacher education students themselves, about making space for their own spiritual development and about allowing them to experience the benefit of RE, so that as teachers they will provide for the needs of children in the same way. Mc Creery's study (Mc Creery 2005) demonstrated how enthusiastic student teachers in England were about teaching RE in the primary school. Others, such as Coll in Scotland (Coll 2008) and Sheridan in Ireland (Sheridan 2012), have focussed on the faith/ religious identity of teachers and/or students. Research on the 'process' in RE in teacher education itself does not appear to be a priority.

Ubani, whose study focussed on the perceptions of RE student teachers in Finland of what constitutes a competent RE teacher, concludes that 'more attention should be paid to research into teacher education, particularly to the profession-specific elements that provide challenges for RE teachers' success and resiliency' (Ubani 2011, p.49). Ubani suggests that such research should

focus on RE teaching as a semi-profession alongside the professions of theologian and educationist. While I can see merit in such a suggestion, I would argue for a focus that would also allow the student space in which to develop both personally and professionally.

Theo van der Zee makes a strong case for 'inspiration' as a requirement for RE teachers, suggesting that 'RE teachers can do justice to students' capacities, ideas and values by inspiring them and allowing for their propensities, potential and other background elements' (van der Zee 2011, p.32). I believe that such inspiration needs to be 'experienced' by student teachers in their own RE in college. Rudge suggests that the following question should be asked of teacher education students:

How can we avoid allowing our teaching to fall into mere factualism, the process by which religious education degenerates into the transmission of information about religions, because it is the easiest thing to do, it does not require us to think about why we are giving out this information and it avoids controversy? It is the basis of a curriculum for no-one, with no educational purpose, going nowhere. On the other hand, to keep constantly before us the question of how our teaching might enrich pupils' lives and point them towards spiritual possibilities, suggests a worthwhile, relevant and vibrant pedagogy. (Rudge 2000, p.108)

My contention is that in order for teachers to enrich students' lives and point them towards such spiritual possibilities, they themselves must have experienced an RE that attempts to help them as students escape from the narrowing effects of the culture to which they belong, while addressing and meeting their needs and enriching their lives, so that they will do likewise in their own classrooms. The links between RE and 'spiritual possibilities' will be explored further in the course of this chapter.

Robert Jackson, in outlining his interpretive approach to religious diversity, makes the point that the approach in teacher education should be about learning principles, rather than large amounts of data, and that teacher education students should be willing to get to know their pupils and learn with them (Jackson 2006, p410-411). It should perhaps also hold that the education of teachers in RE must model the teaching of RE and must itself be RE. For me, the essence of RE is inner work – the RE that happens in the spaces and hopefully 'unfettered' spaces. It is what John Hull (in describing the difference between RE and religious studies) defines as 'helping the pupil in his own quest

for meaning' as opposed to 'the inquiry after other people's meanings' (Hull 1984, p.54). In many ways, RE is perhaps the facilitation of that quest for meaning, a facilitation that can happen as a result of a process that recognizes the importance of a focus on the inner life of the student.

2.6 Students' Experience of Pre-Service Teacher Education Courses

This research study has explored the students' experience of a pre-service RE course in primary teacher education, which recognizes the importance of a focus on their inner lives. I am conscious that speaking of students' experience is complex. 'The student experience' is not a simple concept. Sabri writes of it having 'acquired the aura of a sacred utterance in UK higher education policy over the last decade' (Sabri 2011, p. 657) and suggests that this development has harmed that same experience by wrapping it in a sense of righteousness and reducing it to an economic transaction. It is ironic that sacred language still carries that kind of power. However, this research study has not concerned itself with that kind of student experience, but rather to explore the student engagement that had become apparent to me in my practice.

Researching RE teachers and their concerns about the teaching of Christianity in England, Hayward found it 'surprising that many respondents did *not* point to aspects of Christianity which they found difficult to teach nor in the main to areas where they would welcome opportunities for further study' (Hayward 2008, p. 187). Instead their concern was with fostering students' engagement, which raises the question, according to Hayward, about the nature of the engagement looked for in RE. Perhaps it also raises the question of her respondents' own experience of being engaged, when student teachers. Perhaps we know better how to engage others when we ourselves have experienced just such engagement.

Flornes examines the experience of student teachers of an RE course in Norway, via action research, using questionnaires. His focus seems to be directed to school-based experience and students' performance in the classroom. It is interesting that 'nearly one third of the whole sample did not answer the question of how a good RE teacher can be educated' (Flornes 2007, p.201). This would perhaps suggest a lack of clarity in regard to what it means

to be a good RE teacher. Those that did answer, seemed to focus on the teacher educator as role model, the importance of placement, classroom skills and competencies, cohesion between college and the classroom, values and attitudes among RE teachers, attuning to learners' needs, multi-culturalism and multi-faith issues, and learning from the perspective of student teachers. These responses suggest that the students would favour a more functional approach as opposed to a more creative approach. However, one respondent did offer a different view, suggesting a more holistic approach.

...Teacher educators have to attune to student teachers' needs and develop caring relationships where learners are challenged to reflect in depth, upon personal values and experiences related to religious belief and faith... (Flornes 2007, p.209)

McCreery, in her study of primary teacher education students in the English context, found that they were enthusiastic about teaching RE and suggested that 'experiences during their training should foster this enthusiasm' (McCreery 2005, p.276). While she focused on positive school placement experiences as a solution, that may have been partly because of 'the limited amount of time allocated to religious education' in college (McCreery 2005, p.275). Coll's study of Scottish teachers, while it focused on the faith development of Catholic teachers, also recommended space for reflection, something that perhaps should be expanded beyond faith development (Coll 2008, p.242).

Nilsson's conclusion in relation to primary science teachers' experience of their teacher education course in Sweden, is also interesting, emphasising again the centrality of space for reflection. While it may not be the intention, Nilsson's argument for reflection on experience being central is perhaps recognition of the importance of attending to the inner life of student teachers. Nilsson writes of the importance of teaching science in ways that engage pupils and of the variety of experiences that student teachers have on their learning journeys towards becoming such teachers.

...it is reasonable to suggest that all student teachers travel on different personal learning journeys, interpret and learn from the interactions in different ways... However, it might well be argued that at the centre should be the student teachers' experiences and their reflections and analysis of these specific experiences. (Nilsson 2008, p.87-90)

Researching religious experience among teacher education students in England in the eighties, David Hay said that he 'was confronted with an overwhelming majority of young graduates going into the teaching profession who knew from their own experience that there was a sacred dimension to reality' (Hay 1990, p.55). I have found that this is still the case. I have also found that students value the opportunity to engage with that dimension from a variety of perspectives.

My own journey in RE has always been nourished by insights from a variety of disciplines. This literature review will draw attention to some of the literature from those fields, that I have found to be of particular significance in relation to an holistic approach to RE in teacher education, that sees as important a focus on the inner life of students.

2.7 Attending to the Inner Life of Students

I believe that RE should attend to the inner life of students as part of their ongoing spiritual journey. Increasingly used in education and other areas, 'spirituality' is a contested term, with multiple meanings and influences from a wide variety of disciplines. A google search for the word 'spirituality' will yield 129 million results, while a google book search will suggest over 20 million possibilities for reading material. For myself, I see 'spirituality' as encompassing the inner journey that I have defined earlier as the ontological journey, symbolised by one of the twin oak trees in the introductory image.

Authenticity is an important facet of 'inner life' work for students in Third Level, where authenticity may be difficult to find. In 'Education as a Spiritual Journey', Parker Palmer offers a model for what he terms 'authentic' teaching and learning, proposing that perhaps 'the ancient communal act called teaching and learning can be renewed by drawing upon spiritual wisdom' (Palmer 1993, p.x). Palmer writes about knowing as loving, about education as spiritual formation, about the teaching behind the teaching (the hidden curriculum) and about truth. He insists, following Abba Felix (one of the Desert Fathers of the Christian tradition), that 'to teach is to create a space in which obedience to truth is practiced' and makes the case for including in education the ancient spiritual practices of silence and solitude and prayer. As one renowned for his opposition

to public prayer in schools, his enthusiasm for private prayer in the same schools is interesting.

The 'experiential' is also an important facet. I have described above the experiential nature of the RE course. This approach may be similar to that of Australian educator David Tacey, who roots his work in spiritual education in the ground of experience and insists that spiritual education should also be a priority for an RE that wants to 'engage the lives that it seeks to form and transform'.

The inward or spiritual approach to religion is deeper, based on personal experience, tolerant towards difference, compassionate towards those who make different life-choices, and relatively free of ideological fanaticism. This is all the more reason why religious educators should seek to explore the spiritual approach to religious mystery (Tacey 2004, p.77).

Writing of a primarily American context but with experience of other countries including Ireland and my own college, Aostre Johnson describes spirituality as having contemplative, existential, self-reflective, emotional, ethical, ecological and creative capacities and goes beyond the RE course's emphasis on the importance of attending to the inner life of students, insisting that spirituality is critical to the future of humanity and indeed the planet.

There is a dawning realization around the globe that many people and cultures are losing touch with their inner lives in this era of increasingly high-speed, multitasking, high-stress, acquisition-oriented ways of living – and that this is taking an enormous toll on all forms of life on earth. A restoration of these inner human capacities is critical not only for the well-being of youth but also for the survival of the human species and the planet. (Johnson 2011, p.11)

While the RE course may not have such far-reaching outcomes in mind, being more concerned with the inner life and flourishing of students in the here and now, perhaps Johnson's conviction should not be underestimated!

The elements that the students engage with on the RE course find echoes in the work of Rachel Remen, who has taught spirituality to both medical students and practising physicians in the USA and believes that educators are healers who 'must have the courage to heal this world into what it might become' (Remen 1999, p.35). She laments the medical culture of keeping one's distance, of avoiding connection, of an absence of compassion. She begins

work with groups by offering silence, which she describes as 'a substitute for fear and isolation' (Remen 1999, p.40). She also engages her students in ritual, imagery, journaling, poetry, music and meditation, as well as healing exercises. Her experience has been that the students begin to find meaning in their work, as a result of both the inner work and the small group sharing that is part of the course.

Meaning heals us not by numbing our pain or distracting us from our problems but by reminding us of our integrity: of who we are, of what we are doing, and how we belong. Meaning gives us a place to stand: a place from which to meet the events of our lives; a way to experience life's true value and its mystery. Most of us live far more meaningful lives than we realize. (Remen 1999, p.47)

Steven Glazer's approach is truly an holistic one, seeing spirituality in education as being about everything. He emphasises the importance of attending to each moment. Glazer proposes that attention to the moment happens when students are offered genuine engagement.

It is about bringing ourselves more fully to each moment, learning, acting, and teaching not merely as if *our* life depended on this but *all* of life...Attending to the present; attending to what presents itself; taking first things firsthand. Taking care and bringing care. Seeing in each moment – this very moment – the opportunity for transformation. (Glazer 1999, p.249)

The experiential nature of the RE course is rooted in such attention to the moment. In my experience, focusing on the inner life of students in the kinds of ways advocated by Palmer, Tacey, Johnson, Remen and Glazer, requires particular conditions, such as space, community and engagement, and particular approaches, such as questioning, journaling and ritual, all of which are critical aspects of the RE course.

2.7.1 Space - Creating a Learning Space

Palmer believes that creating a space for learning removes the impediments to learning because it brings openness (in wondering about what the day may have in store), holds the boundaries that make the space safe (including the boundaries of the silence) and offers hospitality to all (including latecomers), welcoming each one and all that they bring (Palmer 1993, pp.71-79).

To sit in a class where the teacher stuffs our mind with information, organizes it with finality, insists on having the answers while being utterly uninterested in our views, and forces us into a grim competition for grades – to sit in such a class is to experience a lack of space for learning. But to study with a teacher who not only speaks but listens, who not only gives answers but asks questions and welcomes our insights, who provides information and theories that do not close doors but open new ones, who encourages students to help each other learn – to study with such a teacher is to know the power of a learning space.

(Palmer 1993, p.71-72)

Creating such a space facilitates moving towards a higher degree of awareness than we usually possess, a creative tension that Palmer calls a paradox. He names six paradoxical tensions that inhabit the teaching and learning space: that it should be bounded and open; hospitable and 'charged'; it should invite the voice of the individual and the voice of the group; it should honour the 'little' stories of the students and the 'big' stories of the disciplines and tradition (I must admit that I think that should be the other way round and that the stories of the students may in fact be the 'big' stories); the space should support solitude and surround it with the resources of community; and welcome both silence and speech. (Palmer 1998, p.74)

Groen, using these paradoxical tensions as the basis for a graduate course on Spirituality in the Workplace, concludes that they create the conditions where the 'learners, if they choose, may experience those deep shifts of ongoing spiritual transformation' (Groen 2008, p.202). In my experience, these paradoxical tensions are a key element of the kind of awareness and depth from which insight emerges. They also contribute to a space that encourages reflection and mindfulness.

My home is called 'Tearmann', an old gaelic word meaning sanctuary, and that is what the house is for me. Sanctuary means not only a safe space but a sacred space, a place for the kind of soul work advocated by Thomas Moore. Soul work takes place in the inmost and holiest part of the self. So there is a real need for sanctuary for students in RE sessions – a space that they have crossed a threshold into, where the 'busyness' of the world is bracketed, where multiple forms of learning are engaged, and where they can get in touch with that deepest, inmost part of themselves. Lange writes about fostering a learning sanctuary for transformation in adult education.

...to be transformative, adult education ought to provide a protective sanctuary for a deep encounter with self (mind, spirit, and body), social relationships, habits of thinking and living, and the conjoined individual and social myths that constrain human freedom and justice. (Lange 2009, p.197)

She suggests that a learning sanctuary is created in three ways - by holding the space open for the needed dynamics to occur; by bringing people into relationship with the natural world; and by facilitating the kinds of conversation from the heart that promote relationship between the participants. All of these conditions are integral to my RE sessions. Lange concludes that 'learning sanctuary honours participants; creates space for compassion and hope on the life journey; models relations of equality, responsiveness, interconnectedness, and depth; and engages the whole person' (Lange 2009, p.201). This kind of learning sanctuary facilitates the journey into the kind of soul work described by Thomas Moore - work that takes time, where there are no easy answers and no short cuts, work that involves depth of reflection. Moore speaks of such depth of reflection in regard to working with stories, something that is a central feature of RE.

...the soul craves depth of reflection, many layers of meaning, nuances without end, references and allusions and prefigurations... The infinite inner space of a story, whether from religion or from daily life, is its soul. If we deprive sacred stories of their mystery, we are left with the brittle shell of fact, the literalism of a single meaning. But when we allow a story its soul we can discover our own depths through it. (Moore 1992, p.235-236)

Preserving the inner space of the story and the mystery contained therein, is an important skill for the RE teacher, who must resist the temptation to jump in with an explanation or what Moore calls a 'fixed interpretation'. Of course the scourge of fixed interpretations in RE extends much further than stories and demands of learning communities an ability to hold meanings in creative tension and to find spiritual value in all kinds of things. Moore says that we need to get past various fundamentalist attitudes, such as fixed interpretations, in order to attain the richness of spiritual depth.

If we can get past various fundamentalist attitudes about the spiritual life, such as attachment to a too simple code of morality, fixed interpretations of stories, and a community in which individual thinking is not prized, then many different ways of being spiritual come into view. We may discover that there are ways of being spiritual that do not counter the

soul's need for body, individuality, imagination, and exploration. Eventually we might find that all emotions, all human activities, and all spheres of life have deep roots in the mysteries of the soul, and therefore are holy. (Moore 1992, p.242)

For the lecturer, working in such a way involves taking a risk with their own authority. Tacey suggests that the authority of the teacher can stand in the way of the intuitive process, a process that is critical to spiritual education, being directed towards soul work rather than the acquisition of information.

Intuition literally means, tuition from within, not from outside. We are good teachers when we dispense accurate and useful knowledge, but we are even better teachers when we allow a process of tuition to arise from within. The word *education* comes from the Latin 'educare', and means 'to draw out', 'to lead forth'. Spiritual education is about drawing out what is already there. (Tacey 2006, p.209-210)

Likewise, in writing about nurturing soul in adult learning, Dirkx suggests that the first step is 'to simply awaken and attend to its manifestation in the learning session' (Dirkx 2012, p.123), which is the first step to mindfulness. Thresholding a session using mindfulness opens up a reflective space. Barker et al summarise the benefits of mindfulness as allowing us to be conscious of our immediate experience, but without being attached to it or driven by it. 'Mindfulness enables us to manage our emotions more skillfully because we are less caught up in their immediate demands' (Barker et al 2008, p427). Moss et al suggest that in practicing mindfulness 'one is brought up close to one's experience' and that it 'can cultivate an intelligently attentive quality' (Moss et al 2008, p.19). This is exactly what the threshold experience seeks to do, to enable the students to 'tune in', as it were.

Miller makes the case for an holistic approach to education that will have as three basic principles, connectedness, inclusion and balance. He suggests that heretofore 'our education has been dominated by yang energies such as a focus on rationality and individual competition, and has ignored yin energies such as fostering intuition and cooperative approaches to learning' (Miller 2005, p.2-3). A deliberately calm and slow beginning to the RE sessions is an attempt to address that concern. However, such a beginning also seeks to upskill students, so that they themselves can train children in such practices, the importance of which is emphasised by Hyde.

If one of the aims of religious education includes a consideration of issues of deeper meaning, then appropriate spaces need to be created in which children can practise stillness, silence and solitude... The implication here is that in order to effectively teach these skills religious educators themselves would need to be proficient in them. (Hyde 2006, p.125)

Hyde suggests that this presents a challenge for teacher education to afford students the opportunity to develop such skills. That challenge can be there particularly in the early RE sessions which some students find awkward. However, like any good discipline, perseverance brings more than its own reward over time. In course reviews, many students have cited the practice of mindfulness as particularly significant.

2.7.2 Community

Singham suggests that the relationship that should exist in the classroom is that 'of good neighbours in a small community... where there is a continuing conversation among interested people, similar to what one might have with neighbours and friends... and it flourishes in an atmosphere of trust and acceptance of differences' (Singham 2005, p.57). The case for community in the classroom is also made by Palmer. He recognises that while this can be done in diverse ways by different teachers with different gifts, the principle remains the same.

Our knowledge of the world comes from gathering around great things in a complex and interactive community of truth. But good teachers do more than deliver the news from that community to their students. Good teachers replicate the process of knowing by engaging students in the dynamics of the community of truth. As I make the case that good teaching is always and essentially communal, I am not abandoning my claim that teaching cannot be reduced to technique. Community, or connectedness, is the principle behind good teaching, but different teachers with different gifts create community in surprisingly diverse ways, using widely divergent methods. (Palmer 1998, p.115)

Once that shift in the role of the teacher has happened, the group can become community. Community is a multi-faceted boon to its members, whether it is a faith community, a community of practice or a community of learning and in the case of an RE group, it can be all three.

The group can be a community of learning when phronesis (practical wisdom that encompasses the ability to know what to do in a given situation while also knowing what's worth doing) is acquired through deliberations with others working towards a common purpose. Eisner speaks of teachers having 'insider knowledge' of teaching. What he suggests for teachers in communities of learning also holds for student teachers, who likewise bring their own unique 'insider knowledge' to the table.

The current interest in teachers deliberating with teachers is an example of a professional practice that can refine phronesis. It can do so by creating a context where multiple interpretations and analyses are likely. Such contexts liberate one from a monocular perspective and a single interpretation. In addition, in the process teachers can strengthen their sense of community by joint deliberation. (Eisner 2005, p.201)

Elsewhere, Eisner writes of four senses in which teaching is an art – 'teaching as a source of aesthetic experience, as dependent on the perception and control of qualities, as a heuristic or adventitious activity, and as seeking emergent ends' (Eisner 1994, p.156). If the teacher is indeed an artist, then it is perhaps in communities of artists that the artist's imagination will be fed.

The group can be a community of practice when the learning that takes place there is viewed as situated activity which has as its central defining characteristic a process that Lave and Wenger call 'legitimate peripheral participation', where newcomers move (over the course of three years in RE in teacher education) toward full participation in the practices of the community.

A person's intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a sociocultural practice. This social process includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills. (Lave and Wenger 1991, p.29)

Elsewhere, Wenger addresses the difference in communities of practice between training and education. This is especially apt for teacher education in general and for an RE practice in particular, which seeks to be a community of learning.

Education, in its deepest sense and at whatever age it takes place, concerns the opening of identities – exploring new ways of being that lie beyond our current state. Whereas training aims to create an inbound trajectory targeted at competence in a specific practice, education must strive to open new dimensions for the negotiation of the self. It places students on an outbound trajectory toward a broad field of possible

identities. Education is not merely formative – it is transformative. (Wenger 2007, p.263)

The group can become a community of faith when it has a shared spiritual life and relational engagement. In examining the implications for RE of Vygotsky's 'Zone of Proximal Development' and Turner's use of the concepts of 'Liminality' and 'Communitas', Junker writes of the faith community as a space where the individual's gifts can be affirmed, enhanced and celebrated by a supportive community and where every member has something to contribute to that community (Junker 2013, p.175). This is something that is surely vital in a group engaging in RE at any level. If students experience such community in their teacher education and recognise its importance, it seems apparent that they will be more likely to foster it in their own classrooms.

Shapiro lists a set of five characteristics of transformative learning spaces, which facilitate the creation of community within RE sessions.

(1) Learning happens in relationships, (2) in which there is shared ownership and control of the learning space, (3) room for the whole person – feelings as well as thoughts, body and soul, as well as mind, (4) and sufficient time for collaboration, action, reflection, and integration, (5) to pursue a process of inquiry driven by the questions, needs, and purposes of the learner. (Shapiro 2009, p.112)

Because these characteristics lead to ownership of the process by students, this can enhance their engagement. Weimer sees this as part of a constructivist approach, which 'lets learners connect with content in ways that make the material meaningful to them' and 'is about students building bridges between what they already know and the new material' (Weimer 2012, p.441).

Working in this way requires that the facilitator is seen by the students as authentic, and present to the process. In writing about such authenticity and particularly about teaching with presence, Kornelson emphasises openness, vitality and living with chaos.

In terms of being open, he follows Applebaum who says that 'a teacher must...to a certain degree make him/herself vulnerable...primarily by showing them that he or she is a human being just as they are...having faults, weaknesses, desires and ambitions' (Applebaum 1995, p.448), as this can engender 'an environment where learners are freer to risk, challenge and reciprocate with openness themselves' (Kornelson 2006, p.75). He identifies

openness as a vital quality that entails being open to the students and their lives and experiences. Another key quality identified by Kornelson is enthusiasm for the subject, and 'that if the teacher cares about the subject and if it challenges her or him, then she or he is more able and willing to connect with learners' (Kornelson 2006, p.76).

Kornelson maintains that where a teacher is amenable to living with chaos and 'willing to let go of a prescribed agenda in the service of connecting students and subject, the teacher and the group may experience heightened feelings of consciousness and synergy and a sense of physical and emotional well-being' (Kornelson 2006, p.77).

In my experience, this is reflected in the development in RE sessions over time as students appear to become increasingly open to the process and engaged, allowing me as facilitator to take risks, to engage enthusiastically myself and to be willing to cede control of the agenda.

Nash and Swaby advocate a spirituality of teaching and learning which will cultivate the kind of community that allows the student and teacher to make the inward journey together and also cultivate the kind of ethos needed for conversations of depth.

A spirituality of teaching and learning, among other things, attempts to elicit candid, first-person accounts of the larger meaning of students lived experience, whenever these meanings are appropriate to the subject matter at hand... We predicate our call to create a spirituality of teaching and learning on the well-tested assumption that, given an ethos of mutual support and caring in the classroom, our students will not hesitate to talk with one another about how their deepest beliefs, ideals, hopes, fears, doubts, and, yes, spirituality (or lack of it) influence their daily lives. (Nash & Swaby 2011, p.118)

Cultivating such connectedness and sense of community has a similar element of risk to that previously described by Kornelson, particularly as the group progresses and individuals begin to share their own spirituality with others. Tolliver and Tisdell warn of the uncomfortable challenge in such risk.

It is risky, in part, because as we attend to the spiritual, we are also required to engage authentically as people, not only as instructors and students. Furthermore, spirit is powerful. However, the most powerful moments we have had in classes are when participants take risks and share their authentic selves and their connection to others through their own honesty and creativity as they relate course content to their lives.

Perhaps it feels risky because it feels as though we also cannot control what feels so powerful. (Tolliver & Tisdell 2006, p.43)

In my own practice, some of these powerful moments of sharing have happened in regard to the seemingly mundane and ordinary. For example, the sharing of memories of Confirmation Day never fails to have a profound effect on the group. The sharing may be about quite everyday things, but in the sharing, there is an unmasking of the sharer's real, firsthand experience, and the listening is real listening.

Tyler and Swartz capture the power of such moments in their descriptions of storytelling and story listening. They suggest that storytelling, where the educator unmask and shares a risky story of their own (again echoing Kornelson), can do much to empower students to take similar risks. It can 'open learners to a departure from usual narratives of their experience – the ones they have been telling for years – in favour of exploring stories of experience fundamentally connected with their closely held assumptions, which may be rarely or never told' (Tyler & Swartz 2012, p.466).

These stories deepen the possibility that their stories will spark other stories, prompt authentic dialogue, and contribute to meaning making. In addition to increasing their own capacity to tell stories, adult educators will be well served by increasing their capacity to listen... a form of noticing the story in a way that goes beyond the content of the story into the spaces between the lines, to listen for what is not expressed – for that which may not even be known by the teller... story listening is gentle, because it stems from an authentic curiosity and care. (Tyler & Swartz 2012, p.466)

My students have reported as deeply affecting, the session on death and hope and the harsher edges of a teaching life. This is similar to the topic of 'death and love', identified by Julian Stern as a defining part of RE. He describes it as 'a *life-and-death* subject, or perhaps a *love-and-death* subject, at the heart of the curriculum' (Stern 2010, p.14). Stern insists that RE is made more inclusive by being able to be in dialogue with such challenging issues, in spite of such issues often being ignored for personal and professional reasons. Drawing on the work of Buber and Macmurray, Stern describes how community is created in school by working with these harsher edge experiences. While admitting that such work is risky, he is adamant that for RE, playing safe is even more of a risk. For me, playing safe in RE is the high road to irrelevance.

2.7.3 Engagement

An approach that seeks the authentic engagement of students, while it may carry an element of risk is nevertheless always worthwhile. bell hooks¹ says that the teachers who most impressed her were those who were prepared to transgress boundaries in seeking to really care for students.

To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. The learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin... (bell hooks 1994, p.13).

The riskiness of such an approach extends to the students who are being invited to engage with new ways of working.

Ideally higher education offers an invitation to think, to be, and to act in new and enhanced ways. However, these learning environments sometimes challenge individuals to move beyond their comfort zone of the known, of self and others; thus these learners may enter higher education experiencing discrepancies in beliefs, attitudes, and understanding, and engaging in a new social environment with provocative values, ideas, and power dynamics. (Kasworm & Bowles 2012, p.389)

An aspect of expanding the students' own educational experiences and enlarging the boundaries of their future practice, is the need to 'create memorable moments' (Garrett 2011, p.9). Garrett suggests that designing creative class activities that promote engagement, have the capacity to become such memorable moments. In my own practice, students have cited activities such as clowning, kite-flying, hoop-work, clay and left-brain/ right-brain work as falling into this category of memorable moments.

¹ 'bell hooks is Distinguished Professor in Residence in Appalachian Studies at Berea College. Born Gloria Jean Watkins in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, she has chosen the lower case pen name bell hooks, based on the names of her mother and grandmother, to emphasize the importance of the substance of her writing as opposed to who she is'. The source of this information is her college website which can be accessed at the following web address:
<http://www.berea.edu/appalachian-center/home/faculty-and-staff/bell-hooks/>

In their work, Tolliver and Tisdell often use rhythm activities 'to engage kinaesthetic ways of knowing and expressing meaning in the world', something they suggest may allow students 'access other forms of information that are not necessarily at the level of conscious awareness' and that such activities 'often allow us to connect with the aesthetic energies that facilitate learning... objects such as symbols or the use of poetry, proverb, or metaphor take on particular meaning because they represent something significant...' (Tolliver & Tisdell 2006, p.44-45).

However, what has proven time and again to be the most memorable moment of the course for many students, is their third year retreat, a day in the wilderness, among 'fields and fells'. Howden says that such a moment is memorable 'exactly because it looks and feels different from what has come to be commonplace in education, learning through lecture or other passive means' (Howden 2012, p.43). Even though his article uses the example of team-building challenges, nevertheless it has echoes of the students' retreat, with the exception of his assertion that the real learning is done in the debriefing reflection. I have found instead, that the real learning comes afterwards as 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' and that the space that the day provides is a treasure unlike any other college experience. In some sense the retreat embodies the aesthetic approach to religious education as it is not concerned with defined learning outcomes but rather becomes a form for discovery, being undertaken for its own sake and for whatever meaning emerges at the level of the individual.

Hughes maintains that an aesthetic approach to education, can 'enrich research and deepen learning through accessing subjective areas of thought and feeling... it not only stimulates creative thinking, but also opens new worlds of meaning, artistic and aesthetic' (Hughes 2009, p.90).

Nicola Slee advocates developing the spiritual dimension of RE through creative acts of the imagination, offering four practical priorities 'as pointers towards a quality of education which might be expected to fan the flames of curiosity, imagination and insight which, themselves, may become the gateway to spiritual discernment and growth' (Slee 1992, p.53). She writes about the need to pay attention to the concrete and the particular in order for a 'genuine

encounter' with otherness to take place; of the need to look, like an artist, for shape and pattern, to see 'each particular thing in its own utter uniqueness'; and she advocates (after my own heart) 'letting the symbol speak' and giving students space to discover newness there (Slee 1992, p.54-55).

The imagination flourishes precisely at the point where what is known, long gone unchallenged to the point where it is hardly even noticed, becomes suddenly questionable, mysterious, provocative. (Slee 1992, p.55).

Using imaginative strategies with students seems to engage them in ways that move them deeper into RE, to that point where the students engage with their own spirituality. Tacey contends that if educators 'have not caught the interest or passion of youth, if they have failed to engage their experience or capture their imagination, not a lot can be achieved' (Tacey 2004, p.90). I have sometimes been asked in relation to my practice whether I am teaching RE or spirituality or a combination of both. I teach RE. Tacey writes of a gap between his work as a spiritual educator and the role of the religious educator. He suggests that RE doesn't begin with experience but rather with scripture, tradition, history, liturgy and worship, and is generally not grounded in the imagination. If what Tacey writes is true, then I don't conform to the norm. While his description of a 'progressive' RE teacher may fit with my original point of departure some years ago, I would like to think that my aim now has moved far beyond merely 'mobilising student interest'.

...I am aware that there are 'progressive' teachers in religious studies who recognise that in order to best mobilise student interest they must begin with experience, and thus adopt a practical approach to the subject. These teachers are already developing spiritual education under the umbrella of religious education... (Tacey 2004, p.76)

Tacey suggests that without capturing the imagination of students, not a lot can be achieved. Ursula King also makes the case for imagination, insisting that 'all learning must include spaces for the passionate use of the imagination, for genuine creativity, originality and community building' (King 2009, p.105). She holds lofty aims for the kind of education that I believe RE should aspire to provide, emphasising that there 'is always room for more spiritual growth of a person, for the transformation of consciousness and soul, but there is also the possibility of a further spiritual evolution of the whole human race' (King 2009,

p.104). O'Sullivan seems to share King's vision for such transformation, but as a shift of consciousness at the level of thought, feeling and action, 'a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world... our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy' (O'Sullivan 2012, p.176). Whether engagement in RE can lead to such transformation of consciousness or spiritual evolution or alternative possibilities for social justice, peace or personal joy, or not is undecided. However, lack of engagement probably leads nowhere.

2.7.4 Questioning

One of the elements mentioned as part of the RE course process is that of 'Asking the Question'. It begins in the same way that Tisdell begins her classes by checking out the students' current well-being, by asking how they are. She suggests that even though it only takes five minutes, it is, nevertheless 'an attempt to create a learning community that honours the life experiences of the learners and sets the stage for the use of other modes of learning in addition to the rational'. (Tolliver & Tisdell 2006, p.43)

Weimer suggests that the problem with questioning is that it is not always learner-centred, and that lecturers often ask questions to which they already have four different answers that they are eager to explain to the students. She follows Brookfield in saying that teachers too often resort to telling students why. 'Questioning could lead more directly to transformative learning experiences if teachers asked thoughtful questions – including those they cannot answer, at least definitively...' She also suggests that teachers should help students generate questions by 'creating a classroom climate where student questions are welcomed and where teachers work to help students frame questions that are relevant, substantive, and provocative'. (Weimer 2012, p.447-448)

Nash and Swaby propose that students, whatever their age, gender, ethnicity or socioeconomic group, have a 'salient spiritual need... to ponder the imponderable. They need time in and out of classroom to wonder, to speculate,

and to ask the truly difficult questions, the questions that end up exasperating most of us, because they threaten our deep-down, secure, and certain places' (Nash & Swaby 2011, p.116).

Palmer writes that too often the silence is broken by rushing in to respond to questions or fill awkward spaces, failing to allow the tension to be creative or the problems and questions to deepen within the students. He advocates instead, the use of a compelling question.

So I have learned in the silence that it is often better to speak a question than an answer. It is natural that silence should teach us to ask questions, since silence is a question itself. In the silence I have learned to ask questions that open up a space where students can listen to their own experience, to each other, and to the subject at hand – not merely to the authority of the teacher. (Palmer 2003, p.82)

Maria Harris proposes that 'the place where the learner is... is the place of the question' (Harris 1991, p.174), echoing Rilke's advice to the young poet: 'Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer' (Rilke 1934, p.27). In terms of complexity, I would describe the group, when a question has been asked, as being in creative tension. As soon as the question is answered however, equilibrium descends. That is why my inclination is never to answer a question. Cilliers insists that 'complex systems operate under conditions far from equilibrium', and that 'equilibrium is another word for death' (Cilliers 1998, p.4). The non-answering of questions is one way of ensuring that equilibrium does not descend.

This element of the RE course also has a cognitive dimension. I have found, like Biesta, that asking the question 'What do you think about it?' or a variation of that, has the potential not only to interrupt or to create a learning space, but 'is also a question with the potential to call someone into being as a unique, singular individual'. When this happens, 'education ceases to be a process of giving, and instead becomes a process of asking, a process of asking difficult questions' (Biesta 2006, p.150).

2.7.5 Journaling

Journaling is an important element of the RE course and is based around three questions that are centred on the feeling aspect of a student's experience. The questions are: What did I learn? What does it say to where I am? What am I going to do about it? The students are reminded that these questions are directed at their experience of what has been happening for them in the group emotionally. Tacey recognises the importance of directing spirituality work with students towards feeling and intuition, and insists that thinking is not enough. 'There is something more fundamental than thinking which we might call the intelligence of the heart, and our education system is not good at drawing this out. Feeling and intuition are hugely important and very effective when they work together with thinking. Feeling discerns something more behind our empty centre' (Tacey 2006, p.208).

Students are encouraged to adopt a style of their own in regard to journaling. Some conform to the norms of journaling in the style of Progoff, whose intensive journal process the mythologist Joseph Campbell described as 'one of the great inventions of our time' (Progoff 1992, cover page); others prefer to follow exemplars such as Merton, who wrote in 'Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander' in a 'flow of consciousness' style (Merton 1966); while still others work with images in verse or visual arts or even doodles. This working with images, that Dirkx understands as 'emotion-laden', can contribute to a deeper understanding of the learning experience (Dirkx 2006, p.24).

Sometimes setting a journal task in the middle of an RE session can re-energise and re-engage a group. It turns each student to their own experience and develops mindfulness and self-awareness, in ways that Weimer suggests can lead to fresh insights. 'For students, the insights can be prompted by good questions and feedback that pushes them to discover the reasons behind the reasons' (Weimer 2012, p.448).

Progoff believes that journaling 'brings an inner self-guidance for life's problems', but that it also 'deepens the level of experience, and this draws an individual into contact with the profound sources of inner wisdom' (Progoff 1992, p.7). I have seen a similar development with students over the duration of the RE course. Moving from a level barely beyond diary in the early stages to

deeply insightful soul work in subsequent years, is something that Progoff also describes from his experience of journal workshops.

Individuals, working in their own lives and in the depths of their own being, do in fact activate spiritual knowledge they did not know they possessed. They did not know how wise they were, nor the power and range of their visionary capacities. Nonetheless it comes from within them undirected, evoked in the spontaneity of their experience by the (journal) process. (Progoff 1992, p.12)

Progoff also sees journaling as meditation, that is not separate from but part of our lives.

Rather, it is meditation in the midst of the reality of our life experiences... The first step is to acknowledge the problems of our life as we find them, to observe them and describe them as objectively as we can. That gives us a reference point in outer reality, but we do not establish our position there. We draw back. We move away from the surface of things. We move inward in order to return with a greater resource to use in reapproaching the situation. (Progoff 1992, p.8-9).

I have often introduced a journaling exercise with a mindfulness activity designed to do just what Progoff describes as the first step. I encourage the students to recognise a problem, as they breathe in, and smile at everything in life that is not the problem, as they breathe out. I have found that this kind of activity helps facilitate the inward journey.

Finally, Progoff also mentions the effect of the group on the process. The journal work will only find depth in an atmosphere that is conducive to such endeavour.

The atmosphere of the group makes it possible for each individual to work at a deep level; but the work that is done is different for each person since each is at a different point in the process of life. For each one, the purpose of journal work is to pick up the process of growth wherever it is in the individual and to draw it forward to its next stage of unfolding in keeping with its own inner timing. (Progoff 1992, p.37)

My students' journaling is also used in their course assessment, where they are required to write a reflection based on their journal. I believe that writing a reflection, rather than collecting the journals, preserves the integrity of the students' journaling. Pavlovich is very positive about reading students' journals, mentioning the great necessity for trust between the student and the lecturer, the deep emotional issues that arise and the responsibility to take the vocation seriously (Pavlovich 2007, pp.292-293). I do not agree. I don't collect the actual

journals and I feel that writing the reflection based on the journal ensures that they are not writing the journal for whoever may be marking it. However, it still allows for the depth of reflection contained in the journal to emerge. Ghaye's statement about tensions regarding reflective portfolios— between writing personal and safe responses, between your views and the views of significant others, between privacy and the right to know, and between the particular and the general (Ghaye 2007, pp.157-158) - seems to support my stance. My assessment tries to honour the students' engagement with the process.

2.7.6 Ritual

Ritual is also an important element of RE sessions, usually used to draw things together and close the session. Tisdell appears to advocate something similar to what happens in RE sessions, although it should be noted that she is writing about the closing session of the term, whereas I would use ritual as the closing element of each and every RE session. 'The closing session... may involve music, dance, or other ways of engaging our bodies, minds and spirits. It taps into and expresses that which is often beyond words and that students often connect to as part of their deeper and more authentic self... ' (Tolliver & Tisdell 2006, p.43-44). She suggests that ritual ties the theoretical and cognitive world to the affective and experiential world and 'seems to create a space where they can construct new knowledge and engage in processes so that this new knowledge 'becomes them'' (Tisdell & Tolliver 2009, p.94). I have similarly found that ritual appears to deepen the students' experience of the session.

Tisdell writes of the importance of attending 'to the shimmering moments in our own teaching and learning in our own journey towards wholeness' (Tisdell, 2008, p.35). The concluding ritual in each session may have the potential to be just such a shimmering moment, but also a memorable moment that may continue to resonate with the student, even after the session. Jarvis may be referring to something similar to such shimmering moments when he writes of the concluding ritual having a dual purpose.

'(Firstly, to) help the learners to crystallize their thoughts and reflect on them and their actions, and secondly, to create a further sense of disjuncture so that they go away knowing that their learning has not

finished and that they have new questions to solve or things to try out' (Jarvis 2008, p.565).

2.8 At the End of the Day it's about Teaching and Learning

Brookfield maintains that in adult education there is no standard model. He claims that diversity in methods and materials is necessary, that perfection is impossible, that learner satisfaction is not the sole aim and that risk taking is important (Brookfield 1987, p.235). In this he seems to endorse the tendency within the RE course to take risks, to engage with RE in diverse ways and not to constantly seek to satisfy the learners but rather to try things out as a form for discovery.

The RE course seeks to facilitate students' increased awareness via mindfulness, breathwork, journaling, the arts, going outside, liminal experiences and rituals. Hay offers a pedagogical structure based around the central feature of awareness, which resonates with this. He advocates raising awareness, embodying awareness, framing awareness and extending awareness (Hay 2000, pp.77-82). Zohar and Marshall similarly emphasise awareness as an essential feature of their seven step programme aimed at raising spiritual intelligence (Zohar et al 2000. p.16), which surely must be an aim of any RE course.

Each of these examples has in common, apart from the resonances with the RE course, an element of variety, of imagination, of engagement and of risk. Each serves to underline that the creative teacher can always find ideas and inspiration from the work of others, but needs to ensure that whatever they do, it remains in keeping with their own way of teaching.

While educationalists such as Brookfield offer imaginative methods, Palmer insists that it is never enough merely to be equipped with the required knowledge and technique, because teaching is not simply about subjects and students. He writes: 'Here is a secret hidden in plain sight: *good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher*' (Palmer 2007, p.104). Students need opportunities to develop that identity and integrity from which good teaching will emerge. This is what the RE course tries to do.

Students matter. When Julian Stern wrote about mattering and what it means to matter in school, he emphasised, following Macmurray, that schools 'are not creating citizens, but *people*' (Stern 2007, p.286) and that in communities people are treated 'as whole people, not as a means to an end'. Following Buber, he sees dialogue 'as the way of treating people properly' (Stern 2007, p.288) because it recognises the full existence of the other (and Stern stresses being careful not to confuse dialogue with 'monologue disguised as dialogue'). It may be that for student teachers, 'mattering' will remain an aspiration unless they experience it themselves in college.

Carl Rogers proposes that the teacher must be congruent, must be a person, must be real in relationship to the students, must accept the students as they are with unconditional positive regard and be empathic to their situation (Rogers 1967, pp.286-292). Being present to students as a real self is an essential characteristic of a facilitator of students' learning. 'When the facilitator is a real person, being what he or she is, entering into relationships with the learners without presenting a front or a façade, the facilitator is much more likely to be effective' (Rogers 1980, p.271). While Rogers would advocate huge change in teacher education (Rogers 1980, pp.281-289), this change would be focused on small-group process. Such small-group process is at the heart of the RE course.

However, economic realities dictate that I must also work with large groups, and even before this research project, I was aware that some students prefer the large group because of the space that it provides for their own thinking (for example see Appendix XII, Excerpt 1). Freire, writing of the possibilities of critical lecturing, states that the mainstay should be a dynamic approach to the content and its ability to animate the critical thinking of students. A liberating educator 'will illuminate reality even if he or she lectures' (Shor and Freire 1987, p.40). Brookfield stresses that, in order to bring this to fruition, the challenge for educators is to make our lectures 'as enlivening and critically stimulating as possible' (Brookfield 1990, p.72). It is my contention that empathy with the student's experience of the lecture helps to facilitate such a dynamic, bringing life to RE in teacher education, whether that be in large or small group settings.

Researching creativity and spirituality in the classroom, Kevin McCarthy writes about the teachers that he has encountered being 'first and foremost creatively and spiritually alive'.

They are warm, confident, generous whole human beings who establish a quality of relationship within their classes, which makes possible a similar quality of learning...In these teachers too, inseparable from their spiritual/creative ability as human beings is their capacity as teachers to relate their 'content' to where their students are coming from, finding just those points of contact with which their students resonate...This means touching into their experience, their beliefs and values, their hopes, fears, aspirations and intimations, in short meeting them whole. (McCarthy 2001, p.138)

McCarthy asserts that the best RE teaching places the student at the heart of the learning process, by valuing the student's 'first hand sense experience' and also valuing 'what comes from the heart'.

Clive Erricker likewise believes that the learner should be at the centre of the learning process in RE, something which 'demands close attention to the action that ensues rather than a written script to be learned' (Erricker et al 2000, p.5), which may entail departing from the norm in teacher education. Outlining the struggle for educators to stray from the 'norm' and to do things differently, the Errickers make the following assertion.

However, systemically, the struggle in terms of allowing the time to pursue a different educational process that privileges the learner and his or her capacities is always an uphill one, and is ultimately defeated in its possibilities by the model of education that we employ. (Erricker et al 2000, p.136)

They suggest that the solution is bound up in the role of the teacher 'as actor and participant', who is 'part of the process' and who must be willing to engage and share from personal experience just like everyone else in the group. In many ways, such a solution could be seen as a departure from the role of teacher and echoes what Carl Rogers said when he changed 'from being a teacher and evaluator, to being a facilitator of learning'.

To my surprise, I found that my classrooms became more exciting places of learning as I ceased to be a *teacher*. It wasn't easy. It happened rather gradually but as I began to trust students, I found they did incredible things in their communication with each other, in their learning of content material in the course, in blossoming out as growing human beings. Most of all they gave me courage to be myself more freely, and this led to profound interaction. They told me their feelings, they raised questions I

had never thought about. I began to sparkle with emerging ideas that were new and exciting to me, but also, I found, to them... I changed at that point from being a teacher and evaluator, to being a facilitator of learning – a very different occupation. (Rogers 1983, p.26)

In some way, Rogers sums up this section of the literature review. Education has always focused on the learner needing to change. Rogers asserts that the teacher also needs to change from being a teacher and evaluator to being a facilitator of learning, who will be willing to stray from the norm, value the experience of students, and teach creatively whatever the context.

2.9 Conclusion: At the End of the Day it's about Something More

This thesis began with an image of the twin oak trees in Marino. I see it as an image for a subject that has huge possibilities for branching out into something more than its current position on the margins. The context of RE in pre-service teacher education in Ireland and my practice therein, was first outlined. Relevant literature in the areas of RE in pre-service teacher education and students' experiences of pre-service teacher education was reviewed. Literature concerned with attending to the inner life of students was explored. Finally, RE in pre-service teacher education was examined from the perspective of teaching and learning. The literature review now concludes by returning to the beginning and reviewing RE in pre-service teacher education as a subject with the potential for transformation while remaining rooted in the needs of the pre-service teacher education student.

In wondering about the epistemological and ontological journey of that student, it seemed that the image of the twin oaks might again come into play. Until we understand their original purpose and gaze up into the branches on a sunny day, the magnificence of those oaks can remain unnoticed, both in terms of inner meaning and outer beauty. Also, while the twin oaks are wonderful in their own right, it must be remembered that their original purpose was to be either side of the planned roadway into a place of education. It is the one who is journeying along that roadway that matters, and the 'mattering' involves community (which is something that may be formed in and by a group that engages in the process of RE) and dialogue (Stern 2007, p.286-288), two essential traits of the RE course.

In RE, the students work with two sets of experiences - what MacKeracher terms, following Belenky et al (1986) - the imposed set or received knowledge and the personal set or subjective knowledge (MacKeracher 2012, p.343). RE has perhaps concerned itself predominantly with the former while neglecting the latter. RE may be sometimes seen as irrelevant to students' lives and viewed with ambivalence as a result. Tacey says that if it wants to survive, RE must recognise this and engage with people's own experience. He writes that the 'emphasis on tradition, which we often confuse with habit or convention, can blind us to the religious possibilities of our immediate experience' (Tacey 2006, p. 204). In his description of his role as a facilitator of spirituality in college in Australia, I recognise many similarities to my own approach and I identify with his assessment of the students' passion for spirituality. He is also very clear about why the old ways no longer work.

Clearly, the old forms of religious education involving 'instruction' in the faith, preaching, or intellectual propositions, are no longer enough. It is coldly external and does not generate enough human feeling or transformation. It no longer captures or revitalises the human imagination. But there is another way of working with religion in dark or destitute times. We have to dig deeper and involve the subjectivity of individuals. (Tacey 2006, p.202)

I have argued previously that RE is a subject that is, in my experience, marginal in higher education. But RE can learn from a discipline such as transformative learning, in terms of its marginal place in higher education. Weimer writes of transformative learning being 'more like a side benefit of education' facilitated by teachers who 'construct learning experiences and interact with students'. He laments its lack of a central role.

The failure to see its significance is ironic, because if you ask faculty to name the most important things they learned in college, most don't list items related to content acquisition. 'I learned how to think.' 'I discovered how much I could learn and that I love learning.' 'College opened my mind to a world of ideas.' 'I learned how to ask questions and investigate ideas.' These kinds of insights are indicative of transformative learning experiences. (Weimer 2012, p.451)

Such insights could perhaps be imagined as possibilities for an RE course in pre-service teacher education in Ireland.

William Kay has high hopes for RE, that it can 'help to foster the conditions whereby religious adherents within democratic states put their energies towards

human flourishing... protecting and introducing the beliefs, practices, values, hopes and visions of major religions to successive generations of children' (Kay 2006, p.575). Kay's hopes seem to place a huge burden of expectation on the subject. Gearon writes of how complex the teaching of RE has become in the British context, due to the disciplines that have emerged to interpret the religious traditions.

The emergent, 'paradigm shifting' pedagogies of religious education have added complexity where simplicity of approach would have sufficed, tangential theory added before students have grasped the rudiments of a religious tradition, or its interdisciplinary complexities, and above all added political agendas before even the most basic understanding of political-theological context. (Gearon 2013, p.171)

Gearon asserts that religion 'has so much more to offer'. For those of us who work in RE in teacher education, the challenge is to find the 'more' in the midst of the paradigm-shifting pedagogies, interdisciplinary complexities and political agendas and to uncover how we go about accessing that 'more' for our students.

RE is not all about changing the world. Neither is it all about being transformative. It is a curricular subject that comes from a particular discipline and has traditionally been taught in a particular way with a focus on particular content and on particular pedagogies, informed by a variety of disciplines including theology, philosophy and history, and influenced by secular, religious and political agendas. But it has such possibilities.

RE has the possibility to provide opportunities that may enrich the inner lives of students, providing created and creative spaces that they may not experience elsewhere. I believe in the importance of RE for student teachers. I also believe that the student teachers themselves need to be religiously educated, not in any theological or catechetical sense, but in a sense of deep 'in-touch-ness' with their own experience, working experientially.

MacKeracher suggests a threefold definition of experience, insisting that it 'plays a crucial role in all aspects of the transformative learning process' (MacKeracher 2012, p.253). Firstly, she says that experience 'is everything that happens to you between birth and death'. Secondly, experience includes 'remote experiences imposed on me by my cultural and social heritage'. Finally,

experience becomes what one ends up with when the first two sets of experience 'overlap and together form a constructed whole' (MacKeracher 2012, p.343).

Including experience as defined by MacKeracher in RE in teacher education, involves opening up a space within which the teacher education students can work with their own experience. I had benefitted from such an approach myself for many years, in informal adult learning under bible scholar Tom Hamill and the staff of the Mount Oliver Institute in Dundalk. This way of working with experience, is what I brought to RE in teacher education eight years ago. I didn't have a lofty manifesto or game plan for what I would do in RE, but rather an intuitive belief in its importance. Having left the primary school classroom on the last day of November in 2005, I began lecturing in primary teacher education the next morning, without any training or induction into third level. I learned very quickly by their engagement that students were responding to my approach and I was surprised that RE could catch their imagination in the way that it did.

I believe that it was not the subject matter per se that captured the imagination of the students, but rather the process, a process that treasures the inner lives of student teachers and believes that teaching is a work of heart. I believe with Klein, that 'if we continue to ignore the inner life of teachers and criteria of the heart we will continue to see teacher burnout... and teachers who are not capable of being responsive, imaginative, or integrated practitioners' (Klein 2008, p.118).

My hope for the research study was to gain some understanding of the complex ways in which a pre-service RE course, with a strong focus on the inner life, was taken up by students both personally and professionally. It is to the methodology employed in the service of that research that the attention now turns.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

‘Begin at the beginning,’ the King said gravely, ‘and go on till you come to the end: then stop.’ (Advice from the King of Hearts to Alice)

This chapter provides a comprehensive and transparent account of both the research process and the rationale behind my research design and data analysis, following the advice given by Silverman regarding honesty and openness:

- Give an honest account of the conduct of the research
- Provide full descriptions of what was actually done in regard to choosing what to study, choosing the method and collecting and analysing data
- Explain and justify each of my decisions
- Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of what I did
- Be open about what helped me and held me back
(Silverman 2010, p.333, adapted from Spencer et al, 2003:76)

This account begins at the beginning in stating the aim of the research study.

3.2 The Aim of the Research Study

The aim of this research study has been to explore participants’ experience of a pre-service course in RE in primary teacher education which recognizes as important a focus on the inner lives of students. Both anecdotally and in terms of feedback received from final year students using Brookfield’s Course Evaluation Instrument (Brookfield 1995, pp.268-270), students had been very positive towards the course. I wanted to know why. I wanted to know what aspects of the course contributed to that but also to understand the diverse ways this might be perceived. While I had hoped to offer a particular way of doing RE with teacher education students generally, I realised during the course of the research that the question of generalisability was problematic. This study was about exploring students’ experience of a particular course in a particular place and time, facilitated by a particular lecturer working in a particular way. If

other lecturers in teacher education find something in my experience that might benefit their own practice, well and good. But that was not my aim. My aim was simply to explore students' experience of the course, so that I might 'learn why the world wags and what wags it' (White 1962, p.183).

My research question is: ***'In what ways, personally and professionally, have teacher education students experienced a pre-service RE course, which recognizes the importance of a focus on their inner lives?'***

3.3 Moving on with the Research – Getting to grips with Theoretical Perspective, Epistemology and Methodology

'Methodology' is defined as 'the strategy, plan of action, process, or design, lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes' (Crotty 1998, p.3). Hermeneutical Research would appear to be the most suitable methodology in terms of a research study designed to examine participants' experience of a pre-service RE course, with the aim of creating shared meanings with the participants (Crotty 1998, pp.1-6).

Of course the choice of methodology must be informed by a particular theoretical perspective, which Crotty defines as 'the philosophical stance informing the methodology and thus providing a context for the process and grounding its logic and criteria' (Crotty 1998, p.7). Because much of the energy of this research involves interpretation, the theoretical perspective will be interpretivism.

Likewise, the theoretical perspective in turn will be underscored by a particular epistemology, which Crotty defines as 'the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology' (Crotty 1998, p.7) and which attempts to explain 'how we know what we know and to determine the status to be ascribed to the understandings we reach' (Crotty 1998, p. 18). I suggest that constructionism/constructivism, a combination of both that is explained in detail further on, will be the epistemology that informs the interpretive approach to this research.

3.4 Theoretical Perspective - Interpretivism

Lather insists that in whichever paradigm it is located, the goal is 'to move educational research in many different directions in the hope that more interesting and useful ways of knowing will emerge' (Lather 2006, p.53). In my practice, I had always hoped that more interesting ways of knowing would emerge for my students. My hope was that the same thing would happen in my research. Crucial to that was the choice of paradigm or theoretical perspective, within which the research would be conducted. To that end I examined four educational research paradigms proposed by Cohen et al (Cohen et al 2007, pp.21-34).

The *normative paradigm*, with its focus on human behaviour as 'essentially rule-governed' and able to be investigated by scientific methods, would be very appealing if the focus of the research study was on content. This paradigm's concern with behaviour, particularly in response to either external environmental stimuli (such as teaching or tradition or church) or to internal stimuli (such as faith or achievement), might suffice for research seeking to judge the effectiveness of RE as the handing on of religious knowledge in a system using a predominantly catechetical approach to RE, such as that which pertains in the majority of Irish primary schools. The kind of research envisaged would seek to establish a theory that would be universal, such as Groome's Shared Praxis (see Groome 1991 & 2001) or Lonergan's Cognitional Theory (see Lonergan 1974). That is not what I seek to do.

The *paradigm of critical educational research* seeks not merely to understand situations and phenomena but to change them. Seeing other paradigms as being merely concerned with understanding phenomena through different lenses, as presenting incomplete accounts of social behaviour because they neglect political and ideological contexts and as being preoccupied with hermeneutic and technical knowledge respectively, critical theory is explicitly prescriptive and normative. It presents a view of what behaviour in a social democracy should look like. I have a concern with regard to freedom when anything is explicitly prescriptive, something that leaves me uneasy in relation to critical research.

The *paradigm of complexity theory* suggests that phenomena must be looked at holistically. In terms of my research it would suggest that students exist in symbiosis, that their relationships are necessary, not contingent and that research would need to include looking at situations through the eyes of as many students as possible. Research should not look for simple cause and effect but its watchword should be 'heterogeneity'. While this paradigm seemed to offer much in terms of a holistic approach because of its complex nature, it regrettably would require a much broader scope than can be afforded in a small-scale research study such as this. Cohen et al confirm my position, insisting that complexity theory suggests that research be 'premised in many ways on interactionist, qualitative accounts, i.e. looking at situations through the eyes of as many participants or stakeholders as possible' and that this approach 'enables multiple causality, multiple perspectives and multiple effects to be charted' (Cohen et al 2007, p.34). Therefore, reluctantly, I must keep complexity in reserve for future research.

The focus of the research has been on the experience of the individual and on exploring and interpreting that experience. As a result, **interpretivism** was the theoretical perspective used. Cohen and Manion describe the *interpretive paradigm* as trying to understand the subjective world of human experience - to understand the individual being investigated. It is concerned with the individual and the individual's viewpoint. Its focus is on action that is meaningful. Theory then follows the research and is built upon the experience of participants and the insights that emerge. In the place of a universal theory, what emerges is a wonderful variety of rich images. This is the paradigm which is most apt as the locus of my research. My concern is with the experience of the individual and how the RE course from the perspective of the students themselves might nurture the individual's inner life. My hope was that a wonderful variety of rich images might emerge in the form of insight and new understandings (Cohen et al 2007, p.22).

3.5 Epistemology – Constructivism/ Constructionism

Positivism can be traced through Comte's position 'which held that all genuine knowledge is based on sense experience and can be advanced only by means

of observation and experiment', to 'a definite view of social scientists as analysts or interpreters of their subject matter' and of science providing us with 'the clearest possible ideal of knowledge' (Cohen et al 2007, pp.9-11). In educational research however, the complexity of the 'teaching, learning and human interaction, present the positivistic researcher with a mammoth challenge' (Cohen et al 2007, p.11). Notwithstanding the positives (sic) of **positivism** and **post-positivism** as detailed by Seale (Seale 1999, p.34) and Crotty (Crotty 1998, p.29), which they insist must be borne in mind in any research study, their inability to cope in relation to human interaction and value-laden research disqualify them from consideration as a possible ontological position that might enlighten the most suitable epistemology for this research. They could not cope with the human interaction aspects that a research study seeking to understand students' experience of a particular RE course might entail and would have been restrictive in seeing things too simply.

Wellington admits to being mystified as to why anyone involved in educational research would choose to 'aspire towards science when scientific methods, processes and codes of conduct at best are unclear and at worst lack the objectivity, certainty, logicity and predictability which are falsely ascribed to them' (Wellington 2000. p.13).

The positivist and interpretive paradigms have been accused of 'presenting incomplete accounts of social behaviour by their neglect of the political and ideological contexts of much educational research' and of being 'preoccupied with technical and hermeneutic knowledge respectively' (Cohen et al 2007, p.26). **Critical theory**, on the other hand, focuses on prescribing what behaviour in a social democracy looks like. 'In particular it seeks to emancipate the disempowered, to redress inequality and to promote individual freedoms within a democratic society' (Cohen et al 2007, p.26).

Cohen et al trace the development of critical theory from the Frankfurt School but focus mainly on the influence of Habermas. I am particularly interested in Habermas's emancipatory interest and critical pedagogy, which imply that 'educators must work with, and on, the lived experience that students bring to the pedagogical encounter ... to transform the experience of domination in students and empower them to become 'emancipated' in a full democracy'

(Cohen et al 2007, p.32). Brookfield describes this more concretely as a series of learning tasks that critical theory's vision of society would entail: 'Learning to recognize and challenge ideology ... to uncover and counter hegemony ... to unmask power ... to overcome alienation and thereby accept freedom ... to pursue liberation ... to reclaim reason ... to practice democracy' (Brookfield 2005, p.39). Critical theory is an important field because it underlines how political and problematical curricula and pedagogy can be (Cohen et al 2007, p.32). Critical theory would travel further down the road to praxis than my research desires to go however, and might even have been arrogant in supposing that the research might initiate action for social justice. My research simply seeks to explore participants' experience, both individually and socially constructed, and therefore will operate from the constructionist/ constructivist epistemology.

Constructionism is defined as the view that 'all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context' (Crotty 1998, p. 42). Drawing on phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, Husserl, Brentano and Lyotard, central to Constructionism is the concept of 'intentionality' and the contention that meaning is only derived through engaging with and directing towards the world (Crotty 1998, pp. 42-45). Referring to Denzin and Lincoln's 'researcher-as-bricoleur' as an illustration, Crotty writes:

Research in constructivist vein, research in the mode of the *bricoleur*, requires that we not remain straitjacketed by the conventional meanings we have been taught to associate with the object. Instead, such research invites us to approach the object in a radical spirit of openness to its potential for new or richer meaning. (Crotty 1998, p. 51)

Social constructionism appears to be constructionism that finds its meaning not individually but socially. It implies that culture has a role in the meaning-making. The result of this development has been the emergence of a new term to describe what was previously known as constructionism. This new term is 'constructivism'. 'Constructionism' then is the term used for social constructionism. To sum up, 'constructionism' is concerned with finding

meaning socially while 'constructivism' is concerned with finding meaning individually. Both would appear to have a part to play in this research study.

For Gunzenhauser et al, most interpretivist theoretical perspectives are grounded in constructionist epistemologies and 'explicitly call on researchers to capture the stories, voices, and lived realities of groups and individuals, including those traditionally missing from positivist and postpositivist research' (Gunzenhauser et al 2006, p.335). It is indeed the stories, values and lived realities of students that I hope to access in my research using a constructionist/constructivist epistemology, adapting the versatility of the bricoleur and focusing with intentionality on the things themselves and our collective perceptions of them.

In real terms, my hope was that the research study would afford me the opportunity to engage with the research participants in a shared search for meaning that would reflect both an individual and social experience – a constructionist/constructivist epistemology that would both underscore an interpretive theoretical perspective and be central to a hermeneutical approach.

3.6 Weighing up the Various Methodologies

Justifying hermeneutic research as the choice of methodology for this research study ensures that it has not just been 'a matter of plucking a methodology off the shelf' (Crotty 1998, p.14). We must weigh the various methodologies up in order to justify that choice.

The traditional **experimental research** study would have seemed very attractive to my younger positivist self, where 'a control group is set up with features supposedly identical in all relevant aspects(an impossible goal)'. As Wellington has said that would indeed be an impossible goal and would utterly ignore all of the other possible variables.

I have done **survey research** with students, using Brookfield's course evaluation. While Wellington insists that data collected in a survey can be qualitative and in fact 'may contribute to the development of theory as much as interview or observational data' (Wellington 2000, p. 101), I decided not to

include such surveys, as they would make the field too large for this study. In seeking an answer to my research question, I decided that interviews would explore the question in a much more meaningful way. Exploring students' experience through surveys would not have allowed for the kind of depth required and afforded by an interview process (with a follow-up interview where further exploration of emerging themes could take place). In hindsight, it is possible that surveys may have slightly reduced the potential impact that my presence at interview may have had on participants' responses. Reducing such potential impact in this way was not something that was considered at the time however.

Crotty sees **ethnography** as having been taken to the bosom of symbolic interactionism, given its emphasis on 'putting oneself in the place of the other and seeing things from the perspective of others' (Crotty 1998, p.76). As I have already written, ethnography would not be suitable as the methodology underpinning this research, because I have not attempted to put myself in the place of the participants in the ethnographic sense and I could not claim to take the place of the participants even symbolically as demanded by symbolic interactionism, because I was present as a lecturer for the object of this research study, the RE course.

Grounded theory was 'spawned' by symbolic interactionism and is defined as 'a specific form of ethnographic inquiry that, through a series of carefully planned steps, develops theoretical ideas ... it seeks to ensure that the theory emerging arises from the data' (Crotty 1998, p.78). Again, I did not seek in this research study to have the theory emerge from the data but simply to explore participants' experience and not, as I have already written, in the place of a symbolic participant.

Carr and Kemmis describe **action research** as 'self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out' (Carr and Kemmis 1986, p.162). While it may involve a teacher researching into his own practice, which is partly what I have been doing, nevertheless the key aim of action research is 'to bring about critical awareness, improvement and change in a practice,

setting or system' and its key elements are 'reflection, planning and action' (Wellington 2000, p.21). I did not set out to engage in action research in order to improve my own practice but rather to explore participants' experience of it.

In examining the possibility of engaging in **phenomenological research**, I was struck by Crotty's desire for a return to original meaning of phenomenology with what he terms two clear characteristics: 'First of all, it has a note of objectivity about it. It is in search of objects of experience rather than being content with a description of the experiencing subject. Second, it is an exercise in critique. It calls into question what we take for granted'. (Crotty 1998, pp.82-83) In my research, I had originally intended to travel this path, noting the importance of avoiding what is usually presented as phenomenology, that is 'self-professedly subjectivist in approach ... and expressly uncritical' (Crotty 1998, p. 83) in favour of staying true to its original meaning. However, honesty in the research demanded that I acknowledge my own place in the project as being utterly embedded in it and also that it would be unethical to even attempt to bracket my own interpretations in claiming to take a phenomenological approach.

3.7 Methodology - Hermeneutic Research

Hermeneutic Research was the methodology chosen as it involves the creation of shared meanings with the participants and it also allowed me to immerse myself in the process. Laverly writes that the result of this type of process includes 'the self-interpreted constructions of the researcher and each participant, thus reflecting many constructions or multiple realities' (Laverly 2003, p.21). Hermeneutic Research, she insists, 'demands self-reflexivity, an ongoing conversation about the experience while simultaneously living in the moment, actively constructing interpretations of the experience and questioning how those interpretations came about' As a result, hermeneutic research was deemed the most suitable approach in terms of this research study, with interpretivism as the underlying theoretical perspective (because so much of the research involved interpretation), and with constructionism/constructivism as the epistemology informing that interpretive approach, because 'such research invites us to approach the object in a radical spirit of openness to its potential for new or richer meaning' (Crotty 1998, p.51).

Laverty claims that the phenomenologist's purpose is to become aware of biases and assumptions in order to bracket them, while the biases and assumptions of the researcher adopting a hermeneutical approach are 'embedded and essential to interpretive process' (Laverty 2003, p.17). I realised that my own biases and assumptions are integral to the process of both the research and the RE course itself as I have engaged in them with my students and that it would be dishonest to attempt to bracket them. Quoting Laverty:

This interpretive process is achieved through a hermeneutical circle which moves from the parts of experience, to the whole of experience and back and forth again and again to increase the depth of engagement with and understanding of texts (Annells, 1996; Polkinghorne, 1983). Kvale (1996) viewed the end of this spiralling through a hermeneutic circle as occurring when one has reached a place of sensible meaning, free of inner contradictions, for the moment. (Laverty 2003, p.9)

The process of interviewing, feeding back the content of the interview and then (in a follow-up interview) engaging in discussion centred on the emerging insights, was an attempt to hold true to that hermeneutical circle. It was an integral part of an interpretive approach that sought to explore the experience of participants, an experience that had both individual and community elements (hence the constructivist/constructionist epistemology). The experience would be explored through the medium of language, arising from a semi-structured interview process, facilitating the hermeneutic research methodology that would lead to the creation of shared meanings (hence the interpretive theoretical perspective).

Gadamer, writing that Hermeneutics must 'start from the position that a person seeking to understand something has a bond to the subject matter that comes into language through the traditional text' (Gadamer 1989, p.295), supports my choice of methodology. The bond is strong. The work is personal. I understand what Gadamer means when he insists that hermeneutic work is 'based on a polarity of familiarity and strangeness; but this polarity is not to be regarded psychologically...but truly hermeneutically...in regard to what has been said...the story that it tells us...*The true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between*' (Gadamer 1989, p.295). It seems entirely apt that this methodology is reflective of the area that the research researches – in terms of what happens in the

space between the familiar and the strange – in conversation with participants about their experience of this space.

Hermeneutics as a methodology really came into its own in the second round of interviews and the analysis stage. Here we (researcher and participants) began to engage with the meaning of texts and our shared interpretations. Crotty insists that interpreters 'would seem to be most free when they are left at liberty to read and interpret in a wide variety of ways' (Crotty 1998, p.109). He proceeds to describe three such ways, applicable to an interview process that uses hermeneutics as methodology:

1. Empathic:

This is an approach characterised by openness and receptivity. Here we do more than extract useful information from our reading. The author is speaking to us and we are listening. We try to enter into the mind and personage of the author, seeking to see things from the author's perspective. We attempt to understand the author's standpoint. It may not be our standpoint; yet we are curious to know how the author arrived at it and what forms its basis.

This way seems to describe what takes place in the transcription and first reading stage, where questions begin to form that will be asked in the second round of interviews.

2. Interactive:

Now we are not just listening to the author. We are conversing. We have a kind of running conversation with the author in which our responses engage with what the author has to say. Dialogue of this kind can have a most formative and growthful impact on ideas we brought to the interchange. Here, in fact, our reading can become quite critical. It can be reading 'against the grain'.

This way actually describes what happens in the second round of interviews, where the interviewer's interpretations are brought to the table, where critical reflection throws up new questions and insights.

3. Transactional:

What happens in this mode is much more than refinement, enhancement or enlargement of what we bring to our engagement with the text. Out of the engagement comes something quite new. The insights that emerge were never in the mind of the author. They are not in the author's text. They were

not with us as we picked up the text to read it. They have come into being in and out of our engagement with it.

This is where treasure emerges from the hermeneutic process. Insights emerge from the dialogue as shared meaning-making takes place. Crotty opines that these various modes 'prove suggestive and evocative as we recognise research data as text – and, even before that, as we take human situations and interactions as text' and also that 'ways of reading are transfigured as ways of researching' (Crotty 1998, p.110).

In summary, hermeneutic research was deemed the most suitable approach in terms of this research study, with interpretivism as the underlying theoretical perspective (because so much of the research involved interpretation), and with constructionism/constructivism as the epistemology informing that interpretive approach.

The research question– ***'In what ways, personally and professionally, have teacher education students experienced a pre-service RE course, which recognizes the importance of a focus on their inner lives?'*** – would be explored hermeneutically, having been approached in a 'radical spirit of openness' (Crotty 1998, p.51), in a search for shared meaning-making in relation to shared experiences, of a pre-service RE course which recognized the importance of a focus on the inner lives of students. That search for shared meaning would require a method of data collection suited to the task and it is to the justification of the choice of methods that the attention now turns.

3.8 Method – Semi-structured Interviews

While other methods, such as questionnaires, participant observation, documents, focus groups and narrative inquiry (see Bruce 2008) could undoubtedly have contributed to my research, I chose semi-structured interviews as I felt that they would best suit the participants and the research topic. In this section it is my intention to justify that choice, recognising that 'it is on the match between methodology and methods and research focus/topic/questions that the credibility of any findings, conclusions and claims depends' (Wellington et al 2005. p.96).

Questionnaires were part of the original schedule. Brookfield's course evaluation instrument (currently used at course end) could have been supplemented by regular use of his critical incident questionnaire. Issues of power and bias in using questionnaires among current students would remain a concern. The purpose of the questionnaire would have been to allow for input from current students without compromising the teacher/student relationship and with due regard to the power variable that exists in that relationship. Other disadvantages of a questionnaire are those of self-selecting bias and responses being influenced by responses to other questions (see Kumar 2005, pp.130-131). While Kumar may argue this latter in regard to questionnaires, it must be said that the same disadvantages could also apply to interviews.

Even though questionnaires surveying past students might have lessened the danger of bias, I believe that questionnaires alone would not have sufficed, for two reasons. Firstly, it was felt that using a questionnaire as well as interviews would have been unwieldy for a study as small-scale as this, as suggested by a marker's critique of an early outline of the study (see Appendix XII, Excerpt 2). Secondly, questionnaires would not have produced the quality and richness of the data that emerged from the interviews.

While seeking to use Brookfield's four lenses in the early planning stages of my research study, my intention was to engage in **observation**, using my colleagues' eyes as non-participant observers in my lectures/workshops using a mixture of narrative, structured observation schedule or scale and video, keeping in mind the ethical considerations and cautionary comments posited by Cohen et al (2007, pp.408-411). I did have a concern about the Hawthorne Effect which Kumar defines as 'a change in the behaviour of persons or groups... attributed to their being observed' (Kumar 2005, p.120) as I had previously witnessed it in RE sessions attended by outsiders. However, in a small-scale study where richness is all important, it was my opinion that observation would not be a source of rich data. Whether systematic or participant, observation would only allow access to surface happenings, whereas much that seemed meaningful for students was hidden.

Documents were also available. As part of the annual assignment, students are required to write a reflection based on their own journaling over the course

of the year. While the reflections are a source of insight, they are not anonymous and are graded. The fact that they were written as assignments which would be marked by the lecturer, rendered them unusable ethically.

Interviews (semi-structured)

As mentioned above, a markers' critique of a proposal that I had written for this EdD Thesis, suggested 'caution against being over-ambitious and trying to do too much given the short word-length of the thesis' (noted in Learning Journal 30th September, 2009 – see Appendix XII, Excerpt 2). I realised that attempting to view my practice through all four of Brookfield's lenses would over-extend the research study. Therefore, I decided to omit the observation and questionnaire (even though it could be held that both had already fed into the direction of the research), and focus on interviewing recent graduates, thus lessening the 'variable of power' issue, while retaining freshness in terms of memory.

The method then entailed conducting semi-structured interviews with the most recent graduates, who would attend college the following year on a part-time basis to engage with a fourth honours year. I had taught them for the previous three years but would not be teaching them during the fourth honours year when I would be conducted the interviews. I spent a lot of time considering the ethics involved in researching students attending the college where I work, even if I were not teaching that particular group at that particular time, and decided that, while issues of power would undoubtedly remain, the fact that I would not be currently teaching the group would lessen the potential bias. While I am mindful that bias is always a danger in any research with students, even with ex-students, I was also confident that beginning teachers would understand the importance of the study and bring their own genuine experience to the conversation.

The question of which form of interview would be best suited to my research was explored. Structured interviews being, in effect, questionnaires delivered face to face, would not have delivered the kind of depth required. Unstructured interviews would be in danger of becoming counselling sessions where the interviewer listens to the interviewee's story, and would not suit this research

that is looking for patterns of experience to be interrogated. Group interviews, including focus group interviews, would, I believe, have brought hesitancy to the interview process, particularly among young people, and would also carry the risk that the group might, in effect, censor the conversation. Having examined other interview possibilities, semi-structured seemed to be the best option as it followed a particular schedule but still left room for such modification as I deemed worthwhile. Mills' use of 'familiarity and custom' as reasons for using the semi-structured interview seem to affirm this option. I consider the '*soft*' approach a wonderful and apt image. She describes the *soft* qualities of the interview as flexibility (allowing side-tracks), sensitivity (allowing feelings to be relevant) and delicacy (capturing the interviewee's point of view) (Mills 2001, p.286).

Semi-structured interviews ensured that all interviewees were asked the same questions, while retaining freedom to bring depth, insight and priorities to the table. I found, however, that I was generally able to keep the interviews quite structured something which was of great benefit at the analysis stage when looking at the transcripts horizontally (question by question).

Kvale defines the semi-structured interview as an interview 'with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena' (Kvale 2007, p.8). Since the research study sought to explore students' experience of the RE course by obtaining descriptions of the experiences of past students vis a vis the course, with the intention of examining them hermeneutically, the semi-structured interview seemed best suited to that task.

Riessman argues for working ethnographically through narrative interviewing and warns that 'interviews, though important, and the most widely used method of data collection in the human sciences, represent only one source of knowledge about a phenomenon or group' (Riessman 2008, p.26). I am, however, convinced that I attended to some of the virtues of narrative interviewing as outlined by her, even in a semi-structured interview situation. Both the interviewee and the interviewer were 'active participants', the interview was conducive to 'conversation', 'storytelling' was a feature (even with the associated loss of power where the conversation might drift away from the

issue), and as interviewer, I kept in mind that 'the specific wording of a question is less important than the interviewer's emotional attentiveness and engagement and the degree of reciprocity in the conversation' (Riessman 2008, p.24).

Describing a semi-structured interview as neither an open every day conversation, nor a closed questionnaire, Kvale outlines twelve aspects of this interview form, from a phenomenological perspective (Kvale 2007, pp11-14), that merited critical reflection.

1. Life world: Interviews allow the subjects to convey their experiences and lived meanings from their own perspective and in their own words. An essential part of what I hoped to uncover in my research was the lived meanings of the participants as students of RE.
2. Meaning: Interviews allow the interviewer to posit an interpretation of what the interviewee says and to have it corrected or confirmed. This aspect of the semi-structured interview afforded me the opportunity to probe the interviewees' experience further.
3. Qualitative: Precision in description and stringency in meaning interpretation are sought. My research was not concerned with numbers but with words, words that describe in normal language the interviewees' experience. Both the second round probes and the use of NVivo 9 contributed to this qualitative aspect.
4. Descriptive: The focus here is on nuanced description depicting the qualitative diversity. My hope was that while a pattern might emerge in the research, it would encompass a rich tapestry of experiences.
5. Specificity: The semi-structured interview seeks comprehensive accounts of specific situations. The experiences of the interviewees in relation to specific elements of the RE course, for example, were sought.
6. Qualified naïveté: Presuppositionlessness, incorporating a critical awareness of the interviewer's own presuppositions, is required. I endeavoured to remain open to the possibility of surprise and unexpected phenomena emerging.
7. Focus: The emphasis is on certain themes but not on specific opinions regarding those themes. I decided on the themes and framed the kinds

- of open questions that allowed the participants to introduce the dimensions of those themes that were important to them.
8. Ambiguity: The interviewer's task is to clarify whether ambiguity is due to faulty communication, or the interviewee's personality, or just a reflection of contradiction in the interviewee's own life. Clarity, not solution, was sought.
 9. Change: It is important to be open to the possibility of an interviewee's change of heart or mind, in the interview process. In order to facilitate this, I allowed for thinking time while questions were being answered. Participants also had the opportunity to comment on their transcripts and add comments as they saw fit.
 10. Sensitivity: I hoped that a lack of knowledge on the part of the interviewer regarding the subject (which Kvale defines as 'sensitivity'), would not arise, since it was my own practice that was in question!
 11. Interpersonal situation: Kvale writes that knowledge is produced in an 'inter-view' in the 'inter-action' between two specific people (Kvale 2007, p.13). As a result, it is necessary to remain mindful of the dynamic of that interaction itself in relation to the production of knowledge in the interview situation, and particularly in the analysis of the interview. Even though using identical questions, another interviewer would perhaps produce a different interview as they would not understand the participants as I would. Their analysis would also be different for the same reasons.
 12. Positive experience: The emphasis here is on boundaries of time. The interviewee may have a positive and insightful experience in the interview and wish to explore things further. This required the establishment of ground rules in relation to boundaries of time and was also served by having a cup of tea after the interview.

3.9 The Overall Design

The following process graphic (Figure 1) illustrates the methodological journey designed to address the research question which drove this study. It illustrates the overall design of the research study from conception to completion and the order in which it was completed.



Figure 1 – Overall Project Design Process Graphic

3.10 Elements of the Design

When the initial research focus had been decided in terms of exploring the RE course through the lens of students' eyes, it was decided to research with 4th years. These students would still be attending college in the evening as part-time students but I would no longer be teaching them. As they would already be attending college, it was felt that it would be convenient for them to participate in the research. As I would no longer be teaching them, the 'power' issues that might have biased researching with current students would be lessened. I would no longer have any input into their assessment, and as confident beginning teachers, they could bring their own genuine experience to the interview. As they would have just completed three years of RE, their memories of the course would be strong.

The research would be hermeneutical as it was concerned with co-creating meaning with regard to the participants' experience of RE and that as the lecturer concerned and also the researcher asking the questions it would not be possible to bracket myself out of the research, thus rendering a phenomenological approach unusable. Semi-structured interviews would be planned having re-read the students' personal reflections on the course to identify common threads that would provide the interview questions.

Ethics approval was sought and obtained from both Exeter and my own college Marino Institute of Education (see appendices II and III). The interview questions were trialled in a pilot interview with a student from one of the previous years (see appendix IV for pilot interview outline), who was able to confirm that all of the different areas that should be researched were being researched. This allowed for the final draft of the initial interview schedule to be designed (see appendix V), that included eliminating an introduction that may have biased the interview before it had begun, as it had presumed positive experience of the RE course. Each element of the design and all of the design decisions were taken in consultation with my supervisors and subjected to discussion over a number of face to face meetings and emails, each one of which brought further clarity to the process (for example, see Appendix VI for an early iteration of the interview schedule and the rationale for it, sent to my

supervisors as preparation for a supervisory meeting. Also, see Appendix IV for pilot interview outline and Appendix V for the actual outline).

Participants in the research were selected based on their willingness to be interviewed. In the email sent to the fourth year students to seek volunteer participants (see Appendix I), each member of the student cohort was invited to participate. Thirteen students out of approximately one hundred volunteered. One subsequently withdrew before interview. The remaining twelve were all interviewed. The sample reflected the make-up of their year group, one being male and one being a mature student, though not by design on my part. All were interviewed on weekday evenings over the course of a number of weeks. All interviews took place in my office in college at a time convenient for participants and were followed by tea/coffee and biscuits. While hosting the interviews in my own office could be seen as contributing to bias issues, it is also the case that students were not unaccustomed to staff offices in MIE and so the venue was chosen for convenience. Interviews lasted one hour. Participants read and signed a consent form and were given a copy of same before the interview commenced (see Appendix XIV). The participants were emailed after the initial interview to thank them for their time and insight and to remind them that I hoped to return to them in the New Year for a brief conversation about their transcripts.

3.11 The Analysis Process

This section of the methodology chapter requires that the data analysis process undertaken be traced and justified and it is to that task that we now turn. The data analysis journey was an interesting one, beginning with an 'immersion' approach and moving on to using NVivo 9 software. The double analysis was apt in many ways for a hermeneutical approach but that was not the reason for it. Because the research study had taken a hermeneutical approach and was informed by an interpretivist theoretical perspective, with constructionism/constructivism as its epistemology, the question of interpretation was central.

In the first round of interviews, the twelve volunteers were each interviewed for an hour, using the interview schedule outlined in Appendix V. When all of the

interviews were completed, they were transcribed as word documents. Each interview was then analysed line by line using the 'insert comment' tool in 'word' to identify codes and record insights (for example, see Appendix IX). This approach to analysis would appear to be a version of an 'immersion' approach, which has been described below. When that vertical analysis (interview by interview) had been done, the interviews were grouped according to questions and analysed horizontally or question by question (for example see Appendix X). This was possible because the approach to the interviews had in fact been a quite structured semi-structured approach.

These two rounds of early analysis allowed for the emergence of common threads between interviews and also some interesting insights to emerge from individual interviews. When those interviews had been transcribed and subjected to a preliminary analysis involving the insertion of comments as issues emerged from the data, a second follow-up interview of about twenty minutes was scheduled. The purpose of this interview was to check that the transcript was correct and to offer each participant the opportunity to comment on their transcript (which had been emailed to them and was also presented to them in hard copy) and to have a brief conversation guided by two further questions.

It was decided that in the second round interviews (see appendix VII), the first question would require silence and deep listening: 'What would you like to say about your transcript?' The second question, exploring the findings in relation to the individual's transcript might be augmented by an exploration of the overall findings, with the ensuing conversation moving into the 'shared meanings' domain. In concrete terms, participants would be asked a follow-up question in regard to their own interview e.g. 'You said in your interview that..... Would you like to say a little bit more about that?'

Because I had been able to keep close to the same question format in the interviews, a second preliminary round of analysis could be conducted across all twelve interviews, question by question. From this second round of horizontal analysis came the questions in regard to issues emerging from across the group, which were used in that second round of interviews. In concrete terms, participants might be asked a question in regard to one of the common themes

e.g. 'It would appear that overall students seem to be saying... What is your opinion?' Revisiting emerging issues in this way to further explore aspects that may have been overlooked in the first round of interviews was true to the spirit of hermeneutical investigation. The second-round interview schedule is outlined in Appendix VII.

The 'immersion' approach that was used to conduct the early analysis has been described as the least structured and most interpretive approach, emphasising researcher insight, intuition & creativity, with fluid unsystematized methods, close to literary/ artistic interpretation and connoisseurship, calling for expert knowledge and targeted at a similarly skilled audience (Robson 2002, p.458).

Having analysed the data at some length and reflecting particularly on new insights emerging from the follow-up interviews, certain patterns began to emerge. These patterns were related to the significance and significant aspects of my practice as it had been experienced by this group of past-students. Each of these sets of early analysis was important.

The vertical analysis (interview by interview) of the first round interviews offered initial insights which were then explored further in the follow-up interview. The horizontal analysis (question by question across the interviews) offered common patterns which were also explored further.

The second round interviews were then transcribed and subjected to the same early vertical and horizontal analysis as the first round interviews. While the 'immersion' approach had been useful in getting to know the data and finding common themes and insights, I was concerned about the question of rigour. As a result, I decided to use NVivo 9 software to code all of the interview transcripts in a fresh way, taking an 'outside-in' approach as it were in place of an 'inside-out' approach. I wanted to ensure that my analysis of the data would be rigorous and I was hopeful of unearthing some 'buried treasure' along the way. While I cannot be sure that the software made a huge difference, I am certain that the extra time spent on the analysis was not wasted and from it the three main themes of the analysis emerged. It may be that using NVivo 9 provided the necessary distance from the data that allowed those themes to emerge.

The first draft of the findings chapter focussed on bringing out the participants' voices under the three themes of 'particularity', 'inner-ness' and 'ongoingness'. A layer of analysis was then added to that so that the findings would become clearer. The major themes then needed to be woven into a more coherent narrative by adding some biographical inserts from individual participants, whose stories would illustrate the findings. Tables were also added in order to illustrate the relative strength of occurrence of various codes under the three themes.

3.12 Limitations

As already outlined, this research study was confined to researching with the most recent graduates of one particular college in relation to their experiences of a pre-service RE course in primary teacher education. It did not set out to make comparison with the experiences of graduates of other colleges. Nor did it seek to examine their professional competence in their own practice in primary school classrooms (although such concerns did arise in the process of interviewing). It simply sought to explore participants' experiences of the course, using semi-structured interviews. In this way, the research hoped to discover something about how the RE course was experienced by the participants and what aspects of the course were deemed significant by them and why.

McCreery's study into how student teachers felt about teaching RE in the primary school raised some important issues for my research. She decided that interviews would be too time consuming and instead used open-response set essays. Among other findings, she concluded that students on the whole were 'positively disposed towards teaching religious education' (McCreery 2005, p.274), and I have also found this to be the case. McCreery suggested that interviews would have allowed for a deeper exploration, thus confirming my decision regarding semi-structured interviews as my research method.

Coll's PhD study (Coll 2008) explored the faith development experiences of Catholic teachers as they progressed from their initial teacher education through to full registration, using grounded theory as its methodology, allowing theory to emerge from the data and using a smaller comparative study to allow

for constant comparative analysis. Coll focussed on the participants' perspectives and how they made sense of their own faith – and the development of this – within the context of the school. Her concern was with trying to capture, as accurately as possible, the participants' own interpretation of events and then using that to develop theory. In my research study, I was also interested in the participants' interpretations of events but I was aware that I myself was present and a party to those same events and as a result the kind of distance that Coll has maintained in allowing for grounded theory to be her methodology would not have been possible. I needed to travel the road of hermeneutics. Coll concluded that the findings, while being of interest to Catholic education in general, are related to the Scottish context in particular. This echoes my own conviction with regard to the generalisability of my research study. Coll also spoke of the comparative study as being of limited value and of the results being used only in an indicative way. This endorsed in some small way my decision to focus my own research in the way that I have.

The research study does have limitations however. Among these are its limited scope, its lack of generalisability, an inability to discern whether the course resulted in better RE teachers or not, and the question of bias due to issues of power being present in interviews between a lecturer and his past-students.

It is limited in scope due to being confined to a 12% volunteer sample of a particular year group in a particular teacher education college at a particular time. It is interesting however that using surveys and participant observation would not have addressed this limitedness in any significant way, because they would not have revealed more about the experience of participants, which was something that could only be accessed in interview. Another aspect of the limited scope of the sample is that the students self-selected, something which may have influenced who volunteered or may have demonstrated a shared characteristic between the twelve. However, I did feel that they were a representative group in the sense of being representative of the types of personalities that I had encountered over the three years. It is also the case that voluntary participants in research are almost always self-selecting at some level.

Because it is confined to researching a particular group of teacher education students in a particular time and place about their experience of a particular RE course, it would be arrogant to assume that the findings could be generalised. However, if other RE lecturers are drawn to any of the ideas or strategies and find them helpful in their own practice, then that will suffice. One of the participants actually addressed this question in her interview, asserting that each teacher must teach the way they are and each lecturer likewise.

Participants have commented on the RE course having an effect not only on how they teach RE but also on how they teach. The question of whether the course actually resulted in better RE teachers or not remains, even if participants may have felt that to be the case.

The question of bias due to power issues remains also and the impact that I may have had on the participants' responses, given that I had been their lecturer, that they were still students at the college at the time of the interviews even though I was not teaching them and was not teaching the fourth honours year that they attended on a part-time basis that year, given that the interviews were conducted by me and given that the interviews were conducted in my office. While I am aware of the potential impact that I may have had, I am also conscious of the steps I took to minimise that impact. I looked for volunteers from the whole year group and interviewed all those who volunteered. I did not approach past-students to participate but left it to participants themselves to come forward in answer to the email. I organised the interviews at a time that was convenient for them and in a place that was known to them and convenient for them, providing silence and privacy (I do not believe that another venue would have changed the outcome of the interview). I ensured that all ethical guidelines from both the University of Exeter and Marino were adhered to and that the participants were aware of their rights at each stage.

I understand very well that issues of power will always exist between teacher and student at any level and that such issues do not disappear after the lectures have been completed. However, the hermeneutical approach to this research required that I be involved and active in the process of conversation with students that were known to me and co-constructing meaning in regard to their experience of the RE course that I facilitated. I am adamant that this was

approached in the best possible way. It is to the ethics of that approach that we now turn our attention.

3.13 Ethical Considerations

In commencing this research I believed that the three main areas of ethical issues in relation to interviewing – informed consent, confidentiality, and the consequences of the interviews - would not present a difficulty in interviewing past-students (Cohen et al 2007, p.382).

In relation to informed consent, Kvale writes of the interviewees being informed of the purpose of the investigation and the design's main features, and that their participation is voluntary, including the right to withdraw at any time (Kvale 2007, p.27). The students were informed in relation to the research, the reasons for it and the potential readers. They were also invited to volunteer to be interviewed. As previously indicated one of the original thirteen volunteers did withdraw before the interviews commenced.

Kvale emphasises the importance of protecting confidentiality (Kvale 2007, pp.27-28). Again, the interviewees were informed that the interview would be recorded and transcribed. They reviewed the transcript and were free to clarify issues that might have arisen for them and also to introduce new material by way of reaction or reflection. They were also guaranteed anonymity in the research paper.

In relation to consequences, Kvale warns of the danger of the interview becoming quasi-therapeutic (Kvale 2007, pp.28-29), demanding ethical sensitivity, which can also be addressed at the transcript reading stage, if an interviewee feels that an answer may be in any way harmful. While one of the interviews did in fact become quasi-therapeutic, I edited those parts of the interview in the narrative account, with the approval of the participant.

Kvale insists that ethical issues 'go through the entire process of an interview investigation, and potential ethical concerns should be taken into consideration from the very start of an investigation and up to the final report' (Kvale 2007,

p.24). For this reason, the ethical aspects of the whole process were kept in mind constantly.

I considered the questions offered by Wellington et al, which they believe can act 'as a valuable prompt towards ethical practice' (Wellington et al 2005, pp105-106) and made the following observations:

- The question of manipulating people and relationships in order to get 'good' data, returns to the key issue of my own integrity. I did not undertake this research to 'cook the books', but rather to learn.
- My sensitivity to the implications of any differences in terms of social power between researcher and 'researched' ensured a very careful approach to interviewing fourth year part-time students, even though I would not be teaching them. I knew that there could potentially be issues of power involved in such interviews. I am cognisant of power in relationships in general, and of the power dynamic between researcher and 'researched' in particular, but I was confident, with myself in my role as their former lecturer and participants in their role as beginning teachers and past-students, in our ability to co-construct meaning in relation to their experience of the RE course that they had recently completed.

The final prompt offered by Wellington et al is a threefold question:

Have you been honest in telling the story of your research as it was? Or have you presented a tidied up version? If the latter, how can you justify your actions? (Wellington et al 2005, p.106)

This research study stands or falls based on my ability to answer these questions. I have been honest in telling the story of my research as it was. I have not presented a tidied up version, which would require any justification.

3.14 Conclusion

Biesta offers three interesting insights from Dewey that have carried me forward on my research journey (Biesta 2003, p.79): that educational practice is "the beginning and the close" of all educational inquiry; that education is an art that can be informed by the outcomes of educational inquiry; and that the one and only purpose of educational inquiry is to make the actions of the educator more

intelligent, and Dewey himself might add ‘ more enlightened, more humane, more truly educational than it was before’ (Dewey 1929, p.39). For me, the aim of this research is not to change the world but to live more fully in it and to enable my students to do likewise. It follows Socrates in maintaining that the unexamined life is not worth living.

Charmaz suggests deciding on the quality of the research using the criteria of *credibility, originality, resonance* and *usefulness*, instead of focusing on reliability/validity (Charmaz 2005, p.528). The research has credibility because it has allowed the authentic voice of the participants to be heard. It has originality because it would appear that there is a dearth of research in regard to the experience of students of RE in teacher education. It has resonance in terms of how participants have hinted at something of universal importance in the inner life of teacher education (or perhaps all) students. It has usefulness because it has enabled me to understand something new about the elements of the process of RE in teacher education and their effects, to ‘learn how the world wags and what wags it’ in my own practice. For Lavery, reliability and validity in the traditions of hermeneutics and phenomenology can be discussed as issues of ‘rigor’. In a hermeneutic phenomenological project it is ‘the multiple stages of interpretation that allow patterns to emerge, the discussion of how interpretations arise from the data, and the interpretive process itself’ (Lavery 2003, p.23). I believe that this research study was indeed conducted with ‘rigor’ and that the multiple analyses allowed the interpretive process to flourish.

Wellington aligns himself with Lincoln and Guba in encouraging educational researchers to aspire to ‘being *systematic, credible, verifiable, justifiable, useful, valuable* and *trustworthy*’ (Wellington 2000, pp. 13-14). I believe that the rigorous process outlined in this chapter conforms to such aspirations. This research study sought to explore participants’ experience of an RE course in pre-service primary teacher education, with hermeneutical research as its methodology informed by an interpretive theoretical perspective and with constructionism/ constructivism as its epistemology. In terms of method, the research was conducted using semi-structured interviews with past-students. The integrity of my research is based on my own integrity as researcher in regard to knowledge, experience, honesty and fairness (Kvale 2007, pp.29-30). I believe that I have conducted my research with integrity.

CHAPTER 4: THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

In the methodology chapter, I described the process of twelve separate interviews with past-students and a second set of follow-up interviews to check that the transcript was accurate and to ask two further questions that emerged from the initial analysis of the first round interviews. This initial analysis was conducted using an immersion approach – described as the least structured and most interpretive approach, emphasising researcher insight, intuition & creativity, with fluid unsystematized methods, close to literary/ artistic interpretation and connoisseurship, calling for expert knowledge and targeted at a similarly skilled audience (Robson 2002, p.458). Having thus ‘immersed’ myself in the interview transcripts, I then conducted a rigorous analysis of the transcripts using NVivo 9 software. This enabled me to approach the data from a fresh perspective, as outlined in the methodology chapter, while also keeping in mind my research question –

‘In what ways, personally and professionally, have teacher education students experienced a pre-service RE course, which recognizes the importance of a focus on their inner lives?’

Using NVivo to ‘code’ the transcripts resulted in 83 ‘nodes’, although some of these ‘nodes’ could be described as a priori because they are directly related to issues raised at interview. These ‘nodes’ were then amalgamated and/or grouped into categories and from these categories the following themes emerged:

1. ‘Particularity’ – RE as particular elements and opportunities that were experienced as part of a particular approach in an initial teacher education course (the epistemological journey or participants’ experience of the external or visible aspects of the course);
2. ‘Inner-ness’ – RE as a subject that impacted on the inner life of initial teacher education students (the ontological journey or participants’ experience of the internal or invisible aspects of the course);

3. 'Ongoing-ness' - RE as a developmental journey which was experienced by students as something that happened over time and incorporated both epistemological and ontological learning.

This chapter will narrate an account of the findings of the research, using extracts from participants to illustrate significant aspects of their experience, with appropriate support from the literature. It will also narrate the individual personal portraits of two of the participants, illustrating the three major themes in a very real way.

The two 'personal portrait' participants were not chosen because they were different from all the others in the way that the mature student and the male student might perhaps have been, but they were still sufficiently different from one another to provide insight. They had different paths through first and second level education. They were now teaching in different school types. Before the study began, I had believed that they had differing levels of engagement with the RE course. The high level of engagement of *both* therefore was a surprise to me. The same was true for a number of the other participants, as I had not understood the actual level of their engagement when teaching them.

While my own commentary is an essential part of the narrative, I have tried to avoid straying too far into interpretation except when clarity demands it. The commentary will be expanded in the following chapter into a much fuller discussion of the findings.

The chapter begins with four tables. The first table below has been designed in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the narrative, by giving a brief demographical synopsis of each participant, followed by some of their own words to give a flavour of their individual ontological perspectives. I previously mentioned on page 50 my surprise at the extent of the positivity towards the RE course. However, in the tradition of hermeneutics, the authentic voice of the participants must be heard. Care has also been taken to preserve anonymity.

Table 1: The Research Participants

<u>Brief Demographic</u>	<u>Brief Perspective</u>
Ali, Irish and a mature student in her early thirties, came from a rural background in the Irish midlands, had attended catholic schools, and was teaching junior classes in a Catholic school in an Irish midlands county town at time of interview	The thing that's forefront in my mind still is...the time – a time for meditation, stillness, a time for ourselves, you would go in and have a time for your thoughts... and it meant that you just thought about things the whole way home. And I think that was the key thing... it didn't finish...when you left...
Sheena, in her early twenties, came from a Dublin city background and had attended catholic primary & multi-denominational secondary schools. She was now teaching in an inner-city catholic school in Dublin	I think a lot of the time, you were doing stuff without telling us you were doing it and then it'd kind of seep in...oh, he's been doing the same thing every week...there's a reason behind it...and how could I use it?...and people who were really eager to go to them – like, you wouldn't skip religion ...RE I mean...
Susie, Irish and in her early twenties, came from a Dublin city background, had attended catholic schools and was now substitute teaching in various Dublin city school contexts	...you always felt it was a time to kind of relax and reflect...which was a nice atmosphere to create...it's about your experience...what you take from it...it's not about, you need to know this for the exams...or, this content is really important ...there was a lot of freedom in that... It's ridiculous that I was too self-conscious to answer a question in other lectures but would dance around in a circle in religious education. It's an example of the environment that was created, you know...
Dan, Irish and in his early twenties, came from a suburban North Dublin background, had attended catholic schools and was teaching in a North Dublin suburban catholic school	Looking now for how it's significant in my teaching life, it actually, out of them all (all the BEd courses), it's the one that taught me what it's like to be a teacher because it teaches you to go with the flow and take things as they come to you and if you feel like doing something and you think it's a good idea, go for it and see how you get on...
Goretti, Irish and in her early twenties, came from a West of Ireland urban city background, had attended catholic schools, and was teaching in a suburban North Dublin city catholic school	...our lecture about death...about the clowning...about giving back... that are 'stand out moments' – 'wow' moments that even at the time you knew – that this was something special – whereas it's very hard to say that about any other subject... Religious Education is probably the only subject in which you're not being taught how to teach it and instead you learn from your own experiences and you build a way and teach it in a way that's for you.
Ellie, Irish and in her middle twenties, came from an East of Ireland urban background, had attended catholic schools, and was substitute teaching in Dublin city centre and North Dublin rural school contexts	I really realised where you could go...what you could really do with RE – how you could change – or not even change – but how you could awaken these things in children so they could see it as something outside a building or a church...they could really feel that this is about being with other people – this is about something more than – 'You have to do this' ...we had these experiences that were so different than anything we'd ever experienced – probably in life, never mind college...

Gail, Irish and in her early twenties, came from a Dublin city background, had attended Dublin inner city & suburban catholic schools, and was substitute teaching in catholic and multi-denominational Dublin city schools	...it wasn't just about what you were going to teach the children – it was about what you were going to learn yourself along the way ...I think it is a journey...it was one place in college where I really felt I belonged – where I came in and I was part of it – and everyone else was part of it and there was never any judgement coming in the door... For the three years here, it was like an upbringing in Religious Education...
Jenny, English-born of Irish parents, in her early twenties, came from an English Midlands city and Irish rural East of Ireland town background, had attended English and Irish primary schools and an Irish catholic secondary school, and was teaching in a suburban multi-denominational school	I think the biggest thing I learned...is to be really present in the moment... to be present for children while you're there I think is a huge, huge thing I've learned... because a lot of people don't listen to children at home.... I think the RE course – of all the courses offered in Marino...for me was probably the biggest part of my professional development – and ... personally as well... and I'm surprised that something – supposedly college- wise – had that power to do that for me – personally...
Mary, Irish and in her early twenties, came from an Irish Midlands rural town background, had attended catholic schools, and was teaching in a suburban Dublin city catholic school	...in Marino, it was very much... part of the person... it was religion that was in the person themselves – kind of brought out in the person...through ...meditation... spiritual type things... and I enjoyed that aspect of it ... I've grown so much as a person... it's opened my eyes into teaching – and the different things that you can try out...
Annie, Irish and in her early twenties, came from an Irish Midlands rural town background, had attended catholic schools and was teaching in a North Dublin suburban catholic school in mainstream and special needs	...I think 'think-time' was definitely provided...we were never forced into anything or forced into answering a question or what do you think – and you never singled anyone out at all, which I think was important – it meant that when you heard something, it was what that person genuinely thought or believed ... Because you let everyone go silent, it meant that everyone was ready and willing to be involved ...and it was like that because everyone had reached that silence...
Jan, Irish and in her early twenties, came from an East of Ireland rural town background, had attended catholic schools, and was teaching in a suburban North Dublin multi-denominational school	I think that my spirituality has grown and not just the religious side of me...but my spirituality of where I am and who I am and my place in the world – that definitely was helped and blossomed... RE played a central role and a vital role in actually preparing us for our careers and life and not just for the children and for the children's benefit...
Sadie, Irish and in her early twenties, came from a West of Ireland rural town background, had attended catholic schools, and was teaching in an inner-city Dublin catholic school	...The most effective thing was the reflectiveness of it, the being present in the breath and also the fact that spirituality wasn't something that had to be a high-falutin idea but simply a lot of the time us being together and happy. It was so simple and I really like that because most things appear to be inaccessible... Spirituality was accessible for everyone... Today really reminds me of the time in September when you took us outside and we lay on the grass and looked at the blue sky and it was wonderful because we all just got to take time, to take a moment and you know you don't know why you do it but it's important and that's what made it so enjoyable...

The other three tables below were designed to provide evidence of numbers of participants who deemed certain aspects of their experience (subsequently highlighted in bold in the text) to be significant for them. While they do not necessarily provide evidence of strength of opinion, they do give the reader a balanced perspective of numbers, thus allowing for a more coherent narrative to be written. It is important to point out that some of these aspects could be described as a priori (and are marked as such) as they are directly linked to interview questions. However the purpose of the tables is to demonstrate what participants deemed significant.

Table 2: 'Particularity'

Participants' experience of aspects of the RE course in teacher education college

<i>Aspect of Participants' Experience</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Number of participants who referred to it as significant</i>
Silence *	Comments on the practice of waiting for silence before beginning RE sessions	12
Centrepiece	Comments on the centrepiece which always contained a symbol of that day's work	4
Music & Song	Comments on the use of music and song	8
Journaling *	Comments on the use of journaling	12
Asking the question *	Comments on an element of RE known as 'Asking the Question' and never answering one	12
Sharing stories	Comments on the sharing of stories in RE sessions	8
No pressure	Comments on a decision not to put pressure on students to contribute to sessions	5
Non-didactic approach	Comments on the non-didactic approach to the teaching of RE in this teacher education practice	8
Going outside	Comments on going outside for ritual elements of sessions	11
Clowning	Comments on 'Clowning' a particular form for discovery attributed to Maria Harris	5
Death and Hope	Comments on a topic which had an emotional impact on participants as students	5
Retreat	Comments on a Retreat Day in the Cooley mountains undertaken by final year students	7
Suggestions for improvement... and dissenting voices *	Comments on suggesting improvement to the RE course now based on participants' experience of it and insight in regard to those who did not engage.	8

Table 3: 'Inner-ness'

Participants' experience of their inner journey in RE

<i>Aspect of Participants' Experience</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Number of Participants who referred to it as significant</i>
Spiritual development	Comments on how participants perceived their own spirituality developing on the course	12
Ritual *	Comments on the effect of Ritual on participants	11
Mindfulness	Comments on the effect of the practice of mindfulness	11
Reflection	Comments on the impact of having a reflective space	8
Professional Development	Comments on RE as professional development for teacher education students	3
Community	Comments on how the RE course contributed to community-making	8
RE Mattered	Comments on how RE mattered	6

Table 4: 'Ongoing-ness'

Participants' experience of being a student of RE at first and second level school		
<i>Aspect of Participants' Experience</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Number of Participants who referred to it as significant</i>
Learning off by heart	Comments on learning things off by heart as a strong focus in primary	4
Strong Church Connection	Comments on a strong focus on a strong 'Church' connection & sacramental preparation	8
Significant teachers	Comments on teachers who made a significant impact on participants	6
Exams	Comments on a strong focus on exam preparation in secondary	4
Participants' experience of being a student teacher studying RE in college		
Strange	Comments on initially finding RE strange in college	6
The long-term aspect	Comments on finding their experience of RE changing over time in college	8
A strange dynamic **	Comments on the experience of being in a group with a strange dynamic	4
Participants' experience of being a teacher of RE		
Elements that impacted on participants' own practice	Comments on using elements of the college RE course in their own classrooms	12
Teaching in Multi-D	Comments on the impact of the college RE course on teaching in Multi-Denominational schools	4
Even when not teaching RE	Comments on the impact of the college RE course on their teaching generally, not just the teaching of RE	12
Not teaching as they were taught	Comments on how participants do not teach the way they themselves were taught in primary school	2

* Participants were specifically questioned about these aspects at interview.

** Four students deemed that aspect to be significant for their particular group.

4.2 'Particularity'

The RE course that the research participants experienced was a particular course in a particular place and time with a particular group of students. The theme of 'particularity' is reflective of an RE course that was concerned with a created and creative space, where a student's own epistemological journey could be nurtured externally while the student's own ontological journey was also facilitated.

This part of the chapter seeks to analyse participants' experience of that particularity in relation to aspects identified as significant by them on their epistemological journey. The analysis of this theme is concerned with the particularity of the set-up of the RE session in terms of the silence, the centerpiece and the threshold experience. It moves on then to the particularity of the set elements of the session such as journaling, asking the question and sharing stories. It looks at the particularity of the non-didactic approach and significant memories. Finally it seeks to analyse the particular recommendations made by participants in order to improve the course and to seek insight in regard to students who had difficulty engaging with the course.

4.2.1 *A Particular Set-up...*

Beginning a session by waiting for **silence** appears to have been important. Some have pointed towards it as a threshold to reflection which was necessary in their busy college life. Silence creates a space for learning, brings openness, makes the space safe and offers hospitality to all (Palmer 1993, pp.71-79). Some liked the silence that this quiet time provided and remarked on the calmness of the room. Others commented on the way that I waited for people to quieten naturally and to engage when they themselves were ready.

Ali (all participants' names are pseudonyms) really liked the quiet time at the beginning, comparing it to waiting for a drama to commence, while Dan suggested it was like waiting for a journey to begin. Ali further admitted to irritation with those who were slow to come to silence, confirming her love of that quiet time in her follow-up interview.

The thing that's forefront in my mind still is still the time – a time for meditation, stillness, a time for ourselves, you would go in and have a time for your thoughts...

Mary seemed to concur, also seeing it as time for herself. For others, waiting for silence symbolised something quite different. Annie recalled how falling into silence signalled a willingness on behalf of the group to engage.

...Because you let everyone go silent, it meant that everyone was ready and willing to be involved ...it was like that because everyone had reached that silence.

This conscious act of choosing freely to engage was important for Jenny, who has also carried it into her classroom practice.

...I think it makes a huge difference then to anything that comes after because... you're volunteering to give your time... everyone has an opportunity to slowly come in... leave whatever was going on before outside... and that's again something I've carried into the classroom

There may be a hint here of what Goretti called 'being treated as an equal'. She spoke of using this to great effect in her own classroom.

...you never had to demand attention – you were given it... It was nice for once to be treated as an equal...and however long it took, you waited... and even in my own class now, I tend to stand and wait ...it works far better than me shouting...

For some, the **centerpiece** had an importance beyond its symbolic features. Ali was drawn by the colour of the cloths and whatever was different, while Susie saw its importance as setting the scene for the session yet also allowing each person to take their own meaning from it. Ellie remarked on its subtlety.

...it's so subtle that... it brings something in mind for you – or it can bring back memories that relate to what you're about to do – without it having to be mentioned at all...

The centerpiece helped Mary to focus and she appeared to suggest that it enriched the reflection in the session.

The centrepiece was really eye-catching ...and it really did reflect either straight to the lesson or a little bit abstract where you had to think about it – but the centrepiece was really, really important...

Music and song often featured in the threshold moment at the beginning of the RE session. Participants suggested that songs and youtube clips used at this stage had a power beyond the songs themselves. Two such songs were 'Man in the Mirror' and 'Somewhere over the Rainbow'.

The Michael Jackson song 'Man in the Mirror' for example, was mentioned by a number of participants as being special to the whole group. It was Mary who had actually brought the song to my attention. I asked her about the song and her answer seems to suggest that it was a larger threshold moment that she had in mind – into a teaching career.

...the words that were in it, you're gonna make a change...that was us – we were going to make a change ...we were going to change so many lives throughout the course of our teaching – and I think that song was just ...perfect... it's all about changing... changing yourself, changing the kids...

This song also went on to produce a 'moment' outside of lecture time when RE poured over into social life for Ali and the other mature students.

...it was actually the end of our last teaching practice...we all went out...that song came on (*Man in the Mirror*) and we were all out on the dance floor ...Sandra...got all animated...she turned all of us around and here was a mirror...we were actually standing looking at ourselves... it really hit home...we were all crying by the end of it....that was almost like a little reflection for all of us together...

Jenny found that music had power to create a mood, mentioning 'Somewhere over the Rainbow' in particular. Dan also remembered the same song as being especially significant for his group.

you were using the songs in the lectures and the first song by Israel (Somewhere over the Rainbow)... that was the moment when our class clicked –and I've asked other people and they would agree with me you know – that broke the ice and I don't know why... you go home that night and you think about it... and you come in the next day and your class might still be talking about it...

4.2.2 Particular Elements...

Journaling brought up a number of issues for participants. Some journalled religiously and saw great value in that. Some saw journaling as part of

reflection. Others appreciated that the journal wasn't collected or forced upon students. Some, like Sadie, journalled only about 'big' moments.

...If something very positive happened...the day that we went out to the sun and looked up into the sky and I wrote in my journal about it being a day when I was able to completely relax... the day we sang Michael Jackson... the retreat... in the Church...

Mary liked that the journaling wasn't compulsory or 'forced'.

...I didn't write at every single lecture... some of them really meant something to me – so then I'd write about them... it wasn't as if I was being forced ...I think it's far more appealing...

Journaling brought Susie on a journey of self-discovery, where 'you were thinking about things you probably wouldn't think about if you weren't part of RE', while Ali appreciated the three questions, saying they made it 'so much easier'. Although Jan sometimes used the three questions, she saw journaling as symbolising reflection, not as a discipline in itself. At interview, Goretti claimed that she didn't journal and then detailed her journaling! Ellie seemed to engage in reflection without journaling, feeling that it would be 'unnatural' for her, while the thought of reading what she had written was off-putting for Gail.

...I really hate reading anything I've written ... that's why it didn't suit me... I would keep... doodles and things...that could be my journal... the day we went on the retreat... that was a journal in itself...

For Annie, journaling was sometimes an excuse to 'vent' about seemingly unconnected things, perhaps thus hinting at her own 'inner-ness' breaking through.

...sometimes I felt that when I was journaling, whatever we were talking about ...would take me on a rant that wasn't connected to what we were doing at all. And I would end up writing about that...

Participants expressed a range of feelings about an element of the RE session known as '**asking the question**', particularly the non-answering of questions. Some saw this as an irritant, others as an opportunity to 'live the questions' (Rilke 1934, p.27), while many admitted to using the same strategy in their own classrooms. Ali saw it as a gift.

as a teacher... that's a great gift... to ask the question and not give the answer... even now in the classroom... there's hundreds of questions that can just be left...

Not everyone saw it as a gift, however. Ellie expressed her ambivalence.

...when you're ready for it and you're in the zone for it... it's great... some days I really enjoyed it and other days it just sent me mad...

For Dan, it was closely allied to journaling and being in touch with his own experience. He uses it now as a launch pad for the children's journaling. Mary found her rational approach to things challenged, but discovered that 'living the question' could also be a source of calm.

I knew you didn't want an answer... but I'd always try and answer it – cos I'm the type of person that, in maths, two plus two is four ...sometimes you live the question in order to find the answer... I found it calming in a way ...to think there is a question that I mightn't be able to answer – but at some stage in my life, I might...

Although it annoyed her, Annie now uses this strategy herself in school. Jan also had her issues with it, though she found it humorous at times, but endorsed it, admitting that 'we were better off finding our own answers'. Gail was very positive about the resulting learning, suggesting that it should be used in all subjects.

...you should do that for everything, not just RE ...questions can carry great weight... and sometimes they're better when you don't answer them... sometimes children even know that and they won't even ask you to answer them... the learning needs to come from themselves...

This kind of learning takes time and emerges from the reflective space created by leaving the question unanswered and just 'loving the question' (Rilke 1934, p.27).

Many participants focused on one particular session where students were **sharing stories** about their confirmation day. This session came in third year at a time when the group had formed community and could freely share such simple memories. Participants seemed to sense that such sharing created community and developed empathy. Jan experienced the sharing of stories as a window into the memory of others, while Sheena spoke about the learning that happens when adults share like that. She herself described *vivid* memories.

...I was saying that I got my nails painted for the first time... I don't know if it's that Confirmation's that important, but I vividly remember it. Vividly, vividly... and other people shared... Ellen got to pick her own tea-pot... it was kind of a different day to some of the other lectures and I don't know why... and you couldn't explain it...because if you told someone else you were talking about tea-pots, they'd think you were crazy...

Sheena's wonderment was echoed by Dan, who spoke of the variety of experience and of learning new things about peers he thought he already knew well.

... the difference in the experience was huge and it was amazing to see how one thing can be different to so many people... that suddenly gave us an inkling that – even though we had been sitting there in the room with each other for two and a half years – we hadn't a clue – we thought we knew each other... big mistake, you know...

Ellie felt the experience 'connected us as a group' and that in 'talking about a real experience...everyone seemed really human'. Gail saw the sharing of stories as developing empathy for others, but also as reaffirming her own story.

4.2.3 A Particular Approach...

Participants commented on the **non-didactic approach**. Annie specified what others identified as RE not being pushed on students, as there being **no pressure**.

You were a big factor, and how you worked with us. We were never under pressure to do anything. We were never under pressure to give an answer, to be totally involved. There were times when you let people sit back when they needed to...

For Sadie, this was also an important aspect of the teaching approach.

...It was just so spiritual and religion was never pushed on us. That was what was very effective... It wasn't out of a book... You didn't tell us what to do or read things out about how things should be done ...

Susie felt that other lecturers went for a more didactic style, unlike in RE where there was a sense of freedom around participation.

...there weren't barriers in religious education. You had a freedom to speak and you didn't have a fear of speaking and participating... It's ridiculous that I was too self conscious to answer a question in other lectures but would dance around in a circle in religious education...

Gail remembered the issue of this particular approach perhaps not suiting everyone, being addressed at the final RE session. But for her, the whole course was ‘an upbringing in RE’.

You did say at the end of the course that you were sorry if the way that we did RE didn’t suit some people and that you hoped they would find their way...But I think that what suited me about it was that it was so kind of holistic...For the three years here, it was like an upbringing in Religious Education...

She said that she felt that the lecturer cared, something she believes is core to the vocation of teacher.

I suppose what I’m really thankful for... is the... I’ll pretend it’s someone else interviewing me – particular attitude of the lecturer... I suppose it was one place in college where I really felt I belonged ...there was never any judgement coming in the door... but the lecturer really loved what he was doing and cared about everyone ...and that makes all the difference... I suppose the lesson from that was – if you’re teaching, just care!

Ali felt that the approach made things ‘real’.

I think it’s the way you did it. When you did that session about death for example, it was real. It wasn’t matter of fact and people’s emotions were raised and they were dealing with real things and the real classroom... Things were made real at the level of the person.

Sadie had a sense of the lecturer being calm, something she would like to emulate, and illustrated the ‘ongoingness’ of RE again with reference to previous teachers all having that ‘feeling of calmness’. Goretti wondered if the approach that she experienced in RE could be used in other subject areas.

Religious Education is probably the only subject in which you’re not being taught how to teach it and instead you learn from your own experiences and you build a way and teach it in a way that’s for you. It should be done in a lot of other subjects because no two teachers are the same, or teach the same topic in the same way...

4.2.4 Particular Memories...

When asked about **memories of particular significance**, participants tended to focus on key events. Goretti spoke about RE having ‘stand out moments’, which were lacking in other subject areas. When Jan was asked about her

memories she said that the hour for the interview wouldn't be long enough and then proceeded to list some of them.

There are so many things. One of the most poignant moments was on the Retreat when we all just stood there and we had decided among ourselves that we would bring the centrepiece. The first time you played 'Man in the Mirror', Clowning, Breaking the crackers, the Nativity Play outside in the dark with one star in the sky – if I keep talking, I'm going to start crying (*silence*). For myself and my friends, the memories that we have from RE are the memories we have from Marino... We were just blessed...

Ali mentioned **going outside**, and how doing things requiring trust led to moments of insight.

...any of those times we went outside you weren't really sure what was going on, and you just went with it – and then all of a sudden, a kind of light went on – ah, this is what it's all about. And it worked because you went with it.

Gail also remembered going outside and has continued that practice, both in school and in voluntary work with the scouts. Again, for Goretti, the active sessions outdoors provided great memories.

...flying kites when so many of us had never flown a kite before ... and we acted out...the Nativity...where we sang songs ...and I thought it was...a much more free way of learning...

Participants remembered '**Clowning**', an activity derived from the work of Maria Harris' aesthetic approach to RE (Harris 1991, pp. 57-59 & 156-157). Students, dressed as clowns, went around the campus, unspeaking but blowing hooters and giving hugs or sweets or smiles. Clowning is a 'form for discovery', with the aim of simply doing something in order to see what happens. It is risky, requiring faith in the one sending them out. Not all of the students were committed to the idea, however. Ellie mentioned how unclear the aim of the activity was at the time.

... it took me a while to see why we were doing it...it was so much fun at the time...now I think that was really important...you don't have to see the value in something when you do it... you are actually being part of the community...you're looking at things from a whole different perspective... and sharing love and joy or whatever...

In spite of the element of risk, Jenny, as a newly qualified teacher (NQT), brought 'clowning' into the classroom. (NQTs would generally be encouraged to conform to what would be regarded as correct, professional conduct).

...I did the clowning...where we all got to dress up and go forth...and spread happiness...with my 2nd class...I decided... even though I'm an NQT, to try and replicate it as much as possible – to do what you did... the children were so into it – they weren't being silly with it – they were completely doing what I'd asked them to do... I told the children the meaning behind it... and we'd a great time... spreading joy...

Clowning was also a strong memory for Dan, who has since used this 'form for discovery' with his class.

...one that jumps out at me... is the inner and outer journey and the inner and outer experience when we went off dressed as clowns... it was a pushing out of the boundaries without explaining yourself you weren't allowed speak... that was huge for me...you were just going to do it... there wasn't going to be an explanation...

Ali's strongest memory was the session on **Death and Hope** (a session that she used as an example of RE being 'real'). The issue of death in school is important. Julian Stern suggests that while such work is risky, playing safe is even more of a risk, leading to RE becoming irrelevant (Stern 2010, p.14). Ali had to work with it.

I think the most deep down wrenching of the heart strings was the one on death...even thinking about it now... the sense of togetherness was because everyone was going through something...when I think back on RE... that's one class or lecture that comes into my head... and immediately there's a kind of a knot... you don't know the connections that you're making...

Even in Ali's second round interview, this session resurfaced.

Your life as a teacher is different. The other day, I was talking to a parent whose Dad had died ...You end up being a counsellor. You're not prepared for that in college but in RE you do get something from sessions like the one on death that equips you to work with that.

Gail also spoke of her memory of the Death and Hope session.

...exceptional circumstances in dealing with loss... really do happen in life and you have to figure it out as you go along...I think that everybody got upset over something that day... we've all had hard things happen to us in... it was nice to know that it has happened to other people and they

have dealt with it...and you're going to have to deal with it in your own way... I think there's great...healing in sharing stories...

Participants were hugely positive about the third year **retreat** – a day in the Cooley Mountains, 'where religion and celtic myth collide'. Sadie said it was fantastic and felt it reflected the course itself.

Fantastic...I don't even know where to start... going up the mountain, standing around with the symbols...I really liked that we had to bring something that we used to reflect back on the three years (*a student led initiative*). You could just tell that everyone had really enjoyed the course. It was just so spiritual...

For Sheena, there was a sense of it being 'a spiritual event', while Dan revealed his part in organizing the mountaintop ritual.

...the retreat... that just summed up the entire course in the space of a few hours... we had the song... the mountains in Springtime and the walk in the rain and the sleepy blue ocean – and you got to the top of the mountain and you thought about it... that kind of liminal experience that we had that day...I rang everybody and said, 'bring something that reminds you of RE and go through that'... it was to have the display that went with every other lecture and just because we were up a mountain, it didn't mean that we weren't doing RE.

Gail found 'specialness' in the day and a particular link with the others, while Mary remembered the faces of the retreatants gathered for the mountain top ritual, a memory that she believes she will never forget.

4.2.5 Particular Recommendations...and Dissenting Voices...

Finally, participants were asked to offer **suggestions for improvement** to the course. Some suggested more of the same, while many were reluctant to do so or offered suggestions they didn't necessarily favour. Such responses raise the possibility of participants' reluctance to offend their lecturer by suggesting change. Therefore, it's important to consider carefully the participants' responses, including in true hermeneutical fashion reading between the lines. It appears for example, that the RE course did not cater well for students who require an utterly rational approach, something which has been addressed since this research study raised the issue. The new first year course in RE

includes more rational approaches, seeking to engage students whose learning style this suits.

Since those who volunteered for interview were positive about their experience of the RE course, one way to access dissenting voices was to seek suggestions to improve the course and to explore from that perspective whatever might emerge in terms of engaging the seemingly unengaged.

Ali wondered if, by periodically adopting a more rational approach, it might be possible to engage those who did not wish to engage in the usual way of working, even though she herself would not be in favour of such an approach. She also felt that the reason she engaged with RE was because it meant something to her.

I can remember coming out of the lectures going, that was great – but some people were...the biggest load of bull... and I was 'What? Were you at the same lecture as I was at?' I think it's because I engaged with it, so it meant something to me...so I suppose with people that it doesn't mean anything to, to somehow try and reach out to them...I'm not sure how you'd do it...maybe it's that we have to do some alternative weeks – one is all this exploration – and the next week it's very factual – to make sure that everyone's learning type or everyone's needs are met...I'm not sure – that's just a suggestion... do you try and do...what I would call, a normal lecture, where it's just the slide and you... Would they come out saying 'that was great... I got loads of information', where I'd be going 'so boring!' ...But I really do think that it's the people who aren't comfortable with closing their eyes in a group and having a bit of quiet time...so it could be that ...some people need more time to build up the trust...

The new first year RE course tries to give students that time by moving more slowly into the extra-rational elements and including rational approaches.

Dan's only concrete suggestion, apart from similar sessions which might involve more explanation (which he wouldn't attend), was that we would spend 'a night in the forest'. This suggestion originates from the list of liminal experiences referenced in 'Annie's Song' by John Denver, a song that Dan's group would have sung and danced to during closing rituals.

I've gotten so much out of it that I don't see a whole lot of room for improvement ...you could suggest a more literal explanation...but if you do that, the people like me would lose out because it's not being left up to them... it grabbed me and it brought me with it ...a minor adjustment would be to have the night in the forest...

Annie felt that she would have used art, in the sense of working with images, something which had in fact been encouraged in journaling.

I'd go about it... very similarly to how you taught us – you got us to think and be really reflective...I might have got into using art as an expression – drawings... but other than that... I think that everything else is exactly as I would have done it...

Annie made a suggestion in regard to modernizing the Alive-O programme (the Catholic RE programme in use in almost 90% of Primary schools in the Republic of Ireland). This suggestion has also been included in recent changes to the RE course.

I think it might have been a good idea...for each group to be given a certain section of a certain Alive-O book...to go away and modernise it...

Susie would focus on keeping RE active, as she herself had experienced it, while Sadie wondered if for some students the course is too removed from what happens in the primary school classroom and needed to have a stronger link in terms of things to do with the children.

Sometimes it does seem removed from what we are doing in the classroom... you had to make sure that what we were doing was tailored to us but also make a difference in the classroom. I suppose it might have made a difference if we had taken the Alive-O and interpreted it ...put your own stamp on it – or more ideas about how to bring it outside like we did – more ideas about how to do things... I'd love if I had a list of all the things we did outside...

This may also hint at why some students had difficulty engaging, as the kind of work being undertaken was not clearly enough connected to the practice of teaching or deemed directly of value for school placement.

Jan, following a lengthy pause, suggested even more meditation and reflection, perhaps with discussion afterwards. Gail wondered about integration with other areas, without losing sight of the bigger picture.

I'd probably end up copying you a lot... I'd look more into the integration with other subjects... maybe you could hijack art and music and drama and... but I think you do already... I think the message is, this isn't just to fill 30 minutes of a day... this is your life – it'll affect how you teach – if you want it to...

In her second round interview, Jan maintained that the elements shouldn't be changed as they are crucial to preserving the uniqueness of the RE course.

...Keep the uniqueness. Don't have it as the hounding that other lectures can be. Get the point across but maintain your way of doing it... Still create the atmosphere as you have done... Keep being creative. Acknowledge the fact that people who've been through it think that.

Jan also addressed the question of why some students didn't engage, expressing the view that it was perhaps related to peer pressure.

I think RE as a subject is similar to something like Drama. You have to let your inhibitions go. And I don't think some people were comfortable with that. They probably felt unable to be themselves because of how that would be perceived by peers and when you look at our retreat and who went on it and who didn't. But then people come up to you and ask you about it and I think that some people had a serious regret that they didn't go because they felt something... I think it came back to something as basic as what others think...

Others would not suggest improvements. Sheena said that she would teach the course just as she had experienced it. Ellie would just add more of the same, since the activities themselves produced the memories that the students treasured. Mary felt there was nothing she could change to improve it. Ellie said there was no way she could recommend improvements, while Goretti refused to suggest any improvement to what she saw as an 'experience', rather than an education.

...if everybody reflects on their religious experience in Marino as I have, they would see how pointless it is to read from a book and how much more they got from it when they had an experience and not an education...

4.3 'Inner-ness'

The RE course sought to take seriously the experience of students as a starting point for their own RE and to contribute to both their epistemological and ontological journeys. The inner-ness or inner life work that resulted from the latter aspect of such an approach seemed to matter to participants.

4.3.1 *A Developing Inner Spirituality...*

Participants revealed that the RE course impacted on their personal **spiritual development** in unexpected and surprising ways. While Jan would have considered herself religious, she found her spirituality blossoming, something that has endured beyond the RE course.

...I think that my spirituality has grown and not just the religious side of me. I would have been religious but my spirituality of where I am and who I am and my place in the world – that definitely was helped and blossomed... I think I've become more accepting of others and less self-absorbed...less materialistic...In life, as you grow, your spirituality grows with you.

Gail felt that RE made her feel spiritually looked after on her journey, while Mary also appears to have found the course a deeply spiritual experience.

I grew...and I think as a person, I became far more positive... the setting and the atmosphere, it was peaceful... I still felt that whole presence of something just a little bit bigger than me that was there...

Dan spoke of the course as 'saving' his 'spiritual development'. He claimed that it opened up a whole new world for him both in school and in his voluntary work with the scouts.

Goretti found nourishment for her own spirituality in the message she took from RE sessions. With Ellie, a sense of spirituality developed in a variety of ways.

...just realising that there was a difference between spirituality and faith... isn't it strange that an exercise like...we lay down on the pitch and looked up at the sky...that would be seen by someone supervising the work as a waste of time...you never know what's going on for people... I took meditation away with me probably as well... and the creating a space....and I see such a huge value in it now.... as a person, it did help me to... go back to spirituality and believing that there was definitely 'something'...

Ellie felt that the space created in the RE sessions remained 'in your subconscious' and, in her first year teaching, that her spirituality continued to be nourished by teaching RE. Susie felt that the RE course led to a deeper understanding of herself and others, but Sadie felt that RE was for *her*, rather than for 'teaching'. This aspect of the RE course surprised Ali.

...It was totally not what I thought it was going to be. I thought it was going to be more like the other curriculum areas – this is what you're supposed to teach, this is how you do it... and yes there was the teaching element as well, but there was a lot about us and our development as well...

Annie saw journal work as a doorway to spirituality.

...it veered away from the topic that we were talking about to whatever was on your mind... something to do with your spirituality... the way I see it, if people want to explore their own personal kind of spiritual feelings or beliefs through the journal they do...

4.3.2 Ritual as Inner Experience of an Outward Expression...

Ritual brought both meaning and closure and was integral to every RE session. The inner experience of the outer ritual is crucial – the inner and outer come together in ritual. Sheena recognised ritual's importance in terms of closure.

...you were going off to something totally different once you left the lecture and it was good to have a kind of a conclusion to it ...you felt it just didn't filter out... which was good...

Dan wondered about the deeper meaning behind each ritual. He has carried both the idea of ritual and also the search for meaning into the classroom. For him, the ritual had a dual purpose – to 'tie up what you had been doing' and also 'something for you to remember it by'. What Goretti liked about ritual was that you got to see sides of other people in the group that you wouldn't normally see.

...it was that silly moment when it didn't matter who you were or where you came from... you were all there for the same thing... you all wanted the same thing... you were blessing each other and you had to say something nice... it was a moment when you forgot ...your own insecurities and you enjoyed the moment for what it was...

Ellie found ritual a shared and meaningful experience of 'real happiness' and 'thankfulness', while Jan's comment in relation to the way that the ritual worked,

seems to echo what Jarvis wrote about the conclusion of a session helping the learners 'to crystallize their thoughts and reflect on them and their actions, and secondly, to create a further sense of disjuncture so that they go away knowing that their learning has not finished and that they have new questions to solve or things to try out' (Jarvis 2008, p.565).

I don't know whether this is the teacher head in me or not but sometimes teachers think that the best conclusion for an actual lesson is by bringing the whole class back together so that everyone's on the same foot. I think those concluding rituals allowed us to bring everything that we experienced ...back together and we might not have vocally shared them but ...we were all back together as a unit...

4.3.3 Mindfulness and Reflection as Space for 'Inner-ness'...

The practice of **mindfulness** and meditation was an important part of the RE course. It was, perhaps, a means by which the inner world of students seemed to enlarge its boundaries. Ali saw its importance as being about 'giving time', while Annie spoke of valuing the space for **reflection** offered in RE sessions.

...I think there was always 'think- time' within the lectures ...looking back now when there were certain activities when you needed everyone to be involved ...but... either way I think 'think-time' was definitely provided... we were never forced into anything ...which I think was important...

For Jan, meditation was one important factor among others that created the RE experience that students had in college.

If you were to single out one factor it would have to be meditation. The first time you did it with us we were out of our comfort zones but it became okay, it became the norm to just be with yourself, to be grounded. But each of those factors came together to create religious education, it wasn't just one single factor. It was a mix...

Another aspect identified by Jan as important, and not unconnected to mindfulness, was 'prayer'. Jan noted that something always brought them to reflection. For Sadie, RE was her only foundation in spirituality, with reflection at its centre.

It was the first opportunity I would have had to explore spirituality... It's probably my only foundation... The most effective thing was the reflectiveness of it, the being present in the breath...It was so simple and I really like that because most things appear to be inaccessible... things like that just stay in your subconscious... being present often comes into

my head just to be completely in the room, and that works... It worked in making us present to each session and works when you come away from the classroom as well...

Ellie also spoke of the experience lending itself to reflection.

...it was... just so open... it just felt natural...the way you approached it... we had these experiences that were so different than anything we'd ever experienced – probably in life, never mind college...and that's why things stuck with me and that's why I naturally reflected...

Ellie had incorporated mindfulness into her classroom practice, to great effect, especially with one particular child.

The 'Breathing in I calm my body'... I do it all the time at school... there's a girl in my class and she lives in her head... she just completely shuts everyone out and she can't hear anyone... and she sits down and it really works for her – and she could do anything afterwards...

4.3.4 RE as Professional Development from 'Inner-ness' to Community...

Jenny felt that RE, of all the courses offered to her in college, was probably the biggest part of her **professional development**. She learned to be present in the moment and present to the children, something she takes into every aspect of her life. Jenny saw the RE course as an education in spirituality, and advocated continuing professional development in developing spirituality.

...you can teach a teacher to teach, but... the experience in Marino – what that left me with was a kind of education in my own spirituality... that is what lingers... and inspires... your lectures on being present to the moment... that's not really about teaching – but it really does help you as a person...I miss your lectures, because they were really kind of focused on my life – and not everything else we were doing... so I feel, even if there was continuing professional development – in developing your own spirituality, I feel that would really help everything else...

Jan saw it as 'more than professional development', that 'it was the making of who we were, as a class, as a year group and obviously as individual people'. Similarly, Ellie remarked that RE created a sense of **community** in her group, perhaps not found elsewhere.

...when we were sharing things... it just... connected us as a group...in a way that we never really did – like we weren't the closest class – but it really brought people together – it developed a sense of community that we probably weren't used to at all – and I loved it...

Some participants tried to articulate why **RE mattered** to them. Sheena emphasized RE's importance by insisting that of all lectures, you wouldn't skip RE.

You could see it in people... who were really eager to go to them...you wouldn't skip anything, but especially not religion...RE I mean...and people kind of partook more...and they weren't shy about doing things that previously they might have thought was silly...and they'd kind of talk about them as well...

Ali described it as not finishing when it finished, because people went away thinking about things, while Jan felt that the significance of the RE course went beyond RE.

...RE played a central role and a vital role in actually preparing us for our careers and life and not just for the children and for the children's benefit...

It is to Dan that I leave the last word, as RE appears to have really mattered to him.

Looking now for how it's significant in my teaching life, it actually, out of them all (*all the BEd courses*), it's the one that taught me what it's like to be a teacher...

4.4 'Ongoing-ness'

'Ongoing-ness' - RE as a developmental journey which was experienced by participants as something that happened over time - was another theme that emerged in the research. This journey encompassed participants' experience of being a student of RE (in primary and secondary school), their experience of being a student teacher and their initial experience of being a teacher of RE.

4.4.1 Being a Student of RE in Primary and Secondary School...

When asked about their experience of RE in primary school, participants spoke of learning things off by heart, of sacramental preparation and of a strong church connection. Some spoke of a broader experience and some, but not all, had positive memories. This question was originally intended as a doorway into the experience of RE in college itself. Nevertheless it raised the issue of where participants may have been situated in relation to RE when they arrived in college. Ellie hinted at this when she said that she experienced RE in college as 'much more concentrated', particularly in regard to rituals which had seemed a 'really small part' of RE previously, but which in college seemed to have meaning – in particular the outdoor rituals and the closing rituals at the end of RE sessions.

While Ali's memory of primary school was mainly of learning things off, drawing in copybooks and writing, she appeared to retain what may be a sense of nostalgia in relation to her experience, describing parts of it as 'nice'.

...really all I remember from Primary School is learning things off by heart... But I do remember an awful lot of drawings...every week, we had to draw a picture of what it was and write underneath and I kept it real neat – so even though I only remember the lessons as being learning things off and saying the rosary and all those kind of things, it was still nice - parts of it.

Others also remembered a lot of **learning off by heart**, particularly prayers, with consequences in Annie's case for not knowing them. She said that 'if we didn't know them, we'd be sent home with a note just to make sure that we learned our prayers'. Sheena commented on what she felt was strictness and again had memories of learning off by heart, and said 'I didn't really enjoy it very

much'. This contrasted hugely with her memory of secondary school which was of discussion and a sense of openness, where 'the teacher was very open to what we had to say'. It may explain her initial reluctance to engage in college. She was unsure whether college would have that same openness or be more akin to her primary school experience. The fact that she knew that Marino had been a Christian Brothers' College may also have contributed to her reticence.

Participants commented on the amount of RE time in school that was used for sacramental preparation and other church activities. Goretti saw it as focused on sacramental preparation rather than on an RE that was broader than that. Gail spoke of visiting the church 'a lot', but appeared to affirm that connection saying about RE that 'it shouldn't just stand alone'. Both had positive memories of such a **strong church connection**, something rarely mentioned in the current Irish debate about the amount of school time being spent on sacramental preparation. Children may well be positively disposed to such preparation.

Secondary school RE also had for some students a Church connection. Jenny's experience of her Catholic Secondary School was very positive.

I loved secondary school and RE – always enjoyed it – I didn't have any exams in it – maybe that's why I felt no pressure... it was quite a religious school and we took part in lots of masses and they got the students involved... so I had a good experience... very positive...

While most participants had varying experiences of RE in Primary School, Jenny alone had experience in both the English and Irish systems. She speaks of a clear difference in approach. Nevertheless, she suggests that her learning came mostly from home.

...I also did RE in church in England – a Sunday school kind of a thing – my mam was heavily involved - so I suppose I'd a good experience of it from both home and school –slightly more from home since I think that was like, my main influence and what I learned most from... The English system was geared more towards active learning representative of art and music while the Irish system was definitely more talk and discussion....

Jan felt that the focus in her secondary school was on the school's Catholic ethos and raised the question of whether a Catholic upbringing, at school and at home, equates to an informed RE. She speaks of an RE that was much broader than that prescribed in the curriculum.

I was involved in organising school masses, various events throughout the year in relation to religious education... At home, I attended mass on a weekly basis so I feel my religious education was quite good. Whether or not it was as well informed as it should have been, I don't know, because people have the opinion that once you go to Mass, that's grand...

Jenny and Jan both felt that they learned from what was happening outside of the RE curriculum in school – in Jenny's case at home and in Jan's case in church related activities.

Some participants' memories of RE were connected to **significant teachers**, teachers who had an impact on them. Sadie's memory of one of her primary teachers was positive. She remembered details about content and being made to think about things, which may have provided a preparation for the kind of reflection which was part and parcel of the college RE course.

...I have a strong memory of my teacher... a bright classroom with big windows and outside a Cherry Blossom tree. I remember her reading... her classroom was always very calm... I have a vivid memory of this, and of saying the prayers and of her making us think about what we were saying – 'Bless the hands that made the food' – and she went through everywhere the food had come from and I couldn't get over how many hands it had passed through...

Sadie also had fond memories from secondary school, of discussions and of being listened to, particularly in regard to one of her favourite teachers.

...We hardly ever opened the book but spent hours discussing poetry... I remember him coming in one day and saying... 'to go forward you have to come back' and I remember just talking about that... I loved school... so much is learned through that situation, discussion - but... we were listened to as well.

Susie's memory, about RE being an important part of the day and a time for reflection, may have influenced her subsequent engagement with the college RE course.

...Religion was always an important part of the day. We always had prayers in the morning and at break times and after break and then at the end of the day... and we used to read stories... and it was always a time that you could reflect...

Mary's positive experience of RE may have been due to a teacher who was perhaps ahead of her time in putting an emphasis on active learning. This

appears to have affirmed Mary's subsequent conviction, that in teaching it is important 'to get the kids up and active'.

...my first experience would be of my teacher...a nun – and the experience was extremely positive – she was a lovely person ...the message she was getting across was that religion was something that you would always kind of have to hold ...I still remember the lessons ...even ones that I would teach now ...like the Good Samaritan ...she'd get us up and we'd act them out ...we're always told now to get the kids up and active... you remember by doing - and that was definitely her way of thinking and her way of teaching.

Gail's experience of RE in secondary school was hugely positive. She 'had some really really nice teachers in RE and teachers who really did care'. Mary's experience, with echoes of her primary school, held positivity towards the nuns who taught her and encouraged her 'to get involved'.

It is interesting how one seemingly insignificant encounter with a substitute teacher appeared to make a lasting impression on Goretti.

...she was completely different to anything we'd ever experienced before – it wasn't just reading the book – it wasn't just listening to a piece – it was singing and it was meditation... where you were brought on a journey... and she was just great in what she did – she didn't just tell stories from the bible, she would tell a story and relate it back to her own life...

The question of **exams** and their effect on RE was interesting. Annie felt that RE in secondary was exam-focused (echoing the primary school emphasis on learning off by heart), but with interesting elements, such as the study of world religions, saying that she 'found that kind of thing really interesting'. Like Annie, Susie also found the study of world religions very interesting. However, she lamented the fact that it was not seen or treated as an important subject if it wasn't being examined, saying 'I know people said that it was a waste of time'. Dan's experience was different. While he took RE as an exam subject for junior certificate, his leaving certificate experience, though not exam focused, was seen by him as holistic.

For 5th year... there were 6 RE teachers – and we had a module with each of them – so we had one that taught us about cults and new religious orders and the difference between the two – we had one talking about nature and spirituality... one week, we had people from Narcotics Anonymous... another week we'd a fella from Mountjoy jail in – you know, people from the edges of society – we had travellers in one week – that kind of a thing. That was good...

This was echoed by Ali, who described her later years in secondary school as 'preparing you for the world'.

Those positive memories were not across the board however, as evidenced by Ellie's experience of what Parker Palmer described as teachers losing heart and disconnecting from their students (Palmer 1998, p.17).

...in Secondary school, especially towards the last years, the teachers kind of gave up on it – we watched films where, it wasn't like we looked at it from any spiritual or religious perspective – they were just put on cos they were a good watch... I think it was because it just made life a little bit easier than just fighting with 2 or 3 outspoken people who just didn't want to participate...

4.4.2 Being a Student Teacher...

An analysis of the experience of participants in relation to their journey in terms of 'ongoing-ness', needs to explore their experience of being a student-teacher in college. While a case can be made for the college experience to have been explored already, under the two previous themes of 'particularity and innerness', nevertheless it requires analysis as part of the theme of 'ongoing-ness' also.

Mary had had a very positive experience of RE at primary and secondary school. For her, the essential difference in Marino was the shift from a church focus to a focus on the person herself.

...I think that in secondary school it was very much focused on – you go to mass, you do this, you do that... in Marino, it was very much ...part of the person... in the person themselves... brought out in the person... meditation... spiritual type things... that was different... and I enjoyed that aspect of it...

The initial experience of RE in college for many students was described by them as somewhat **strange**. This may have been because of the extra-rational aspects of the course described in some detail in the literature chapter (Lawrence 2012, p. 472), or because of the difference between RE in college and RE as they experienced it in primary and secondary school. Kasworm and Bowles describe the kinds of cognitive, sociocultural and emotional challenges that students can experience as a result of a transformative learning approach in higher education settings and it may well be that it is that movement 'beyond their comfort zone' that causes what participants describe as 'strangeness'.

Ideally, higher education offers an invitation to think, to be and to act in new and enhanced ways. However, these learning environments sometimes challenge individuals to move beyond their comfort zone of the known, of self and others; thus these learners may enter higher education experiencing discrepancies in beliefs, attitudes and understanding, and engaging in a new social environment with provocative values, ideas, and power dynamics. (Kasworm & Bowles 2012, p.389)

That movement beyond the comfort zone may have a connection to Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, that Débora Junker, writing about the implications of the concept for RE, believes can be applied to adult development as well as children's learning. She contends that adults 'engage in a lifelong process of learning and development' and that 'when members of a given community interact among themselves, multiple ZPDs can be stimulated simultaneously'.

This phenomenon creates opportunities for individuals to activate not only their own potential, but also, by collaborating with each other, to reach other levels of development otherwise impossible in isolation. In my view, faith communities could explore this experience more seriously by providing contexts for people to work beyond what they recognize as their individual ability and by helping them to discover collective gifts and cooperative possibilities. (Junker 2013, p.167-168)

While the RE course may or may not have provided contexts for people to work beyond their ability, it did appear to provide contexts that were beyond their comfort zone. Whether this was true or not for Ali, she was clear that her initial experience of RE in college was strange. She also noticed that much of the work concerned the community aspect of the group, what she described as being about 'us'.

Very strange ...totally not what I thought it was going to be. I thought it was going to be more like the other curriculum areas – this is what you're supposed to teach, this is how you do it. But it was more about 'us' in 1st year... there was the teaching element as well, but there was a lot about us and our development as well... it didn't always necessarily feel like it was about RE, but when you came out of it , you went. 'Ah yeah...that was where he was going with that'.

In the same vein, Jan described her initial experience of RE in college as being 'strange beyond belief'. She cited its unpredictability and spoke of needing to be 'in the moment' in order to benefit from it.

For the first few weeks we were just finding our feet... we really looked forward to it but we didn't know what we were looking forward to ...

Sheena was also in the 'strange' camp, describing her early experience of RE as 'mad' and 'random' and 'so different to other lectures'. She said that she didn't realise that she was learning 'loads'. She maintained that an engaged approach was needed, rather than merely copying text from powerpoint slides into a notebook, saying that 'you actually had to think'.

I loved it and I used to really look forward to the lectures cos you were doing something different – and you actually had to think – you didn't just have to read the slides and write them down...

Ellie found that the perceived lack of structure in RE, by comparison with other areas, left her unsure early on, until she saw what she called the 'long-term learning' in it. Annie described her initial experience of RE in college as positive but also as strange and lamented the lack of similarly active learning in her primary school.

It was strange – cos we were learning about things that were the same – but we were learning about how to teach them in ways that we hadn't been taught... the activities that we did ...were totally different to my experience in Primary School... I enjoyed the RE programme... I learned a lot from it...

The long-term aspect of an extra-rational approach to learning may be problematic. It takes time. Dan spoke of it 'taking a while' before RE started to make sense. He also hinted at the inner journey that is part of RE, the 'ongoing-ness' that is the subject of this part of the study.

I took a while for me to grasp the level – or should I say the levels... I know that an awful lot of it went over my head... then progressively as I got into it, it hit a point where it started to make sense... RE is more of an internal thing...

Goretti called her early experience of RE in college just that – an experience – and seemed to suggest that it required of the student a readiness to engage, where 'you went in and you didn't know what to expect'. But she also hinted at a potential difficulty for student teachers in terms of applying what had been learned in college in the classroom situation, particularly if they see from their own experience that in order to benefit from such an approach you need to be ready to engage.

I think my religious experience was a much better way of describing it than RE... it didn't feel like it was formally taught – it was an experience – you went in and you didn't know what to expect – but you came out

having gotten an experience...or having learned a lesson – for life... and it was totally active... it would be hard to put it into a classroom – and maybe the message wouldn't transfer as well to kids – but as an older student, it was great –and it was just that – an experience – and while we still got formal education, it wasn't taught in a black and white way...

In terms of 'ongoing-ness', Goretti suggested that there was a gradual change that led to a higher level of engagement, but was uncertain whether it was the course that was changing or she herself. She also seemed to be thinking ahead to her own practice and wondering if what she learned would 'transfer as well to kids'.

Ali felt that by third year she had a sense of what was happening in RE and certain expectations regarding the ritual nature of the beginning and end of sessions and space for reflection. But she also began to expect to be challenged in some way in the RE session.

...I never came out of RE going, 'I'm not really sure what that was about'. You might have come out going, 'I've something to think about', you know, with open-ended questions that might come back to you in a few weeks...

Gail had a sense of RE as a journey, that was not just about RE per se, but also about one's whole approach to teaching.

I think the whole course (*the BEd*) is very demanding of you...physically, emotionally... and I think RE was certainly a very welcome addition... it wasn't just about what you were going to teach the children – it was about what you were going to learn yourself along the way ...that you were on the journey... not just to help you in RE, but trying to help you probably in your approach to teaching altogether...

For Sadie, it wasn't just about RE and the teaching of RE. She felt noticed and understood during times of stress, particularly during TP (teaching practice).

... I liked that you always acknowledged the pressure we were under. That was important. I saw TP students on the bus this morning and remembered you saying to think about the classes you're going out to and all the wonderful stuff you bring to them. That made us feel great. There was no point then in worrying about it...

For Jan, RE was important to her in a time of bereavement and helped her to hold what was happening. It seemed to offer a space for students to work with such difficult or challenging issues.

... it just allowed things to flow... When my Nana died... I had never gone through something like that before. I don't think I would have either approached it or gotten through it in the same way, had I not had a year and a half of the religious education here...I genuinely think it helped me to be the person I was then or become the person I am now...

In Jan's second round interview, she went as far as maintaining that her experience of RE in college shaped her awareness of the world as a bigger place.

...I definitely think that the religious education that we had here shaped my awareness of the world being a bigger place than me... you learn to treat everyone with the same respect, every culture with the same respect, every religion with the same respect...

However, RE did not appear to automatically engage every student or every class grouping. With some groups, it took longer than others. This may or may not have been related to the issues discussed earlier of some students requiring a more rational approach, or a sub-group within a group requiring a more rational approach. Whatever the reason, participants were conscious of the lack of engagement from their own group, where that was an issue.

Annie belonged to a group that had what she called '**a strange dynamic**' and where there was some ambivalence towards whatever might be happening. She said that by third year she had lost her self-consciousness in the group and had a sense of something she called 'moving on'. At Annie's second round interview, she suggested that, for her, developing friendships within the group was the key to subverting that restricting dynamic. Sadie's understanding of this same group was that it wasn't the group that changed, but rather she herself, and others as individuals within it.

...I didn't really like the dynamic in the group early on but by the time they came to third year, I didn't really care what they thought any more... and I think that happened with a lot of people, so for that reason the group did actually change.

4.4.3 Being a Teacher of RE...

Participants spoke of **elements that impacted on their own practice** - elements of the RE course that they have brought into the classroom and other school contexts. During her first year teaching, Ali found her time for RE lessons

restricted but she still used elements of what she had experienced in college throughout the school day. It appears that the elements that most appealed to themselves as students have in turn been adapted by them as teachers.

...if you get to it twice a week in junior infants, that'll be it. But you can use other things constantly – mindfulness exercises, getting them out of their seats, into a circle....

Annie spoke at length about incorporating what she had learned into her classroom practice, beginning with her use of questions as an opportunity to reflect. Interestingly, while such a practice used to irritate her in college, she nevertheless seems to have seen it as a valuable learning opportunity. She also uses RE to get to know the children in a deeper way.

...I've changed my method of questioning... sometimes they'll ask me a question and I'll ask what they think before I answer... I would use songs... I learned to use religion as an opportunity to get to know the children ...to address things that might be going on in the classroom or how children might be feeling... almost suit the lessons to their needs...

In her second round interview, Annie spoke of activity and reflection as two aspects of RE that she liked in college and that she now incorporates into her own practice. Dan likewise has adapted material from the college course to suit his primary class, in particular journaling, where he facilitates the children's engagement with questions.

...I don't like them to answer the questions I ask... I say 'In your head, think about this'... I'll be able to see who thought about it by what they write in their journal... you can see from the journal that their responses can show huge difference

Sadie has included the 'welcome' and the breath-work. Even when it's difficult she perseveres because of her experience of it in college.

...I think of you every day when a child comes in late and I just say 'welcome!' because if there was anything I took away, it was that... and it's something so small but just so lovely to be told, even to just be told 'welcome!' ...I trust it because I experienced it... I tell them to feel the ground with their feet and try to do breathing with them even though it's hard to do...

Mary uses a centerpiece with candles and a focusing symbol, just as she experienced it in college. She also remarks on the importance of making connections with the children, again something that she herself had experienced.

...I've built up really strong relations with some of the kids in my class...and I feel that they could come and talk to me about anything... I think that's really important... but that's what we were taught in Marino – the door was always open for us...

Sadie seemed enthusiastic about the possibilities of bringing ritual into the classroom or bringing the classroom outside to the ritual and clearly remembered such times in college, while Ellie appeared to acknowledge the risk involved in the initial stages in such work, again reflecting the 'ongoing-ness' of this approach.

... it's so long-term, that, in the beginning you might not see where you are going ... how you could awaken these things in children... because you tackled it in such a different way - like clowning... or going out singing carols outside... it encouraged you to think in a different way when you're going for RE...

Jan reflected on how the RE course in college impacted on her **teaching in a multi-denominational school**, perhaps by encouraging open-mindedness and acceptance of others. In her second round interview, she elaborated further on that.

...to an extent, I still am ignorant of other religions but I love asking the children about them and I tell them things about my religion and we all do different things...if anything, I think we were even more prepared because it wasn't based on just – 'this is the Learn Together curriculum and this and that' ...it was much more reflective, including journaling on what we did and taking out what we did from that.

Jenny was also convinced that the skills learned in RE in college were 'completely' transferable into the multi-denominational system, while Gail said that the RE course prepared her for 'real teaching'. Like Jan and Jenny, Gail spoke about her experience in multi-denominational schools, again mentioning open-mindedness.

I suppose it prepared me for real teaching... teaching the 'Learn Together' Curriculum ...there's no real book or anything... It's very open and for some people that's scary but from my experience of college, I suppose it made me more open-minded about everything and that you can have ceremonies and rituals very easily if you put a bit of time into it.

Students seemed to incorporate aspects of the RE course into their practice, even **when not teaching RE**. In her first round interview, Sheena was teaching in language support but had found ways to bring her experience of the RE

course into the classroom, including the welcome, which she said the children loved. Likewise, Susie has been using some of what she learned in the RE course with the children she is teaching in learning support, mentioning meditation and reflective conversation in particular. By the time of her second round interview, Ellie was in learning support and as a result her use of the RE course material was more restricted, but she had nevertheless found a very important use for meditation in an after-school activity.

...it does have a part to play in the Rainbows programme ...for children after school who have suffered a bereavement, and ...some children who are disturbed and the meditation and social skills stuff from RE comes into that...

Lortie's thesis about teachers ending up teaching as they had been taught in spite of their college education (which he describes as having a 'lack of potency' which does 'not offset' earlier influences), seemed to be under threat from some of these research participants who would beg to differ with him (Lortie 2002, p. 81). Ali felt that she always imagined that she would teach RE the way that she herself had been taught, but that following the RE course she saw 'so much scope for other things'. Ellie also felt strongly about the importance of **not teaching the way she herself had been taught in primary school**.

...before I started in here, I would have taught it like I'd learnt it... but I do teach it in a completely different way than I learnt it... it's much more about the children... it's the one subject that you can just do... something completely different... and I think the way you taught the course reflects that...

Illustrating the nature of 'ongoing-ness', Ellie's comment is reflective of the hope that on the journey from student to teacher, the emphasis moves from what she has learned and how, to what she should teach and how. The 'how' is of particular importance here.

Framed against the theme of 'ongoing-ness', I have analysed the participants' experience of RE, beginning at primary and secondary school, through college and into their initial experiences as teachers in primary school classrooms. The theme of 'ongoing-ness' is not confined to this section of the analysis however and the previous themes of 'particularity' and 'inner-ness' reflect this.

'Particularity' might be termed the epistemological journey of participants through teacher education RE, being concerned with their experience of the

'externals', the visible aspects of the RE course. 'Innerness' might similarly be termed the ontological journey, being concerned with what was happening for participants in terms of the inner life, the invisible aspects.

4.5 Two Portraits

Portraits of two of the research participants, framed against the three themes described above, now illustrate in a very real way how the RE course was experienced.

4.5.1 Sheena's Story

Sheena's early reluctance to engage with the RE course seemed to stem from her experience of RE in primary school. She said that she had been nervous about coming to a Catholic college, that it might be 'like my primary school was... learn off all these things and then you'll be a better person'. Or that it would be a question of 'who knows the most Bible stories... or who goes to mass most often'. Her fear was soon alleviated however.

...it wasn't like that... it was – spiritual is probably the right word...it was great and it was spiritual and it was about you developing as well – not just about you knowing a lot about religion... it was about everyone in the room...individually, and as a group, developing as well... everyone got more into what we were doing in the lectures ...gradually everyone got used to it... maybe some people had it from the first week... I don't know – I didn't...as I said, I was more nervous – but that was possibly to do with going to a new thing as well... people...were really eager to go... you wouldn't skip religion... RE I mean... and they weren't shy about doing things that previously they might have thought was silly...and they'd kind of talk about them as well and you wouldn't be shy to talk about them either... it was good...

In this extract Sheena seems to hint that she was not alone in an initial reticence to engage with RE (ongoing-ness). She also refers to 'what we were doing in the lectures' (particularity), and students' engagement with the 'spiritual' (inner-ness). We now turn our attention to those themes in her portrait.

Particularity

In regard to the set-up of the RE sessions, Sheena commented that she loved the quiet time at the beginning and that 'there was never a rude start to lectures... it gave you a chance to get into it'. She liked the mindfulness exercises as she had previous experience of meditation in secondary school. This enabled her to engage with it in college straight away. She had also taken my custom of welcoming latecomers and used it in her own classroom.

Sheena liked the reasoning behind 'asking the question' and used it with her own class also. She had been faithful to the journaling in college, insisting that it was 'properly reflective'. She had attempted to continue journaling during her first year teaching. She also appreciated the freedom around sharing stories.

...it was good – it was nice to hear what other people had to say, and you have a chance to talk if you want...but you don't have to talk – which is good – because sometimes you might not want to... or you might not have anything to say... and some people just don't like to talk in the group as well... it's important... and they can kind of think about it for themselves...

Sheena was very clear about the importance of the non-didactic approach. My habit of writing a verse connected to each RE session epitomised this for her. Likewise the silent times of prayer, which she called 'real prayers', seem to have been important.

I'd say the biggest thing for me was it wasn't pushed on you... that was important for me... it wasn't all mass and prayers... there were prayers... but they were real prayers – they weren't prayers you'd learned off, say, since you were 4 yrs old and they just weren't true but you said it cos you felt you had to say it... they were real prayers... when you thought about it, they actually meant something to you...and when you wrote the poems... they were really nice...

Even in regard to going outside, Sheena referred to feeling unpressured as a good thing.

We were outside a lot... it was good... I'll never forget it... again, everyone was afforded a chance to speak if you wanted to – and if you didn't, you could partake without speaking, which is good... it was really nice...

When asked about particular memories of the course, Sheena thought for a while before offering hers. It was one day when we were outside and her parents walked through the grounds and were recognized.

... I think we all felt really welcome and there was a big effort made to get to know us – like, one day – you probably don't remember this – but my Da walked by while we were down in a group in the field... with my Mammy and it was kind of nice – cos you knew who we were –because of the way the lecture was set out ...you obviously made an effort as well... it was nice to know that the lecturer knew that it was you... and it made you feel, well, I'm actually learning something and there's a reason... that you weren't just student number***....who was here because you were doing a degree and that was it....

Sheena said that if she were teaching the RE course, she would teach it in the same way. She then went on to say that she felt that the variety of elements and approaches ensured that everyone could find something in it, citing the example of one of her friends.

I think there was a lot of thought put into it ...there was always a song or a poem as well as the meditation as well as the talk – I think that was good ...some days the song would kind of get to you and the talking wouldn't for whatever type of a day you'd had...and other times it would be the poem that you might have read through afterwards or the prayer that you read through that might have got to you ...I think that's good, having the different approaches to the same thing – cos you're getting to everyone that way....I know one of the people in particular, loved the songs more than anything else – and it was always the songs –and he'd be talking afterwards kind of saying ' do you know that song we were listening to...do you know what was in that....' - that got to him more than the other stuff...which was good...

Inner-ness

Sheena remembered certain aspects of the course affecting her spiritually. Rilke's notion of 'living your way into the answers' stood out for her. Sheena herself used the word 'spiritual' when she was searching for words to describe the 'inner-ness' of the RE course.

...it was great and it was spiritual and it was about you developing as well – not just about you knowing a lot about religion... it was about everyone in the room... individually, and as a group, developing as well...

She recognised ritual's importance in terms of closure.

...you were going off to something totally different once you left the lecture and it was good to have a kind of a conclusion to it – that you felt it just didn't filter out... which was good...

Sheena felt that mindfulness worked best in the large group session.

I thought the meditation worked better in the amharclann – the two minutes quiet time – because you were kind of in your own little space...

As previously mentioned, she had experienced mindfulness in secondary school and loved it in college and admitted missing that reflective space now as a practising teacher. At the first interview, Sheena was teaching in learning support and was looking forward to having her own class the following year. By

the time of the follow-up interview, she had her own class and did indeed practise mindfulness daily.

Ongoing-ness

In regard to her experience of RE before College, Sheena commented on what she felt was strictness and had memories of learning off by heart. She said that she 'didn't really enjoy it very much'.

My primary school was very religious and you had to learn all these religion things at night and you had to stand up and say them and if you couldn't say them you got in trouble.

This contrasted hugely with her memory of secondary school which was of discussion, where 'the teacher was very open to what we had to say'. Nevertheless, as previously mentioned, she was still nervous about RE in college. This explained her initial reluctance to engage.

So I was a bit nervous about coming to college. I knew the Christian Brothers had been there and I didn't know if we were going to be learning the Bible off or whatever and get in trouble if we didn't know it but it was never like that. It was that you engaged as much as you were able to engage. It changed as well. At the start I probably listened a lot. I didn't really say anything... because I needed time to decide. Like, we had English and you went and they said this is how you teach phonics and you had to think more in RE and I liked that it wasn't pushed because I needed time to come to terms with it myself.

In terms of those early days in college, Sheena was in the 'strange' camp, describing her early experience of RE as 'mad' and 'random' and 'so different to other lectures'. She said that she didn't realise that she was learning 'loads'. She maintained that an engaged approach was needed.

I loved it and I used to really look forward to the lectures cos you were doing something different – and you actually had to think – you didn't just have to read the slides and write them down...

In her second round interview, Sheena elaborated on what it was that was different.

...what we did was more – you had to sit back and think and no one was going to do it for you. No one was going to tell you what anything was or what the right thing was. But sure, you didn't tell us what anything was (ha, ha...) so you kind of...came to it or you didn't. I don't know if everyone did. That was their business really.

This comment again raises the possibility that for some students RE may not have worked. But for those who were able to engage, it appears to have contributed epistemologically (via particular elements) and ontologically (by valuing their inner lives) to their ongoing development as teachers and as people. Like Sheena, Jenny's story is a good example of such engagement.

4.5.2 Jenny's Story

Jenny's story is quite different to Sheena's. She had a very positive experience of RE before college in both English and Irish systems and also in terms of what she identified as the influence of home. Jenny's story demonstrates the versatility of the RE course in terms of its application in multidenominational settings. She is convinced that what is important is not the content of the RE course, but rather the process. Her story illustrates that conviction. From the beginning, Jenny had a positive experience of the RE course in college and had no sense of the strangeness mentioned by others.

...it was a mixture of... active learning and different things... we were outside and it wasn't just talk and discussion... and the focus on the ritual and that are things I really enjoyed...

Particularity

In regard to how the RE sessions were set up, Jenny commented not only on her experience of them, but also on how she has adapted and applied them to her own classroom. She endorsed the quiet time, the centerpiece and the use of music. She felt the music set the tone and often carried the message of the session and had incorporated these elements into her classroom practice.

...in most other subjects or lectures you don't get... that time to wait... I think it makes a huge difference then to anything that comes after because... you're volunteering to give your time... everyone has an opportunity to slowly come in, focus on the centre-piece, have a think... leave whatever was going on... and that's again something I've carried into the classroom – when my children come in, I have music on – and there's two minutes just to leave everything behind just before we move forward... not shouting at them when they come in... and I think they respect the fact that they're getting time...

Jenny was committed to journaling, appreciating particularly that it wasn't being assessed. It was a 'true journal'.

...it gave me a chance to reflect on the experiences after the experiences... it was your own... you could say what you wanted – I think that was lovely... the questions then got me thinking about other things... I miss the journaling ...I think it was a deeper level than just information... it was more positive... you took ownership of it... it wasn't an assignment... it was something you enjoyed...

In regard to asking the question and never answering one, Jenny also strongly endorsed this element. For her it was all about the question.

...what I really took from that was the importance of the question – not really the answer... it really did focus you to the question... the fact that you weren't going to answer... it keeps it out there...

Jenny appeared to have a well-developed sense of empathy with others when they were sharing stories. She had a sense that each one's memory was 'obviously very special to them' and described their memories as 'vivid'. She also felt that what was important was that the students had their stories heard. It may have been special because of the deep listening that took place.

...I remember hearing everybody's stories and they were all so different – but everybody remembered them so vividly... it was obviously very special to them... we had the same experience but in such different ways... it would have been a shame just to write it down and never to have shared it...that's...maybe where the importance was... to hear the story...

Jenny spoke about being present in the moment and being present to the children in class as the 'biggest' thing she had learned in the RE course. When probed further about this she said that it had come from her experience of the non-didactic approach.

I just always felt that you were present to our lectures and I'm not saying that anybody else wasn't... I really felt that... to have somebody be really present to you, helps you to be present for others... where the fact that there was waiting time, I never felt that anything was rushed... we were there and we were sharing our experiences....

Previously, I have written of Jenny bringing clowning into her own classroom and of how it was a special memory of the RE course for her. She also remembered the retreat as being special.

...I loved the retreat... It was different ...and there was a decision to be made about whether you could afford the time... A big memory was when we were at the top of the mountain ...doing our ritual with string... I'd never been up a mountain before... and I'd say a lot of people hadn't... there was a kind of mood with it...very special...

When asked to suggest improvements to the course, Jenny jokingly commented that there might be 'plagiarism' issues, as she felt that she would be inclined to 'copy' what I had done with her group..

I think I'd probably do a lot of what you did... I'd try to be present to them – I'd try to get a sense of the group I was with and see what they needed... Another thing – I do some yoga and tai chi and oddly enough, it reminded me of your lectures ...

However, she also wanted to emphasise the importance of the reflective space offered in the RE course, giving a strong endorsement of its impact on her inner life, which leads us towards her insights about 'inner-ness'.

...I feel like you ticked every box – we had rituals, we had music, we went outside, we were inside... if you experience what we experienced as a year group... it really inspires you to do different but similar things... giving people time as well was a huge thing... I feel for me it was really important – and just important for your own self ...and to make sure that's intact ... and that you're in touch with your own spirituality....

Inner-ness

Jenny's insistence that the course put her in touch with her own spirituality surfaced more than once in her interview. She said that she felt that the experience of the RE course left her with 'an education in her own spirituality' and that she would advocate spirituality as part of professional development.

I think definitely to teach about your own spirituality as well as teaching others... and your own kind of RE and continuing RE and participation is probably the best way... I miss your lectures, because they were really kind of focused on my life and not everything else we were doing... I feel, even if there was continuing professional development in developing your own spirituality, I feel that would really help everything else...

Furthermore, she felt that it was important for her as a teacher to have that kind of inner work done before going into the classroom.

I feel for me it was really important... important for your own self which I think you bring to the teaching of religion – whatever religion it is – you bring a lot of yourself – your own values and beliefs – and to make sure that's intact – that's your responsibility and you've a responsibility to the

children to make sure you're coming in with a positive view on things – and that you're in touch with your own spirituality...

Jenny remembered two particular rituals and her experience of them.

...the first one was we walked... to the trees just at the front... we just stood around and we had our prayer time out there with everyone holding hands around the space... the second one I remember was where we used the palms and we dipped them in the water and we blessed the person to our left and to our right. I remember them – I don't know why – above any others... I enjoyed them... and I feel that initially I found it strange... I'd be quite a quiet person... when you do something, and it is a bit maybe strange or different, that it takes you out of your comfort zone...

Jenny's sense of there being something valuable in the RE course did not diminish over time, and again has carried over into an utter conviction of the need for RE to engage with the deep exigencies that children experience.

I think for me that the actual realisation of the religious education I had comes after and when you have all these things in place, the learning just seems to come. I think people sometimes worry too much about the need to know x, y and z... that's the easy part in my opinion... I think that children are so bright and they pick that up... the deep stuff that teachers shy away from and they shouldn't because that's what children are good at in my opinion and it's from there that everything else will come...

Ongoing-ness

As mentioned previously, Jenny's experience of primary and secondary school and also both the English and Irish systems as well as a strong religious home influence, appeared to leave her positively disposed to engagement with the RE course. She has adapted and applied what she has experienced on the RE course and incorporated it into her own practice.

For example, she felt she learned something valuable from the experience of ritual both in terms of the unexplained symbolism and of ritual's power to engage. She then elaborated on her use of ritual in the classroom and its positive effect on the children's behaviour.

... often, I'll have an object and I won't tell them about it. I'll let the children tell me how they feel about it... they love speaking and sharing things with each other... it even seems to help with their behaviour... I think the children are more comfortable with each other... whatever they said was valued by everybody and respected...especially when the

rituals became more fun that they had enough respect for me to not take it too far...there was always respect for others there, which I loved...

Returning to the question of ritual in her second-round interview, Jenny demonstrated that she has also adopted a non-didactic approach in her classroom.

...ritual is kind of neutral – it gets to the essence of what you're trying to teach ...when children take ownership of it and do it themselves, it just takes on a new level. I can steer them but even the ideas for the rituals can come from the children, from things that happen in class. It's all quite natural. The children enjoy it and I think they take the most from it. I always took most from our rituals and I tried to think 'well, what did I like?' and 'what did I find good?'...

Another good example of Jenny's ongoing development was her ability to apply what she had learned in the multid denominational context in which she was teaching.

I was able to apply what I had learned completely to it... I suppose it shows the quality of the course ...it's completely transferable ...the methods used – and even the rituals...many things I learned ...thinking hats ...ritual ... music ...sacred space

Jenny's story is one of total engagement and reflection on her own experience. In the RE course, she found what was meaningful for her, adapted it for the children in her class and saw the 'ongoing-ness' of it all as 'all quite natural'.

The two portraits that have been drawn in this section are of participants who came to college with varying experiences of RE in primary and secondary school. They began the college RE course with varying levels of engagement. They became engaged students and have become outstanding teachers with heart for the work of teaching and heart for the children. Jenny's closing comment in her second-round interview could just as easily be applied to Sheena.

...I absolutely love going in every morning because I absolutely love the job and I don't think I would be doing justice to the children if I didn't. And someone said that that's what's obvious about me that I love what I do. It's the only decision that I ever made that was 100% right, doing teaching. And especially when I'm doing something that I love in the classroom. I love teaching RE. The children pick up on that. They know that I'm so interested and I get so excited and it's infectious. When you're interested and you're confident in what you're doing, well that's infectious too. I think it's really important that the teachers are really confident in

what they're doing and happy, because that's what the children pick up on...

4.6 Conclusion – Answering the Research Question

The goal of analysis is to understand core concepts and to discover themes that describe the world you have examined. Your analysis is done when you can put together a theory that answers your research question and that would be accepted by your interviewees as an accurate depiction of their world and thoughts. (Rubin & Rubin 2005, p.245)

My research question is:

'In what ways, personally and professionally, have teacher education students experienced a pre-service RE course, which recognizes the importance of a focus on their inner lives?'

In this findings chapter I have looked at how this research question has been answered and I believe that the narrative therein would be accepted by my research participants as an accurate depiction of their world and thoughts.

The analysis has been framed *generally* against the three themes of 'particularity', 'inner-ness' and 'ongoing-ness'. The theme of 'particularity' relates to the participants' epistemological journey, as it is concerned with how concrete elements of the course were experienced personally and professionally by participants. The theme of 'inner-ness' relates to the participants' ontological journey, as it is concerned with how participants experienced the space provided by the course for 'inner' work. The theme of 'ongoingness' relates to the total RE journey of participants from primary and secondary school to college and into their teaching lives. The analysis has also been framed *specifically* in relation to the portraits of two research participants. Their stories illustrate each of the themes and also help answer the research question in a very real way.

In terms of answering the research question, what is clear from the findings of the research is that the participants experienced as life-giving and nourishing the created and creative space that was the ground and foundation of this pre-service RE course, with its focus on their inner lives, in three ways – in particularity, inner-ness and ongoing-ness.

In terms of particularity, the elements of the RE course were experienced by students as a life-giving and nourishing part of their epistemological journey. In terms of inner-ness, the space provided by the course for the flourishing of their inner lives was experienced by students as a life-giving and nourishing part of their ontological journey. Finally, students experienced the ongoing-ness of RE as an important stage of their self-development at a particular phase of their ongoing lifelong journey.

However, it is also clear from the findings of this research study that the theme of 'inner-ness' has emerged as an umbrella theme. The particularity of the elements of the RE course and the participants' ongoing developmental journey in which the RE course was seen as important, both contributed to that 'inner-ness' in nourishing the inner life of students.

That the participants appear to have experienced the course in such a positive way, may in fact explain the rather overwhelmingly positive annual course evaluations that were part of my original rationale for conducting this research. This chapter has opened up the ground for a much more robust and fuller discussion of the findings in the next chapter, where the centrality of the theme of 'inner-ness' will be clearly stated.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

The emphasis in the previous chapter was on a straightforward reporting of findings illustrated by examples of participants' voices and subjected to an interpretive analysis. The balance in this chapter will now shift towards discussion. It will attempt to answer the research question in the light of the findings in the previous chapter. It will also discuss the implications of these findings for practice and future research in the broader context of teacher education and RE in teacher education (including my own practice). Parker Palmer suggests that the deep learning of any discipline takes place at the intersection between the little story and the larger story. This discussion chapter will attempt to do something similar in terms of bringing the little story of the research study into that larger context.

We can evoke the spirituality of any discipline by teaching in ways that allow the "big story" told by the discipline to intersect with the "little story" of the student's life. Doing so not only brings up personal possibilities for connectedness but also helps students learn the discipline more deeply. Learning does not happen when the subject is disconnected from the learner's life. (Palmer 1998/1999, p.3)

In the case of this research study, the little story has been the story of the experience of RE for a group of teacher education students in a particular place and time. The larger story concerns the education and specifically the RE of students in pre-service teacher education and the importance of a focus on their inner lives, so that their learning is connected to their lives. However, as in the case of Palmer's paradoxical tension where he suggests that the teaching space should honour the 'little' stories of the students and the 'big' stories of the disciplines and tradition (Palmer 1998, p.74) and in the light of my wondering about which should in fact be the 'big' stories, the question remains about whether the *findings* may actually be the 'big' story in this case. The central place of 'inner-ness' and the importance of inner-life work for teacher education students that has emerged in this research study would seem to support the view that those findings may indeed be the 'big' story.

This chapter makes it clear that the students who participated in this research study provided rich data with regard to the variety of ways in which they experienced the RE course, both personally and professionally. Wellington has put forward the view that ‘the sights of educational research should be set realistically but not apologetically’ (Wellington 2000, p.182). He suggests that it can ‘provide illumination and insight into situations, events, issues, policies and practices in education at all levels’, that it can ‘show important connections and correlations’, that it can be a ‘critical commentator on initiatives and developments in education’ and that it can make education better ‘even if this happens by a slow osmotic process’ (Wellington 2000, p.182-183). This discussion chapter will endeavour to point out some ways in which this research study might contribute to the field of teacher education and RE in teacher education, even if it were to happen by just such a slow osmotic process.

The findings of this research project may not be confined to RE in teacher education. Research participants have pointed out, that it may be an important part of the overall professional development of teacher education students, so that as teachers and future teachers, we might bring ourselves ‘more fully to each moment, learning, acting, and teaching not merely as if *our* life depended on this but *all* of life’ (Glazer 1999, p.249). Although such sentiments may seem like wishful thinking, nevertheless there is still the hope, that as student teachers carry what they have learned into the classroom, the lives of the children will be enriched. Both Sheena’s and Jenny’s work in school already seems to be impacting not only on the children but on those around them. What difference it might make into the future however is as yet unknown.

5.2 Structuring the Discussion – ‘Inner-ness’ at the Centre

The findings were framed *generally* against the three themes of ‘particularity’ (how the particular elements of a particular approach in a particular pre-service RE course were experienced), ‘inner-ness’ (how the RE course impacted on the inner life of pre-service teacher education students) and ‘ongoing-ness’ (how the course was experienced as part of an ongoing journey in RE) and

specifically in relation to the portraits of two research participants, whose stories illustrate each of the themes in a very real way.

The structure of the discussion chapter will mirror that of the findings, except that the discussion will broaden those three themes out into a larger context and clarify the central place of 'inner-ness' therein.

In this way, the little story of the findings will be allowed to intersect with the bigger story of the education and specifically the RE of pre-service teacher education students.

'Particularity' will be discussed in terms of **the inner life as curriculum content** - what students are taught and how – not in the sense of syllabus material or subject content material but rather in terms of the process and the elements of the practice that students engage with.

'Inner-ness' will be discussed in terms of **the inner life for professional identity** – the development of students' professional identity and how RE is valued as an important aspect of that development.

'Ongoing-ness' will be discussed in terms of **the inner life as personal story** – how past experience and future practice are viewed through the prism of the RE course.

All three themes will also be discussed in relation to the two profile participants' similar and contrasting experiences of the RE course.

5.3 The Inner Life as Curriculum Content

This title is derived from the first theme to emerge from the analysis of the data, the theme of 'particularity'. At interview, when participants were questioned about the elements of the RE course, they suggested that certain elements experienced by them in RE were particularly significant. In what became a case of the tangible and material facilitating the intangible and 'other', in different ways and for different participants, the curriculum content or course material enabled and valued an inner life experience, which was in turn and in different ways valued by participants.

RE sessions began with a **particular set-up**. The set-up was an attempt to create a learning space in the room, a created and creative space. In the literature review the creation of such a space was seen as connected to the paradoxical tensions suggested by Palmer (Palmer 1998, p.74) and Groen as creating the conditions where 'deep shifts of ongoing spiritual transformation' may be experienced by the learners (Groen 2008, p.202). Among the significant facets of the set-up was the *silence* in which an RE session would begin, the *centrepiece* as a symbolic focus for the session and the place of *music and song*, which would often follow or sometimes even replace the silent time.

The findings seem to suggest that participants were both engaged and empowered by **silence** and a deliberate slowing down of the opening of the session. The kinds of difficulties encountered by Flanagan et al in their project aimed at introducing mindfulness practices into Irish schools (Flanagan et al 2012, p.61-76), suggest that some teachers need to be convinced of the importance of such slowing down. That some students seem to have experienced the same kind of difficulty with the slow beginning may have been hinted at by Ali, who spoke of her irritation with those students who were slow to come to silence.

Perhaps it was because the **centrepiece** was rarely explained, thus retaining its symbolic power, that participants mentioned how it deepened their reflection. Or it may have been the case that the space 'to discover newness there' is what allowed the 'symbol speak' (Slee 1992, p.55). It may also be the case however that those who had difficulty with an extra-rational approach would also have

had difficulty with the non-explanation of the centrepiece, unlike Mary who saw the centrepiece as really important and always *'eye-catching ...and it really did reflect either straight to the lesson or a little bit abstract where you had to think about it'*. Mary's insight brings Emily Dickenson to mind – 'Tell the truth but tell it slant, success in circuit lies' – a line often used to explain the workings of a parable as a symbolic story. The importance of the symbolic is beautifully described by Mark Patrick Hederman.

Symbols are their own intractable reality, uncontrollable in terms of epistemology's bridle and bit. And yet they are there to show us a vastness and a possibility way beyond the compass of our mental capacities. They constitute a language, they present a structure, they offer an understanding which we must renounce our limited mindset to engage. If we are to enter the world to which they offer access we have to strip ourselves of the armour, the equipment, the paraphernalia of conquering explorers and sit down patiently to watch, to wait, to attend, to listen (Hederman 2007, p.95).

However, it is always a risk to allow students to sit patiently and engage with the power of the symbolic or, as Hederman says, to watch, wait, attend and listen. That silence was seen by some as a meditative time or a time for waiting and wondering about what was to follow but it was also seen as part of a democratic classroom and was considered as essential to full engagement in the RE session. *'Because you let everyone go silent, it meant that everyone was ready and willing to be involved'* was how Annie described it, while Goretti spoke of using the same strategy in her classroom with the children. She saw it as *'being treated as an equal'*. Jenny concurred with both, describing what happened as *'volunteering to give your time'*. She said that her experience was that *'everyone has an opportunity to slowly come in... leave whatever was going on before outside'* and that she has also carried this strategy into her own classroom.

The place of **music and song** is recognised in RE programmes in primary schools, but often neglected at higher levels of education. This is in spite of the power of artistic expression for adults which, as Lawrence suggests, 'offers the potential to expand our knowledge and understanding in new and exciting ways' (Lawrence 2012, p.483). Participants suggested that music and song had a power beyond the songs themselves which seemed to add further to the symbolic nature of the set-up. Mary offered a stunning example of that power. She believed that a particular song had produced a breakthrough in the strange

dynamic that she had experienced in her group until then and that the lyrics about changing had in fact been taken to heart in the group.

The particular set-up deemed significant by participants may offer a strategy for the engagement of students at third level and beyond. Rachel Remen demonstrates how she has brought a similar contemplative space to her work in spirituality and holistic education with medical students (Remen 1999, p.35-47). Perhaps the facets of the set-up of an RE session that participants deemed significant, such as silence, music and song and the centrepiece, ought not be confined to the domain of RE alone, but may in fact have a role to play in the engagement of students in other disciplines and at other levels.

Particular elements of the course that were deemed significant included *journaling, asking the question, and sharing stories.*

In regard to **journaling**, it is arguable that the 'learning journal', which has become a commonplace instrument in third level, cannot hope to be authentic, due to it being submitted for assessment. The contrast between writers like Pavlovich, who is positive about reading students' journals (Pavlovich 2007, pp.292-293), and Ghaye who questions the ethical dilemmas around safety, bias and privacy (Ghaye 2007, pp.157-158), ensures that such an argument will continue. Journaling, which Progoff insists contributes to deepening the level of experience (Progoff 1992, p.7), was engaged with in a variety of ways by participants, as befits a 'one size does not fit all' approach.

In this research study, participants have made it clear that they wouldn't have liked their journal to be assessed. Mary said that she liked that it wasn't compulsory or '*forced*'. Some journaled about everything, others only about '*big*' things, others as reflection or even therapy and some not at all, at least not in a written format. It must be noted that those who did not journal perhaps because the journal was not going to be collected, may in fact have missed out on an important learning experience. However, had it been collected, the journal might have been written solely with the lecturer in mind and perhaps lacking the kind of authentic engagement attested to be some participants. Such enforced journaling would probably not have been able to tap into what Tacey described

as 'something more fundamental than thinking which we might call the intelligence of the heart' (Tacey 2006, p.208). The RE course journalling was directed towards feeling and intuition. Susie, for example, saw it as a journey of self-discovery that left her *'thinking about things you probably wouldn't think about if you weren't part of RE'*.

'Asking the question' and never answering it, is an attempt to do justice to the need for RE to treasure the mystery of it all, to 'ponder the imponderable' (Nash & Swaby 2011, p.116). Parker Palmer believes that it is important to allow the tension created by an unanswered question to be a creative tension, a creative tension described in complexity science as 'far from equilibrium' (Cilliers 1998, p.4), where the classroom becomes a creative space and 'students can listen to their own experience, to each other, and to the subject at hand – not merely to the authority of the teacher' (Palmer 2003, p.82). Maria Harris proposes that 'the place where the learner is ...is the place of the question' (Harris 1991, p.174). Paying homage to Rilke's approach to 'living the question', the strategy known as 'asking the question' both irritated and stimulated participants in equal measure. However, it has been adopted by participants from both camps as a classroom strategy, even by those who professed to be irritated by it at RE sessions. Ali appreciated the creative tension, even in her own classroom where she says that it's a gift *'to ask the question and not give the answer... even now in the classroom... there's hundreds of questions that can just be left...'* Gail suggested that it is a strategy that should be used in all subjects as it allows the learning to emerge from the children themselves. Cognisant of those who have difficulty with an extra-rational approach however, it is most likely that such a strategy would not be used by them in their own classrooms.

Lange writes that one of the ways in which a learning sanctuary is created is by facilitating the kinds of conversation from the heart that promote relationship between the participants, something that 'honours participants; creates space for compassion and hope on the life journey; models relations of equality, responsiveness, interconnectedness, and depth; and engages the whole person' (Lange 2009, p.201). The significance that participants attached to **the sharing of stories** seemed to bear that out. The stories themselves were not of huge significance, but the sharing and caring was an important part of the

group's learning about individual members as they opened the students to 'exploring stories of experience fundamentally connected with their closely held assumptions, which may be rarely or never told' and did indeed 'prompt authentic dialogue and contribute to meaning making' (Tyler & Swartz 2012, p.466). Ellie spoke of the experience of sharing Confirmation Day stories, for example, as '*connecting*' them as a group while Gail saw it as developing empathy for others. Sheena and Dan were unable to say what it was that made that particular RE session different or special but that it was a memorable learning experience. Their response may point to variation in the impact of this particular element in the RE session.

Participants also considered the **particular approach** to be significant. Key to this was that the approach was seen as *non-didactic*. Tacey says that this can involve a lecturer taking a risk with their own control and authority over the group, where 'the teacher has to play lightly with his or her authority, and take risks with it, because to some extent the authority of the teacher stands in the way of the intuitive process' (Tacey 2006, p.210). Carl Rogers' change 'from being a teacher and evaluator, to being a facilitator of learning' is described as happening very gradually as he began to trust his students. He claimed that it led to 'profound interaction' (Rogers 1983, p.26).

The findings seem to suggest that such an approach may bear dividends in regard to the quality of experience that students have in college. Participants such as Annie spoke of having a sense of there being '*no pressure*', while Sadie saw RE as '*never pushed*' on them and that that was what made it so effective. Susie talked about there being '*no barriers*' in RE and of having no fear of '*speaking and participating*'. Goretti said that RE was '*probably the only subject in which you're not being taught how to teach it and instead you learn from your own experiences and you build a way and teach it in a way that's for you*'.

While some participants pointed to the lecturer as a factor, on closer inspection it was what the lecturer did that made the difference but also what the lecturer didn't do. Gail described that as non-judgmental caring, an essential part of what she considered '*an upbringing in RE*'. While many students would have experienced the non-didactic approach as freeing, it is worth noting that this

approach may have been confusing for some students who have just emerged from the Irish secondary school system. This could also have been a contributory factor to the initial strangeness experienced by some students in RE sessions.

When asked about **particular memories**, participants spoke of *going outside*, *clowning*, *death and hope* and the *third year retreat*. These were stand-out moments, which produced the kind of engagement that Garrett asserts comes from designing creative class activities (Garrett 2011, p.9). They were not all joyful times however, as they included a session on death and hope, identified by Julian Stern as a defining part of RE. Stern insists that RE is made more inclusive by being able to be in dialogue with such challenging issues (Stern 2010, p.14). The findings seem to suggest that perhaps memorable moments such as clowning and retreats could form part of college courses at all levels. Howden makes the case for the importance of team-building activities and sees them as memorable because they are 'different from what has become commonplace' (Howden 2012, p.43). For Taylor, memorable activities such as these are part of an holistic approach, 'which encourages the engagement with other ways of knowing – the affective and relational' (Taylor 2009, p.10).

In regard to **going outside**, Ali spoke of needing to trust and go with it '*and then all of a sudden, a kind of light went on – ah, this is what it's all about. And it worked because you went with it*'. That idea of needing trust was also crucial to Ellie's experience of **clowning**, saying it took her a while to see why it was important – '*you don't have to see the value in something when you do it...you are actually being part of the community...you're looking at things from a whole different perspective... and sharing love and joy or whatever...*' Trust also came into play for the session on **death and hope**, which Ali described as '*the most deep down wrenching of the heart strings*' that they went through as a class together. But the experience gained has helped her in difficult classroom situations, which is why Stern describes it as a defining part of RE. Finally, the **third year retreat**, which Sadie felt reflected the RE course itself, was variously described as fantastic, a spiritual event, a liminal experience and a day of specialness.

Interestingly Jan spoke of those who didn't attend the retreat as regretting that decision and she seemed to align those students with those who didn't engage. This again raises the dilemma of lack of engagement. Elements that engage cannot hope to engage absent students or students who are not really present. When Gail spoke of her '*upbringing in RE*', she also remembered the final lecture where the lecturer publicly acknowledged those for whom his approach was difficult.

Exploring ways to engage such students, who found the extra-rational approach difficult, was focused on at interview where participants were asked to suggest improvements to the course. Participants did make **particular recommendations** for improvement to the RE course, such as enhancing the primary RE lessons or having even more of the elements that were already in use, such as meditation and aesthetic approaches. However, they were somewhat reluctant to suggest concrete changes, preferring instead to focus on what they saw as the positives in their own experience. The question of finding a way to engage those who find the extra-rational approach challenging, was met with particular reluctance. It is clearly the case that the whole question of initiation into this way of working, requires further research as suggested by Axelson and Flick, who maintain that 'we need to know more about why some students, and some subgroups of students, disengage under certain circumstances and what to do to prevent that from happening' (Axelson & Flick 2011, p.43).

One obvious way of enhancing engagement might be through facilitating the creation of community within RE sessions in ways such as those advocated by Shapiro. This could lead to increased student ownership of the process because the shared learning space is given time for meaningful work and is driven by the students' needs (Shapiro 2009, p.112). Ali advocated occasionally adopting a more rational approach. Dan supported that view, advocating extra RE sessions where things would be explained. Both qualified their views by saying that personally they would find that more rational approach boring. However, the need for such variety of approach seems clear and has already been taken on board in designing the new first year RE course, which includes

more traditional and rational approaches in order to at least try to minimise student disengagement from the beginning.

Revisiting our **two profile participants**, Jenny endorsed the set-up and the various elements, adapting and applying them to her own classroom. She particularly enjoyed the music, while Sheena liked the quiet time and the mindfulness. Both endorsed the waiting and wondering, along with other elements such as journaling and asking the question. In terms of special memories, Jenny spoke of the sharing of stories while Sheena mentioned the verses that I would write about the previous session. Both endorsed the non-didactic approach and recommended no change to the teaching of the course, as they felt that the variety of elements '*ticked every box*' (Jenny) and '*ensured that everyone could find something in it*' (Sheena).

Based on the data that has emerged in this research study and is supported by the literature, it is clear that in different ways and for different participants, curriculum content can and did create a space for the inner life. It is also clear that not only the two profile participants but the research participants generally, both personally and professionally, had a positive experience of that inner life work and clearly identified the particular elements of the course that resulted in that positivity. Their experience has already informed the ongoing development of various aspects of the RE course and also the inclusion of the weekly 'Suaimhneas' (a Gaelic word meaning 'tranquillity') pause hour in the college timetable. This 'pause' hour or time of reflection has been timetabled for students and staff each week. This is an hour when no lectures, seminars or meetings take place. Instead, students and staff are offered space for reflection through a selection of holistic or silent opportunities. This hour in the weekly timetable and the opportunities offered therein, can be seen as a direct outcome of the findings of my research. This outcome will be further elaborated on in the Conclusion chapter (page 155).

The elements that contributed to creating the space for that inner life work so richly endorsed by the research participants and subsequently integral to the 'Suaimhneas' hour, may also have a place in the work of others in RE in teacher education and in teacher education generally.

5.4 The Inner Life for Professional Identity

This title is derived from the second theme to emerge from the analysis of the data, the theme of 'inner-ness'. In different ways and for different participants, the reflective space of the RE course afforded participants an opportunity to develop their own identity as teachers, to reflect on the kind of teacher that they wanted to become. That space in turn and in different ways was also seen and valued by participants as a space in which to develop their own spirituality, while also allowing community to form in the group.

RE in teacher education can provide opportunities for students to dig deeper, to develop their spirituality, to explore new ways of being and to develop the identity and integrity from which good teaching comes. Palmer calls it 'a secret hidden in plain sight: good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the integrity of the teacher' (Palmer 2007, p.104). He writes that his ability to teach, to connect with his students and to connect the students to the subject being taught, is not dependant on method, but rather on his willingness to trust his selfhood and to make it 'available and vulnerable in the service of learning'. His evidence for this claim comes from years of asking students to describe their good teachers.

Listening to those stories, it becomes impossible to claim that all good teachers use similar techniques: some lecture nonstop and others speak very little; some stay close to their material and others loose the imagination; some teach with the carrot and others with the stick. But in every story I have heard, good teachers share one trait: a strong sense of personal identity infuses their work. (Palmer 1998, p.10)

Critiquing what he sees as traditional ways of teaching RE, Tacey insists that the old forms are no longer enough and that 'we have to dig deeper and involve the subjectivity of individuals' (Tacey 2006, p.202), while McCarthy deems it important to employ a way of teaching that involves 'touching into their experience, their beliefs and values, their hopes, fears, aspirations and intimations, in short meeting them whole' (McCarthy 2001, p.138). It is perhaps in such ways that students can engage in inner work that allows them to develop their own spiritual identity. Addressing the difference between training and education, Wenger sees education as concerning 'the opening of identities - exploring new ways of being beyond our current state' and as not being 'merely formative', but 'transformative' (Wenger 2007, p.263). This appears to

affirm Parker Palmer's conviction in regard to the superiority of identity over technique as the source of good teaching.

Participants seemed to value the space afforded them in RE both to reflect and to develop their own professional identity. The findings indicate that a professional development journey from 'inner-ness' to community took place, supported by mindfulness and reflection and ritual and informed by a growing inner spirituality. Jan suggested that the RE course afforded her the space in which to develop that identity.

I think it did more for me, speaking from personal experience, than something like professional development where you had to learn about things. I always knew that you don't go in and curse in front of the children, for example, but I didn't know that you could go in and be silent – that not speaking is okay, that not telling people to be quiet is okay, that not telling people to shut up is okay.

I don't think that Jan was suggesting that she would have been a bad teacher without the RE course, but simply that it seemed to give her space to decide on the kind of 'self' that she would bring into the classroom. Jenny was more specific, that it was the RE course that made the difference for her, both professionally and personally.

I think the RE course – of all the courses offered in Marino...was probably the biggest part of my professional development – and kind of personally as well, I feel being present to the moment is something I take into every aspect of my life... I feel that if you can master that really you're very much happier... I'm surprised that something... college-wise – had that power to do that for me – personally....

A developing inner spirituality is something which was experienced by Jan as 'blossoming' and making her 'less self-absorbed and more accepting of others'. Participants reported that they found their spirituality nourished by the space that was created for inner work, a space that Cranton described as 'some place in between, where we challenge, respect, and care for our students' (Cranton 2006, p.86) or where, as Tacey puts it, we 'dig deeper and involve the subjectivity of individuals' (Tacey 2006, p.202). The findings seem to suggest that a space within which to develop their own inner spirituality was seen as important for these participants, and may in fact, be important for teacher education students in general. King sees even greater possibilities in this, when

she speaks about a 'transformation of consciousness and soul' and 'a further spiritual evolution of the whole human race' (King 2009, p.104).

The 'shimmering moments' described by Tisdell (Tisdell 2008, p.35) and valued by participants, were moments such as those experienced in ritual. Participants were enthused about the power of **ritual as an inner experience of an outward expression**. They mentioned in particular how it allowed the benefit of the RE session to remain in the memory and at the same time brought closure to the session. Sheena spoke of it being '*good to have a kind of a conclusion to it – that you felt it just didn't filter out*', thus echoing Jarvis who wrote, that learners would 'go away knowing that their learning has not finished and that they have new questions to solve or things to try out' (Jarvis 2008, p.565). Tisdell's experience is that ritual 'taps into and expresses that which is often beyond words and that students often connect to as part of their deeper and more authentic self' (Tolliver & Tisdell 2006, p.43-44). This is probably something that needs to be experienced to be understood.

The 'shimmering moments' experienced in the RE course are what led Ellie to teach vibrant RE in her own classroom, where she experienced similar spiritual nourishment, because the memory of the college RE course had remained, as she put it, in her subconscious. Goretti felt that ritual was a sometimes '*silly*' moment where you saw sides of people in the group that you wouldn't normally see, forgetting your own insecurities and being in the moment. She remembered that moment as one of '*real happiness*' while Dan found it so meaningful that he has carried ritual as a search for meaning into his classroom practice where mystery, like unanswered questions, is treasured.

The findings indicate that ritual should perhaps have a bigger role in the RE session, as it appears to add a layer of richness and depth to whatever is happening. The challenge of course is often one of time. Ritual takes time. It cannot be rushed or forced. And because it takes time, it comes under pressure from a crowded timetable and a need to 'cover the content of the course'. Like the 'Suaimhneas' pause hour which has become part of the College timetable and is valued for the reflective space it provides, so a ritual ending to a session may also have an inherent value that is worth arguing for.

Participants saw **mindfulness and reflection as providing space for inner-ness** and emphasised their centrality to the total experience of the RE course. Mindfulness can enable students to be brought up close to their experience (Moss et al, 2008, p.19) and to become conscious of their immediate experience but without becoming attached to it or driven by it (Barker et al 2008, p.427). Such research, highlighting the benefits of mindfulness, is endorsed by the findings. Mindfulness and reflection are more and more being seen as important at all levels of education. Hyde believes that they are essential skills for RE teachers, who will then be able to create reflective spaces in their classrooms 'in which children can practise stillness, silence and solitude' (Hyde 2006, p.125).

Aostre Johnson claims that the restoration of contemplative practices is 'critical not only for the well-being of youth but also for the survival of the human species and the planet' (Johnson 2011, p.11). Whatever about such lofty aspirations, participants do appear to have hugely valued the opportunities for mindfulness and reflection offered in RE sessions. Jan asserted that this aspect of RE, while it wasn't the only important aspect, may perhaps have been the single most important one. Sadie saw reflection as the '*foundation*' of RE and, in her experience, working not only in making her present to the RE session, but also present to her life outside of the session. Participants have also incorporated mindfulness and reflection into their classroom practice. Ellie reported on its effectiveness, particularly with one child who had difficulty staying calm, saying that '*she sits down and it really works for her and she could do anything afterwards*'.

Participants saw **RE as professional development from inner-ness to community**, believing that RE's significance went beyond RE. They suggested that it formed the teacher within and that it mattered, perhaps because, as Stern writes, that RE matters because it treats people 'as whole people, not as a means to an end' (Stern 2007, p.286).

In the literature review the case for community in the classroom was made by Parker Palmer who believes that 'good teaching is always and essentially

communal' (Palmer 1998, p.115). An example of the importance of the communal comes from Pillen's research into beginning teachers' identity. The research focuses on tensions that arise for beginning teachers in regard to developing their own professional identity, particularly around conflicting conceptions of learning to teach. The writers suggest transforming such tensions into learning experiences by providing students with opportunities to share these tensions with others (Pillen et al 2013, p.674-675). Such sharing can form community and community in turn can enable such sharing.

Community was reviewed in terms of a community of learning, a community of practice or a community of faith and also the possibility of an RE group being a community of all three.

Eisner suggests that teachers working as a **community of learning** can refine phronesis (practical wisdom about their teaching) 'by creating a context where multiple interpretations and analyses are likely' (Eisner 2005, p.201). Such a context can be created in RE sessions, resulting in a richer learning experience for all. Lave and Wenger make the case for a **community of practice**. This can be seen as a 'process of becoming a full participant in a sociocultural practice' (Lave and Wenger 1999, p.29), such as teaching. Their emphasis on process mirrors the emphasis of the RE course, as does Junker's description of a **community of faith** as a space where the individual's gifts are affirmed, enhanced and celebrated (Junker 2013, p.175). Finally, the kind of community advocated by Nash and Swaby where 'our students will not hesitate to talk with one another about how their deepest beliefs, ideals, hopes, fears, doubts, and...spirituality (or lack of it) influence their daily lives' (Nash & Swaby 2011, p.118), something which perhaps feels risky because we are 'required to engage authentically as people' but also because 'it feels as though we also cannot control what feels so powerful' (Tolliver & Tisdell 2006, p.43).

The RE course appeared to make a real difference in the lives of students, both personally and professionally, as members of such communities. RE was described as being '*more than professional development*' by Jan, who added that it was the '*making*' of the students as a class group, as a year group and as

individuals. Ellie said that it created community and connected them as a group. Ali felt that it played a central role in preparing them for their careers and life and not just teaching. Dan claimed that it was the course that taught him what it was like to be a teacher.

In relation to **the two profile participants**, Jenny said that she would advocate spirituality as part of professional development in teacher education, as she felt that it was the biggest part of her professional development and that she had received an education in her own spirituality. By way of contrast, Sheena seemed to have a sense of being personally affected by her experience and yet at the same time being conscious of everyone *'individually, and as a group, developing as well'*. Both had a sense of RE being important for the development of their professional identity as teachers and both adapted and brought to the classroom what they considered most important. For Jenny, that was ritual, while for Sheena it was mindfulness. Flanagan et al suggest that there is a challenge in the Irish context in relation to introducing such contemplative practices into Irish schools, as it *'may require a spiritual education that does not ignore challenging issues but involves them as a core element of the learning'* (Flanagan et al 2012, p.74-75). It would appear that Jenny and Sheena might be up for the challenge involved, as they appear to be strong advocates for spiritual education.

The question arises in relation to students who did not appear to engage and who perhaps remained unaffected by practices such as mindfulness and ritual, who did not appear to engage in community or find RE contributing to their professional identity. From this vantage point, it is impossible to gauge what effect being part of a group that were positively engaged would have had on them, if any. Might it be fair to conclude however that the level of non-engagement must have been relatively small as it did not appear to detract from the overwhelmingly positive experience of the research participants, even in the group with the professedly *'strange dynamic'*?

Based on the data that has emerged in the research, supported by the literature, it is clear that in different ways and for different students, the space provided by the RE course for the depth of reflection on their own identity as

teachers, for the development of their individual spirituality and for the creation of community among them, was valued as a crucial part of their teacher education. This was true for the profile participants and the research participants generally (while any benefit to those who had difficulty engaging remains unknown). The space for inner life work that contributes to professional identity, may also have a place in the work of others in RE in teacher education and in teacher education generally.

5.5 The Inner Life as Personal Story

This title is derived from the third theme to emerge from the analysis of the data, the theme of 'ongoing-ness', which encompasses the participants journey from primary and secondary school, through college and into a teaching life. Participants' previous experience of RE appeared to have an impact on their engagement in college and their experience in college similarly appeared to have an impact on their first year teaching RE in school. The RE course was part of a lifelong journey of learning, where the experience of the student mattered and where the student's history and hopes also mattered. This was experienced in different ways and by different participants as being a valuable part of each one's ongoing story. The space provided by the RE course, within which inner life work could take place, appeared to enable students to begin to construct meaning from, and to integrate, the various experiences of the personal story of their particular journey into a teaching life.

Participants considered their experience of **being a student of RE in primary and secondary school** to be significant. They mentioned a variety of factors, both positive and negative, such as learning off by heart, a strong Church connection, formative teachers and the question of exams. It would appear from participants' responses that RE as a school subject was often not experienced as one which 'might enrich pupils' lives and point them towards spiritual possibilities' (Rudge 2000, p.108) or one where RE teachers tried to 'do justice to students' capacities, ideas and values by inspiring them and allowing for their propensities, potential and other background elements' (van der Zee 2011, p.32). On the whole, they didn't appear to have experienced teachers who were really willing to get to know their students and learn with them (Jackson 2006, p.410) or teachers helping them in their own 'quest for meaning' (Hull 1984, p.54). They didn't seem to have much experience of schools honouring the little stories of the students and the big stories of the disciplines and tradition (Palmer 1998, p.74). As a result, when they came to college, students were perhaps wary of the subject called RE that appeared on the college timetable.

Sheena took longer than others to engage in college because her negative experience from her own primary education had left her fearful of doing so. However, some of positive memories of participants were surprising. Sadie

spoke of significant teachers who had offered an early experience of the contemplative. She also referred to discussions, where the students not only spoke but were listened to as well. Both Dan and Ali spoke positively of later secondary RE as preparing them for the world. By way of contrast, the experience of Ellie appeared to be similar to that described by Palmer, of teachers losing heart and disconnecting from the students, the subject and themselves (Palmer 1998, p.17). Ellie's RE college experience seemed to highlight the missed possibilities of her secondary school RE.

The findings seem to suggest that the engagement, and particularly the initial engagement, of students in teacher education college, may be affected not only by the curriculum at first and second level, but also by their experience of significant teachers of the subject at those levels.

Their experience of **being a student teacher** was seen as part of that continuum, where an initial strangeness, due perhaps to being unaccustomed to an extra-rational approach, gave way to a dawning realisation that something significant was happening. This appears to have been particularly true for Dan who spoke of the RE course as being a journey where it took a while to get into it before it began to make sense. The extra-rational approach meant that participants experienced what Kasworm and Bowles describe as students being challenged cognitively, socioculturally and emotionally, to 'move beyond the comfort zone of the known' (Kasworm & Bowles 2012, p.389).

While such a process may seem akin to Vygotsky's 'Zone of Proximal Development' (Vygotsky 1935, p.86) applied to adult learners, with the scaffolding provided by either the group, the created space or the lecturer or a combination of those, it may not be that simple in the case of the RE course. This is primarily because, according to the participants, the RE course seemed to entail a different kind of learning. However, Junker believes that 'multiple ZPDs can be stimulated simultaneously' (Junker 2008, p.167) when adults engage in a process of interaction in a community setting, such as the college RE course. She says that this process requires a context for students 'to work beyond what they recognize as their individual ability and by helping them to discover collective gifts and cooperative possibilities (Junker 2013, p.168).

Vygotsky's definition of the zone of proximal development may in fact illustrate how 'ongoingness' works and particularly how students can blossom over the duration of a college course when they find themselves in a context within which they flourish.

The zone of proximal development defines those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state. These functions could be termed the *buds* or *flowers* of development. The actual developmental level characterizes mental development retrospectively, while the zone of proximal development characterizes mental development prospectively. (Vygotsky 1978, p.86-87)

Gradually, it seemed to dawn on students that they were learning '*loads*' (Sheena), even though '*it didn't always necessarily feel like it was about RE*' (Ali), that there was '*long-term learning*' in it (Ellie). Her experience of the RE course caused Annie to lament the lack of active learning in her own primary education. Others spoke of higher levels of engagement and it becoming a '*religious experience*' rather than RE (Goretti), and of expecting both reflective space and challenge (Ali). Gail felt that the journey was not just about RE but about '*your approach to teaching altogether*', while others spoke of RE helping in times of stress (Sadie) and bereavement (Jan).

Finally, the participants' experience of **being a teacher of RE** in the very early days of their teaching careers was explored in relation to the elements of the RE course brought into the classroom and the impact of the course on all kinds of school settings and roles (including when not teaching RE). It emerged that the RE course appeared to provide an anti-dote to the 'Lortie' effect (Lortie 2002, p.81), termed 'the apprenticeship of observation', where teachers revert in practice to teaching as they themselves were taught, because their college course lacked the potency to change that. Garrett says that such conceptual change is hard work.

...student teachers must come to an awareness of their past and the ways that their own narratives of schooling might impact the ways that they are experiencing their teacher education programme and, perhaps even more importantly, how they are enacting the beginning phases of their teaching careers with diverse young learners... (Garrett 2013, p.647)

That participants had come to such an awareness was illustrated by the strength of their conviction about the importance of not teaching as they themselves had been taught, because they could see '*so much scope for other things*' (Ali) or because they could now see it as a subject where you could do '*something completely different*' (Ellie). This appeared to be the case, when teaching in different contexts (Jan and Jenny) or even in learning support (Sheena).

Whether that effect would continue to be seen beyond the first year teaching is not within the scope of this study. However, Gail's contention that the RE course prepared her for '*real teaching*', due to the shift of focus from a traditional college focus on content, might be a source of hope. A further source of hope that emerged from the findings was the number of elements of the RE course mentioned by participants as having being adapted for use in their own classrooms. These included mindfulness exercises (Ali), asking the question (Annie), taking a social intelligence approach in using RE as an opportunity to really get to know the children, journaling (Dan), welcoming the latecomers and concluding with ritual (Sadie), the centrepiece (Mary), and taking risks (Ellie). The findings seem to suggest that participants would not revert to teaching as they themselves had been taught, due to their experience of an RE course with a power that could 'offset' earlier influences (Lortie 2002, p.81).

In relation to **the two profile participants**, as has been already mentioned, their experience of primary school RE coloured their early engagement (Jenny) and reticence (Sheena). Jenny had very positive memories of RE in both the English and the Irish systems. By way of contrast, however, Sheena, commenting on her experience of primary RE, said that she '*didn't really enjoy it very much*'. Sheena's early reticence to engage is particularly interesting, given that, like Jenny, her experience of second level was positive. It appears to suggest that one's primary education may affect not only subsequent learning and achievement, but may also have an impact on engagement at third level. Sheena returned to this question of the 'ongoingness' of her developing engagement and hinted that it was engagement that defined whether or not the

course was positively experienced. Because both Jenny and Sheena were engaged, the course was experienced positively by them.

Participants' previous experience of RE at first and second level, may be a significant factor in their initial engagement at college or lack thereof, while their ongoing experience of RE in college can have an impact on their future practice and particularly on how they teach RE. Writing about the future of RE in Northern Ireland and its need to move beyond the narrow confines within which it is to be found, Norman Richardson suggests two options.

Religious Education can be defensive, small-minded and ineffectual, making little impact on the thinking and decisions that people make about how to deal with life. But RE also has the potential to be informative, challenging, creative, humane and enjoyable, and, together with Education for Citizenship, to contribute significantly to the preparation of children and young people for life in a diverse and turbulent global society. (Richardson 2010, p. 21)

It is clear that the research participants have that same potential in their teaching of RE, to teach it in ways that will be 'informative, challenging, creative, humane and enjoyable' for the children.

Based on the data that has emerged in this research study, it is also clear that the space for inner life work afforded participants in the RE course, affirmed and supported their ongoing personal story as teachers with cherished memories, present experience and future hopes. It is hoped that they in turn will value the personal stories of the children that they teach, affording them the same kind of space that they themselves have experienced as important in college. It is also hoped that space might be made for the kind of inner life work that values the personal story of students with real needs and as students with a unique history, present experience and future hopes, in the work of others in RE in teacher education and in teacher education generally.

5.6 Conclusion

In this discussion chapter, I have been mindful of the challenge posed by Radnor in relation to creativity, riskiness and illumination.

...it has to be the responsibility of each researcher in interrogating his or her data to engage in the creative, constructive intellectual process of making sense of the data and theorizing from it... It feels to the researcher a risky business because he or she has to believe in themselves and believe that they can demonstrate sensitivity towards the data and the ability to bring out the meaning that will... reveal new knowledge to the wider research community (Radnor 2002, p.91).

Radnor's use of the word illumination here is particularly significant for a research study that seeks to understand the experience of participants, and to illuminate that which has heretofore been invisible (in a phenomenological sense). It does indeed feel like risky business to engage with answering a research question that has invisibility attached to it. Accessing that invisibility has entailed engaging in a creative, constructive intellectual process of making sense of the data via a hermeneutical approach. That approach has endeavoured to be faithful to the participants' views and insights, in regard to the ways in which they have experienced the RE course, with its focus on their inner lives. I have tried to bring out the meaning, co-constructed with participants, which will reveal new knowledge to the wider research community.

While that new knowledge will be expanded upon in the concluding chapter of the thesis, it can be summarised using the three frames that emerged from the analysis and that led to the findings that framed this discussion:

1. 'Particularity' – Elements that have contributed to the positive experience of research participants in this study should be recognised and explored while other possible elements should be researched in order to further enhance a process that recognises the importance of a focus on the inner life;
2. 'Inner-ness' – The inner lives of students should be seen as an essential aspect of their professional development and therefore it is imperative that space is created within which their inner lives may be nourished;
3. 'Ongoing-ness' – Students' lives should be considered as part of a continuum of learning that is lifelong but that is focused on the present moment, where the person who is the student is seen as real and

important, with a history that matters and a future full of possibilities, but with present needs that are worth attending to.

Parker Palmer provides a wonderful illustration of what can happen in the life of a teacher when they bring their souls to school and cease to live a divided life (Parker 1998, p163-183). The research participants appear to understand that. They seem to be adapting what they had learned (inner life as curriculum content), and considered an essential part of their identity as teachers (inner life for professional identity), and a key part of their ongoing development (inner life as personal story), to be the best teachers (and not just the best teachers of RE) that they can be and to try to make a difference in children's lives.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

6.1 The Journey

This thesis began with an image of magnificent twin oak trees either side of a planned roadway. It could be an image for the thesis itself and the journey of epistemological and ontological learning that it has involved. When I began the journey that has led to this thesis, I knew from the anecdotal evidence, and particularly from the course reviews based on Brookfield's course evaluation instrument, that students were generally experiencing the RE course in a positive way. What I didn't know was why. While I may have had a sense of the elements of the RE course contributing to the experience and so on, the ways that the RE course actually works have now emerged in the research. What had previously been a mixture of the anecdotal and conjecture and hit and miss, has now become firmly grounded in research.

In the **literature review** chapter, the context of RE in pre-service teacher education in Ireland and my practice therein, was outlined. Relevant literature in the areas of RE in pre-service teacher education and students' experiences of pre-service teacher education was reviewed. Literature concerned with attending to the inner life of students was explored. RE in pre-service teacher education was examined from the perspective of teaching and learning. Finally, RE in pre-service teacher education was reviewed as a subject that matters, not least because the student who is engaged with her or his journey in RE, matters. Other areas investigated, that were not included in the review, have undoubtedly informed my own learning and what I have written. Reading, like education, is rarely wasted.

The **methodology** chapter provided a comprehensive and transparent account of both the research process and the rationale behind the research design and data analysis. The research study sought to gather the kind of data which would help to answer the research question. The study was located in the interpretive research paradigm, with hermeneutical research as its methodology and constructionism/constructivism as its epistemology. In terms of method, the

research itself was conducted using semi-structured interviews with past-students.

The **findings** chapter described how the findings emerged from the data in order to help answer the research question. The analysis has been framed *generally* against the three themes of ‘particularity’, ‘inner-ness’ and ‘ongoing-ness’. The theme of ‘particularity’ related to the participants’ epistemological journey, and their experience of particular elements of the course. The theme of ‘inner-ness’ related to the participants’ ontological journey, as it was concerned with how participants may have experienced the space for ‘inner’ work provided by the RE course. The theme of ‘ongoingness’ related to the total RE journey of participants from primary and secondary school to college and into their teaching lives. The analysis was also framed *specifically* in relation to the portraits of two research participants. Their stories illustrated each of the themes and also helped answer the research question in a very clear and tangible way. It was evident from the findings that the theme of ‘inner-ness’ had become the central theme and this was reflected in the discussion where the three themes were discussed in light of the centrality of the inner life.

The **discussion** chapter then sought to bring the little story of this research study into a wider context of RE in teacher education and teacher education generally, so that issues that had emerged from the findings could be subjected to a fuller and more robust discussion. This discussion took place under the umbrella theme of ‘the inner life’, reflecting the centrality of the theme of ‘inner-ness’. The elements of the course that were described in the findings under the theme of ‘particularity’ were discussed in terms of ‘inner life as curriculum content’, where participants’ engagement via these elements was subjected to critical reflection informed by insights from the literature. The ‘inner life for professional identity’, derived from the theme of ‘inner-ness’, allowed for critical discussion of ways that the created and creative space, afforded to the participants on the RE course, contributed to the development of their own personal and professional identity. Finally, the ‘inner life as personal story’ discussed the participants’ journey of ‘ongoing-ness’ from primary through secondary to college and the teaching life, and the ways in which students’

previous experience impacts on current practice. All three themes were also discussed in relation to the profile participants' stories.

6.2 Learning from the Answer to the Research Question

In relation to the research question, it is clear that the research participants experienced as significant their pre-service RE course, which recognized the importance of a focus on their inner lives. The inner life was a central part of the research question and the significance of this focus on the inner life has been a central outcome of the research study. It is clear that the space provided by the course for inner-life work was valued by participants. Furthermore, they have signalled that it met a deep need in their lives as students.

The deep importance of that inner-life work and their valuing of the space for that inner life work was a surprise to me. It has informed my own current practice in affording that space, even when including rational approaches (such as in the new first year course), by continuing to incorporate a significant element of mindfulness or meditation in each session.

One outcome of the findings of my research can be seen every Wednesday at noon in MIE, where a 'pause' hour or time of reflection called 'Suaimhneas' (a Gaelic word meaning 'tranquillity') takes place,, and no lectures, seminars or meetings take place but instead, students and staff are offered spaces for reflection. The 'Suaimhneas' hour has been formed and continues to be informed by the findings of my research. When the College President invited me to become part of a group that would endeavour to make a contribution to the welfare of the college community, it was my conviction that the findings of my research pointed to the kinds of activities that might contribute to that welfare. I then consulted with the various student year groups to gauge their thoughts about the possibility of including such an hour on a busy timetable and so began an innovative and nourishing development. It has been extremely heartening that the findings of my research in relation to the inner life of students have been seen as important and valued by my colleagues and the College President but also that the kinds of activities that were seen as

important by my research participants have now become part of the college-wide timetable and provide a much broader institutional space for 'inner-ness'. The inner life of students and staff is being valued and nurtured institutionally – a unique development for a teacher education college.

That their own personal experience was valued was seen as important by participants. The example of the sharing of stories supports that. The sharing of stories, even about simple things from their experience of primary and secondary school and also their experience in college was seen as a valuable exercise in getting to know one another and in developing community. They also seemed to experience it as being valued for themselves, for who they were as individuals, as opposed to their achievements. One of the issues in third level education may be that suddenly students feel that they are not seen as individuals, in the way that they were at first and second level. It is clear from this research that valuing the individual and the individual's experience is significant.

It is also clear that the 'ongoing-ness' of students' lives, as part of a lifelong process, needs to be understood by those who teach them. The active and extra-rational approaches endorsed by participants, such as mindfulness, ritual and journaling, might also be of value in teacher education in general. Participants felt strongly that these approaches should not simply be confined to RE as they had contributed to their overall professional identity as teachers.

The imagination does indeed have a place at third level. Everything does not necessarily have to conform to templates, learning outcomes and strategic plans. The form for discovery advocated by an aesthetic approach, where the outcome might not be predetermined but open-ended, should also have a place. This was something that was clearly valued by participants. They valued getting the kite to work. They valued the clowning. They valued the retreat day in the mountains. They valued what such activities taught them about themselves and others. They valued the community that was formed as a result. They valued the space provided. Such activities could not be straitjacketed into the kinds of course outlines that are sometimes prevalent at third level.

The research experience has influenced my thinking about much more than my own practice. In RE in particular, it should be recognised that much more is going on in the world and in the lives of the people in it than can be described in a template or subjected to a phenomenological approach. Narrow approaches fail to treasure the gift within any particular tradition or worldview and such treasuring begins always at the level of the individual. Hederman describes education as personal relationship (Hederman 2012). In the research study, it is clear that personal relationship was significant in the forming of community. That personal relationship emerged from the personal relationship with the inner life, with the subject, with the lecturer, with the approaches and in particular with the others in the group.

RE should concern itself with treasuring the individuals who engage in the study of RE. So many students come to college and their favourite subject has been decided by the regard that they had for the teachers of that subject at previous levels of education. One of the challenges emerging from this research is to teach RE in a way that inspires and to adopt approaches to the subject which breathe life into it. The kind of teacher education advocated by Hederman, carries many echoes of the kinds of things valued by research participants, particularly in terms of the space provided for inner work.

An 'inspired education' programme would surely augment the existing professional development of a teacher, by complementing their teacher training programmes (and later in-service courses) with experiential workshops in personal creative development, in ways that would deepen the connection of their whole person with the 'source' of the creative spirit, latent within every human being. (Hederman 2012, p.199)

6.3 Learning from the Research Experience for Research

Completing this piece of original research has also brought home to me the complexity of any research involving interpretation. In particular, I have a new-found respect for the time that it takes to allow the findings and recommendations to emerge from the data.

Reflecting back on the study and my original plan to use all four of Brookfield's lenses in order to gather data, I can clearly see now that this study was too small for such an approach. The surveys and participant observation would

have been interesting but superfluous to requirements. I could have used surveys alone but the shared meaning-making of the semi-structured interview was a vital part of the interpretive process. Participant observations using colleagues would have resulted in swapping interviews with actual participants for interviews with temporary participants and would in reality have lessened the richness of the data.

Knowing what I know now, if I were to conduct the interviews over again, I could perhaps opt for a more unstructured approach, which might allow me to gather a broader range of data or allow the interview direction to be guided more by the participants. For instance, I asked specific questions at interview in regard to each of the various elements of the process. While such an approach allowed me to individually research each one of the elements, it may not have been the optimum way to research the participants' experience. However, this insight has only come about because of my experience with the semi-structured approach. While mindful of the limitations that the study might have, I would still argue that 12 in-depth semi-structured interviews and follow-up interviews produced the kind of depth of insight that the study required and allowed for a great richness to emerge from the data. This was the key strength of this approach.

6.4 Drawing Conclusions

The work is not yet complete however. This doctoral research study began with a desire to learn about the experience of students of a pre-service RE course in teacher education. Anecdotal evidence seemed to suggest that something was happening in relation to the RE course but research was required which would uncover the reality of the situation. And so began a journey of learning that at times appeared as mercurial as the research question it sought to answer:

'In what ways, personally and professionally, have teacher education students experienced a pre-service RE course, which recognizes the importance of a focus on their inner lives?'

While the research question has already been answered at length, it still remains for me to draw conclusions in regard to the implications going forward for a world that has aged four years since this study began, while also

summarising my contribution to knowledge in the field of RE in teacher education and making suggestions for further research.

The elements of the practice have been pointed to as important contributors to the positivity of the participants' experience. In the ever-changing context of RE in primary schools in Ireland, focussing on the content will poorly serve teachers into a changing future, while focussing on the process will enable them to teach whatever content the curriculum entails. The participants who went on to teach in multi-denominational contexts exemplified this, particularly in the energy and imagination that they brought to the work.

It is interesting to see the explosion in interest in mindfulness and meditation in the last few years. It has been linked to improved test scores or even knowledge retention at third level (Ramsburg et al, 2014, p.431-441) or with significantly higher levels of gamma wave brain activity evidenced by the research conducted by Goleman and the Dalai Lama (Goleman 2003, p.13). A google search for 'mindfulness' will result in over five and a half million results, while a google book search will yield 693,000 possible titles. The question must be asked about why such interest exists. Whether or not there is something about the world we live in at the moment that means that a more holistic approach has a stronger appeal, this certainly seems to be the case for the research participants, if their experience is to be taken seriously.

And students' experience needs to be taken seriously. The inner life of students is of particular importance during these current recessionary times when the future can seem bleak. Such inner work is facilitated by creating a space in which students' spirituality can be nurtured. Community also makes a difference in students' lives and is facilitated by attending to the needs of the group and using strategies such as ritual and journaling and the honouring of questions. It is in such a space and within such a community that student teachers can best be religiously educated, not in a theological or catechetical sense, but in a sense of deep 'in-touch-ness' with their own experience, working experientially with others. Such space and community is also an important part of an holistic approach to teacher education. Unless they have the opportunity to do such work themselves as students, it is difficult to see how they might facilitate the

children that they will teach in attending in turn to their own inner lives as an essential part of RE.

6.5 Further Research

Further research might include a follow-up study with the research participants to determine if the process has continued to be transferrable to the primary school classroom. Such a study might determine if the elements adapted from their college experience by participants have had a positive effect on the children in their classes.

Another possibility for research might involve finding out if the process could be used with another discipline or by another RE lecturer in another college. Such studies might make use of the suggestions made by Sleeter for research in teacher education. She suggests that teacher educators should collaborate on research linking teacher education with its impact on teachers and students and also that 'researchers in different geographic locations or higher education institutions, with careful planning and coordinating, could carry out linked small-scale studies that ask the same questions and use the same methodology' (Sleeter 2014, p.152).

In terms of a different direction altogether, an action research project based on working with a primary school staff, using the kinds of elements endorsed by participants, with the aim of nurturing the inner lives of staff members and creating community, might also be worthy of consideration.

There is also a great need for research into the teaching of RE in primary schools in the Republic of Ireland. The discussion is currently fed by the anecdotal and by controlling interests and agendas and there are many areas where research is required.

When I began my EdD, I was aware of that need. However, before I could begin any such research, I needed to research my own practice and to move beyond the anecdotal evidence therein. I felt that the first step to beginning a life in research was to research my own practice.

6.6 The Last Word

My hope for the research was that I would gain insight into the experience of participants in regard to my practice in RE, a pre-service RE course that recognizes the importance of a focus on the inner lives of students. I suppose that in my heart of hearts I had always wondered if I could take a subject like RE and teach it in a way that would empower students, enrich their lives as students and help form community among them, in the hope that they in turn might go and do likewise in their own classrooms. I may have done just that for some students. I may also have suggested ways in which that might be done in teacher education by lecturers both in RE and in other subjects.

Parker Palmer wonders if we are doing enough in regard to attending to the inner life of teacher education students.

A teacher has the power to compel students to spend many hours living in the light, or the shadow, of the teacher's inner life. Are we doing enough to help teachers-in-training understand their inner terrain in ways that will minimize the shadow and maximize the light? (Palmer 2003, p.378)

Following this research study, I am convinced that the RE course that I teach, with its focus on the inner lives of students, provides more than the 'enough' that Palmer refers to.

Because the object of my thesis has been to explore what appears to have been a significant and empowering experience for the participants and the subject of my thesis has been a practice in RE in pre-service primary teacher education in a small college in Dublin, I would like to conclude the thesis with a verse that imagines that practice finding its voice.

If the Subject would Speak, the Object would be Clearly Seen!

I've seen them come and go

This seemingly biblical dozen

And other pilgrims too

Finding me strange at first and at times

Wandering around the totality of my bits and pieces

*As ongoing-ness
Wondering about going along with it engaged
In my particularities
But showing signs in quiet times of moving on and moving
Into inner-ness
Imagine my surprise when I realise
That what I was not
Was more important than what I was
It's like the space between the coals
That allows the fire to burn
Spaces that are places of the faces of the soul
Coals that when pushed over time become diamonds
Fire that is simply a miracle
With the power to set the world ablaze
And I have seen the faces of the treasured souls
The object that may spark a fire
In a bigger picture subject
By a little story subject
That wants to change the world*

APPENDICES

APPENDIX I

(EMAIL SENT TO 4TH YEAR STUDENTS SEEKING RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS)

A Chairde,

The purpose of this email is to look for volunteers to take part in a research project designed to investigate the experience of those who have engaged in Religious Education in Coláiste Mhuire from 2007 to 2010. The participants in this research will most likely be students in fourth year, though not necessarily so (and I would be very grateful if you could forward this email to any students from the 2007-2010 cohort who have elected not to do 4th Year this year). The research will involve about twelve to fifteen students, randomly selected from those who volunteer to take part.

The time commitment involved will be approximately one hour for an interview, with a follow-up meeting at a later date to provide an opportunity to discuss issues emerging from the research. It is intended that the interviews will take place on one of the evenings in March/April (when participants from the current 4th Year group are in College) and the follow-up towards the summer, at a mutually convenient time and place.

Teacher Education Students in Coláiste Mhuire have given very positive feedback with regard to their experience of Religious Education in the College. However, this research is not confined to those whose experience of RE was positive, as it seeks to investigate students' experiences further, with the intention of achieving a better understanding of how the practice works and how it might be improved, as well as the relative significance of its various aspects. Insights obtained from the research will inform the development of this College's RE practice and also hopefully inform the practice of RE in Teacher Education generally.

I am undertaking this research as part of my Doctorate in Education: I will be following the Ethics Policy of the University Of Exeter Graduate School Of Education and will invite informed consent from all participants, including to record interviews for analysis. Information supplied will be confidential and only used anonymously in the dissemination of findings. Participants will have the right to withdraw from the research at any time.

Hoping you'll want to participate and looking forward to meeting with you. Email me at gerry.oconnell@mie.ie by March 10th if you are willing to do so.

Le gach dea-ghuí,

Gerry O'Connell.



Graduate School of Education

Certificate of ethical research approval

STUDENT RESEARCH/FIELDWORK/CASEWORK AND DISSERTATION/THESIS

You will need to complete this certificate when you undertake a piece of higher-level research (e.g. Masters, PhD, EdD level).

To activate this certificate you need to first sign it yourself, and then have it signed by your supervisor and finally by the Chair of the School's Ethics Committee.

For further information on ethical educational research access the guidelines on the BERA web site: <http://www.bera.ac.uk/publications/guidelines/> and view the School's statement on the GSE student access on-line documents.

READ THIS FORM CAREFULLY AND THEN COMPLETE IT ON YOUR COMPUTER (the form will expand to contain the text you enter). **DO NOT COMPLETE BY HAND**

Your name: Gerry O'Connell

Your student no: 0400819465 580042170.

Return address for this certificate: 13 Blakley Close, Dundalk, Co. Louth, Ireland.

Degree/Programme of Study: Doctorate in Education

Project Supervisor(s): Dr. Cheryl Hunt and Dr. Karen Walshe

Your email address: igo201@ex.ac.uk and gerry.oconnell@mie.ie

Tel: 00353863723852

I hereby certify that I will abide by the details given overleaf and that I undertake in my thesis to respect the dignity and privacy of those participating in this research.

I confirm that if my research should change radically, I will complete a further form.

Signed: Gerry O'Connell date: 5/07/2011

NB For Masters dissertations, which are marked blind, this first page must **not be included** in your work. It can be kept for your records.

Chair of the School's Ethics Committee

Certificate of ethical research approval

Your student no: 0400819465

Title of your project:

An investigation of the experience of Religious Education that is offered to teacher education students in Coláiste Mhuire Teacher Education College.

Brief description of your research project:

Teacher Education Students in Coláiste Mhuire have given very positive feedback with regard to their experience of Religious Education in the College. This has been clear, not only anecdotally, but from their responses received via Brookfield's Course Evaluation Instrument and also in written reflection assignments. This research project seeks to investigate those positive experiences further, with the intention of achieving a better understanding of how the practice works, as well as the relative significance of its various aspects.

Using themes developed from a close re-reading of their end-of-year reflections in order to frame questions, the research will adopt a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews with past students.

Insights obtained from this research will inform the development of this College's RE practice and also hopefully inform the practice of RE in Teacher Education generally.

Give details of the participants in this research (giving ages of any children and/or young people involved):

The participants in this research are currently part-time students in fourth year (most in their early twenties), who studied religious education with me for the previous three years. They are no longer my students.

Give details (with special reference to any children or those with special needs) regarding the ethical issues of:

- a) **informed consent:** Where children in schools are involved this includes both headteachers and parents). An example of the consent form(s) must accompany this document. a blank consent form can be downloaded from the GSE student access on-line documents:

I will be following the Ethics Policy of the University Of Exeter Graduate School Of Education. It will be essential to obtain informed consent from participants in the semi-structured interviews. Records of when, how and from whom consent was obtained, will be recorded. Participants will be made aware of how the research findings will be used. Informed consent will be ongoing throughout the research. Participants will be reminded that they have the right to withdraw from the research at any given time and that data related to them will be destroyed.

Chair of the School's Ethics Committee
updated: July 2010

b) anonymity and confidentiality

Records of the data collected (including transcripts and any audio recordings) will be stored in a secure and safe place. Electronic information will only be accessed by the researcher with their username and password. This information will be stored on a secure system with recognised virus protection. Electronic and paper information will be locked in a secure building. Information will also be coded to ensure anonymity. This will remain anonymous in the write up of the research. Collected written information will be destroyed by shredding and securely disposed of when it is no longer required. Any audio recording will also be disposed of digitally.

Give details of the methods to be used for data collection and analysis and how you would ensure they do not cause any harm, detriment or unreasonable stress:

Information to determine the views and perceptions of past students with regard to their experience of RE in the previous three years will be obtained through semi-structured interviews, in particular their views with regard to impact, effectiveness, strengths and areas for improvement. This will involve about twelve fourth year part-time students, randomly selected from those who volunteer to take part in the research. With the consent of participants, interviews will be recorded and transcribed.

The semi-structured interviews will be transcribed for analysis. Views of participants will be compared and contrasted and insight sought with regard to common issues that arise. Data will then be coded and organised thematically to determine the effectiveness of the programme and its benefit to students. It will also provide information for the future development of the RE programme.

Give details of any other ethical issues which may arise from this project (e.g. secure storage of videos/recorded interviews/photos/completed questionnaires or special arrangements made for participants with special needs etc.):

During the data collection, data analysis and write up, data (audio recordings, interview data and individual data) will be securely stored in a locked cabinet in a secure building. As previously mentioned, electronic information will only be accessed by the researcher with their username and password. Electronic information will also be stored on a secure system, within a locked building, with recognised virus protection. It will be destroyed when it is no longer required.

Give details of any exceptional factors, which may raise ethical issues (e.g. potential political or ideological conflicts which may pose danger or harm to participants):

While no such circumstances are envisaged, nevertheless informed consent and right to withdraw will be strictly adhered to.

This form should now be printed out, signed by you on the first page and sent to your supervisor to sign. Your supervisor will forward this document to the School's **Research Support Office** for the Chair of the School's Ethics Committee to countersign. A unique approval reference will be added and this certificate will be returned to you to be included at the back of your dissertation/thesis.

N.B. You should not start the fieldwork part of the project until you have the signature of your supervisor

This project has been approved for the period: October 2010 until: September 2012

By (above mentioned supervisor's signature): Cheryl Hunt date: 13/1/11

N.B. To Supervisor: Please ensure that ethical issues are addressed annually in your report and if any changes in the research occur a further form is completed.

GSE unique approval reference: 9/10/11/27

Signed: Saleh Al-Dhahbi date: 10/02/2011
Chair of the School's Ethics Committee

This form is available from <http://education.exeter.ac.uk/students/>

APPENDIX III

(APPLICATION FOR ETHICS APPROVAL FROM COLÁISTE MHUIRE, MIE)

RESPONDING TO REQUESTS FOR STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

BACKGROUND INFORMATION	
Name of researcher/principal investigator:	Gerry O'Connell
Affiliation of researcher/principal investigator:	Coláiste Mhuire
Current qualifications of the researcher/principal investigator?	MREd (1 st Class Honours) EdD (Year Three)
Is this research being conducted as part of a degree or diploma programme?	Yes
If so, please give details of the programme (i.e. name, level etc.)	EdD University of Exeter
Provide a summary of the research project including its main goals.	Teacher Education Students in Coláiste Mhuire have given very positive feedback with regard to their experience of Religious Education in the College. This research project seeks to investigate those positive experiences further, with the intention of achieving a better understanding of how the practice works, as well as the relative significance of its various aspects. Using themes developed from a close re-reading of their end-of-year reflections in order to frame questions, the research will adopt a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews with the most recent past students, i.e. current 4 th Years. Insights obtained from this research will

	inform the development of this College's RE practice and also hopefully inform the practice of RE in Teacher Education generally.
Who is supervising the research?	Dr. Cheryl Hunt & Dr. Karen Walshe
What are the supervisor's qualifications?	Both at Doctorate Level
RECRUITING PARTICIPANTS	
Who is being surveyed as part of this research? Please list the profiles of all prospective research candidates who are being surveyed, even if permission to conduct research on them is not part of this application.	Current 4 th Years (Approximately 12 students randomly chosen with various groupings – gender, age, etc – represented.
Who is the researcher seeking permission to survey in this application?	As Above.
How is it proposed to contact the students in Colaiste Mhuire?	Email and then a follow-up letter outlining the process and ethical issues in greater detail.
How will students' informed consent be sought?	I will be following the Ethics Policy of the University Of Exeter Graduate School Of Education. It will be essential to obtain informed consent from participants in the semi-structured interviews. Records of when, how and from whom consent was obtained, will be recorded. Participants will be made aware of how the research findings will be used. Informed consent will be ongoing throughout the research.
Is participation in the study voluntary for students?	Yes
At what stage(s) is it possible for students to withdraw from the study, should they choose to do so?	Participants will be reminded that they have the right to withdraw from the research at any given time and that data

	related to them will be destroyed.
USE OF DATA	
When is it proposed that students provide data?	Mid-March to Mid-April 2011.
How is it proposed that students provide data?	Information to determine the views and perceptions of past students with regard to their experience of RE in the previous three years will be obtained through semi-structured interviews, in particular their views with regard to impact, effectiveness, strengths and areas for improvement. This will involve about twelve fourth year part-time students, randomly selected from those who volunteer to take part in the research.
How will the data be used?	With the consent of participants, interviews will be recorded and transcribed. The semi-structured interviews will be transcribed for analysis. Views of participants will be compared and contrasted and insight sought with regard to common issues that arise. Data will then be coded and organised thematically to determine the effectiveness of the programme and its benefit to students. It will also provide information for the future development of the RE programme.
Is it proposed to publish the findings of the research?	Yes
In any write-up of the data, will it be possible to identify the college that the students are attending?	Yes
BENEFITS AND RISKS OF THE STUDY	
Will students be informed of the benefits and risks of participating in the study?	Yes
What are the potential benefits to participants of taking part in this study?	With hermeneutical research as the methodology, meaning making will be a shared endeavour between me as interviewer and the students as participants. They will

	benefit not only in terms of critical reflective practice but also in terms of being instrumental in deciding the future direction of RE in College and perhaps further afield.
What are the potential benefits of conducting this study?	I hope to develop and improve my own practice and perhaps to influence the direction of RE in TE into the future.
What are the potential risks to participants of taking part in this study?	While no such risks are envisaged, nevertheless informed consent and right to withdraw at any stage will be strictly adhered to.
ANONYMITY/CONFIDENTIALITY	
Will students' identities be attached to any data collected?	Yes but information will also be coded to ensure anonymity. This will remain anonymous in the write up of the research.
If yes, what arrangements are in place to ensure the confidentiality of such data?	Electronic information will only be accessed by the researcher with their username and password.
Where and how will the data be stored?	Records of the data collected (including transcripts and any audio recordings) will be stored in a secure and safe place. This information will be stored on a secure system with recognised virus protection. Electronic and paper information will be locked in a secure building. This will remain anonymous in the write up of the research. Collected written information will be destroyed by shredding and securely disposed of when it is no longer required. Any audio recording will also be disposed of digitally.
Do other issues arise in the case of the specific study which merit special	No

consideration?	
How will students be informed of the answers to the questions above?	See attached email content seeking volunteer participants.
Please attach any correspondence (e.g. letters, notices etc.) that will be used in recruiting students for this research.	Please see attached email content.
Please attach any surveys, interview protocols or any other information that is available about the research.	Please see attached interview questions and themes that have arisen in student reflections.

APPENDIX IV

(PILOT INTERVIEW OUTLINE)

I just want to say thanks at the outset, for agreeing to pilot the interview with me this evening.

To set the scene:

This research project is designed to investigate the experience of those who have engaged in Religious Education in Coláiste Mhuire from 2007 to 2010. Teacher Education Students in Coláiste Mhuire have given very positive feedback with regard to their experience of Religious Education in the College. This research seeks to investigate students' experiences further, with the intention of achieving a better understanding of how the practice works and how it might be improved, as well as the relative significance of its various aspects. Insights obtained from the research will inform the development of this College's RE practice and also hopefully inform the practice of RE in Teacher Education generally.

Potential Interview questions:

- Can you describe your experience of RE before you came to College? Do you remember what RE was like for you when you first started in College? In what ways did the College course in RE differ from your previous experience? What aspects were the same?
- Can you describe how your experience of RE here developed over time?
- What particular aspects of the RE course were most important/ relevant/ useful for you? What aspects distanced you?
 1. Waiting & Wondering – the quiet time at the beginning?
 2. The threshold experience – mindfulness, meditation, youtube clip?

3. Asking the question – and never answering one?
 4. Gathering around the subject – sharing or reflecting upon our previous experience?
 5. Journaling?
 6. Pushing back the horizon – not only in terms of content but also in terms of method?
 7. Concluding ritual?
- Has the course helped you in terms of your own spirituality? How? Can you suggest anything that might have been helpful in that regard?
 - Has the course helped you in your teaching of RE in the classroom? How? Could you suggest improvements now based on your classroom experience this year?
 - Has the course had any relevance for you in your own personal life? How? Any suggestions about improvements?
 - What did you learn on the course and how has that learning impacted on you personally/ as a teacher?
 - Is there any particular memory of the RE course that you would like to talk about?
 - Did the course succeed in providing a reflective space for you as a student over the three years? How?
 - I always wonder if students who tell me everything is good are perhaps just telling me what they think I want to hear, so I'm going to ask this question: What would you do if you were teaching this course?
 - I have no further questions. Is there anything else that you would like to talk about in regard to your experience? Are there any questions you would like to ask?

APPENDIX V

(FIRST ROUND INTERVIEW OUTLINE)

I just want to say thanks at the outset, for agreeing to take part in this interview with me today.

To set the scene:

This research project is designed to investigate the experience of those who have engaged in Religious Education in Coláiste Mhuire from 2007 to 2010, with the intention of achieving a better understanding of how the practice works and how it might be improved, as well as the relative significance of its various aspects. Insights obtained from the research will inform the development of this College's RE practice and also hopefully inform the practice of RE in Teacher Education generally.

Potential Interview questions:

- Can you describe your experience of RE before you came to College?
 - Do you remember what RE was like for you when you first started in College?
 - In what ways did the College course in RE differ from your previous experience? What aspects were the same?
 - Can you describe how your experience of RE here developed over time?
 - What particular aspects of the RE course were most important/ relevant/ useful for you? What aspects distanced you?
8. Waiting & Wondering – the quiet time at the beginning?

9. The threshold experience – mindfulness, meditation, youtube clip?
10. Asking the question – and never answering one?
11. Gathering around the subject – sharing or reflecting upon our previous experience?
12. Journalling?
13. Pushing back the horizon – not only in terms of content but also in terms of method?
14. Concluding ritual?

- Has the course helped you in terms of your own spirituality? How? Can you suggest anything that might have been helpful in that regard?

- Has the course helped you in your teaching of RE in the classroom? How? Could you suggest improvements now based on your classroom experience this year?

- Has the course had any relevance for you in your own personal life? How? Any suggestions about improvements?

- What did you learn on the course and how has that learning impacted on you personally/ as a teacher?

- Is there any particular memory of the RE course that you would like to talk about?

- Did the course succeed in providing a reflective space for you as a student over the three years? How?

- If you were teaching the RE course here in Coláiste Mhuire, how would you go about it?

- I have no further questions. Is there anything else that you would like to talk about in regard to your experience? Are there any questions you would like to ask?

APPENDIX VI

(An Early Iteration of the Interview Schedule and Rationale for it)

February 2011: Discussion Document for March Supervisory Meetings

Potential Interview Questions and Themes from Student Reflections from which those questions are derived.

Having re-read the reflections written last year at the conclusion of their course by the current 4th Year Students (whom I hope to interview), certain elements of my practice arise consistently and will form the basis for potential interview questions:

- Rituals and the other elements
- Experiential aspects alone and in small groups and in the large group
- Poetry and Quotations and Music
- Meditation and Mindfulness and Breathing and Silence and Reflection – ‘I can step away from desperately trying to learn and I probably learn the most’, ‘I have learned to live in the moment, develop into a creative teacher and live each day as if it’s my last’
- Bringing what has been experienced to life and to the classroom
- Spirituality
- The personal journey and the space to work with it
- Particular sessions such as ‘Death and Hope’ and the retreat day
- The unpredictability and wonder
- Journalling
- Active Learning
- Memories
- Sharing

(Please note that the research will be conducted using a one-hour semi-structured interview. Kvale defines the purpose of the semi-structured interview as ‘obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena’ (Kvale 2007, p.8). Because, as I have suggested in section 5 above, the meaning making will be a shared endeavour between me as interviewer

and the students as participants, the methodology will be hermeneutical research. The theoretical perspective will be interpretivism (because so much of the research involves interpretation), and the epistemology informing that interpretive approach will be constructionism, because 'such research invites us to approach the object in a radical spirit of openness to its potential for new or richer meaning' (Crotty 1998, p.51). Obviously, the whole project is located in the interpretive research paradigm.)

Potential Interview questions:

- Can you describe your experience of RE before you came to College?
- Do you remember what RE was like for you when you first started in College?
- In what ways did the College course in RE differ from your previous experience? What aspects were the same?
- Can you describe how your experience of RE here developed over time?
- What particular aspects of the RE course were most important/ relevant/ useful for you? What aspects distanced you?
- Has the course helped you in terms of your own spirituality? How? Can you suggest anything that might have been helpful in that regard?
- Has the course helped you in your teaching of RE in the classroom? How? Could you suggest improvements now based on your classroom experience this year?
- Has the course had any relevance for you in your own personal life? How? Any suggestions about improvements?
- What did you learn on the course and how has that learning impacted on you personally/ as a teacher?
- Is there any particular memory of the RE course that you would like to talk about?
- Did the course succeed in providing a reflective space for you as a student over the three years? How?
- What would you do if you were teaching the course?
- I have no further questions. Is there anything else that you would like to talk about in regard to your experience? Are there any questions you would like to ask?

APPENDIX VII

(SECOND ROUND INTERVIEW SCHEDULE)

Thank you again, _____, for taking the time to meet me for this follow-up interview today.

You've read your interview transcript, _____.

Is there anything you would like to say?

Thank you, _____. As you may remember, the research project was designed to investigate the experience of those who had engaged in Religious Education in Coláiste Mhuire from 2007 to 2010, with the intention of achieving a better understanding of how the practice works and how it might be improved, as well as the relative significance of its various aspects. At this point, the research question has been refined and now reads:

In what ways, if at all, has the RE experience of my teacher education students been significant?

With that in mind and with some time left, I'd like to ask you a question or two, from the point of view of your own experience and also as reflected by others whom I have interviewed:

Possible Follow-Up Prompts:

(These follow-up prompts, based on the initial vertical analysis, will be kept in reserve. The point of the Second Round is primarily to ask the initial question. The follow-up will only be used if time allows and it is deemed relevant to the conversation.)

Interview 1: You intimated in your interview that the experience of the RE course may be different for mature students. Would you like to say more about that?

Interview 2: You mentioned in your interview that RE was never pushed on you. Would you like to say more about that and why it was important?

Interview 3: In your interview you didn't say too much about your own spiritual development. Would you like to add to that now?

Interview 4: It was clear from your interview that you were hugely engaged with the RE Course. Could you say more about the reasons for this engagement?

Interview 5: You've intimated in your interview that the course, by giving you an opportunity to reflect, contributed to your spiritual development. Would you like to say more about that?

Interview 6: You've intimated in your interview that the course had an effect on your spiritual development. Would you like to say more about that?

Interview 7: In your interview there's a sense that you, as a teacher, are an advocate for 'pushing back the horizon' and for trying things out, taking risks, going outside, pushing the boat out. Would you like to say a little about how the RE course contributed to that?

Interview 8: It's clear from your interview that, not only were you totally engaged in the RE course but that you've taken what you learned into the classroom also. Would you like to say more about that?

Interview 9: You've mentioned in your interview how the group became more engaged with RE over time in college. You've also demonstrated a concern for children who are disengaged in class. These two things may be connected and the former may offer a solution for the latter. Can you identify how your group in college gradually became engaged?

Interview 10: It's clear from your interview that your experience of RE in Marino was positive. Can you identify factors that contributed to that positive experience?

Interview 11: It's clear from your interview that your experience of RE in Marino was positive, that you were hugely engaged with the course and that other things flowed from that engagement. Would you like to say more about that engagement and suggest how others might be similarly engaged?

Interview 12: The aesthetic approach seems to have been important to you – the reflective space, the arts, ritual and symbol, etc – in your experience of the RE course. Would you like to say more about that?

Questions arising from the Horizontal Analysis:

(These questions, like the follow-up prompts, will also be kept in reserve and used as required by the interview. I do like the idea of introducing 'the collective into the individual interviews', however! The numbers correspond to the question numbers in the horizontal analysis document.)

1. It appears that students' experience of RE at first and second level differed widely and yet it may not have been a huge factor in their engagement at 3rd level. Any thoughts about that?
2. Students' experience of First Year RE in College also varied widely. Any thoughts about that?
3. Students seem to be suggesting that they experienced the course as 'different', and that its 'differentness' may have been important? Any thoughts about that?

4. Students seem to suggest that the various aspects of the RE sessions were important contributors to reflection and the RE journey generally, and have carried some of the ideas into their own classrooms. Any thoughts?
5. Students have described elements like mindfulness and meditation, journaling, and music as important in the development of a spirituality that was religious but not in the way it had been previously. Any thoughts about that? What do students mean by 'a spirituality that was religious'? Is there a difference between spirituality and religion, do you think?
6. Any further suggestions for improvement to the course now based on your classroom experience?
7. A variety of factors associated with the course have been mentioned as having an impact both personally and as a teacher, including the sharing, the reflection, the connectedness, the differentness, the example and the 'open door'. 'More meditation' has been suggested. Any thoughts?
8. When students talk about particular memories, it seems to be most often connected to rituals and things out of the ordinary. Any thoughts?
9. For some students the biggest thing was the 'reflective space' provided by RE. Any thoughts?
10. Students seem to suggest they wouldn't change the course much, if they were teaching it, but perhaps add on 'information' type sessions, self-esteem work, Tai Chi, Drama and something about engaging children in RE who don't want to engage. Any thoughts?
11. Students seem to profess a positive attitude generally towards RE and a willingness to try things. Any thoughts?

APPENDIX VIII

(SAMPLE FIRST ROUND INTERVIEW - JAN)

I just want to say thanks at the outset, for agreeing to take part in this interview with me today.

To set the scene:

This research project is designed to investigate the experience of those who have engaged in Religious Education in Coláiste Mhuire from 2007 to 2010, with the intention of achieving a better understanding of how the practice works and how it might be improved, as well as the relative significance of its various aspects. Insights obtained from the research will inform the development of this College's RE practice and also hopefully inform the practice of RE in Teacher Education generally.

Potential Interview questions:

- Can you describe your experience of RE before you came to College?

In school I would have had quite a good religious education. I went to an all-girls primary school and secondary school and they were all Catholic ethos based, so it was a fairly good Catholic upbringing. I was involved in organising school masses, various events throughout the year in relation to religious education. We were a Mercy Order school so we had Catherine McAuley Day and things like that. At home, I attended mass on a weekly basis so I feel my religious education was quite good. Whether or not it was as well informed as it should have been, I don't know, because people have the opinion that once you go to Mass, that's grand, it's set in stone.

- Do you remember what RE was like for you when you first started in College?

Strange beyond belief, and we didn't know what way to think of it. It seemed to be a whole new aspect, a whole new way and vision, a whole new way of looking at it, that I would never have thought of myself and now, looking back at it I probably wouldn't be able to see it in any other way. For the first few weeks we were just finding our feet, as it were, and religion – we really looked forward to it but we didn't know what we were looking forward to as it wasn't exactly set in stone what would happen – it was not like Maths where we knew that we were going in to do x, y and z! So, it was interesting to say the least. *Did you wish you had known what was coming?* No! I think the enjoyment of it came from what actually happened, being in the there and now and that was one of the central things to it – being in the moment. If you had known what was coming, you

couldn't exactly have given it your all. *So the unpredictability was a gift?*
Yes. Definitely.

- Obviously, then, the College course differed from your previous experience? What aspects were the same?

I suppose the importance of prayer, and it being central to religious education be it a rote prayer that's learned off or just sitting in a moment of silence and pausing and reflecting on what's happened, and the various aspects of prayer – the importance of light, a candle lighting – that's one of the aspects, now teaching in an Educate Together school that I miss, lighting a candle and just being able to sit and think. That's one aspect that I definitely miss, being in an educate together school, because to me that symbolises so many various little things. *I'll ask you a little bit about your experience with the 'Learn Together' programme in an educate together school in a while, if that's okay, but let me come back a bit first.*

- Can you describe how your experience of RE here developed over time?

I don't know whether it was because we became more comfortable with it, or whether it was just what we began to expect, but it became an almost innate way of how we taught about religion then. I know for myself, I would be sitting looking at a powerpoint and wondering – where's this going, really and truly? – and with de Bono's hats or things like that – where are we going with this? – and now we're able to sit and quote powerpoints, having done it in a religious sense or not. I think it just became appropriate and relevant to other aspects of Marino as well, so it just allowed things to flow.. *I'm going to pick up on two words there – 'relevant' and 'aspects'. In the last year I wrote a description of the elements of my course and I'm going to ask you about them now.*

- What particular aspects of the RE course were most important/ relevant/ useful for you? What aspects distanced you?

1. Waiting & Wondering – the quiet time at the beginning?

At first, and I don't know whether this is me generalising now or not, but at first people were quite uncomfortable because there's always people who feel uncomfortable in a silence and especially me because I can't stop talking. I often feel I should be saying something so that there's not that silence there. But I think, with my Nanny dying in Second Year, those moments of silence became my favourite part of religious education purely because I felt that I could just sit back, think of her, pray to her, think of other things in life. So I definitely felt that because you didn't come in and say 'right pens out, we're going to write' or 'today we're going to look at this methodology or whatever', it was almost when the time felt naturally ready that we started. I really liked that aspect.

2. The threshold experience – mindfulness, meditation, youtube clip? *Students, like yourself, with Nemo, often contributed to that.*

I think if you asked any person who graduated last year, the song for that year group was ‘Man in the Mirror’ and that came from religion. I think that the fact that I was comfortable enough to come in and ask you to put on a clip of a fish speaking whale proves that, although sometimes you came in with ‘Annie’s Song’ or things like that, it just could be personal to us if we wanted it to be or it could be to learn from – that option was there – i just think it sums it up that ‘Man in the Mirror’ was special to the group and came from everyone in the room. I think when you saw the Retreat and all the songs that we brought up to the mountain and the different things that we brought up to the mountain top for the centrepiece, I think all of that came from the effect of the threshold experience.

3. Asking the question – and never answering one?

Tedious at times (smiling). Sometimes, you find it easier when things are in black and white and you answer it. A bit like a politician is you – answer a question with a question. *Did you like that bit?* At times I found it humorous, At other times, because we valued your opinion, we wanted a concrete – ‘do this, do this and do this..’ Whether we enjoyed it or not I don’t know but we learned to live with it - it just became part of it. *Were you a questioner?* Not as much as I would have been in other lectures, really because I felt comfortable. I might have asked a question about teaching practice or something but I don’t think I asked a question in relation to RE – I just took it as part of what we were doing. So I don’t think I would have questioned that much. I don’t think I shut up but I don’t think I asked many even about TP. *Did I answer those type of questions?* Yes but often by asking what we would do when we really just wanted an answer. *Even if it wouldn’t work?* Yes. *Okay. I understand now. But it would have been a mistake to answer them wouldn’t it?* Yes. We were better off finding our own answers.

4. Gathering around the subject – sharing or reflecting upon our previous experience? *What comes to mind?*

Ellen’s teapots! Various other weird and wonderful confirmation stories, which are very ritual-based, very Catholic-based experiences, rather than just of religious education in general. I don’t think people were ever afraid to say something in class that day, be it about getting their nails painted or whatever. I think every experience that everyone had, added to the experiences of the whole group in religious education because I can sit here today and talk about Ellen’s teapots. *But there was something that day about the experiences that were shared that they were genuine experiences,*

it wasn't just a story about what happened. You could just completely empathise with them and it was almost as if there was a slight window to their Confirmation Day and you were able to see in. I think that in a sense we were beyond lucky because our class was so close. I think we shared those experiences from the first day of religion even though we didn't know what to expect and it was uncharted territory. I think we were always able to share our experiences. *What was the reason for that?* I don't know. I don't think we'll ever be able to put our fingers on it. I just think we were all blessed to have been put into our class. I don't think I would be the person I am today if I hadn't been in that group. And I think a lot of people in our class would say the same thing. And I think when you look back over your experience of Marino and not just religious education, your experience with them is what your memories become.

5. Journalling?

Yes. Yes. Did do it at times and at times, I didn't. *What way did you do it?* At times I did answer the three questions but I did not journal from the first day of first year to the last day of third year. But some things you'd say or some things someone else would say, if I felt that it was noteworthy, I would start scribbling and I'd sometimes doodle things beside it. I remember I've an A4 sheet of 6 random hats and they weren't shaped anything like your hats but, to me they're de Bono's hats. So, visually I saw them differently but I knew what they stood for. I don't think you always have to write and physically put pen to paper in order to journal. I think the journal symbolises reflection and I think we did that anyway throughout.

6. Pushing back the horizon – not only in terms of content but also in terms of method?

You talked about de Bono's hats already. Anything else come to mind? The Thinking Frames with the photographs that Denise had taken. There are so many things, like lying on the hill on the grass under the blue sky, making the circle of the year group – the sitting circle, and then it almost collapsing, going to the crossroads. You just didn't know what to expect but each had its own importance. A thousand times you could walk past a tree down there and never think of it until you stood around it in a moment of silence where we took time to reflect.

7. Concluding ritual?

I don't know whether this is the teacher head in me or not but sometimes teachers think that the best conclusion for an actual lesson is by bringing the whole class back together so that everyone's on the same foot. I think those concluding rituals allowed us to bring everything that we experienced for the fifty minutes we were there, to bring everything back together and we might not have vocally shared them but the fact that we all ended the

session on the same level almost acted as the introduction for the next session because we were all back together as a unit. END OF PART ONE

- Has the course helped you in terms of your own spirituality? How? Can you suggest anything that might have been helpful in that regard?

Yes. Definitely. Certain aspects of life when you get bogged down in things. There are at least three people I could name off other than myself who can put two feet on the ground, take a deep breath and remember where they are. I think that just makes you realise, as big as problems seem, when you take that deep breath you think aha me! And then where you are in the grand old scheme of things! *Okay, so you would say what might have been helpful is the likes of the mindfulness and so on?* The CDs with meditations were important. I think that my spirituality has grown and not just the religious side of me. I would have been religious but my spirituality of where I am and who I am and my place in the world – that definitely was helped and blossomed.

- Has the course helped you in your teaching of RE in the classroom? How? Could you suggest improvements now based on your classroom experience this year? *You're in learning support this year. The work that you do – any spin-offs from the RE course for that work?*

At times various stories come into my head, for example. We're doing the 'Incredible Edibles' programme and the first thing that comes into my head is the Parable of the Sower because I remember on TP planting seeds with the class and reading that story. I miss the songs. I miss sitting down with a class of children and singing the songs – it's an element of it that they really like. I don't know whether it's because of my experience of being in Educate Together or because of my experience here, I'm definitely much more open-minded and accepting of other people. I see beyond religion's embrace – not that I would ever have been racist or judging but I would have known I was different or they were different – it's not...

- Has the course had any relevance for you in your own personal life? How? Any suggestions about improvements?

I think I've become more accepting of others and less self-absorbed. I've come from that Leaving Cert points and it's all about me kind of thing to a less materialistic approach. In life, as you grow, your spirituality grows with you. My Spirituality has changed since going to Marino but I don't think it has changed since last May. I think it's the same. *Any suggestions in relation to your own spirituality, work or personal life, about improvements to the course based on your experience?* (silence) Maybe

more meditation with more opportunity for discussion after it about the experience. *Reflective opportunities?* Yes, but more so on a personal basis.

- What did you learn on the course and how has that learning impacted on you personally/ as a teacher?

I don't think I could put it down in just a few sentences. I think it's really hard to differentiate between Marino and RE because for all of us, it was such a huge part and such a central feature of it. Third Year revolved around our Retreat. So many things happened and when people talk about a memory from Marino, nine times out of ten it's about RE. I think, teaching aside, RE played a central role and a vital role in actually preparing us for our careers and life and not just for the children and for the children's benefit. For example, Irish was to improve our Irish for the children's benefit. In RE, we were able to take a much more personal aspect of it and something else from it. *Beyond what you needed for teaching?* I think we could reflect it to the children. It's really important how we go in now and put that forward but, if you're tired, if you're upset – I would never have been able to do that before – I'm able to stop and breathe. That's for my sanity, more of a personal gain from RE.

- Is there any particular memory of the RE course that you would like to talk about?

This is supposed to be an hour interview. We don't have that long! There are so many things. One of the most poignant moments was on the Retreat when we all just stood there (on top of the mountain) and we had decided among ourselves that we would bring the centrepiece. The first time you played 'Man in the Mirror', Clowning, Breaking the crackers, the Nativity Play outside in the dark with one star in the sky – if I keep talking, I'm going to start crying (silence). For myself and my friends, the memories that we have from RE are the memories we have from Marino. *And there was something important about the group and the shared memory?* Yes, definitely, and it took Declan to start singing 'Annie's Song'. We were just blessed. And I think that the RE because it's not just black and white, it allows the group to mould as a group where everyone has those individual experiences that come together as one.

- Did the course succeed in providing a reflective space for you as a student over the three years? How?

Yes. Whether it was when we were all yapping at the beginning or a youtube clip or one of the other aspects, something always brought you to reflection. The fact that there was always an open door too. *The reflective space – was it mainly in the large group, do you think?* I think in third year, yes. The other years not as much.

- If you were teaching the RE course here in Coláiste Mhuire, how would you go about it?

Everything the exact same! I'd copy every single part of it and maybe at the end of the year say 'Thanks Gerry'! Definitely. I don't think, from a

dancing Elmo to standing outside and singing, I don't think it would be such a profound experience if it were changed, if it were altered. I understand that it can't be the exact same for everyone but I just think that the elements that made it can't be touched. *Would you imagine that it would be the same for other years as it was for your year or that it would be the same for your group as it was for other groups?* I'm not sure, but knowing people in the year ahead of us – they still speak of it with high admiration, they look back on it and smile as well, which is what you want to do but whether or not... I definitely think our group was willing to go that extra step with it but I believe everyone got something out of it even still... It's about attitude.

- I have no further questions. Is there anything else that you would like to talk about in regard to your experience? Are there any questions you would like to ask?

I don't know. I think we've touched upon everything. When my Nana died, the first person I sent an email to was you and I don't know whether that was because I felt I needed to let Gerry know or whether it was the importance of you knowing because I knew she would be somewhere in your head. I had never gone through something like that before. I don't think I would have either approached it or gotten through it in the same way, had I not had a year and a half of the religious education here and I genuinely mean like, from thinking about little things – I remember sitting beside the coffin and I literally closed my eyes and thought of everything. I don't know whether that was the reflection or whether that happens naturally. Whether I would have reacted in the same way I don't know and will never know but I genuinely think it helped me to be the person I was then or become the person I am now. *So you've a sense that it equipped you to work with that experience?* Definitely. *And when the outsiders are looking at the RE course and they're thinking in terms of what you're learning about RE, what are you learning from RE and how is your teaching of RE as a result of doing the course. Which of those three is strongest?* Not the 'about' because I think you can just read that but all of the other elements come from the actual course. For example, the bereavements that I've dealt with at work this year, I don't think that I would have been able to deal with that if I hadn't gained what I had gotten from RE – I think the 'from' is more important than the 'about'. *Are there any questions you would like to ask?* When is the stetescope coming? (Laughing)

APPENDIX IX

(SAMPLE SECOND ROUND INTERVIEW - JAN)

Thank you again, Jan, for taking the time to meet me for this follow-up interview today.

**You've read your interview transcript, Jan.
Is there anything you would like to say?**

Just that reading back over something you say is slightly humorous and amusing. No. It's strange that I've come back into Marino today and for the first time feel that I don't belong here, which I don't any more. And then reading back over this and it was such an experience... It's kind of like toying with two different worlds. The yin and the yang...

The memories disappear?

No, the memories don't disappear, just the sense of belonging and I don't like that. I never thought that that would happen.

How long is it since you've been here?

Last May. It's almost a year.

About the transcript?

There were certain parts to journaling that were much easier than others – being outside, the Nativity Play - some of these things were much easier to write about in the sense that feelings were evoked but journaling about a specific part or stage in your life didn't quite have as big a feature. The personal was much easier.

Alive-O was set out in black and white, for example, and you can take from and add to it but the reality is that it's there. I suppose that the whole emotional experience of the RE course now allows me to be more accepting of allowing everyone to experience something different in the Educate Together school rather than relying on the Catholic ethos in the Catholic School, which I went to and adored and I still go to Mass at least once a week. I'm strong in faith but I don't feel like I need to preach, shall we say. You can do it in different ways rather than using religion as the key thing.

Allow me to ask you my research question then at this stage:

In what ways, if at all, has the RE experience of my teacher education students been significant?

You've been teaching the 'Learn Together' programme in an Educate Together school, so the RE that you received here – has that been significant in terms of teaching that programme?

In the Catholic School that I have been working in also, I was teaching Alive-O, so it's not as if I haven't taught that since Marino. But I definitely

think that the religious education that we had here shaped my awareness of the world being a bigger place than me, in the sense that I was someone who really enjoyed religion – maybe there were some people that didn't – but every single person that comes to a situation where there's a group together – everyone brings something different and things like when P... – he may not have been in College every day or put a lot of work in but when he sang that Christy Moore song in the Chapel upstairs, it was phenomenal – and nobody expected it from him of all people – and I just think that you can't judge a book by its cover. It may take someone longer to actually take part but you learn to treat everyone with the same respect, every culture with the same respect, every religion with the same respect. I think that that was instilled in me here because previous to that I would only have had a Catholic-based narrow-mindedness, shall we say.

So it was significant then. You said something about it not being for everybody. What's your feeling about that? I can't get to the others, you see, and they're not going to come to me and say they thought it was rubbish or whatever.

I don't think it's a case of it being rubbish. I think RE as a subject is similar to something like Drama. You have to let your inhibitions go. And I don't think some people were comfortable with that. They probably felt unable to be themselves because of how that would be perceived by peers and when you look at our retreat and who went on it and who didn't. But then people come up to you and ask you about it and I think that some people had a serious regret that they didn't go because they felt something – I think it came back to something as basic as what others think...

What about a sense that I didn't prepare students to teach in Educate Together Schools?

I think the course completely outshone that. I never dreamed that I would be teaching in an Educate Together School from the point of view of background and so on and to an extent I still am ignorant of other religions but I love asking the children about them and I tell them things about my religion and we all do different things. For assembly on a Wednesday, if I'm taking it, I allow some of the children to share their stories and next week because it's Easter, I'll share a story. And if anything, I think we were even more prepared because it wasn't based on just – 'this is the Learn Together curriculum and this and that' – but it was much more reflective, including journaling (hint, hint) on what we did and taking out what we did from that.

It's clear from your interview that your experience of RE in Marino was positive, that you were hugely engaged with the course and that other things flowed from that engagement. Would you like to say more about that engagement?

I probably didn't shut up at times.

You were never encouraged to shut up!

I know. That was you. But other people... I enjoyed RE so much that a lot of the time I didn't pay any attention to what others thought. I felt it was the making of who we were, as a class, as a year group and obviously as individual people. At this stage, I think of everything – the retreat and thinking of things to bring up the mountain to surprise you for a change – it was such a huge part of the B.Ed. for us. Even when you meet people from previous years, they ask 'How's Gerry? How's Gerry?' and we just say 'We had him for three years. We were so lucky.' I thoroughly enjoyed it and I think that the people who didn't put as much into it – looking back now, if they were back again I think they'd give it their all. I think it did more for me, speaking from personal experience, than something like professional development where you had to learn about things. I always knew that you don't go in and curse in front of the children, for example, but I didn't know that you could go in and be silent – that not speaking is okay, that not telling people to be quiet is okay, that not telling people to shut up is okay.

You were blessed with a peer group who allowed you to be yourself, who allowed everyone in the group to be themselves.

Yes and obviously I am completely biased but I really think that our class completely outshone ourselves in allowing the opening of the gift and the sharing of the gift with one another.

A variety of factors associated with the course have been mentioned as having an impact both personally and as a teacher, including the sharing, the reflection, the connectedness, the differentness, the example and the 'open door'. 'More meditation' has been suggested. Any thoughts?

If you were to single out one factor it would have to be meditation. The first time you did it with us we were out of our comfort zones but it became okay, it became the norm to just be with yourself, to be grounded. But each of those factors came together to create religious education, it wasn't just one single factor. It was a mix. All were interlinked and each session would have had many components.

Any further suggestions for improvement to the course now based on your classroom experience?

...LONG PAUSE... This should be a complement... I'm really trying to think!

The reason why I'm asking this question is because the B.Ed. is moving to 4 years and the RE section is going to be done in first year.

I think that's detrimental.

After first year they'll sign up for the certificate or not.

No. I think if you think back to when we started 5 years ago. You don't appreciate what's happening in first year. It takes first year to settle in. Those who don't sign up will miss an opportunity. Even people who may not have valued the course as I did – they still brought something and they still got something – and I think I don't like the idea of it.

What are the essentials? What really needs to be retained? First Year now! Keep the uniqueness. Don't have it as the hounding that other lectures can be. Get the point across but maintain your way of doing it.

What do you mean by hounding?

I mean standing at the top and not letting other people have an input. Not giving people time in the middle to let things sink in – just 'bang bang bang bang the fifty minutes are up!' Still create the atmosphere as you have done. I would say don't change but I suppose it has to.

It's interesting, you see, because I have the research that says 'don't change it' but...

Can you not just hand it to them and say – look! No one wants a change. *You make a great argument and I don't need that much convincing but I will take account of what you say.*

Keep being creative. Acknowledge the fact that people who've been through it think that.

Let me ask you about the big group session. It had its own blessing. Would you do away with it completely?

No.

It hasn't done so well the last two years.

If it was possible – not everyone can sit in that big hall – I know it's mainly in the small groups that we go out but if it were possible... But it was amazing that there was a different energy in the small group. Each group had its own energy and even among the small groups. Each was different and went about things differently. But keep the big group too. Definitely... Wednesday... Double class... and you think you didn't affect us... I even remember the timetable!

I'm going to stop it there. Thank you very much.

You're welcome very much!

Screenshot of Sample of Vertical Immersion Analysis

I suppose the importance of prayer, and it being central to religious education be it a rote prayer that's learned off or just sitting in a moment of silence and pausing and reflecting on what's happened, and the various aspects of prayer – the importance of light, a candle lighting – that's one of the aspects, now teaching in an Educate Together school that I miss, lighting a candle and just being able to sit and think. That's one aspect that I definitely miss, being in an educate together school, because to me that symbolises so many various little things. *I'll ask you a little bit about your experience with the 'Learn Together' programme in an educate together school in a while, if that's okay, but let me come back a bit first.*

Comment [d3]: Prayer!

• Can you describe how your experience of RE here developed over time?
I don't know whether it was because we became more comfortable with it, or whether it was just what we began to expect, but it became an almost innate way of how we taught about religion then. I know for myself, I would be sitting looking at a powerpoint and wondering – where's this going, really and truly? – and with de Bono's hats or things like that – where are we going with this? – and now we're able to sit and quote powerpoints, having done it in a religious sense or not. I think it just became appropriate and relevant to other aspects of Marino as well, so *it just allowed things to flow. I'm going to pick up on two words there – 'relevant' and 'aspects'. In the last year I wrote a description of the elements of my course and I'm going to ask you about them now.*

Comment [d4]: It allowed things to flow!

• What particular aspects of the RE course were most important/ relevant/ useful for you? What aspects distanced you?

1. Waiting & Wondering – the quiet time at the beginning?
At first, and I don't know whether this is me generalising now or not, but at first people were quite uncomfortable because there's always people who feel uncomfortable in a silence and especially me because I

can't stop talking. I often feel I should be saying something so that there's not that silence there. But I think, with my Nanny dying in Second Year, those moments of silence became my favourite part of religious education purely because I felt that I could just sit back, think of her, pray to her, think of other things in life. So I definitely felt that because you didn't come in and say 'right pens out, we're going to write' or 'today we're going to look at this methodology or whatever', it was almost when the time felt naturally ready that we started. I really liked that aspect.

Comment [d5]: In her own need, silence became important!

2. The threshold experience – mindfulness, meditation, youtube clip? *Students, like yourself, with Nemo, often contributed to that.*

I think if you asked any person who graduated last year, the song for that year group was 'Man in the Mirror' and that came from religion. I think that the fact that I was comfortable enough to come in and ask you to put on a clip of a fish speaking whale proves that, although sometimes you came in with 'Annie's Song' or things like that, it just could be personal to us if we wanted it to be or it could be to learn from – that option was there – i just think it sums it up that 'Man in the Mirror' was special to the group and came from everyone in the room. I think when you saw the Retreat and all the songs that we brought up to the mountain and the different things that we brought up to the mountain top for the centrepiece, I think all of that came from the effect of the threshold experience.

Comment [d6]: It had an effect!

3. Asking the question – and never answering one? Tedious at times (smiling). Sometimes, you find it easier when things are in black and white and you answer it. A bit like a politician is you – answer a question with a question. *Did you like that bit?* At times I found it humorous, At other times, because we valued your opinion, we wanted a concrete – 'do this, do this and do this..' Whether we enjoyed it or not I don't know but we learned to live with it - it just became part of it. *Were you a questioner?* Not as much as I would have been in other lectures, really because I

felt comfortable. I might have asked a question about teaching practice or something but I don't think I asked a question in relation to RE – I just took it as part of what we were doing. So I don't think I would have questioned that much. I don't think I shut up but I don't think I asked many even about TP. *Did I answer those type of questions?* Yes but often by asking what we would do when we really just wanted an answer. *Even if it wouldn't work?* Yes. *Okay. I understand now. But it would have been a mistake to answer them wouldn't it?* Yes. **We were better off finding our own answers.**

Comment [d7]: We needed to find our own answers!

4. Gathering around the subject – sharing or reflecting upon our previous experience? *What comes to mind?* Ellen's teapots! Various other weird and wonderful confirmation stories, which are very ritual-based, very Catholic-based experiences, rather than just of religious education in general. I don't think people were ever afraid to say something in class that day, be it about getting their nails painted or whatever. I think every experience that everyone had, added to the experiences of the whole group in religious education because I can sit here today and talk about Ellen's teapots. *But there was something that day about the experiences that were shared that they were genuine experiences, it wasn't just a story about what happened.* You could just completely empathise with them **and it was almost as if there was a slight window to their Confirmation Day and you were able to see in.** I think that in a sense we were beyond lucky because our class was so close. I think we shared those experiences from the first day of religion even though we didn't know what to expect and it was uncharted territory. I think we were always able to share our experiences. *What was the reason for that?* I don't know. I don't think we'll ever be able to put our fingers on it. I just think we were all blessed to have been put into our class. I don't think I would be the person I am today if I hadn't been in that group. And I think a lot of people in our class would say the same thing. And I think when you look back over your experience of Marino and not just religious education,

Comment [d8]: A window into the experience of others! This gathering around the subject experience and the number who spoke of the 'confirmation' sharing seems to reflect Cheryl's conviction in the 'Spirituality' Seminars where the really valuable stuff seemed to happen in the spaces!

your experience with them is what your memories become.

5. Journaling?

Yes. Yes. Did do it at times and at times, I didn't. *What way did you do it?* At times I did answer the three questions but I did not journal from the first day of first year to the last day of third year. But some things you'd say or some things someone else would say, if I felt that it was noteworthy, I would start scribbling and I'd sometimes doodle things beside it. I remember I've an A4 sheet of 6 random hats and they weren't shaped anything like your hats but, to me they're de Bono's hats. So, visually I saw them differently but I knew what they stood for. I don't think you always have to write and physically put pen to paper in order to journal. I think the journal symbolises reflection and I think we did that anyway throughout.

Comment [d9]: Doodling

6. Pushing back the horizon – not only in terms of content but also in terms of method?

You talked about de Bono's hats already. Anything else come to mind? The Thinking Frames with the photographs that Denise had taken. There are so many things, like lying on the hill on the grass under the blue sky, making the circle of the year group – the sitting circle, and then it almost collapsing, going to the crossroads. You just didn't know what to expect but each had its own importance. A thousand times you could walk past a tree down there and never think of it until you stood around it in a moment of silence where we took time to reflect.

Comment [d10]: The frames!

Comment [d11]: Reflection!

7. Concluding ritual?

I don't know whether this is the teacher head in me or not but sometimes teachers think that the best conclusion for an actual lesson is by bringing the whole class back together so that everyone's on the same foot. I think those concluding rituals allowed us to bring everything that we experienced for the fifty minutes we were there, to bring everything back together and we might not have vocally shared them

Comment [d12]: Bringing it all back together!

Screenshot of Sample of Horizontal Immersion Analysis

Question Number 9:

Did the course succeed in providing a reflective space for you as a student over the three years? How?

1. Do I know what a reflective space is?? *Just that students found that in the midst of the week's lectures, they found that there was a reflective space in RE.* Time for reflection....yeah....do you mean separate to journal work...cos I always thought that for me, the journal work was part of that. I don't know if everyone did..I think people who were into it – and I think you have to be – you have to be a certain personality to like to reflect....

Comment [d1]: Journal was part of it!

2. *You guys were the first to have 2 hours for the 3 yrs – did it always happen?* For me, usually I tried to make myself – cos I found a lot of the time you were running from one class to another – from TP to class – so you had to kind of take a time to just think – or not think – but sometimes I guess, it can be hard, cos something else comes into your head...the meditation helped with that as well, cos you were kind of used to it... *But there was something there where you made a decision that it was going to be a reflective space...* Yeah you kind of had to – otherwise all that would come into your head would be the next assignment...or were you late....or.... *So it mightn't have been a reflective space for everybody?* I think for that sort of thing it has to be up to everybody – cos you can't stand over everybody and say 'Do it'. I love it – I miss it terribly..... *I always wonder if students are telling me that everything is good that maybe at some level they're telling me what I want to hear?* No – it's not...

Comment [d2]: I miss it terribly!

3. I just felt that RE was something that was completely different to other subjects – and it's kind of like, I had a business teacher in school and you always felt that he was so much fun and there was such a good atmosphere created in his class that you loved going to business – you felt that it was a time when you were working as a team rather than as a recipient of knowledge – and he'd a great personality – and that's something I remember from RE – and if people like going to a lecture then you're doing a good job – like, people never feared going to RE like they did going to other lectures where they'd be afraid – oh they're going to pounce on me to answer this or – I didn't do that reading last week and I'll be one she'll ask – but there was never that fear about RE – I just think it was a time to reflect – and you could always notice that there was effort put in – I'd always see you carrying over your boxes of resources and I used to say, oh, I should be nice to him – he does put in an effort – you'd be breaking your back going over with your

boxes – and it kind of encouraged me to go to the lectures ...and also in the variety – like, there was so much variety – maybe Visual Arts it's easy to do that – but RE – even the topic you'd immediately think it's going to be a boring subject but it's not – you didn't ask much about the Alive O programme – but I think the Alive O is good cos it gives you stories and stuff to work from - but I didn't become a teacher to colour by numbers – to follow a step by step guide – cos in my thinking, you know, you become a teacher so as you can do something that people on the street can't do – so if someone trains for three yrs and they follow the Alive O book step by step, well then they're not teachin – they shouldn't have went to... *you said it earlier, you use it as a resource – you do your thing...* Yeah and you take what you want from it – and sometimes it can help you to structure lessons – but also I always try to incorporate drama strategies or art – or something to make it appealing – children have to be interested – and it's the same in college – they have to be engaged – you have to have something that engages them and makes it appealing... *you have to remember, particularly the early ones up as far as no6 – there were only two of them written since the new Curriculum – so the previous ones to that have no access to drama education or no access to visual arts as it is now – they came from a time when the visual arts was, throw them a template...* When I think of my own experience – you know, there's the notion there that experienced teachers know it all – that we should be learning from them and that they're beyond criticism – I don't believe anyone is beyond criticism – cos when I was in school, it was chalk and talk – and you read the story and did the questions that follow – but I don't think that's teaching – and I didn't think – like, I wouldn't like to go out and teach the way I was taught in PS - but I think that the variety that was created in RE made it appealing – I think that that's what my business teacher did – he took a subject that was not potentially appealing from the outside – but he made it engaging and he used to use examples – it was almost like going to see a comedian –like, it was so funny, and when I reflect on it now I'm just amazed at what he could do with such an uninteresting subject – and I think that if you can do that as a teacher, you're a great teacher – and I think that's something that happened in RE – I'm sure you could have done PowerPoints for your lectures – but you didn't choose that – you chose to put your own style on it – and I think that's something that's great – that's what makes someone great as well – when they don't follow the crowd – they put their own stamp on it - and even if it works for some and doesn't for others, you can say that, well I did things my way

Comment [d3]: Still on the periphery of things

4. Definitely – cos everything we did – or at least everything I did, I thought about it – and I thought about why I did it – and like I said, I thought about what relevance does it have to where

I am right now in my journey – and I think this is what sums that up – because I thought about lectures and – you know, I went as simple as to say ok, I took so much personally from being able to look at the display at the waiting part – the start of the lecture – and if we're going to go up on this retreat, we'd better have a display – so that's when I rang everybody and said, bring something that reminds you of RE and go through that – and that's where the display came from – and first of all I rang Paul and I rang Eilish and Jane and then they rang people and they rang people – and suddenly from this one idea that I had, I was able to see that other people had experienced the same thing. *It was a special moment I'd have to say for me too...cos I had no inkling.* Yeah – that was the aim like...it was to have the display that went with every other lecture and just because we were up a mountain, it didn't mean that we weren't doing RE.

Comment [d4]: Definitely!

5. *Again, we've probably touched on this already, so we'll keep it moving.*

6. Yeah definitely...it just encouraged me to think even...because...like, I think if we had to hand up that journal, it could have been a disaster, to be honest Gerry..... *It wouldn't have been a journal though – if you'd had to hand it up – I would have got a whole load of diaries telling me what I did – even though I already knew that.* That's it...and...just because it was...just so open.....it just felt natural...like, it never felt like I had to go home and think about it...it's just things...but when...the way you approached it and things you said...and the way you created....we had these experiences that were so different than anything we'd ever experienced – probably in life, never mind college – that you're always automatically going to think about it when you go home or when you go away – just when little things happen...oh...when we did that or...there was a real sense - it was a really natural process for me...and I think it was cos things were so unusual really – let's face it – and that's why things stuck with me and that's why I naturally reflected... *That's very good...it's very interesting to hear you talk like that – and it has given me an insight into the value of doing the journaling the way we do – cos it leaves that space open – and you close it down if you do something else..and I have to say that would have been my conviction.*

Comment [d5]: Natural reflection!

7. *I think that was the biggest thing about it* – you have to be allowed – I mean other elements of the B.Ed. are so intrusive...I mean it can get ugly and it can get very personal – and obviously everybody has to be competent and be given a badge – and then at the end of it, you're stamped and you're sound – and I think you forget – but when you come in, you're only

Comment [d6]: The biggest thing!

17...18 tops. And when you're 18, you are still a kid – well I know I was anyway...and you're still on the journey of life...and RE definitely...I think what it did was it made you feel spiritually that you were still being looked after – and I've no doubt that there is something out there...and there is something at play...and I am part of something...but...you know...it's not like something you can buy...and it's not like something that can be just given to you...it's a journey and that's there your whole life long...and I suppose that's a message that I haven't just gotten from RE – it would from my own...particularly from my mother – she wouldn't be what you'd call religious in the traditional sense...but she would be quite spiritual...and the course really reaffirmed for me... that spirituality...and that is a journey...and it's there for you if you want...but it's very very personal – and there's no two people the same...and I suppose during the course there were some hard times...and I suppose slap bang in the middle of our course we had the scandals in the church and everything...and it's really sad...but I mean...nobody can take your faith away from you...and I mean, people do terrible things to each other...but it's very very personal – and it's for you to say what's for you –and I think the biggest message that comes from it – whether you're an atheist or whatever you are- the biggest message I think is, love thy neighbour – and I don't think you can go far wrong with that in life at all... *It's interesting the way you have processed the journey.*

8. I think the RE course – of all the courses offered in Marino – the religious one really – I think professional development – and we go to our professional development lectures – but I feel that religion for me was probably the biggest part of my professional development – and kind of personally as well. I feel being present to the moment is something I take into every aspect of my life...and I feel that if you can master that really you're very much happier – and I'm surprised that something – supposedly college- wise – had that power to do that for me – personally.... *How did we begin that – what was your earliest memory of that on the course?* I just always felt that **you were present to our lectures** –and I'm not saying that anybody else wasn't – I really felt that –and again, to have somebody be really present to you, helps you to be present for others...where the fact that there was waiting time – I never felt that anything was rushed...it was just that we were there and we were sharing our experiences.... *I was a disaster with time management wasn't I? Was that part of it?* I don't even think that that was a bad thing – that we felt valued because of that....if you were going over time or didn't start on time – it wasn't really about the time – **it was about the experiences from it and I thought that was brilliant.** *I've a memory of you on your final teaching practice and I think – had I a visitor with me...had I someone*

Comment [d7]: RE important!

Comment [d8]: You were present!

Comment [d9]: It was about the experience!

else with me in the classroom? And it seemed as if you had forgotten we were there – you were utterly present to what you were doing with the infants – do you remember that? Yeah vaguely... So you carried it – it became part of your life – the ability to be present to your work...do you find it still? Yeah – definitely. I get caught up in the moment.

9. **Most definitely** – when I was doing my thesis – cos the method I chose, I had to keep a reflective diary – and even though it was nothing to do with RE, it still...it still opened me to that idea once again of writing down my feelings, my thoughts...things that happened or occurred that went well for me and things that didn't...and I had to do that for my thesis – so I was back into that kind of mode again – certain days certain things would happen and I'd write about them – not every day – but most days I would – and it brought that back again for me...and I still have that in my teaching style – *were you able to include much from it in your thesis?* I was – and I think that they were the most important things – cos they showed the development – they showed the progress that my kids were making – and I was making – *and the insights that came too.* Definitely... *is it something that you would try to keep going?* On a personal level –yes. *Is it hard to find time when you don't have to?* No –No –I've become kind of in a bit of a routine now – it's not every day – but it is kind of 2 or 3 times a week – I will – just for 5 mins – even if it's in bed at night – I will sit down and write some of the things that happened that day – and I think it's a great way...like...in such a staff like that...it is a big staff...and things can happen...and you kind of have to keep them to yourself...but when you write them down...you feel as if you've gotten a big big weight off your mind –or sometimes a child might have done something that really really bugged you – or something went really well for you and you really loved it – but you could only say 'well done' to them...but when you write it down, you get such a boost of confidence for yourself – so it is a bit of that stress released – so it's good in that sense..

Comment [d10]: Definitely! The reflective diary assignment in 4th year brought the memory back!

10. **Yeah – definitely** – I think there was always 'think- time' within the lectures you know....or even if there were lectures where you were in a reflective mood and you weren't in the humour to engage, you were kind of happy to sit back, listen, and think about what was being said - or reflect on it yourself – I don't think you were ever really forced into anything as such... *And was that a good thing?* yeah I think so... *Do you think that there were times when I should have been forcing people?* No – I don't think so – cos even, looking back now when there were certain activities when you needed everyone to be involved in – like doing the Christmas activity and you needed someone down on the floor pretending to be a donkey – everyone got involved anyway....you know – for things like that – cos they

Comment [d11]: Think time!

APPENDIX XII

Excerpts from My EdD Learning Journals

Excerpt 1: (April 7th, 2009)

At my last session with third years two interesting insights emerged. N, through tears of gratitude, thanked me. She said that I didn't give up on them and that I helped them find one another by allowing them to be themselves. I wrote the verse 'The Agony and the Essay' about my own struggle to teach that year group for the first two years in particular. At the end of two years, another lecturer was scheduled to take over but that plan changed. Not only was I going to be teaching the group for another year but I was going to be teaching them for double the hours – two hours per week instead of one! I resolved, in the manner of Rilke and his questions, to love everything that happened, to love my subject, to love the silence, to love the ambivalence, to love everything. I also resolved to ensure that all sessions would include mindfulness, music, ritual, journal time and unanswered questions.

The second insight arose from another student's comment. The two hours per week entailed one large group of 100 and three small groups subsequent to that whole group hour. I felt that the real work, in terms of engagement, happened in the small groups. When I shared this opinion at the last session, E spoke out with a conviction that he had never previously displayed, saying: 'What makes you think that there's nothing going on in the large group?'

My experience at this session reminded me of how my own knowledge is never enough. The image that came to me was that having knowledge is like trying to eat your dinner with the fork of a tree – you can visualise it but you can't do it!

Excerpt 2: (September 30th 2009)

In her comments on my EEDD031 Assignment (A Proposed Theoretical Framework and Methodology for a Small-Scale Research Project to Examine My Religious Education Practice in Coláiste Mhuire Teacher Education College), Christine Bennetts wrote:

This assignment indicates how involved you already are with your own practice, and that of your students' education, and it is clear that this is a field which is ripe for a research study.

You have a good idea of the main paradigmatic stances and relevant ontological and epistemological issues and concerns. You have read widely in this field and managed to make a personal and professional sense from the many arguments and competing approaches that are in circulation today. This is in itself, no mean feat!

Whilst accepting that this assignment indicates simply your initial ideas regarding your research, I would caution against being over-ambitious and trying to do too much given the short word-length of the thesis.

Doubtless you will consider your ideas carefully over the next six months, and may decide to undertake something smaller and more manageable, but no less significant. (EEDD031 Feedback Sheet, First Marker's Comments, endorsed by the Second Marker Cheryl Hunt)

Brookfield's four lenses would spread the net too wide. I need to leave aside the participant observation (with colleagues observing as participants!) and the questionnaires and focus on interviews with recent graduates from whom I can learn what's going on.

APPENDIX XIII

RE COURSE SPECIFICATIONS 2007-2010

Programme(s) to which Course applies: B.Ed. Primary

1. Title of Course:

Religious Education

2. Level (JF, SF, JS, SS, Postgraduate):

JF, SF, JS

3. Course Size:

63 hours over 3 years (hours distributed at local level)

4. Teaching and Learning Methods:

Lectures, seminars, field-trips.

5. Aims:

- **To equip students with the appropriate methodologies for the teaching of R.E. at primary school level.**
- **To familiarise students with the Christian tradition – its scriptures, beliefs, history and practices.**
- **To explore the faith dimension of human experience.**

6. Syllabus

- **Approaches to Religious Education – historical and contemporary.**
- **Scripture: the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament**
- **Sacraments**
- **Ecumenism: interchurch and interfaith**
- **Exploration of the doctrinal, moral and liturgical content of R.E. syllabi in use in primary schools.**

- Experiential work in relation to above content.
- Prayer – forms and application to the classroom.
- Church history.

7. Learning Outcomes:

- The students should understand the rationale for the religious education syllabi in use in primary schools.
- The student should be able to teach the lessons in the R.E. syllabus effectively and with confidence.
- The students should have knowledge of the history of Religious Education.
- The students should have a real sense of the religious development of a child at primary school level.

8. Required Equipment for course delivery:

OHP, Tape Recorder, Video Projector, Flip Chart, Photocopied Materials

9. Special Features (e.g. field trip):

Field trips e.g. visits to centres of various Christian denominations and of other religious traditions e.g. mosque, synagogue etc., Guest speakers, Inter-College worship, Shared teaching

10. Assessment Mode (e.g. coursework, examination, other):

Examination and/or coursework

11. Method of Assessment (e.g. essay, seminar paper, exam, etc.):

There are three assessment points in this course. Students will be expected to complete three assignments from the following list as specified by their College lecturer:

Examination (1 hour); Essay (1,000 words or word equivalent); Timed essay/class examination (1 hour); Project (1,000 words or word equivalent).

12. Course Mark: 100%

13. Pass Requirement: 40%

14. Supplemental Assessment Mode:

Examination and/or coursework

15. Method of Supplemental Assessment:

Examination (1 hour) and/or coursework (1,000 words equivalent)

16. Pass Requirement for Supplemental: 40%

17. Required Reading:

Introductory Chapter in R.E. programme teacher texts

DES (1999) Primary School Curriculum. Religious Education. The Stationery Office: Dublin.

DES (1999) Primary School Curriculum. Religious Education – Teacher Guidelines. The Stationery Office: Dublin.

18. Recommended Reading:

Priestly, Jack G. Bible Stories for Classroom and Assembly The Old Testament, Norwich, Religious and Moral Education Press, 1992.

Priestly, Jack G. Bible Stories for Classroom and Assembly The New Testament, Norwich, Religious and Moral Education Press, 1992.

Diane, John (Ed) The Lion Illustrated Encyclopaedia of the Bible, Oxford, Lion Publishing, 1998.

APPENDIX XIV

An Investigation of the Experience of Religious Education that is offered to Teacher Education Students in Coláiste Mhuire Teacher Education College.

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I am a doctoral student at the University of Exeter, and I am conducting interviews for my research into students' experience of Religious Education in Coláiste Mhuire.

During the interview, you will be asked some questions about your experience, and about which aspects of the course were most relevant for you as a student, in terms of your own religious education and also in terms of your teaching of religious education. The interview is designed to be approximately an hour in length. However, please feel free to expand on the topic or talk about related ideas. Also, if there are any questions you would rather not answer or that you do not feel comfortable answering, please say so and we will stop the interview or move on to the next question, whichever you prefer.

All the information will be kept confidential. I will keep the data in a secure place. The data will be stored on computer and on SD card and a transcript of the interview will be made and kept by me. Only I and the faculty supervisors mentioned above will have access to this information. Upon completion of this research, all data will be destroyed.

Participant's Agreement:

I am aware that my participation in this interview is voluntary. I have been fully informed about the aims and purposes of the project. There is no compulsion on me to participate in this research project and, if I do choose to participate, I may at any stage withdraw my participation. The researcher has reviewed with me the ethical procedures which will be followed in the course of the research. I have the right to refuse permission for the publication of any information about me and any information which I give will be used solely for the purposes of this research project, which may include publications. All information I give will be treated as confidential and the researcher will make every effort to preserve my anonymity.

If I have any questions about this study or about my rights as a research participant, I am free to contact the researcher or the supervisors (contact information given above). I have been offered a copy of this consent form that I may keep for my own reference.

I have read the above form and, with the understanding that I can withdraw at any time and for whatever reason, I consent to participate in the interview.

Participant's signature

Date

Interviewer's signature

Data Protection Act: The University of Exeter is a data collector and is registered with the Office of the Data Protection Commissioner as required to do under the Data Protection Act 1998. The information you provide will be used for research purposes and will be processed in accordance with the University's registration and current data protection legislation. Data will be confidential to the researcher(s) and will not be disclosed to any unauthorised third parties without further agreement by the participant. Reports based on the data will be in anonymised form.

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