DCU

'I think it's very difficult to be different'

How does Religious Education contribute to inclusion in an Irish Roman Catholic post-primary school?

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Thesis submitted for the award of Doctorate of Education

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October 2018

Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctorate in Education is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

Signed: _____   (Gillian Sullivan)

ID No.:

Date: 25th October 2018

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mother Rose, who has championed inclusive education her entire life. From her experience as a Primary school teacher, her work with the Travelling community, first as Resource Teacher and then as Visiting Teacher for Travellers for Louth and lastly as Principal of an all- boys' school, she has shown steadfast commitment to an inclusive education which embraces diversity in all its many forms. Thank you Mam, for inspiring your children to see life from the perspective of the 'other' and to understand how we are always enhanced by doing so. Your influence has been great and my gratitude is deep.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to a number of people, for without their help, this thesis would not be possible.

I wish to express my deep gratitude for the generosity of the Mater Dei Educational and Research Trust who awarded me a scholarship to undertake this EdD. I am also greatly indebted to the Irish Centre for Religious Education (ICRE) for the support and guidance provided throughout my study.

My heartfelt gratitude to my supervisor Dr Elaine McDonald for all of her support and encouragement throughout this entire process. It was an honour to be your student once again and I really appreciate all the guidance you so generously gave to me.

I would also like to acknowledge the support of my colleagues and students whom I feel very privileged to work with. I especially wish to thank the participants of this research for the valuable and worthwhile contributions they made to this study. I would also like to thank my Principal, who supported and encouraged my undertaking of this doctorate, and in doing so confirmed my belief in the importance of life-long learning. Heartfelt thanks must also go to the Board of Management who, showing their commitment to the advancement of teaching and learning, trusted me to conduct this research within our school community

I am very grateful to have shared this EdD experience with such wonderful colleagues and critical friends. The friendships made over the last four years are a source of sustenance and inspiration for me. A special thank you is due to my very good friend and younger brother who was my constant companion, loyal champion and wise counsel throughout this unique journey we both shared. Thank you Patrick.

I wish to thank all of my wonderful family, my parents Rose and Paddy and my siblings Barry, Patrick and Elaine for all of their love and belief in me. A special thank you to Elaine, for her loving and loyal friendship, it has sustained me in all of the happy and difficult times of my life.

To my wonderful daughters, my heart's best treasures, Zara and Olivia. Thank you both for being a constant source of joy and love for me. I could not be more proud of you Zara for all that you do and the grace and ease in which you do it. Olivia, who made a surprise arrival right in the middle of this research project, your endless wonder and zest for life has enhanced all of our lives. I thank God for you both every day.

Thank you to the grandparents, who's unique and significant role in the girls' lives helped to keep everything on track. Special thanks goes to the 'grandmothers extraordinaire': Rose, Joan and Noeleen, who all stepped in when this research project meant I was a mother missing in action. There are no better hands the girls could have been in.

Finally, my deepest thanks goes to my partner Thomas. Thank you Thomas for helping me fulfil so many of my life goals with your steadfast love, support and encouragement. It's true to say that since meeting you all of my dreams are coming true.

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Abstract

This study seeks to investigate the capacity of religious education within a denominational setting to contribute to an authentic inclusion. The understanding of an authentic inclusion that underpins this study recognises and engages with the complexities of a pluralism, in which there are often incompatible and contested world views on the nature of the ultimate order-of-things, by providing opportunities and encounters for true communication and dialogue.

In reviewing the literature differing, and at times conflicting, expectations regarding the purpose, nature and scope of RE in post-primary schools, as held by the Irish State and the Catholic Church, is identified. These conflicting expectations have emerged from the historical influence which the Catholic Church has had on Irish education as a whole, and on the provision of RE in particular, and the subsequent efforts of recent governments to align practice more closely with European educational policy.

This qualitative bounded case study which investigates the role of religious education in an increasingly diverse educational landscape is scaffolded by two key pillars: the voice of students and the voice of Religion teachers. Firstly, the study provides an insight into how senior-cycle students of different religious and secular worldviews experience religious education within a denominational context. Secondly, the perspective of the Religion teacher is investigated with particular attention paid to how teachers experience the delivery of religious education in an increasingly diverse environment. The study involves an exploration of diversity in terms of religious belief, intra-religious diversity and secular worldviews. In doing so the study foregrounds a diversity of perspectives and puts these in dialogue with literature from the academy as well as State and Church policy.

The research findings suggest that students of different belief backgrounds experience religious education at senior-cycle in different ways. Further, a dichotomous understanding of what the purpose, nature and scope of religious education ought to be exists between the participating teachers and students. Where these different perceptions collide, it is students with minority religious and secular worldviews who are most impacted upon. A consensus, however, regarding the potential the subject has to provide a pluralist perspective is also evident. Finally, the research draws on the work of Jackson, Ipgrave and Cullen to provide a way forward towards an authentically inclusive experience of senior-cycle religious education, which necessitates a dialogical, reflexive and critically engaging experience for students and teachers of all religious and secular worldviews.

List of Abbreviations

RE	Religious Education
CCE	Congregation for Catholic Education
CEIST	Catholic Education, an Irish Schools Trust
CoE	Council of Europe
CoRE	Commission on Religious Education
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DES	Department of Education and Skills (previously known as the Department of Education (1921–1997) and Department of Education and Science (1997–2010))
ETB	Education Training Board
GDC	General Directory for Catechesis
IHRC	Irish Human Rights Commission
JCRE	Junior Certificate Religious Education
LCRE	Leaving Certificate Religious Education
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
REDCo	Religion in Education: A Contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries?
UK	United Kingdom

Chapter 1   Introduction

This study seeks to investigate the capacity of religious education (RE) within a denominational setting to contribute to authentic inclusion. This introductory chapter focuses on three key points: (1) the rationale and scope of the research; (2) an overview of the specific site of the research and the participants of the research; and (3) the personal philosophy of education of the researcher. An understanding of the rationale and scope of this research will inform the reader of the milieu in which this timely research emerges. Consideration of the specific site of the research will allow for a deeper understanding of the educational environment within which this case study was conducted. This research is scaffolded by two pillars, namely the student voice and the voice of the Religion teacher, which address a lacuna in research within the Irish context. Investigating both perspectives gives rise to a more nuanced understanding of how RE is experienced within this specific context. Finally, it is hoped that providing my own personal philosophy of education will help to further illuminate, for the reader my motivation for the research.

1.1   Rationale and Scope of the Research

The Republic of Ireland (hereafter Ireland) has undergone rapid social, economic and cultural change since the mid-1990s. The economic boom between 1995 and 2007 transformed Ireland's global profile to one of prosperity, opportunity and immigration (Darmody, Tyrell and Song, 2011; Devine 2011). The population of Ireland has experienced an unprecedented rate of growth in terms of diversity of race, culture and religion. Moreover, the increased diversity in population resulting from a rise in immigration to Ireland has been in the context of a wider global population movement (Darmody, Tyrell and Song, 2011).

The increasing diversity within contemporary Irish society has led to amplified interest in how this phenomenon has impacted and influenced educational policy and practice. The *Toward Mutual Ground* conferences held in 2011 and 2012 respectively sought to address, through engagement and dialogue, the pertinent topics of pluralism and diversity, which are vital to the provision of effective RE in Ireland. Considering the relevance and need for such engagement, findings from the 2011 census show that the Irish population represented 199 different nations, an increase of 143% since 2002 (Kieran, 2013, p.30).This increased diversity was again reflected in the more recent 2016 census, with almost 64,000 Irish residents describing themselves as "Muslim". There has also been a considerable rise in the number of people adopting a secular stance. Almost 10% of the Irish population state they have no religion, increasing by 74% from 2011 (CSO, 2017).

Kieran identifies the challenges posed by such plurality and diversity in the questions they raise for educators, such as "How do we recognise and respond to religious pluralism in schools in Ireland?" and "How do we accommodate diversity of belief, both religious and secular, in educational practice

in Ireland?"(Kieran, 2013, p.26). These are apposite questions for those involved in the provision of RE, as they provide an impetus for reflection on what the purpose, nature and scope of RE ought to be in a pluralist society. Candid consideration and conversation on what inclusive RE looks like in a growingly diverse Irish society requires robust commitment on the behalf of the main stakeholders in education.

The two-day conference *Voices of Young People*, held in June 2018 in Dublin City University, sought to re-engage stakeholders in education on the topic of religion in education and to present timely research on the role of religion and its significance in the lives of young people. The research study, "Growing up female and Catholic in the Republic of Ireland", was introduced by Gareth Byrne and Bernadette Sweetman as an example of the burgeoning research developing in the Irish Centre for Religious Education in DCU. Building on the work of Leslie Francis, the study employs "the notion of intersectionality in order to explore the potential distinctiveness of the values and beliefs of female students", ranging in age from 13-15, growing up in Ireland (2016, p.67). A valuable finding of this research is the significance that religion still holds even for those not affiliated to any religion. Indeed, in response to "I often talk about religion with my friends", 30% of students with non-religious worldviews agreed, in comparison to 23% of the "practising Catholics" (2018, p.83). This highlights how religion continues to be relevant in the lives of Irish young people and has important implications for those involved in the provision of RE.

Recent developments in the United Kingdom (UK) relating to the provision of RE, as indicated in the revised publication of the *New settlement: religion and beliefs in schools*, further demonstrate the valuable place of RE in the firmament of education as a whole. Clarke and Woodhouse (2018) emphasise RE's role in contributing to the common good in aiding social cohesion in pluralist societies. Such is the potential of RE to respond to issues of diversity that they strongly advise the UK government to legalise compulsory theoretical RE for students up to the age of 16 and to rescind the opt-out option for parents to withdraw their children from the study of RE (2018). The Commission on RE (CoRE) in the UK has also developed a proposed national plan for RE, *Religion and worldviews: the way forward*, in response to these recommendations (2018).

The acceptance of religion as an important influence on European culture and society has resulted in support from the European Commission, the European Wergeland Centre and the Council of Europe (CoE), as well as a growing synergy between RE scholars and politicians (Mercer 2007, p.444). Indeed, the emphasis of the role of RE in intercultural education is evident from publications such as *Toledo guiding principles on teaching about religions and beliefs in public schools* (2007), *The recommendation for intercultural education and the challenges of religious diversity in Europe* (2008) and more recently *Signposts: policy and practice for teaching about religions and non-religious world views in intercultural education* (2014). The European Commission-funded REDCo

Project (Religion in Education. A contribution to Dialogue or a factor of Conflict in transforming societies of European Countries, 2006-2009) is an example of the commitment to research into the role of religion in education. The data collected by the REDCo report is prolific and fruitful, not least in terms of its application to the development of pedagogies and approaches for RE (Jackson, 2007).

A central finding of the REDCo report is that "Most students would like school dedicated more to teaching about different religions than guiding them towards a particular religious belief or worldview" (Jackson, 2009, p.3). O'Grady identifies this as expressing an anxiety around potential conflict regarding religious matters, along with a desire for a "safe classroom environment where there are agreed procedures for expression and discussion" (O'Grady 2012).

The rationale for undertaking this particular research within the area of RE lies in the complexity attendant upon the provision of a subject where there exist conflicting perceptions and expectations of what its purpose, nature and value ought to be.

1.2   Research Question

The current research investigates how RE contributes to authentic inclusion in an Irish Roman Catholic post-primary school. The type of authentic inclusion that underpins this study recognises and engages with the complexities of a pluralism in which there are often incompatible and contested worldviews on the nature of the ultimate order-of-things, by providing opportunities and encounters for true communication and dialogue. The concept of authentic inclusion heavily informs the conceptual framework of this research and is further elaborated in Chapter 3, Methodology. This study recognises the tension between a theoretical RE that promotes a learning *about* and *from* religions and a practical RE concerned with the teaching *into* a religious way of being. It explores how effectively RE within a specific context navigates between both purposes.

The research addresses the lacuna in the literature by documenting the student and teacher experience of RE at senior-cycle post-primary level. This research is scaffolded by the student and teacher voice, which allows for a multi-perspectival account of the experiences of RE in this context. Documenting the voice of the students, especially those of minority religious and secular identities, is central to this study. As the researcher, I wanted to gain an insight into how senior-cycle students with different minority religious and secular identities experience RE within this context. From my experience as a Religion teacher within the school community, I am aware of the diversity of religious and secular worldviews that exists. However, I wanted to explore the intra-religious diversity concerning conviction of belief and the participation in religious practices among students from the same religious traditions. A further objective of this research is to investigate teachers' perception regarding their experience of teaching in an increasingly diverse environment. This chapter now turns to a brief profile of those participating in the research.

1.2.1 Student Participants in the Research

The decision to focus on senior-cycle students means these students have had a longer experience of RE within this specific context. Twenty-nine students from fifth and sixth year participated in this study. Among this cohort of students two different perspectives are represented: one from the perspective of students studying Leaving Certificate Religious Education (LCRE) and the other from students studying non-exam RE. The majority of participating students studied Junior Certificate Religious Education (JCRE), which enables those no longer studying an exam in RE to reflect on any difference of approach. Students participating in this research represent the different religious and secular worldviews within the school community under study. A description of the sampling strategy employed in the research is provided in section 3.7 of this thesis.

1.2.2 Participating Religion Teachers

The participating teachers in the research have been teaching RE for between 5 and 33 years, which allows for a range in both age and experience. One of the Religion teachers also holds the position of Deputy Principal, while another is a Head of Year in the school under study. It was important that these teachers had the necessary experience of teaching RE at senior cycle, which narrowed the sample available for participation.

1.2.3 Guiding Questions for the Research

The guiding questions of the research were developed in order to address the main research question: "How does religious education contribute to inclusion in an Irish Roman Catholic post-primary school"? They are as follows:

- How do senior-cycle students from different religious and secular worldviews experience religious education in a Roman Catholic post-primary school?

- What is the level of intra-diversity among students who identify as being of the same religious or secular worldview in this denominational post-primary school?

- What are the attitudes of senior-cycle students to the study of different world religions and secular worldviews?

- How do Religion teachers experience the teaching of senior-cycle syllabi for LCRE and non-exam religious education?

- What are the challenges and opportunities presented by issues of diversity of belief and non-belief experienced by Religion teachers teaching religious education at senior cycle in a Roman Catholic post-primary school?

1.3 The Specific Site of the Research

The site for the current research is a Presentation school, XXX College. XXX College is an all-girls' post-primary school, currently under the trusteeship of CEIST: Catholic Education, an Irish Schools Trust. It is situated in an urban setting with many of its students also attending from surrounding rural areas. The population of the school is also diverse in terms of the socio-economic background of the students. The school held disadvantaged status until 2008. The school continues to grow in religious and cultural diversity, not least because it is situated close to a Direct Provision centre for refugees to this country. With the current student population at 944 students, the school has recently experienced a decrease in enrolments, which could be due in part to the recent opening of an Educate Together post-primary school nearby.

The researcher, herself a past student of the school, has been working in this school community for the past eight years as a Religion and English teacher. All junior-cycle students take RE for the Junior Certificate exam. This school has offered RE as an exam subject for the Leaving Certificate since 2006.

1.3.1 CEIST

The CEIST Trusteeship is made up of five Catholic Religious Congregations, whose involvement in post-primary education spans over 350 years. These religious congregations include Daughters of Charity, Sisters of Christian Retreat, Sisters of Mercy, Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, and Presentation Sisters. CEIST is built on the founding visions of these congregations "emphasising the dignity and rights of the human person, empowering the most vulnerable in society and enabling young people to become catalysts for social transformation throughout the world" (CEIST, 2018). Reflecting on the first ten years of CEIST, as a lay Catholic educational trust in Ireland, Griffin identifies ensuring the consistency of the school ethos with the founding intention to be a distinct responsibility of school Trustees (Griffin, 2018, p. 67). This requires that Trustees 'retain an interest in the day-to-day life of the school, as this is the fertile ground of the day-to-day wherein ethos grows or withers" (Griffin, 2018, p. 68). The school under study was founded by Presentation Sisters, whose vision of education echoes this emphasis on education's transformative character, with special attention to those marginalised by poverty.

Presentation Sisters

Nano Nagle founded the Presentation Sisters, as the order would come to be called, in 1775, amidst a time of great upheaval and suffering for Irish Catholics under the Penal Laws (Raftery, Delaney, Bennett, 2018, p. 3). The Presentation Sisters were dedicated to educating the poor and marginalised in order to liberate them from the religious discrimination and oppression they were suffering. By providing a Catholic education, the Presentation Sisters sought to empower young people, through the Gospel message of hope, to become agents of social change. The work of the order is inspired by the universal message of Jesus Christ, who borrowed from the words of the prophet Isaiah when he said "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring the good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18). Indeed, the centrality of catering to the needs of those who are "made poor" in the name of Jesus Christ is evident in the order's global outreach, where it has congregations across every continent.

For the Presentation schools in Ireland today, the challenge of material poverty, although sadly not rare enough, is not as pressing or prevalent as it was when the order was established in the 18th century. However, one can interpret Nano Nagle's commitment to those "made poor" as a reference to those suffering a material and/or spiritual poverty at the hands of a dominant oppressor. Indeed, it is not difficult to identify examples of this poverty in contemporary Irish society, with homelessness, drug and alcohol addiction and violence at an all-time high. Therefore, if schools inspired by the Presentation Sisters' vision want to honour Nano Nagle's commitment to those "made poor", they must ask the following questions: "Who within our school community is being 'made poor?'", "How are these students being 'made poor?'", and "What can our school community do to change this"?

This researcher contends that students with different religious and secular identities can be those "made poor" within a denominational context that fails to recognise and respect the religious and non-religious minorities within it.

1.3.2   The Mission of the School under Study

The mission statement of the school under study expounds core Christian values along with the inclusive ethos that the school endeavours to achieve. XXX College commits itself to the mission of Nano Nagle to "educate the marginalised". The faith development policy (see Appendix A) of the school under study advocates the provision of programmes and practices that promote the Catholic faith. Identified as opportunities that encourage and promote faith development within this school community are:

1.   The Formal RE Programme

2.   The Celebration of Faith in our Community and charitable activities.

3. Student Welfare Policies

However, this faith development policy also states that an inclusive aim of the school is "to encourage other students to deepen their particular faith" (Faith development policy). Opportunities for the development of faith other than the Catholic faith would appear to lie mainly within the remit of the formal RE programme, as outlined in the syllabus by the National Council of Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA).

As previously mentioned, all junior-cycle students study the JCRE syllabus for the State examination. This syllabus presents an option in Part One, whereby Religion teachers choose between two out of three sections to study. These three sections are Section A: 'Communities of faith', Section B: 'Foundations of religion-Christianity', and Section C: 'Foundations of religion – major world religions'.

However, in XXX College, the Religion Department Plan stipulates that Religion teachers will cover sections A and B and therefore omit section C (please see Appendix B). The researcher's apprehension in relation to the omitting of Section C for study is concerned with the diversity of religious and non-religious belief that is present within this school community. It would appear that a failure to study the religious and non-religious beliefs of some students, albeit a minority, is failing to provide an inclusive RE. It would also appear to be a negation of the aim of the school's faith development policy to develop the faith of non-Catholic students. It also seems counter to the Gospel values of inclusion, as espoused in the school's mission statement. The established discrepancy between the school's claims of inclusivity and the decision not to study world religions is borne out in the experience of the students and teachers, as explored in the course of the research.

1.4   The Personal Educational Philosophy of the Researcher

As a post-primary teacher, I understand education to be intrinsically relational and deeply transformative. I consider the task of teaching to be a creative dynamic, which is intuitive and instinctive in its response to the various learning needs of the students in my care. I believe a holistic vision of education that considers the physical, social, emotional, intellectual, moral and spiritual development of the whole person should inform both policy and practice.

Paulo Freire's philosophy of education, with the emphasis on its liberating potential, has influenced my epistemological position of contextual constructivism. I believe that, as people, how we come to know is deeply shaped by how we perceive the world around us. Freire advocates for a mutual approach to education that encourages the co-creation of knowledge between students and teachers (Freire, 1972). This "authentic" approach allows students to be aware of their incompleteness and

strive to be more fully human in a holistic approach to education. While Freire's work was developed within a specific geographical and political context, his conclusions have universal implications. If one were to substitute the word "oppressor" and "oppressed" with "an educational environment neglecting intercultural education" and "students with different religious and non-religious beliefs", his work would become even more relevant to the current research (Freire, 1972, p. 58).

To experience the world from the perspective of being oppressed or marginalised impacts not only a person's understanding of the world but also on they come to know the world around them. The ontological and epistemological positions are collaborative and co-operative and a person experiencing repeated restriction, owing to their identity, is impacted in terms of their attitudes, beliefs and behaviour. I was motivated to undertake the research from a desire to explore student and teacher experiences of RE, as impacted by the diversity of religious and non-religious belief within this specific educational context. Freire places great emphasis on the transformative character of education and its potential in liberating people from constraints of both a material and spiritual poverty. It is my contention, as researcher, that the syllabus aim "to contribute to the spiritual development" of students of RE is compromised if there is neglect of the religious diversity within the school community (NCCA, 2003). It is my experience that a spiritual poverty exists in a context which does not embrace the religious and secular identities of all its students.

Efforts to relate the content that is taught to the personal experience of the students is a priority of effective RE and indeed is an important tenet of intercultural education. The neglect of a student's lifeworld ensures that the knowledge they receive remains abstract and sterile. I have been fortunate to work with students from a range of backgrounds and, in my experience, students on the margins of society due to class, ethnicity and religious belief need to be empowered through the transformative nature of education to progress and achieve their aspirations in life. My sense of social justice for these students has been strengthened through the readings of Freire, who proclaims education's transformational character. Freire's insight into oppressed societies reveals that the refusal to link knowledge with the student's experience results in a lack of awareness and understanding of how one is both *in* and *with* the world, and therefore denies recognition of one's capacity to transform the world (Freire, 1972, p. 62). An education solely concerned with the acquisition of knowledge that reinforces the oppressed reality of the pupils stifles creativity and critical thinking and hence perpetuates subjugation.

The religious diversity evident in classrooms is indicative of contemporary Ireland's multicultural society. The role of the whole school community in engendering and fostering attitudes of respect and inclusion cannot be underestimated. It is my belief that it is the responsibility of every teacher to employ an intercultural approach in their teaching, which engages all students in an environment of respect and mutuality. Education plays a key role in the development of the whole person and should

encourage the flourishing of each individual to their full potential. By authentically including the religious and non-religious minorities within the classroom, teachers are providing a more fruitful and enriching RE for all students.

Therefore, I understand my research fieldwork with the participating students and my fellow Religion teachers as a reciprocal process of meaning-making, whose aim is not to purport a teleology of certainty regarding goals of social cohesion. Instead, it aims to open up a conversation within this educational community about the purpose, nature and scope of RE, and how it can be enhanced to include all of our students, in all of their diversity.

1.5 Layout of the Thesis

This chapter has outlined the rationale and scope of this study, along with providing contextual information regarding the specific site and participants of the research. It has also provided insight into the researcher's personal philosophy of education, so that readers may better understand the motivation for this research. Chapter 2 explores the literature relevant to this study of religious diversity and its impact on denominational RE. Chapter 3 follows with a detailed description of the chosen research design of the study. Chapter 4 presents both the research findings and discussion of these findings. Chapter 5 draws some conclusions and makes recommendations for the school community under study and stakeholders involved in RE within the Irish context, along with suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2   Reviewing the Literature

2.1   Introduction

This literature review outlines the body of knowledge relevant to this study of religious diversity and its impact on RE. This study is born out of a response to a lacuna in the field relating to the research question: "How does religious education contribute to authentic inclusion in an Irish Roman Catholic post-primary school"? A primary concern of this research is to explore how senior-cycle students with minority religious and secular worldviews experience RE within a Catholic post-primary school.

This research study identifies different, and at times conflicting, expectations regarding the purpose, nature and scope of RE in post-primary schools, as held by the Irish State, teachers, students, and the Catholic Church. These conflicting expectations have emerged from the historical influence which the Catholic Church has had on Irish education as a whole, and on the provision of RE in particular, and the subsequent efforts of recent governments to align practice more closely with European educational policy. The concept of an authentic inclusion is germane to the conceptual framework of this research and is explored in detail in 3.2 of Chapter 3: Methodology. This authentic inclusion, which emphasises the importance of dialogical encounters, underpins this review of the literature which puts the work of different theorists in dialogue with policy and legislation pertaining to RE.

The structure of this literature review borrows from a section of the syllabus for senior-cycle RE entitled, 'The search for meaning and values'. This section of the syllabus is concerned with the development of philosophical, religious and non-religious wisdom, as informed by the historical human search for meaning and values. Students studying this section are tasked with critically assessing the prevailing influences, values and principles of defining moments in philosophical, religious and non-religious thought. Adopting this approach, this review endeavours to explore and examine three significant developments, in an attempt to map the trajectory of RE within the Irish context.

The first section, from 2.4-2.8, of this chapter begins by charting the considerable influence of the Catholic church within the Irish education system. An exploration of the values informing the distinctive relationship between religion and education follows. A consideration of expectations regarding the function of different school types and the role of the Religion teacher within Catholic schools illuminates this unique relationship.

The second section, from 2.8-2.9, of this chapter explores the major development concerning the introduction of a State syllabus in 2000 for RE at post-primary level. It examines the values and principles informing this landmark development in the provision of RE within the Irish context. It also provides a review of the State syllabi for senior-cycle RE and the Catholic Church documents seeking

to support it. Furthermore, this section examines recent efforts by the State to review the RE syllabus at junior cycle, in an attempt to align itself with European educational policy on the teaching of religion. The expectations of both the State and the Catholic Church, implicit in this literature, are brought to bear on the research question investigating the capacity of RE to contribute to authentic inclusion.

The final section of this review represents a point of departure in terms of future developments for RE, in light of recommendations for policy and practice from the broader European context. This section reviews two pluralist approaches to RE which may provide insights into how to formulate an appropriate response to the varying expectations of State and Church for denominational RE. Ipgrave's "Dialogical Approach" echoes the importance of student voice in RE, which is an integral aspect of the current research, while Jackson's "Interpretive Approach" also reflects the epistemological stance of this study, as informed by a constructivist-interpretive paradigm.

Before the exploration of these three defining junctures in the development of RE, this chapter opens with two prefacing sections that aim to clarify some of the problems inherent in studies of religious diversity and RE. Section 2.2 provides clarification on the terminology used through this research study; and section 2.3 offers a brief overview of dominant understandings regarding the role of RE and the values that reinforce common approaches to RE.

2.2 Defining the Terminology Used

- o Religious diversity

- o Religious pluralism

- o Secularism

- o Use of the term "Other"

- o Religious Instruction and RE

- o Intercultural Education

2.2.1 Religious Diversity

Bertram-Troost, with her assertion that a single definition of religious diversity cannot be given, identifies the lack of conceptual clarity regarding the terms "religion", "religious" and "diversity" (Bertram-Troost, 2011, p.271). It is important from the outset of any empirical research study employing the term "religious diversity" to provide a stipulation of how it is to be understood in the research, rather than a definitive definition.

Therefore, the term "religious diversity" used throughout the current study refers to the different religious traditions of the participants of this research and the diversity inherent within these religious traditions. When reference is made to the religious diversity of the school under study, this includes the variety of secular worldviews that also exist. The term "worldview" used in this study draws from the understanding of the concept underpinning the Astley-Francis Open Worldview Scale (Astley and Francis, 2002), which takes McKenzie's (1991) definition of worldview as a starting point: "a worldview is an interpretive understanding a person reaches after reflecting on his or her experience of the world" (McKenzie, 1991, p.7). Religious diversity, therefore, is a relative term in the context of this study used to describe the diversity of religious and non-religious beliefs of the participants of the research.

The intra-religious diversity present in the perspectives of these participants is also a significant feature of this research. It is important to refute homogenous representations of religious traditions, which reduce the richness of the lived experience of believers (Jackson, 2004). Instead, it is imperative to explore the heterogeneity endemic to all religious traditions, so as to appreciate the multifaceted dynamic that is a religious tradition. Intra-religious diversity was evident in the contributions of each of the distinct focus groups, which were made up of students from the Roman Catholic tradition, different Christian traditions, and the Muslim and Hindu religious traditions. The premise of religious diversity is wide-ranging in this study, as it also involved students with diverse secular world views (OSCE, 2007). These students self- assigned themselves as humanist, agnostic or atheist, with some resisting labelling and therefore described as having a "secular worldview".

Intra-religious diversity pertaining to belief and practice among the participating teachers was not discernible. While there was no explicit intra-religious diversity among the Religion teachers voiced, this cannot be interpreted as all five teachers having the exact same religious beliefs and commitment. It is, however, important to state that while there was an expectation on behalf of the researcher, to encounter more diversity of belief among this cohort of participants, all of the Religion teachers described their faith positions and understanding of the purpose and nature of RE with considerable accord. This is explored further in Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion.

2.2.2   Religious Pluralism

Many commentators note that it is important to distinguish between the terms "plurality" and "pluralism". While generally "plurality" is used in a descriptive sense, "pluralism" represents a normative idea (CoE, 2007, p. 32). Using the term "plurality" in the descriptive sense means it can be more easily accepted that a plurality exists, whereas the normative idea of "pluralism", held by most Western societies, is the acceptance and recognition of a variety of cultures and ethnicities co-existing in one place. Silk (2007) identifies religious pluralism as the means by which a country populated

with different faiths enables such faiths to co-exist without the persecution of religious minorities. Merrigan warns that a "pluralistic attitude" does not always result in practice and behaviour that takes the "other" really seriously" (Merrigan, 2013, p.66). Taken to its extreme, such pluralism is a reduction of all truth claims to just one: the truth of pluralism (Donovan, 1993).

2.2.3   Secularism

Any consideration of religion in society, and indeed religious plurality, would be incomplete without addressing the concept of secularism. The term "secularism" refers to the separation of religion and state as a foundational principle upon which a society is ordered. However, it is important to note the distinction between a secularist approach and secularism, as the process of secularisation does not always result in a comfortable and concluded secularism. Jose Casanova (2006) identifies that the many iterations of the concept "secular" almost renders it non-operational.

Taylor concedes that there are multiple modernities and that not all areas of the Western world concerned in the study of secularisation have developed at the same rate (Taylor, 2004). Modernity arrived late in Ireland, compared to most other European countries: hence, the process of secularisation, with its consequence of the disassociation between religion and the State, is recent in Irish history. Secularisation within the Irish context has not resulted in unbelief becoming the default position, and therefore provides an interesting site in which to explore Taylor's thesis, which deems the secularisation theory as a "subtraction story", mere "spin" convincingly created and circulated by secularists (Taylor, 2007, p.573)

However, the rapid rate of secularisation is undeniable with the present Taoiseach's identification of a "quiet revolution", referring to the huge cultural change and creation of a new social imaginary that requires full separation of the Catholic Church from the Irish State. Indeed, the speed of such secularisation is evidenced by the same-sex marriage and the abortion referenda (2015 and 2018 respectively). Moreover, the removal of church influence in the domains of health care and education is ongoing at present in Irish society. Indeed, Michael Hayes recognises that with the emergence of a pluralist society, Ireland is now a post-Christian and post-secular country (Hayes, 2013).

The most recent census figures (2016) show a significant rise (73%) in the number of Irish citizens claiming to have "no religion", from the previous census carried out in 2011. Increasingly, people are becoming disaffiliated from the influence of religion in their lives and this, in turn, informs how they perceive the role of religion in society. A contributing factor to the strong disaffiliation from the Catholic Church in Ireland has been the revelation of sexual abuse scandals and the Church's subsequent attempts to cover up these horrific secrets. These scandals have irrevocably affected the perception of the Church as a source of religious and moral authority in Irish society (Cassidy, 2002).

The implication of this shift in understanding for the provision of education in this State can be seen in the establishment of the Forum of Patronage and Pluralism in Primary Schools (2012) (hereafter the Forum), which sought to address the dominant role played by the Catholic Church in the governance of 96% of Irish primary schools (Anderson, Byrne and Cullen, 2016)The establishment of state-run Community National Schools in 2007 was an earlier endeavour to redress what is perceived by many as an inequitable education provision in Ireland's growing pluralist society. Community National Schools are mandated to provide RE suitable for the diversity of religious tradition of those who attend. Jackson (2004) notes that a secular education system can still endorse RE that allows for a freedom of religion, while resisting a secularist approach that suppresses the study of religion.

Lee proposes that the recognition of non-religion as a "significant social, cultural, and psychological phenomenon represents a sea change-or revolution- in social scientific thinking about religion and modernity" (2014, p.111). This burgeoning area of research has, however, resulted in the inconsistent use of terminology. Lee argues for using the term "non-religion" as a master concept for this new field of study and considers it incorrect to think of the term "secular" as a more "empowering concept", when "non-religion" by its definition, "describes something that is ontologically distinct from religion in a way that secular is not" (Lee, 2014, p.118).

In the current research, however, the worldviews of students who do not belong to a religious tradition are described as "secular", for reasons I now outline. The first reason for the use of the term "secular worldviews" is due to the students themselves selecting it as an appropriate term best describing the diverse non-religious worldviews that existed among them: for example, atheist, humanist, agnostic and secular, and unlabelled. The second reason for adopting this term is because this research concentrates predominantly on the perspectives of minority faith and worldview students in the school under study. Given their minority status within this educational context, it did not seem appropriate to describe these students with a term beginning with a negative prefix. Acknowledging the limitations and difficulties associated with using the term "secular", it is used as a relative term in this research, describing the diverse non-religious worldviews of the participating students.

2.2.4 The "Other" and "Othering"

The use of the term the "other" and the verb of "othering" can be considered as problematic and divides opinion. The use of the term "other" in this research does not imply any pejorative meaning: rather, it is used to describe those who are of different religious and secular worldviews within the school under study and so are "other" to the Catholic norm. The term "other" is therefore adopted because it is helpful in describing the minority perspective in relation to the more dominant majority. The practice of "othering" is described by some of the participants of this research when recounting experiences of their RE to date.

Said's post-structuralist work *Orientalism* (1978) emphasises the nebulous task of cultural interpretation and representation, which can lead to patronising and diminishing representations of that which is different from, or "other" to one's own culture. Irwin uses the terms "misrecognition", "non-recognition" or "patronising recognition" to describe how those of non-Catholic status may be treated in a Catholic school(2010, p. 461). It is the intention of this research, while avoiding such reductive and potentially damaging representations, to give voice to the "other" and consider their experience of the RE classroom in a Catholic school. Further discussion of these issues is presented with the research findings in Chapter 4.

2.2.5   Religious Education and Religious Instruction

It is necessary to view the terms "religious education" and "religious instruction" as distinct and separate, despite the fact that they are frequently referred to interchangeably in the public discourse of religion. These terms are not co-extensive, although there are points of convergence between them. The term "religious instruction" traditionally refers to the act of a person being instructed in their own religious tradition. "Religious instruction", from the perspective of the Catholic Church, is catechesis, which derives from the Greek meaning to echo the teaching. The *General Directory for Catechesis* describes it thus,

> Catechesis is nothing other than the process of transmitting the Gospel, as the Christian community has received it, understands it, celebrates it, lives it and communicates it in many ways. (GDC, 105)

Devitt describes catechesis as the handing on or the sharing of Christian faith, which usually involves clarifying its meaning, while RE is more concerned with clarifying the meaning of religion and may or may not involve handing on a faith tradition (Devitt, 2008, p.170)

Tracing the use of the terms "religious instruction" and "religious education" in Irish public discourse, Cullen (2013) identifies the increased use of "religious education" after it was initiated by the survey on the attitudes, needs and aspirations of post-primary RE teachers *Whither Religious Education?* (Weafer and Hanley, 1991). However, Bourke (1991), writing at the same time that the survey was being conducted, identifies the use of the term "religious education" in denominational education as problematic. She identifies the dominant model of teaching religion to be catechesis (religious instruction) rather than education in the area of religion, and therefore points to the misuse of the term "religious education" (Bourke, 1991, p. 153). With the formal introduction of the Junior Certificate Religious Syllabus for State examination in 2003, and subsequently for the Leaving Certificate, the term "religious education" gained greater prominence and was to be thought of in terms of an academic subject. However, the current study concurs that "the theory underpinning the teaching of

senior-cycle religion (in Catholic schools) betrays a lack of conceptual clarity in its failure to distinguish clearly between Catholic schools' dual goals of education and faith-nurture" (Bourke, 1991, p.151). Indeed, many church and educational documents conflate the two terms, further highlighting the need to distinguish between them.

RE is the term given to the critical encounter between religion and education. RE itself is a "bruised term" (Cullen 2013, p. 6) with a plethora of divergent perceptions relating to its appropriate nature and purpose (Renehan and Williams, 2015). RE studied in post-primary schools has the same educational profile and educational goals as the other academic subjects, with syllabi drawn up by the National Council for Curriculum and Development. To support the introduction of Religion as an exam for the Leaving Certificate, the Irish bishops issued *Guidelines for faith formation and the development of Catholic students (2006)*, as a support for the teaching of RE in Roman Catholic schools. In line with the 1998 Education Act section 15, denominational schools are permitted to uphold the "characteristic spirit" of the school and so within these schools these syllabi are taught through a catechetical lens.

This is an issue that arises as problematic, when considering the experience of minority faith students and those with secular worldviews of RE, in the school under study in this research. The implications of failing to maintain a distinction between catechetical faith formation and critical RE is further explored in Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion.

2.2.6   Intercultural Education

Both the 20th and the 21st centuries saw unprecedented migration, which has subsequently led to a greater heterogeneity of cultures, religions and ethnicities residing in Western Europe. The terms "multiculturalism" and "interculturalism" have been used to describe the reality of such pluralism. Lane describes multiculturalism as having multiple meanings, which include, "the recognition of peoples from different cultural backgrounds seeking to occupy the same social space" (2008, p.17). Interculturalism is distinct from multiculturalism, in "the very practical sense of indicating cultural exchange and dialogue between two or more cultures outside the modern nation state rather than within it" (Besley and Peters, 2012, p.4).

Besely and Peters (2012) identify the concept of intercultural dialogue as presenting the dominant paradigm for "cultural policy" and the educational foundation for the advancement of intercultural understanding. Moreover, the *White paper on intercultural dialogue: living together as equals in dignity"* (CoE, 2008), emphasises the vital role of intercultural understanding in generating social cohesion. This paper demonstrates the collective will of the CoE in the development of intercultural understanding, describing how:

> In 2007, the European Ministers of Education underlined the importance of measures to improve understanding between cultural and/or religious communities

through school education, on the basis of shared principles of ethics and democratic citizenship; regardless of the religious education that prevails, tuition should take account of religious and convictional diversity. (CoE, 2008)

Educators adopt the term "intercultural education" rather than "multicultural education" in order to "emphasise a more critical and interactive view of culture" (CoE, 2007, p.43). The pedagogical implications of interculturalism assume that exposure to and engagement with different cultures will encourage a greater understanding of the world's people in all their ethnic, cultural and religious diversity (Besley and Peters, 2012). Such an education would provide "the basis for intercultural understanding and the appropriate conditions for dialogue" (2012, p.6). Within the Irish context, *Guidelines for intercultural education* in primary schools, issued by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) 2006, identify intercultural education as having two principal features. These guidelines define it as:

> … education which respects, celebrates and recognises the normality of diversity in all areas of human life. It sensitises the learner to the idea that humans have naturally developed a range of different ways of life, customs and worldviews, and that this breadth of human life enriches all of us. It is education, which promotes equality and human rights, challenges unfair discrimination, and promotes the values upon which equality is built. (NCCA, 2006,p. 3)

These guidelines were strongly influenced by the *Guidelines on traveller education in primary schools* (DES, 2002), in which the aims of intercultural education are to:

o Foster conditions conducive to pluralism in society

o Raise children's awareness of their own culture and attune them to the fact that there are other ways of behaving and other value systems

o Develop respect for life-styles different from their own so that children can understand and appreciate each other

o Foster a commitment to equality

o Enable children to make informed choices about, and take action on, issues of prejudice and discrimination

o Appreciate and value similarities and differences

o Enable all children to speak for themselves and articulate their cultures and histories.

Contemporary Ireland is a multicultural nation, due to the high rate of emigration in recent years, which espouses a liberal ethos. A liberal culture is hallmarked by an acceptance of pluralism and a

"tolerance of many divergent and in some cases incompatible world-views" (Cassidy, 2002, p.20). A defining feature of a liberal culture within a pluralist society is the belief that it is no longer acceptable to dismiss the truth claims of others. Therefore, intercultural education is apposite in addressing the needs of a pluralist society.

The understanding of intercultural dialogue and education from the perspective of the Catholic Church is outlined in 'Educating to intercultural dialogue in Catholic schools: living in harmony for a civilization of love'(Congregation for Catholic Education (CCE), 2013). This document considers an authentic intercultural pedagogy in light of Pope Benedict XVI's words to involve 'a deep-seated knowledge of the specific identity of the various dialogue partners" (CCE, 2013, para. 27). The Church recognises also the dialogical character of identity building which sees multicultural Catholic schools "tasked with helping people with different experiences to relate to each other", so that each individual can evolve and flourish to their full potential (CCE, 2013, para. 84). Within the Irish context the Irish Episcopal Conference's publication *Share the Good News* identifies "newcomers [as a] gift and a challenge" (IEC, 2010 p.26). The diversity of people coming to Ireland provides Irish society with resources and new experiences. However, the Irish bishops recognise the challenge religious diversity can present to Catholic schools in terms of struggling to provide the adequate resources required to cater for the diversity of religious and spiritual needs (IEC, 2010 p.26). This research reveals the struggle of a Catholic post-primary school to adequately cater for the needs of their religiously diverse student population. It examines the perceptions of minority faith and worldview students experiencing a Catholic hegemony in an educational setting. A significant finding of the research is how the aims of intercultural education are being obfuscated by a centring on the dominant religious identity within the school community. The deeply ingrained impression of Catholic religious identity on Irish culture and its subsequent influence on education is explored in the next section of this literature review.

2.3   The Role of Religious Education

A challenge of this research is that it has had to cope with the lack of a recognised, accepted and available theoretical framework for RE. Instead, there exists a multitude of understandings regarding the role of RE and the subsequent expectation of what its proper purpose, nature and scope ought to be. Byrne emphasises the importance of being alert to the changing purpose, nature and scope of RE in different contexts (Irish Episcopal Conference, 2010). Boeve recognises how "current religious education is challenged in two directions: on the one hand it cares for the future of the Christian tradition, and on the other hand it wants to live up to a context that steadily recedes from the Christian culture and that pluralises religiously" (2012, p.155). This section of the chapter seeks to enlighten the reader to some of the dominant perceptions regarding the role of RE, and explore and examine the values and principles which underlie them. It is structured around Grimmitt's well-established

identification of three different operative approaches to RE, as reconceptualised as three modes for teachers by Riegel and Mendl (2014): teaching about religion, teaching from religion, teaching into religion.

2.3.1   Teaching *about* Religions

The teaching *about* religions can be understood as promoting a religious literacy that will in turn enhance efforts for social cohesion within multicultural societies. Hull identifies the descriptive, historical and critical character of this approach and describes it as a teaching and learning from the outside, rather than from within the religious traditions being studied (2001). This approach offers an inter-religious focus that informs students objectively about different religions and non-religious worldviews.

This approach is underpinned by anthropological values and principles that uphold a human development perspective of education, while also approving the argument from expedience regarding social cohesion within multicultural societies. This argument from expedience is grounded in the belief that the more people know about one another the more they will get along together. The teaching and learning *about* religions encapsulates a theoretical, objective and critical approach to the study of religion. Critics of this approach identify its inadequacies in not only failing to nourish the spiritual and faith development of students but also entirely neglecting the lifeworld and experiences of the student. Instead, the *about* religions inadvertently reduces the student to a tourist exploring different religions as sites to garner cold religious facts that deny the "fuzzy edgedness" and considerable internal diversity inherent in all religions (Jackson, 2004, p.87).

Hull, however recognises the valuable contribution that this approach makes to freedom *of* and *for* religion in helping to counter religious intolerance, through:

> Empowers[ing] the student with critical skills for interpreting religious phenomena, it tends to release students from unexamined belief, breaking down the stereotypes of other religious traditions and providing frames of reference which will help defend the student from fanaticism and prejudice. (Hull, 2001, p. 4)

Equipping students with such skills is undoubtedly valuable and worthwhile, given the growing multiculturalism of Irish society today. However, the insufficiency of this approach in catering for robust engagement with religious diversity that centres on the learner remains problematic and it is with this in mind we now turn to the second approach.

2.3.2   Teaching *from* Religion

A teaching *from* religion approach maintains the critical distance necessary in the teaching *about* religion approach and engages with the same religious content, although it incorporates the lifeworld of the learner. Grimmitt understands the dominant pedagogical principle of his model to involve encouraging students "to build conceptual bridges between their own experiences and what they recognise to be the central concepts of religion" (1973, p.49). The emphasis is on an anthropological and human development aspect of education, in which the learner is central and transformed by their study of RE.

Riegel and Mendl (2014) identify the teaching *from* religion approach as supporting students in answering their existential questions concerning religion and belief. The life experience of the learner is put in dialogue with the different religious and non-religious worldviews under study. This RE begins a conversational process allowing for all students, indiscriminate of their religious and non-religious identities, to interpret and re-interpret their beliefs in light of their learning (Meijer, 1995). Hull considers the value of such an approach as contributing to the moral and spiritual development of the student. Other proponents of the approach identify its potential for surpassing a countering of religious intolerance to enhancing an intercultural understanding (Jackson, 2003, 2007). However, the marriage of a teaching *about* and *from* religion inevitably falls short of the expectation of denominational schools to provide RE that develops the religious faith of its students.

2.3.3   Teaching [*into*] Religion

Teaching religion or teaching *into* religion can be described as a practical approach to RE, which "represents the formative aspect of familiarising students with the relevant religious community" (Riegel and Mendl, 2014, p.168). Moran describes such an approach as learning how to be religious in a particular way (cited *IN* Cullen, 2013, p. 18). The principles and values underpinning such an approach emphasise faith development as the primary concern of the RE being provided. Traditionally, this kind of RE would have been known as "religious instruction", which facilitated the denominational school's "role as a socialising agency" (Bourke, 1991, p.151). Hull asserts that the objective "of the instruction is to enable pupils to come to believe in the religion or to strengthen their commitment to it" (2001, p. 3). Catholic theologian Dermot Lane understands a learning *into* Christianity as "attend[ing] to the revelation of God given in experience and history, in the rhythms of nature, and in particular in the narrative of Jesus Christ" (2013, p.27). Students respond in faith to such RE through "discovering the presence of an underlying reciprocity, relationality and mutuality between God and humanity" (2013, p.28).

As is evidenced in the Irish context, this approach to RE is challenged when confronted with religious pluralism. Hull identifies two possible consequences of this for RE. The first involves a total

secularising of the state education system, relegating the nurturing of faith to the confines of homes and religious communities. The second involves a segregationist approach to RE, where students of different religious faiths all receive RE from a representative of their faith separately (2001). This approach, while providing freedom for religion of the different religious communities, fails to enhance the freedom of individual learners by broadening their perspectives through an inter-religious approach (2001). While this may seem to bring us back to the value of teaching *about* and *from* religion, how can these approaches be reconciled within a denominational RE?

For Lane, the teaching and learning *into* religion overcomes the limitations of the *about* and *from* approaches and in doing so provides a "logical and educational progression in learning about, to learning from to learning into a particular faith tradition" (2013, p.29). Groome (2011) also recognises a learning *about* and *from* different religious traditions as being imperative for an intercultural understanding and a necessary task of a denominational RE. The effective incorporation of all three modes of teaching and learning could allow a denominational RE to adopt a pluralist approach to the teaching of different religious and non-religious worldviews. Moreover, this would contribute to the spiritual and moral development of all students, along with developing the religious faith of students sharing the same religious identity of the school.

Hull considers this a faith-based approach to RE which, instead of neglecting the teaching and learning of other religions, attempts to present different religions from the perspective of one religion (2001). While a faith-based education remains somewhat problematic for Hull, he makes the distinction between convergent and divergent models within faith-based education. For Hull, resisting the convergent model in which "the faith of the teacher, the contents of the teaching, and the outlook or commitments of the pupils are all intended to converge", and adopting a divergent approach that requires the teaching of "content other than that typical of the teacher's own faith, and to anticipate a range of responses from the pupils, and all this without infringing the basic principles of one's faith", is the ideal (2001, p. 6).

According to Kieran (2013), RE within the Irish context presents opportunities for students to learn *about* and *from* different religious traditions while simultaneously having their own religious identity nurtured. However, later in this review of the literature we will see how different expectations concerning the role of RE frustrate the straightforward application of such an approach.

 This section has provided an overview of three of the most common approaches to RE. It also highlighted the values and principles that underpin each approach. We now embark on an exploration of the values and principles that have informed the development of RE within the Irish context to date. We begin our search for meaning by examining the symbiotic relationship of faith and culture, which gave rise to the unique situation of religion's role within Irish education.

2.4   Religious Identity and Education in the Irish State

This section of the review of the literature explores the unique relationship between Irish culture and Catholic identity. It attempts to illuminate the deeply embedded influence of religious faith on Irish cultural identity. It then outlines key historical developments in which the complex interplay between the Catholic Church and State in the provision of education is evidenced. This enables an understanding of how deeply embedded Catholic religious values have been within Irish culture.

2.4.1   Religious Identity and Culture in the Irish Context

Gallagher recognises that religion and culture have enjoyed a "reciprocal relationship" throughout history, until recent centuries (Gallagher, 1997, p.8). This is clearly illustrated within the Irish context and especially in the example of the Irish language, much of which is engraved with religious metaphor. Williams reflects on how Gaelige is the "pre-eminent vehicle of the relationship between faith and culture in Ireland" (Williams, 2005, p.20). There are indeed numerous religious references that run throughout the Irish language, from general expressions such as *buíochas le Dia* and *Dia dhuit,* to the underpinning of Catholic moral teaching in *an gníomh giniúna* (Williams, 2005, pp.20-21).

The marriage between faith and culture, as depicted in this union of religion and language, was particularly conducive to the construction of an Irish Catholic identity against that of its British colonial "Other". This led to the strengthening of the binary opposition between Irish Catholic and British Protestant, and ultimately reinforced imperial essentialist concepts regarding identity. With the birth of the Irish Free State, the relationship between nationality and religious identity was further galvanised, with Irish Catholicism becoming the foundational stone upon which this new State would be built.

2.4.2   The Development of the Catholic Church's Involvement in Education in Ireland

The symbiotic relationship between the Catholic church and the Irish State had major implications for the provision of education. An overview of some of the key historical events illustrates the copper-fastening of Catholic involvement in post-primary education.

In the late 17th century, post-primary schools were established in Ireland by the British Government to further impress upon Irish society the English language and culture, along with the Anglican religion (Coolahan, 1981). This further exacerbated the religious discrimination suffered by the Catholic majority under the Penal Laws, which effectively sought to disenfranchise Irish Catholics of their religion, language, culture and education. In reaction to the prohibition on education, Catholics established unofficial schools known as "hedge schools", to educate young Catholics. This was to be the genesis of a nation which highly values and protects Catholic education (Keogh and McCarthy,

2005; White 2010). After the passing of the Catholic Relief Act (1782), Catholics were permitted to establish schools without fear of persecution.

Despite the dominant model of Catholic education in Ireland today, the founding vision of the national (primary) school system in 1831 was to establish inter-denominational schools that were intended to be managed by one or more religious communities. The Stanley letter (1831) is testament to a proposed education with a greater multidenominational character, which would provide a common, secular literary and moral education. RE was intended to be provided separately by the relevant religious communities, who would determine its content and delivery (Faas, Darmody and Sokolowska, 2015). Nevertheless, the Christian churches would not support this multidenominational model and so the Government yielded to provide State aid to denominational schools in 1840, which signalled a departure from a more inclusive and diverse education (Coolahan, 1981). From then, the religious character of schools was as prominent as the patron so determined it to be.

Later, when Ireland gained independence from British rule, and officially became a free State in 1922, the relationship between nationality and religious identity was further bolstered through the involvement of the Catholic Church in education and healthcare provision. Article 42.4 of the Irish Constitution (1937) outlines the State's responsibility for education as *providing for free education* rather than *providing free education.* This facilitated the new State to outsource the responsibility for education to the churches in a time of economic and social struggle (Coolahan 1981; Williams, 2005; O'Mahony, 2013). The State provided the funding to the churches so that they could provide free education on the State's behalf. It is mainly this indirect provision model for education that exists today (O'Mahony, 2013),

> The State shall provide for free primary education and shall endeavour to supplement and give reasonable aid to private and corporate educational initiative, and, when the public good requires it, provide other educational facilities or institutions with due regard, however, for the rights of parents, especially in the matter of religious and moral formation. (Art. 42.4)

Almost the entire responsibility for the provision of education in the Irish State lies within the remit of the Catholic Church. Presently approximately 90% of Irish primary schools are under the patronage of the Catholic Church, along with 50% of post-primary schools with the remaining schools, while nominally non-Catholic schools, nonetheless have a strong Catholic influence at trustee and chaplaincy levels (Rougier and Honohan, 2015).

The inherent nature of Roman Catholicism's influence on Irish culture and education further complicates the growing diversity and the changing cultural and religious landscape of contemporary Ireland (Anderson, Byrne and Cullen, 2016). The rapid secularisation of Ireland, as outlined earlier in this literature review, has subsequently led to a decline in the domination of the Catholic church in most spheres of Irish society (Devine, 2011). The government-sponsored review at primary level in

2012 reflected the appetite for increasing a pluralism of educational provision (ATCS, 2012; Coolahan et al., 2012). Since the review, change has been slow to be implemented, although an increase in the building of state-run schools at both primary and post-primary level has been evident in the last number of years.

2.4.3   Concerns Regarding Schools with Religious Identities

The Irish Constitution identifies parents as the primary educators of children and, in recognising the primacy of their role in the formation of the child, it seeks to ensure further that no parent's conscience is compromised in this responsibility. Article 42.3.2 of the Irish Constitution holds that the Irish State:

> Shall not oblige parents in violation of their conscience and lawful preference to send their children to schools established by the State, or to any particular type of school designated by the State.

O' Mahony identifies the above article, along with articles 42.1/42.2/44.2, as being suggestive of a strong protection for individual religious liberty and a guarantee of freedom of choice to parents, regarding the type of education and most particularly the type of RE that they wish their children to receive. However, the reality in fact is very different (O'Mahony, 2013, p.158). The implications of the dominance of Catholic education means that often parents are forced to send their child to Catholic schools, despite belonging to a different religion or having a secular worldview. Daly (2009) criticises this approach, as it makes the protection of religious liberty in the educational setting contingent upon the existence of critical mass and social and political capital, which in turn undermines the individual right to religious liberty.

A process of divesting the remit of RE from the churches is evidenced by the Education Act of 1998 and the rescinding of Rule 68 in 2016 from the *Rules for National Schools*, which had stated that:

> Of all parts of a school curriculum Religious Instruction is by far the most important. Religious instruction is a fundamental part of the school course, and a religious spirit should inform and vivify the whole work of the school. (DES, 1965)

The Education Act of 1998 removed the prohibition on State involvement in RE, allowing for a greater focus on the role of the State in responding to growing religious pluralism in society. This marked a departure in understanding religious learning and teaching as an ecclesial task (Williams, 2005; Anderson ,Byrne and Cullen, 2016). However, under the Act, schools with a religious character will still retain their "characteristic spirit", which has been criticised as upholding the inequality of the Catholic dominance in education provision. While the Act does require schools to provide for maximum accessibility, it allows for denominational schools to refuse admission in instanceswhere

such admission is considered to compromise the "characteristic spirit" of the school (O'Mahony, 2013, p. 60). This rule, informally known as the "baptism barrier", is to be lifted from September 2019 for oversubscribed primary schools (Donnelly, 2018). However, Catholic schools' mission statements often espouse the all-encompassing nature of the religious identity of the school. Expectedly, such promotion of religious identity does not always sit comfortably with parents and students of different religions and worldviews. While an opt-out of RE is operative, the provision of a secular moral and ethical education is not offered as an alternative (Mahwinney et al., 2010; DES, 13/18; DES, 62/18).

The Employment Equality Act (1998) also raises concerns regarding the imbalance of educational provision and the right to religious liberty. This Act prohibits religious discrimination in employment matters, though it permits denominational schools to hire and fire where necessary, to uphold the religious ethos of the school. That such an exemption exists in Ireland's anti-discrimination legislation has been the focus of much debate. Similarly, the Equal Status Act (2000), seeking to prohibit religious discrimination in schools' admissions, also allows for an exemption by denominational schools.

2.4.4 Two Major Documents Calling for Change for Education and Religion

The publication of the Irish Human Rights Commission's report (2011) and the report from the Forum (2012) brought the issue of education and religion into sharper focus within the Irish public sphere. Pressure had been mounting on the Government to provide a diversity of school types to reflect the growing diversity of Irish society (IHRC, 2011; Renehan, 2011; Renehan and Williams 2015). The 2011 report from the Irish Human Rights Commission (IHRC) stated:

> The overarching recommendation of the IHRC is that the State should ensure that there is diversity of provision of school type within educational catchment areas throughout the State which reflects the diversity of religious and non-religious conviction now represented in the State. (2011, p.2)

Indeed, Ireland has attracted international attention for its deficit of school types. The imbalance between denominational and multidenominational schools is perceived as indicative of a lack of equity between religious and non-religious groups in Irish society (IHRC, 2011).

The Forum established by then Minister of Education Ruairi Quinn was tasked with the challenge of addressing the inequitable provision of school types in Irish education and reviewing denominational patronage of mainly the primary school sector. The main objective of the Forum was to begin the monumental process of divesting some Catholic schools of their religious character. Observations made by the Forum concerning schools' religious ethos are interesting to note and relevant to the focus of the current research. The report makes the distinction between narrow perceptions of school ethos as being a religious ethos only and a more comprehensive meaning of ethos as something that should be experienced by students in the everyday life of the school, through "dignity and respect of their rights" (Renehan and Williams 2015, p.77). However, the report is clear on the legal responsibilities of all schools to uphold a school ethos or characteristic spirit (2015, p.77). Renehan (2011) notes that while parents who do not espouse a particular religious faith have a right to withdraw their child from RE classes, they do not have the right to dictate that the school ethos throughout the entire day be changed to suit their specific religious, secular, atheistic or agnostic preferences.

The contentious issues of denominational patronage, religious ethos and RE were explored by both the IHRC's 2011 report and the Forum's 2012 report. Inevitably, there exist, among the Irish public, conflicting understandings relating to what the appropriate function of a school's ethos and what the purpose, nature and scope of RE as a school subject ought to be. However, both documents cohere to give voice to the exigence that exists for greater school type choice in Irish education. The prominence of religious influence in Irish education can clearly be acknowledged from the brief overview of the structure of post-primary schooling provided in the following section.

2.5 Post-primary Schools and the Voluntary Sector

There are 711 post-primary schools in Ireland and these are categorised as follows: 374 voluntary secondary schools, 241 vocational schools, and 96 community/comprehensive schools in Ireland (DES, 2018). There are seven main categories of post-primary schools: voluntary secondary schools, Education and Training Board Ireland Schools (ETBI), community schools and colleges, comprehensive schools, Gaelscoileanna and Educate Together schools. This section provides a brief overview of schools outside the voluntary sector and then proceeds with a more detailed account of the voluntary sector, with particular emphasis given to the Catholic vision of education in these schools.

2.5.1 Schools outside the Voluntary Sector

Education and Training Board Schools (ETBI)

Major changes occurred in educational provision in the late 1960s, based on the *Investment in Education Report*, which signalled a change in the State's attitude to its involvement in post-primary education (Tuohy, 2013, p.239). The introduction of free education in 1967 saw the State develop new comprehensive schools which sought to provide for a continuation of education from primary schooling, coupled with an emphasis on technical education (Tuohy 2013). Originally named Vocational Educational Committee (VEC) schools, ETBI schools were established by the State and were intended to be of a secular ethos. However, the State acquiesced that these schools should have a Catholic ethos under the insistence of Archbishop McQuaid (Clarke, 2011). Indeed, Tuohy asserts that at the time "the link with moral formation of the person and religious instruction was regarded as unproblematic and axiomatic" (2013, p.246). Today, these schools are run by the statutory bodies of the ETBs and cater for 25% of the student population, the majority of which are Catholic (DES, 2013).

These schools, along with all post-primary schools, have the choice of teaching RE syllabi at both junior and senior cycles. The contentious issues surrounding the opting out of RE recently re-entered public discourse, when the current Minister for Education and Skills, Richard Bruton, revisited it in recent circulars 13/18 and 62/18 instructing nondenominational school types, ETBs and community schools, to cater for this right to opt-out in a more explicit and effective way. The most notable change is that these schools are to provide "alternative tuition throughout the school year rather than supervised study or other activities" (DES, 2018, para. 3.2). This implies that instead of parents exercising their right to opt out of RE, they will be a part of the process of planning and selecting the alternative subject to study. Research in Northern Ireland found that the opt-out option is unsuitable for protecting religious freedom in a diverse and pluralist society, as there is "ignorance surrounding the option, difficulties and concerns about taking it, and desires for more inclusive Religious Education" (Mawhinney *et al*., 2010).

Community Schools

Historically, community schools resulted in amalgamations between voluntary and vocational-second level schools in the 1960s. There are currently 78 schools, with more in the planning and construction stage (ESRI, 2013a), and are financed entirely by the Department of Education and Skills (DES). While these schools are co-educational and espouse a multidenominational ethos, they can be considerable denominational schools and largely Catholic, with only five managed by the Church of Ireland. The religious identity of each school is therefore emphasised as much as the patron so wishes. RE provided for in these schools is also informed by patron preference. It is important to note that these schools have a paid chaplaincy service which was ruled, when challenged, as constitutional by the Supreme Court, given that the State has a responsibility to assist parents in this aspect of education (Campaign to Separate Church and State v Minister of Education [1998] IR 321 at 357-8).

The example of the development of community National Schools by the State in 2008, of which there are currently 12, illustrates the deeply engrained influence of the Catholic Church on education in Ireland and the challenge this can present, as the Church is the majority shareholder in Irish education. Community National Schools are multidenominational, inclusive schools that welcome all children from the communities they serve (Conboy, 2017). The ethos statement for these schools, as described on the website, states "respect for plurality of faiths is seen as integral to the daily routine of the school" (2018).

This aspect of the ethos of Community National Schools is a pertinent one in the context of the growing religious diversity in Irish society. Therefore, state-funded schools that celebrate a plurality of faiths and secular worldviews are to be welcomed, although such pluralist ideals have been impeded by the Catholic Church. Investigative work carried out by RTÉ's education and science correspondent Emma O'Kelly, revealed that during the negotiation stages of school development, the Catholic Church, in return for their support of Community National Schools, confirmed that faith formation, including sacramental preparation, was to be provided to Catholic students during the school day (Mullally, 2017). This was described by church officials as "a minimum non-negotiable requirement" (O'Kelly, 2012).

While faith formation is understood by the Church as a vital aspect of Catholic education, within the context of a religiously diverse setting, apposite RE would fruitfully allow for a multitude of voices (IEC, 2010, p. 57). The consequence of this requirement for faith formation is the segregation of pupils to allow for belief specific teaching within the multi-belief programme that was developed originally for the schools (Mullally, 2017). Research studies reporting student voice emphasise that students do not wish to be separated for RE (Jackson, 2009; Tuohy 2013). Concerns have been raised about how this segregationist approach not only compromises the inclusive ethos of the schools but has also proved unworkable for the Educate Together primary schools (Edwards, 2007).

Educate Together Schools
The dominance of denominational education provision in Ireland has been countered by a number of educational developments that seek to redress the imbalance. Educate Together primary schools were established in 1978 in response to parental demand for alternative educational provision. Describing themselves as multidenominational and equality based, they are co-educational, child-centred and democratically run, and all religions and beliefs are guaranteed equality of esteem. Children from all backgrounds and beliefs are carefully nurtured and taught to interact with different viewpoints in an atmosphere of equal respect (Educate Together, 2006). They are currently the fastest-growing school sector in primary education in Ireland. At present there are 82 primary schools and nine post-primary Educate Together schools. Five are under sole patronage while four share a joint patronage with the ETBI.

Educate Together schools describe their ethos as providing for "a strong moral, ethical and spiritual framework for the whole school community, and inform … all policies and practices in the daily life of the school". While the founding vision of the school was to provide RE appropriate to the religious identities of each child, this approach was eventually abandoned due to practical difficulties and ethical objections (Educate Together, 2016). Students in Educate Together primary and post-primary schools study a common ethical curriculum entitled "Learn Together" and any faith formation activities, such as sacramental preparation, are conducted outside school hours. Educate Together post-primary schools can also choose to study the syllabi for RE as provided by the DES, although at the time of writing none are doing this.

Remaining Schools

The remaining schools which differ from denominational voluntary secondary schools include: community colleges, comprehensive schools and Gaelscoileanna. Community colleges are managed by boards of management, which are sub-committees of the ETBI. The Catholic Schools Partnership (2012) states that these schools are similar to the community schools with regard to the provision of a chaplaincy service. Comprehensive schools are denominational in ethos – either Catholic or Protestant (Hyland, 1996). The final type of second-level school is the Gaelscoileanna – Irish Medium Education. These were founded in 1973 under the umbrella of Gaelscoileanna Teo – "a national, voluntary organisation". The religious identity and ethos of these schools depend on the patron.

2.5.2   The Voluntary Sector of Post-primary Education

Voluntary schools account for approximately 52% of all second-level schools and hence cater for the majority of second-level students, with an enrolment of 59% of the entire student population (ESRI, 2013). These schools have been categorised as almost non-governmental, in that they are owned and managed by religious organisations, whether partly or fully publicly financed (Maussen and Bader, 2012). Traditionally owned and managed by religious personnel from different religious orders, many of these schools are now within the remit of denominational educational trusts. The school at the centre of this research study, a Presentation school, is now under the trusteeship of CEIST, the Catholic Education and Irish Schools Trust. Currently CEIST is a trustee for 107 voluntary secondary schools (CEIST, 2018). The mission of these schools is "to provide a holistic education in the Catholic tradition", envisioning "a compassionate and just society inspired by the life and teaching of Jesus Christ" (CEIST, 2018).

A Catholic Understanding of Education

The primacy of the person and the transformational character of education are fundamental to the understanding that informs a Catholic education. This understanding is firmly rooted in the belief of *Imago Dei,* where the intrinsic value and dignity of every person, as reflective of God, must be

cherished (Genesis 1:27). Catholic education is therefore understood as "a human activity: it is a genuine Christian journey toward perfection" (CCE, 1988, para. 48). The task in providing a Catholic education requires the formation of the whole person and so it strives to be holistic in its endeavour, encompassing the spiritual, moral and intellectual development of each person.

D'Souza identifies the relational aspect as a significant tenet of Catholic education, as informed by a Christian anthropology (D'Souza, 2015). Through a Catholic education, "the person is formed for *being - with* and *being for* others which is realized in love" (CCE, 1988, para 76). The primacy of the person in relation to others is strongly promoted in church documents on Catholic education that convey a strong emphasis on the relationality, confessional dimension of RE. The implications this has for RE in Catholic schools is that it should not reduce the teaching of other religions to a presentation of the different religions in a comparative neutral way, as this creates confusion and can garner religious relativism or indifference (D'Souza, 2015, p.12). The current research finds that the neglect of the study of different religions compromises the vital relational aspect of RE in a Catholic school. Further discussion on this is presented in Chapter 4.

2.6   The Influence of School Culture and Ethos

Culture, being a polysemous word, is elusive and difficult to define. Cassidy considers culture as "a cluster of assumptions, values, and ways of life that give expression to the identity of a human community" (2001, p.1). Culture pervades every aspect of communal life within a certain geographical area: simply put, culture is *how we do things around here*. The Latin origin of the word culture, "cultura" meaning "to till" or "to cultivate", signals it as an unnatural entity, a human-made creation. The original meaning helps to ensure a better understanding of culture as a non-neutral construct (Gallagher, 1997, p.12). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that it is impossible to objectively analyse a certain cultural context without some level of prejudice or bias. Gallagher identifies culture as the most influential and determining factor in "how we see ourselves" (1997, p.10). Constructionist theorists have termed this cultural conditioning as our "social imaginary", which is a "common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy" (Taylor, 2004, p.23). Indeed, the role of the imagination in assisting identity formation and development is vital.

Culture is the chief factor in how we see ourselves and is fundamental in forming our identity as individuals. Therefore, the particular culture within a school can be influential in shaping its members' individual identities. The dynamic between the collective identity of the school and its impact on the identity formation of individual members is relevant to this research, where students with minority religious and secular worldviews belong to a school with a different religious identity.

The all-encompassing character of a school's culture is described by *The glossary of educational reform* (2018) as follows:

> The term school culture generally refers to the beliefs, perceptions, relationships, attitudes, and written and unwritten rules that shape and influence every aspect of how a school functions, but the term also encompasses more concrete issues such as the physical and emotional safety of students, the orderliness of classrooms and public spaces, or the degree to which a school embraces and celebrates racial, ethnic, linguistic, or cultural diversity.

Similar to "culture", "ethos" is a nebulous term that resists straightforward conceptualisations and is itself subsumed within the broader concept of culture. When used in relation to schools, it signals the range of beliefs and values that define the philosophy of a particular school. Donnelly identifies definitions of ethos as being informed by either a positivist or an anti-positivist stance (2000, p.135). A positivist stance will determine ethos as a "*formal* expression of the authorities' aims and objectives for an organisation" (2000, p.135). This stance would seem to describe Catholic schools, as they are directed by the beliefs and values of the Catholic Church hierarchy. However, theorists from the anti-positivist approach understand ethos as informally emerging from a process of social interaction between all members of the school community (2000, pp.135-136). The findings of the current research echo Donnelly's research in that it found a disconnect between the formal expression of school's ethos and the lived experience of it (2000). The periphery voices of those who do not fully assign to the shared religious vision of the school under study draw into sharp relief the divide between the two. Moreover, McLaughlin identifies that "the potential tension between an 'intended' ethos and an 'experienced' ethos is ... an inescapable part of ethos in an educational context" (2005, p.312).

Morris (1998) asserts that for a school to have a distinctive and completely coherent ethos, all members of the school community must adhere to values and beliefs of those in authority. Donnelly notes the challenge for teachers and students of religiously diverse and increasingly secular societies, who are members of Catholic schools, "where the Catholic hierarchy's objective for education is that of total commitment to religious values on the part of teachers and pupils" (2000, p. 138). However, the current research questions this expectation of total commitment to Catholic values and asks instead if it is possible for a Catholic school to re-imagine its ethos as one committed to the values of an intercultural education that seeks to contribute to an authentic inclusive environment.

2.6.1 The Identity Development of Students

Adolescence is the stage of development which typically initiates a unique growth in the development of one's identity. Young people from 12-18 years of age generally embark on a period of self-discovery that traverses the interiority of their being and their experience of the outside world around

them. The interconnectedness of and interplay between exterior and interior experiences at this stage have formative implications for identity development. Erikson (1950) describes the adolescent stage of his eight-stage theory of psychological development as a time of struggle and conflict regarding a person's negotiation between remaining faithful to inherited values from early influencers, for example parents or guardians, and the strong affiliation and attachment to "new" ideals and values. A young person at this stage must forge their own individual identity, as distinct from these early influencers. The importance of social interactions at this stage crucially confronts a young person with other and often conflicting ways of being in the world, which further allows for a developing sense of morality. A successful identity development results in the adolescent making commitments, the "psychosocial bonds young people make by the end of adolescence", which underline their integration within society (Miedema and Bertram-Troost 2007, p.133). Marcia identifies the significance of "commitment" and "exploration" in Erikson's work (1993).

Understandably, education and schooling play an important role in the identity development of young people at this exploratory stage of their lives, which coincides with the development of formal operational thought or the ability to think critically (Erikson, 1968). As this research explores young people's experience of RE, a subject which aims to open up and critically explore questions of religious and non-religious belief, it must also investigate how this experience impacts upon the religious or non-religious identity development of the young person. Where the religious or non-religious identity of a student is different from the religious identity of the school, how the dominant religious identity of the school engages with this difference is influential to the identity development of the student, in terms of their self-understanding of their own religious or non-religious identity, as understood by the religious ethos of the school. To put it more candidly, the identity development of students relates to their sense of belonging in the school community of which they are members (Barrett, 2000).

Research conduct by Miedema and Bertram-Troost (2007) examines the role of denominational secondary schools in the worldview identity development of adolescent students. The authors define a worldview as "the system, which is always subjected to changes, of implicit and explicit views and feelings of an individual in relation to human life" (2007, p.136. See also Andrée 1989; Leeferink and Klaassen 2000; Miedema 2003) or simply, "the way one looks at life". Employing a theoretical conceptualisation of "religious identity development", this research finds that school had no significant impact on the religious commitments or explorations of students. However, students indicate that school has an impact on the way they look at life, hence the researchers recommend further research in students' evaluations of RE to broaden the picture.

The current research explores students' experience of RE and reflects on how this has impacted their self-understanding of their individual religious or non-religious identity. Experiences relating to how

one's religious or non-religious identity is perceived to be treated is important. For example, if a person of minority faith feels the religious school they attend does not adequately recognise or respect their religious identity, then this can impact negatively on the way they define themselves in relation to the school's identity. Indeed, there are various studies critiquing the misrecognition of children's religious and non-religious school identities (Hemming and Madge, 2012; Byrne, 2015; Stapleton, 2018). Kitching defines misrecognition as referring to "the misrepresentation, non-engagement of non-co-religionist child identities as part of religious schools' curricula or ethos" (2017, p.2). Barrett (2000) suggests it is helpful for Catholic students to attend Catholic schools, as it positively assists their identity development in terms of giving them a sense of belonging and coherence. This sense of belonging aids the development of an "authentic selfhood" (Kitching, 2017, p.2). The participating Catholic students in the current research did report more positively on the RE they received, although they showed a heightened awareness of the how their peers with different religious and secular worldviews felt overlooked.

An important implication of Miedema and Bertram-Troost's research is that teachers who want to gain a deeper insight into the religious identity developments of their students must recognise and engage with the religious and non-religious backgrounds of the students and their parents (2007, p.149). The findings of this research reveal a blind spot regarding adequate recognition on behalf of the participating teachers of the religious diversity within the school community.

The following section of this review considers the role of the Religion teacher in Catholic schools, which is understood as following the perfect model of Jesus Christ – the ultimate teacher, whose teaching is witnessed in his life, death and resurrection by Christians (McKinney, 2013 pp.81-83). Teachers in Catholic schools are called to "imitate and give witness to Christ, the one teacher, not only in their words but also in their behaviour" (2013, p.81). The challenges of this expectation are also explored in the following section.

2.7   The Role of the Religion Teacher in Catholic Schools

In *The religious dimension of education in a Catholic school* (1988), CCE identifies the Religion teacher as central to the evangelising mission of the Catholic school and the achievement of its educational goals (CCE, para 96). The dual nature of their role in providing critical RE in tandem with developing the faith of Catholic students places significant demands on Religion teachers. Professionally, they are committed to serving two distinct, however potentially complementary, purposes (Rossiter, 1982; Groome, 2007). The increased emphasis on managerial professionalism in education, exerting the pressures of learning outcomes, accountability and demands for immediate, externally mandated and monitored results, further alienates education from more democratic models that explore human learning and development (Mooney Simmie and Moles, 2011, pp.466-467).

Within this context one wonders if Religion teachers feel especially conflicted in their endeavour to prepare students for exams, while nurturing faith and spiritual development, itself an educationally immeasurable activity.

Pope Benedict XVI's address to Catholic Religion teachers makes explicit the Church's understanding of the interconnectedness between faith and knowledge, along with the image of the Religion teacher as a role model of the faith within Catholic RE:

> There is a connection between the scholastic teaching of religion and the existential deepening of faith, as happens in parishes and in the various ecclesial structures. The very person of the Catholic religion teacher constitutes this bond: to you, in fact, in addition to the duty of the human, cultural and didactic competence proper to every teacher, belongs the vocation to make it clear that the God of whom you speak in the classrooms is the essential reference point of your life. (2009)

A personal commitment to the faith and an understanding of their role as vocational is emphasised by the Catholic Church as tenets of what a makes for a "good" Religion teacher. Educational research finds the perception of teacher as a moral agent to be common among understandings of what it means to be a "good" teacher. Estola, Erkilla¨and Syrja¨la (2003) conceptualise the teachers' vocation as a "moral/ethical" voice (as cited in Kitching, 2009, p.144). However, Kitching (2009, p.143) draws on Jersild (1955) in asserting that the "authentic self", upon which the "reflective practitioner" is often based, can risk invoking an individual social dualism, should there be much discrepancy regarding the personal and professional life of the teacher. The significant change in perception relating to the moral authority of the Catholic Church in Irish society, and the rise in disaffiliation, have resulted in some teachers who do not identify with the Catholic faith or whose personal lives are divergent from the Church's social and moral teachings.

2.7.1   Teacher as "Other"

The position of teachers whose personal faith or sexual identity is contrary to the teachings of the Catholic Church raises important issues in relation to professional autonomy and the provision of RE. Considering the dominance of Catholic education and the changing faith profile of the population means that inevitably there are teachers working in Irish Catholic schools teaching religion who do not identify as Catholic. Also, there are teachers identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, whose sexual identities are considered "intrinsically disordered" by the Catholic Church. Research involving teachers of Irish Catholic primary schools who belong to the LGB community reveals the conflictual tension experienced between their professional and personal lives (Fahie, 2017). This research finds that while there is disruption to "the long-accepted (co) relationship between teaching at primary level in Ireland and faith formation", LGB teachers do not reject the value of teaching RE outright (2017, p.20). Instead, they exercise professional autonomy through an "on-my-terms" approach to the

teaching of RE. In spite of this, the significant demand made upon teachers of religion by the Catholic Church to share in the Christian vision and instil it within the students heightens this incongruity:

> They are teachers of the faith; however, like Christ, they must also be teachers of what it means to be human ... A teacher who has a clear vision of the Christian milieu and lives in accord with it will be able to help young people develop a similar vision and will give them the inspiration they need to put it into practice. (Pope Benedict XVI's address, 96)

The current research investigates how minority faith students experience RE in a Catholic school, and in this regard it explores the experience of the "other". However, while it includes the teacher voice, none of the participating teachers described themselves as contrary or "other" to the Catholic ethos of the school. Instead, participating Religion teachers designated their role in what can be described as vocational terms.

2.7.2   Profession as Vocation

Research conducted by Lewis et al. in 2009, within the Irish context, reveals that participating teachers, from both the primary and post-primary sector, indicated low levels of professional ambition, instead affirming the perception of their role as vocational. Only 16.6% of the 353 teachers surveyed cited "professional career" as an important value, reinforcing the notion of teaching as a vocation and a service to the community, rather than a career pathway in one of the professions (Lewis et al., 2009 p.18). The findings also present a positive profile of Religion teachers who generally feel "supported by school management, energised by their professional contact with students, positive about the status of RE and the allocation of resources to RE in their schools" (2009, p.19).

However, Religion teachers, along with their colleagues, are experiencing increasing professional demands due to the focus of Teaching Council (founded in 2006) on augmenting the professionalisation of teaching. Given the traditional understanding of teaching as vocational and the recent increase in teacher professionalism within the present performance and results-driven educational culture, it is interesting to consider the perceptions which RE teachers have of their role within their school community and the subsequent implications these have for their teaching practice and approach. Roebben (2016) asserts that teacher education must equip teachers with more creative and performative tools so that Religion teachers can understand their role as profession-as-vocation. Teacher education focusing on developing teachers' personal, and possibly evolving, philosophies of education at different intervals in their career could help with the demanding duality attendant upon the role of the Religion teacher.

This duality is especially prominent for Religion teachers working within Catholic schools, and whose role requires meeting the Catholic Church's expectation to foster faith development while, in some cases, simultaneously meeting the educational demands and expectations of preparing students for a State examination. The current research explores how the perceptions of Religion teachers, regarding their role, impact on their professional practice and pedagogical approach. It demonstrates a diminishing of teacher autonomy, relating to catering for religious diversity, when conflicting perceptions and expectations exist regarding the purpose, nature and scope of RE between Religion teachers and their students. This would seem to compromise both the vocational and professional aspects to the Religion teacher's role.

In contrast, teachers participating in the research by Lewis et al., while exhibiting a strong commitment to confessionalism, were equally committed to the idea that pupils should become acquainted with a range of different religions and with something of "the denominational diversity within Christianity" (2009, p.22). However, their endorsement of the aim of promoting learning *in* religion does not negate support for the other two areas of learning *about* religion (95%) and learning *from* religion (77%) (2009, p.21). This can be interpreted as these teachers exercising greater autonomy in responding to the plurality of religious beliefs and worldviews of the students they teach.

2.7.3   The Changing Role of the Religion Teacher

In *Willingly to school* (2000), Devitt offers support to Religion teachers on the introduction of the State syllabus for RE at post-primary level. This was a considerable change for some teachers, who were now to teach RE as an exam subject. It involved a new syllabus, along with the external state formative assessment of the subject. It is interesting to note that while providing an overview of the different kinds of Catholic education that exist, Devitt makes the following statement in relation to voluntary schools:

> ... another very different kind of Catholic education is the general education of people who are Catholics. Here the learners are entirely or nearly exclusively Catholic, the same is usually true of the staff. In Ireland, the private schools run by clergy and Religious and lay Catholics would clearly fit into this category.
> (2000, p. 8)

This statement can no longer could be accepted as accurate, given the generational change that has occurred in the interim. The increase in religious diversity and the rapid rise of secularisation means that the traditionally religiously homogenous population of voluntary schools has changed significantly. Devitt's central concern of, "How can the NCCA syllabuses be integrated into the catechetical work of teaching Religion to Catholic pupils in Irish schools today?" needs further nuance in the current, changed context. Therefore, a more apposite question today might be: "How can Catholic schools maintain the catechetical work of teaching Religion to Catholic students while

nurturing the spiritual and moral development of students with different religious and secular worldviews?"

It is with this question in mind we now turn to the second key development in the history of RE within the Irish context: the introduction of a State syllabi for RE. The following section explores this syllabi and supporting documents at senior cycle, since this is the primary focus of the current study.

2.8   Religious Education at Senior-cycle Post-Primary Level

Despite religious instruction (later termed "religious education") being a fixed subject on school timetables, it had not been possible to assess this work under the State examination system until relatively recently. This anomaly existed due to the Intermediate Education Act of 1878, which permitted the teaching of religion but exempted it from assessment (Devitt, 2000, p.5). The repeal of the section pertaining to the exemption signalled a major development for RE within the Irish State. The long-awaited introduction of RE as an exam subject heralded a fundamental shift in the understanding of how the subject should be perceived. Advocates of this development propounded that State assessment of the subject would ensure greater criticality and enhance religious literacy (Devitt 2000; Condron, 2014).

The school currently under study experienced this significant change when it decided that all students of the school should study JCRE from 2003, while LCRE has been offered since 2006. For senior-cycle students who do not choose to study LCRE, non-exam RE is provided. It is important to note that not all post-primary schools offer RE as an exam subject: recent figures show that 27, 170 students sat the JCRE in 2018, while 1,081 students sat the 2018 LCRE.

A central focus of this research is student and teacher experience of LCRE and the non-exam RE at senior cycle. Therefore, consideration of the current syllabi follows in 2.8.1. An overview of the proposed new specification for RE at junior cycle is presented next, as this charts the new direction for RE. Following this, 2.8.4, reviews published documents that aim to support teaching in religiously diverse contexts. The section that follows, 2.8.6, reviews key documents from the Catholic Church that seek to support and advise the delivery of the syllabi.

2.8.1   The Syllabus for LCRE

RE as a subject for examination was introduced in Ireland in 2000, with the first cohort of students sitting the JCRE in 2003 and the LCRE in 2005 respectively. The opening section of the syllabi "Religious Education in the Curriculum: An Educational Rationale" outlines general aims for education drawn from the 1995 white paper. These aims include:

• To foster an understanding and critical appreciation of the values – moral, spiritual, religious, social and cultural – which have been distinctive in shaping Irish society and which have traditionally been accorded respect in society

• To promote quality and equality for all, including those who are disadvantaged, through economic, social, physical and mental factors, in the development of their full educational potential

• To create tolerant, caring and politically aware members of society. (DES, 2003, p.3)

The NCCA developed the syllabi and initial drafts envisaged a "creative divorce between Catechesis (practical RE) and religious education (theoretical RE)" (Murray, 2008, p.101). However, Murray reports on the tension that arose in negotiations between the NCCA and the Irish Bishops and Religion Teachers Association resulting in a compromise that "facilitated a flexible approach to the syllabi combined with an inherent 'faith bias'" (2008, p.102). In place of previously suggested "divorce", more of an "integrating synthesis" was forged between the informative and formative aspects of the syllabi (2008, p.102). Murray identifies that the debate on the RE curriculum at the time of development centred on the needs of Catholic students to the degree that he asserts "the "Other" if now inside the State, is still outside the classroom" (2008, p.103).

Granville's analysis of the NCCA draws attention to the significance of the partnership model employed by this body in both the political and symbolic frames (Granville, 2004). The representative committee structure means that the NCCA is constantly in the process of group activity, where conflict is often a factor. In such a context, "power is central to the process and the intensity of the conflict is a function of the authority of the NCCA itself" (2004, p.85). An important finding of this research is the negative impact that the decision to make the section with the greatest inter-religious focus an option for study has had on students. A negative repercussion of this decision means that schools can decide to limit the opportunity for engagement with different religious and non-religious interpretations of life. The decision is symptomatic of the dynamics of power at play in the process of curriculum design. While this decision may not have been reached without contention, it is indicative of the Catholic Church's influential voice in curriculum development (Gleeson, 2000). Recent research conducted by Sullivan (2018) explores the influence of denominational school management bodies in the development of a curriculum in *Education religions and beliefs (ERB) and ethics* at primary level. The case study of *ERB and ethics* details how members of the "policy elite", and in particular denominational school management bodies, exercised considerable power during curriculum negotiations and worked to actively obstruct the development of the curriculum.

2.8.2   The Aims of the Syllabus

In *Leaving Certificate religious education guidelines for teachers*, the NCCA states that the "syllabuses for Leaving Certificate emphasise the importance of a spirit of inquiry, critical thinking, problem-solving, self-reliance, initiative and enterprise" (DES, 2005, p.3). The stress on the critical aspect of education in religion, as indicative in the above quote from the syllabus, does not necessarily render a faith-forming aspect impossible. Indeed, critical RE and faith formation are not mutually exclusive; and moreover, they can be considered complementary (Rossiter, 1982).

The stated aims of the RE syllabi for the JCRE and LCRE are as follows:

> 1. To foster an awareness that the human search for meaning is common to all peoples of all ages and at all times.
>
> 2. To explore how this search for meaning has found and continues to find expression in religion.
>
> 3. To identify how understandings of God, religious traditions, and in particular the Christian tradition, have contributed to the culture in which we live and continue to have an impact on personal lifestyle, inter-personal relationships and relationships between individuals and their communities and contexts.
>
> 4. To appreciate the richness of religious traditions and to acknowledge the non - religious interpretation of life.
>
> 5. To contribute to the spiritual and moral development of the student.
> (DES, 2003, p.5)

The syllabus for LCRE is divided up into three units. Unit One consists of an obligatory section for study, Section A: 'The search for meaning and values'. This unit offers a broad, if at times truncated, study of the development of the tradition of search for meaning and values by all peoples at all times throughout history. An important objective of this section is to enable students to respond, with the relevant knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes, to questions concerning how this search for meaning has been expressed at significant times, in different religious and non-religious traditions throughout history (DES, 2003, p.4).

As with the syllabus for the JCRE, the study of world religions remains an optional section in Unit Two. However, it is important to note that the syllabus aim, "to appreciate the richness of religious traditions and to acknowledge the non-religious interpretation of life" can only be fully realised through the study of Section C. Further, given the rise in Irish citizens identifying as having no religion, as demonstrated by the 2016 census, any study of RE that merely "acknowledges non-religious interpretations of life" must now be considered limited.

2.8.3 Curriculum framework for Non-Examination Religious Education

This optional framework for non-exam RE was developed closely alongside the syllabi for JCRE and LCRE. Due to the close relationship between the syllabi, some sections are common to both the LCRE and the non-exam RE course. However, the non-exam course is shorter and "offers choice and scope for creativity for teachers and schools" (DES 2005, p.152). The only section with an explicitly inter-religious focus on the non-exam RE curriculum framework is Section C: 'Religious faiths in Ireland today'. It is important to note that all of the eight topics are optional and rely on teacher agency for study.

A report produced in 2017 for the Standing Conference on Teacher Education North South (SCOTENS) identifies a "disconnect between communities of belief , other than Christianity, and curriculum programmes [for RE] raising issues of fairness and equality" (Nelson and Irwin, 2017, p.4). It is the contention of the researcher that while the 'World religions' section remains optional on both the Junior and Leaving Certificate syllabi, there is a limitation to the knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes students can attain regarding other religious traditions. It is quite possible that a post-primary student of a non-Christian faith background, studying Religion for both Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations, may never be afforded the opportunity to study in any depth their own faith tradition or secular worldview. These possibilities represent the limitations of an RE that ought to be inclusive.

The syllabus also states that its emphasis is on "the value of religious belief and on diversity and mutual respect which is of particular relevance for national and global citizenship" (DES, 2000, p.5). The link the syllabus makes between the study of a RE, inclusive of different religious and non-religious worldviews, and aptitude for responsible citizenship is significant. Increasingly, national and international policymakers are recognising religion as an important factor influencing social cohesion within multicultural societies. However, it is important that the study of RE does not become reduced to efforts of social cohesion alone.

A central aim of the syllabi at junior-cycle and senior-cycle is "to contribute to the spiritual and moral development of the student" (DES, 2003, p.5). If students are to flourish and fulfil their full potential, then it is vital that a holistic education be delivered. RE has a unique opportunity among other subjects to enhance, deepen and enrich the spiritual and moral development of the student (Sullivan, 2017). Later in this review of the literature, educational approaches that provide authentic inclusion of religious and non-religious worldviews, and which therefore contribute to the spiritual and moral development of the student, are considered. The role RE can play in promoting responsible citizenship is also integral to the rationale behind these approaches.

Section A: 'The search for meaning' is common to both LCRE and the non-exam curriculum framework and provides an important opportunity for young people to explore the pathway of their own search and to come to know and understand the search for spiritual wisdom in the major religions of the world. Senior-cycle students are on a journey of discovery: very often this is a journey of self-discovery. A journey of authentic self-discovery, which would fulfil the syllabus aim to contribute to "the spiritual and moral development of the student", is one that must be relational to and inclusive of the "other" (DES, 2003, p.5). Hence, it is vital there is recognition of and engagement with the plurality and diversity that exists in Irish classrooms and the wider society. This is further explored later in the thesis and discussed in light of the research findings in Chapter 4.

2.8.4 Documents Supporting the Syllabus

Included in the NCCA's *Guidelines for teachers of religious education at Leaving Certificate* is an essay that addresses the rise of religious diversity in Ireland in recent decades. This essay, 'Teaching for diversity', is included in the section entitled 'Teaching approaches and practical tips for teachers" and can be described as offering *tips* to teachers of senior-cycle RE when encountering religious diversity in classrooms. The consignment of pedagogical, methodological and theoretical considerations to mere *tips* further highlights how the NCCA undervalued the reality of religious diversity within RE classrooms.

This essay, included in the *Guidelines*, is not grounded in a specific approach related to religious diversity, such as the interpretive or dialogical approach (Jackson, 1997; Ipgrave 2002; Chater and Erricker, 2013). Instead, the only approach advocated by these *Guidelines* is Thomas Groome's shared Christian praxis. The lone inclusion of a pedagogical approach that promotes a learning *into* religion, namely Christianity, in statutory documents supporting the teaching of the syllabus further underscores the dominance of Catholic education in post-primary education. This could be interpreted as an example of how education in the area of religion is being subsumed under the more dominant concern for catechesis. Returning to the question "*How can Catholic schools maintain the catechetical work of teaching Religion to Catholic students while nurturing the spiritual development of students belonging to different religions and none?*", we see more clearly the challenges faced by Religion teachers in this regard.

However, with the introduction of the new junior cycle, a greater emphasis is advocated on the importance of inclusive education incorporating various pedagogical approaches. The following section explores these positive changes.

2.8.5 The New Specification for Religious Education at Junior Cycle

The initiation of the new junior cycle by the DES in 2015 incurs significant changes to teaching and learning in the post-primary context. The *Framework for junior cycle* (DES, 2015) details this reform, which is to be built around 24 statements of learning, requiring eight key skills, while anchored in the eight principles of wellbeing, learning to learn, choice and flexibility, quality, creativity and innovation, engagement and participation, continuity and development and inclusive education (2015). The *Framework for junior cycle* (2015) identifies that the reform:

> Incorporates a shared understanding of how teaching, learning and assessment practices should evolve to support the delivery of a quality, inclusive and relevant education that will meet the needs of junior cycle students, both now and in the future. This shared understanding is informed by engagement with stakeholders and by national and international research. (NCCA, 2017)

The onus on inclusive education informed by professional practice, national and international research is of particular relevance to the current study, with its exploration of how RE can contribute to authentic inclusion. The new specification for RE will be introduced to schools in September 2019, while a *Background paper and brief for the review of junior cycle religious education*, published by the NCCA in 2017, initiated the consultation process with school management boards, teachers, parents and students, and all those interested in curriculum reform. The NCCA conducted documentary and qualitative research involving both the teacher and student voice, to investigate which elements of the old syllabus were considered valuable and should remain, and to identify topics that needed greater attention. A significant focus of this background paper is on the inter-religious objective of RE (NCCA, 2017).

As previously highlighted in the review of the syllabi, leaving the study of world religions optional can undermine the inter-religious objective of an RE appropriate to a society growing in its religious diversity. Findings from the NCCA research illustrate students' desire to learn about a wider variety of religions and in greater detail. A participating student reported what they felt was an instrumental approach to studying different religions:

> When we study a world religion it's done differently – done very superficially and we just learn off the key facts. (NCCA, 2017, p. 22)

The new specification for RE seeks to reform the teaching of RE so that is enhances the learner's experience of this subject and "generates engagement and enthusiasm and connects with students' lives" (NCCA, 2017, p.32). For this to be an attainable objective, RE must include a greater engagement with different religions and non-religious worldviews. Presently, non-religious convictions are studied within the section entitled 'Challenges to faith' of the current junior-cycle syllabus, which not only implies a faith bias but also denies robust engagement with these non-religious worldviews. The potential of RE to endorse and encourage an inter-religious perspective,

while deepening people's own religious or non-religious worldview, is outlined in the following statement:

> Understanding religions in all their complexities has the potential to contribute to developing understanding, respect and recognition of the rights of others. It also has the potential to develop sensitivity to and respect for the philosophical and/or theological principles underlying particular worldviews and thus a deeper appreciation of particular ways of being religious or non-religious. (NCCA, 2017)

Perhaps the above statement could be read as an attempt to ease fears of RE being instrumentalised to suit a neoliberalist approach to integration and inclusion. Indeed, the impact of the new junior cycle has inspired must debate. The *Framework* (DES, 2015) does, however, state that schools may continue to provide RE programmes in accordance with their own ethos. While the reform of the junior cycle more generally has allowed schools greater flexibility in terms of using the eight principles as a basis by which they will plan for, design and evaluate their junior-cycle programmes (DES, 2015). The option of reducing some subjects to short course options has also provoked strong reaction.

The Irish Catholic Bishops Conference produced a document entitled *Religious education and the framework for junior cycle* (2017), which acknowledges the need for a re-imagining of the role and contribution of RE. Addressing the flexibility offered by the *Framework* (2015), this document outlines that Catholic schools must design RE programmes that:

> must be informed by the Framework for Junior Cycle (2015), the RE subject specification, the particular learning needs and interests of the students and must reflect the characteristic spirit of the school. (ICBC, 2017)

Therefore, RE in schools under Catholic patronage will retain its current status as a subject, taught by qualified teachers for a minimum two hours a week for each of the three years of the junior cycle (Irish Catholic Bishops Conference, 2017). Schools will have the option to present for an externally examined certified assessment task at the end of the third year. However, if a school decides not to opt for external assessment, students can still be assessed by presenting two Classroom-based assessments (CBAs) that can be recognised as part of their junior-cycle profile of achievement (JCPA) under 'Other areas of learning' (NCCA, 2017). Support for Catholic schools also comes from the Episcopal Commission, which drafted guidelines for the implementation of the current syllabi for JCRE and LCRE.

2.8.6   Catholic Church Documents Supporting the Syllabi at Senior Cycle

The Episcopal Commission published *Guidelines for faith formation and development of Catholic students* for LCRE (2006), which takes each section of the Leaving Certificate syllabus and supplements the aims with a *Catholic guideline reference for State syllabus*. This reference resource

directs Religion teachers working in Catholic schools to draw from important church documents on the topics being engaged with. For example, in Section C: 'World religions', there is a strand entitled 'The community of believers', which will require teaching about the beliefs and practices of the Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist or Hindu communities. The Irish Catholic Bishops' *Guidelines* direct teachers to the Vatican document *Nostra aetate*: *declaration on the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions*,

> [People] expect from the various religions answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition, which today, even as in former times, deeply stir the hearts of men: What is man? What is the meaning, the aim of our life? What is moral good, what is sin? Whence suffering and what purpose does it serve? Which is the road to true happiness? What are death, judgment and retribution after death? What, finally, is that ultimate inexpressible mystery which encompasses our existence: whence do we come, and where are we going? (ICB, 2006, par. 1)

This extract highlights the pertinent and inevitable questions members of every faith community ask of their faith tradition. By emphasising the commonality in terms of the search for meaning, the Catholic Church recognises the richness of how this is expressed in the different faith traditions. This church document, which was written in response to a growing religious pluralism in Western societies, seeks to provide the Religion teacher with an inclusive spirit in which to teach about "rays of truth" found in other world religions (ICB, 2006, par. 2). However, it is important to note that *Nostra aetate* does not include non-religious worldviews. This is later addressed by Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et ratio* (1988), the central claim of which is the universality of reason and logic and how this provides the starting point for relations between the Church and with non-religious worldviews.

The national directory for catechesis in Ireland, *Share the good news* (*SGN* hereafter), was published by the Irish Episcopal Conference (IEC) in 2010. This document serves as a resource for catechesis but is also encouraged to be used by teachers delivering senior-cycle RE. *SGN* asserts that "religious education is a process that contributes to the faith development of children, adolescents and adults" (IEC, 2010, p.57). When considering the inter-religious function of RE, this document stresses the importance of not reducing RE to a purely phenomenological approach, where learning *about* religions is common and general practice involves the comparing of different religions' history, traditions and customs. Instead, RE should centre on the faith life of the students and the communities of faith to which they belong (2010, p.57). The primacy of lived religious faith within RE and a robust engagement with religious diversity is emphasised in the following statement:

> All religious education is formative in nature, allowing students to become aware of and respond to the transcendent dimension of their lives. It should "contribute to the spiritual and moral development of the student". (IEC, 2010 p.58)

This echoes the aim of the syllabus in contributing to the moral and spiritual development of each student. The findings of the current research reveal tensions between the expectation for faith development from the Catholic Church and the expectation to fulfil this syllabus aim for all students of every faith and none. However, *SGN* does draw the reader's attention to the distinction regarding terminology and intention signalled in the terms "spiritual development" and "faith formation". *SNG* reminds its readers to be alert to "what form of religious education is being spoken of within a particular context" (2010, p.57). It is important to remain cognisant that an intrinsic aim of the Catholic school is to promote the Christian faith. Roman Catholic RE is informed by the Vatican document *Gravissimum educationis* (1965), which outlines that Catholic schools':

> proper function is to create for the school community a special atmosphere animated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and charity, to help youth grow according to the new creatures they were made through baptism as they develop their own personalities, and finally to order the whole of human culture to the news of salvation so that the knowledge the students gradually acquire of the world, life and man is illumined by faith. (Vatican Council II, 1965, para. 25)

Within the Irish context there is a scarcity of empirical research that investigates the implications of Catholic schools' prerogative for faith formation of Catholic students and its aspiration to contribute to the spiritual development of students outside the Catholic faith. The current research seeks to address this research gap through imparting the experiences and perspectives of teachers and students, and in doing so make a valuable contribution to this area.

SGN (2010) identifies that an important aspect of the moral, spiritual development of a young person is to encounter and engage with the "other". This document draws on the work of theologian Dermot Lane to emphasise the importance of an inclusive spirit in the teaching of RE:

> It needs to be said that Catholic education is not about control but offering a vision of life inspired by Jesus of Nazareth; is not about indoctrination but about opening windows of wonder and igniting a search for wisdom; is not something exclusive to Catholics but inclusive and welcoming towards all to "come and see"; is not sectarian but radically ecumenical and formally committed to inter-religious dialogue. (IEC, 2010, p.58)

The Catholic Church, post-Vatican II (1962-1965) has committed itself to inter-religious dialogue in a way that has come to be understood as an integral part of the Church's mission. An important conciliar document influencing the drive for inter-religious endeavour, *Gauduim et spes* delineates the Church's responsibility of "reading the signs of the times and interpreting them in light of the Gospel" (Vatican Council II, 1965). Lane recognises "a growing awareness that in the twenty-first century, to be religious will require that one be inter-religious and that to be authentically Christian will necessitate that one enter into respectful dialogue with other religions" (2011, p.19).

An inclusive RE does not seek to diminish the voice of those with different religious and non-religious identities, but instead upholds a mutuality between all voices. It seeks to affirm individuals in their search for meaning. *SGN* considers this time and transition of adolescence in a young person's life to be instrumental in forming their own personal identity and in developing a true sense of themselves. It acknowledges "the growing cultural phenomenon among young people of rejecting, to a greater or lesser degree, institutional affiliation of one kind or another" (IEC, 2010, p.149). However, *SGN* remains positive about this time of self-discovery that can lead a young person to a deeper knowledge and understanding of themselves and their relations with others and God (IEC, 2010, p.149).

2.8.7 Guidelines Supporting Religious Diversity in Voluntary schools

The *Guidelines on the inclusion of other faiths in Catholic secondary schools* were published in 2010 by the Joint Managerial Body for School Management in Voluntary Secondary Schools (JMB, hereafter). These guidelines sought to address the changing context of Catholic schools in Ireland, which now host "an increasingly religiously diverse and secular population" (Mullally, 2010, p.5). This document also acknowledges the considerable intra-diversity present within the Catholic cohort of students alone attending Catholic schools. Professor Leslie Francis identifies three categories of Catholics in his work based on religious saliency with regard to public worship: that of "practising Catholics", "sliding Catholics" and "lapsed Catholics" (Francis et al., 2016, p. 67). Those described as "practising" attend Mass once a week, the "sliding Catholics" refer to those who attend Mass less than once a week, while the "lapsed Catholics" refer to those who never attend Mass. Therefore, Catholic schools contend with a range of diversity of belief and belonging, within the cohort of Catholic students, along with those with non-religious worldviews and those from different religious traditions. Within this context, the document emphasises the inclusiveness of Catholic schools in embracing this diversity of belief. Drawing on *Nostra aetate*, these *Guidelines* (2010) underscore recognition of the value of different faith perspectives by the Roman Catholic Church:

> The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men [People]. (Vatican Council II, 1965)

The *Guidelines* document (Mullally, 2010) is useful for school leaders, not only because it offers practical procedural advice on dealing with the reality of religious diversity in the daily running of a school, but it also emphasises the importance of school identity amid this time of change. A recommendation outlined by the document pertinent to the current research is the wearing of religious symbols. The current school under study does not permit Muslim students to wear the hijab. While

this is not a written rule included in the uniform policy, it is nonetheless communicated to Muslim students who request to wear it, and is being upheld. This school rule can be understood as part of the school's culture in "how we do things round here", which this research has found impacts negatively on the school's operative ethos.

However, the *Guidelines'* assertion is clear that:

> No pupil or staff member should be prevented from wearing a religious symbol or garment in accordance with their tradition, for example, the hijab for Muslim girls and the turban for Sikh boys. (Mullally, 2010, p.15)

Referring to article 18 of the *Universal declaration of human rights*, the *Guidelines* uphold that freedom of religious expression as a basic human right, while also underscoring the understanding of the Catholic Church's identity as being "a universal Church" (2010, p.25). Accordingly, the *Guidelines* address the identity of Catholic schools and their unique vision of education in tandem with its appropriate response to the religious diversity present in these schools.

The prominence given to faith formation as an aspect that should be cross-circular and assisted by the school's religious ethos as all-encompassing within schools is a defining feature of a Catholic education. The *Guidelines* resonate this prominence by insisting that "in Catholic schools, Religious Education should be at the heart of the curriculum" (2010, p.9). The *Guidelines* duly advise school leaders to meet with minority faith or worldview parents of prospective students prior to enrolment, to further enlighten them on the religious character of the school their son or daughter is to attend. However, problems may still arise with regard to the purpose and nature of RE in the school. Parental fears that their children will be exposed to proselytisation should not be easily dismissed: instead, these fears should be listened to and engaged with more. The current study finds that nebulous understandings of the purpose and nature of RE exist between the participating teachers and students in the research. It finds that where different understandings on the purpose and nature of RE collide, it is the minority faith and worldview students who are most negatively impacted. Research conducted by Darmody et al. (2011) on the lives of immigrant and ethnic minority children illustrates, along with other research studies, the precariousness and vulnerability of immigrant status within the educational context (Devine 2009; Bryan 2010). A lacuna in the research in the area of RE relating to senior-cycle students with minority status has been previously identified by Darmody et al. (2011). The current study seeks to address this.

In recalling the Catholic vision of education as a spirit-filled activity that is inclusive in its outreach and scope, the JMB *Guidelines* ascertain that "a genuinely Catholic ethos is based on universal values which are formative for people of all faiths and is respectful of traditions other than our own" (2010, p.7). Consequently, the this document recognises that a principal function of Catholic schools is to promote the faith and spiritual development of all students, regardless of whether they are Catholic

(2010, p.25). However, the current research problematises such an understanding of this principal function of the Catholic school in providing a case study that reveals a limited and limiting experience of RE, which diminishes the efficacy of faith and spiritual development of all students, regardless of their religious or non-religious identities.

It is also interesting to note that the religious diversity addressed in the *Guidelines* (2010) does not include consideration of religious diversity among teaching and ancillary members of Catholic school communities. The teaching population within the Irish State has remained under-representative of diversity in terms of gender, religion, culture and ethnicity (Devine 2005; Reimers, 2017). However, considering Ireland's growing diversity, this will not always be the case.

This section has provided a review of the syllabus for RE at senior cycle, along with important documentation aimed at supporting the teaching and learning of RE in Catholic schools. It has demonstrated the expectations of both the State and the Catholic Church, and reflected on these in light of the research question investigating the capacity of RE to contribute to authentic inclusion.

The following section documents important policy developments relating to religion and education within the wider European context. Section 2.9 constitutes the final development, offering a different perspective, with RE's function and role being understood predominantly in terms of its inter-religious objective to facilitate greater educational inclusion and social cohesion. This section considers how RE within the Irish context, and more specifically within denominational education, can navigate this new direction.

2.9   Religious Pluralism and Policy Development in Education in Europe

While the current research study is focused on denominational education, developments in Europe relating to the role of religion in education in public schools has implications for how RE is taught more broadly. In the European context, a seismic shift in the understanding of the role of religion in education ensued after the catastrophic events of 9/11. A revaluation of how education could address matters of religious plurality resulted in a drive for the religious dimension of intercultural education to become much more prominent. However, there is still much debate regarding the relationship between religion and education in public schools and this remains contested throughout European Member states. The following section reviews key policy documents that track the progress made by bodies such as the CoE and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in addressing how education can support religious pluralism.

2.9.1   The Council of Europe

The CoE is an international organisation founded in 1949, prior to other institutions such as the European parliament and the European Commission, and currently comprises 47 Member states. Following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the CoE prioritised an evaluation of the role religion plays in public life and how the promotion of the religious dimension of intercultural education and RE could assist in protecting freedom of and freedom for religion in religiously plural societies. *The new challenge of intercultural education: religious diversity and dialogue in Europe* (2002-2005) became the first project of the council and focused on religion's relationship with culture. The project found that, "regardless of the truth or falsity of religious claims, religion is a part of life and culture and therefore should be understood by all citizens as part of their education" (Jackson, 2012, p.170). Two reference books were published by the council following this project; *The religious dimension of intercultural education* (2005) and *Religious diversity and intercultural education* (2007). Recommendations were published for governments, policymakers and educators in 2008. The recommendations state:

    i.   Intercultural dialogue is a pre-condition for the development of tolerance in Europe;

    ii.   There should be respect for the rights of individuals to hold particular religious beliefs;

    iii.   Teaching about religious and non-religious convictions is consistent with the aims of education for a democratic citizenship;

    iv.   Promoting dialogue between people from different cultural, religious and nonreligious convictions is important in schooling;

    v.   Respecting the dignity of everyone and promoting mutual trust and understanding is important for education in the twenty-first century.
(CoE, 2008)

The council's recommendations underscore the importance of the learning about religions and learning from religions as a prerequisite for a democratic, diverse yet unified Europe. Subsequent publications illustrate the possible applications of the 2008 recommendations for those involved in educational policy and practice. Significant among these was *Signposts: policy and practice for teaching about religions and non-religious worldviews in intercultural education* (Jackson, 2014). This document is for policymakers, schools and educators to specifically address the issues that may arise from religious pluralism in schools and colleges. It advocates interpretive and dialogical didactical approaches and advises on the integration of non-religious worldviews into the study of RE (2014, p.47).

Signposts' (2014) direction relating to the integration of non-religious convictions and religions within intercultural education is particularly apposite to the current research, which includes the views of

students with non-religious worldviews. While the 2008 recommendations identifies both non-religious convictions and religions as "cultural facts" that are "complex phenomena", with neither being "monolithic" (CoE, 2008), *Signposts* (CoE, 2014) aims to aid the inclusion of non-religious convictions in intercultural education. Detailing the problematic issues of nomenclature concerning the study of religious and non-religious beliefs, *Signposts* also raises issues concerning the skills and attitudes needed by teachers to promote dialogue throughout this educational endeavour.

The most recent publication by the CoE is *Competences for democratic culture* (2016), which describes a conceptual model of the competences needed by citizens for "living together as equals in culturally diverse democratic societies" (2016, p.9). Twenty competencies that enable individuals to participate effectively in a culture of democracy are listed under the categories: Values, Attitudes, Skills and Knowledge and Critical Understanding. The document is aimed at policymakers and educational practitioners and can be used to aid pedagogical design, assessment and curriculum development.

2.9.2 The OSCE and the Toledo Guiding Principles

In parallel with the work of the CoE, OSCE developed the *Toledo guiding principles on teaching about religions and beliefs in public schools* (2007). These guiding principles, developed by a team of international lawyers, social scientists and educators from a cross-section of religious and philosophical backgrounds (Jackson, 2013), promote the study of religion in schools as a way to foster greater levels of security and stability in European societies. The objective of the *Toledo guiding principles* is:

> to contribute to an improved understanding of the world's increasing religious diversity and the growing presence of religion in the public sphere. Their rationale is based on two core principles: first, that there is positive value in teaching that emphasizes respect for everyone's right to freedom of religion and belief, and second, that teaching about religions and beliefs can reduce harmful misunderstandings and stereotypes. (OSCE, 2007)

These *Toledo guiding principles* argue that the teaching about religion and beliefs has human rights implications and therefore must be acknowledged and adopted by stakeholders in public education. They offer criteria and recommendations for those involved in developing policies on religion and education. The *Toledo guiding principles* uphold the distinction between practical and theoretical RE, asserting that "students are not pressed to accept, conform, or convert to any belief" (OSCE, 2007, p.20).

Critics of the development of policies concerning "religious education" or "teaching about religions and beliefs" by an organisation like the OSCE make the criticism that they "politicise" RE (Gearon, 2013, 2014). Gearon identifies this instrumentalisation of RE as a manipulation of its objectives in

order to effectively address issues of security, which reduces the intrinsic value of the subject. Jackson, countering such criticism, concedes that there are issues about the nature or aims of RE that relate to the social, political and security concerns (Jackson, 2016). However, legitimate concerns persist regarding the possibility of the purpose of RE becoming manipulated by political agendas seeking harmonious integration of religious diversity, and the fear that its purpose will become fixated on objectives that are conducive to social cohesion, while ignoring the complexity and conflictual aspects of the study (Wright, 2000; Thompson 2010; Gearon, 2013, 2014). It is important to note the fundamental conflict between epistemology in RE as a faith pursuit and RE as a knowledge pursuit. It is interesting, but not surprising, to note that while 55 of the 56 states in the OSCE, including Ireland, accepted the *Toledo guiding principles*, the Holy See did not. In a circular letter to Bishops in 2009, the Holy See refers to the tension between the aims of RE in public and denominational education:

> The nature and role of religious education in schools has become the object of debate. In some cases, it is now the object of new civil regulations, which tend to replace religious education with teaching about the religious phenomenon in a multi-denominational sense, or about religious ethics and culture – even in a way that contrasts with the choices and educational aims that parents and the Church intend for the formation of young people. (CCE, 2009, p.1)

The circular letter goes on to recommend that the Church recall the founding principles of a Catholic education as rooted in its mission of the developing of the Catholic faith and the formation of the person as a whole (CCE, 2009). Accordingly, it asserts the existence of faith to be the primary premise for RE as follows:

> Religious nature is the foundation and guarantee of the presence of religious education in the scholastic public sphere. (CCE, 2009, para. III, 18)

While RE may contribute effectively to social cohesion, it should not be bound by arguments for expediency. RE in the context of the Catholic school seeks to nurture the faith of its Catholic students first and foremost, with an inter-religious objective as secondary. The Catholic Church also identifies the marginalisation of practical RE within public schools as compromising the right of parents and students to religious freedom. However, it recognises that within Catholic schools, "the religious freedom of non-Catholic pupils must be respected" (2009, para. III, 16). Knowledge of other faiths is not understood as outside the remit of Catholic schools: indeed, the teaching about different religions is promoted in church documents *Nostra aetate*, being an example example. However, there is an assumption that a focus on the teaching about the religious phenomenon in a multi-denominational sense will reduce the complexity of religions to a list of descriptors and denigrate the practical approach with its concern of teaching a person how to be religious (2009). The Catholic Church's rejection of the *Toledo guiding principles* (OSCE, 2007) seems to be based on pedagogical grounds

rather than ideological grounds. However, it is important to note that the *Toledo guiding principles* are not intended for denominational or faith schools, but rather for public or state-run schools.

2.9.3 The European Commission's REDCo Report

In 2009, the European Commission funded a large-scale research project entitled, *Religion in education: a contribution to dialogue or a factor of conflict in transforming societies of European countries?* (REDCo) project. The aim of the project was to explore if RE in Europe was a factor contributing positively or indeed negatively to religious dialogue. The research project assessed "the potential and limitation of religion in educational fields" of the participating countries (England, Estonia, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, the Russian Federation, and Spain). This significant study included the voice of European students ranging from 14-16 years old (Arweck, 2017).

Findings from the research conclude that, overall, participants were positive in their appraisal of RE and agreed it should be taught in schools. However, the majority of students felt that school is not the place for religious practice (Knauth and Kors 2011). Allowing for the contextual difference across and within participating countries, Jackson (2012, p. 7-8) summarises the findings as follows:

- Students wish for peaceful coexistence across differences, and believe this to be possible;

- For students, peaceful coexistence depends on knowledge about each other's religions and worldviews and sharing common interests as well as doing things together;

- Students who learn about religious diversity in school are more willing to have conversations about religions/beliefs with students of other backgrounds than those who do not;

- Students wish to avoid conflict: some of the religiously committed students feel vulnerable;

- Students want learning to take place in a safe classroom environment where there are agreed procedures for expression and discussion;

- Most students would like the state-funded school to be a place for learning about different religions/worldviews, rather than for instruction into a particular religion/worldview.

The REDCo report and other policy developments from Europe clearly emphasise the importance of RE in public schooling. It is, however, interesting to note that the importance of this subject is understood primarily in terms of RE's inter-religious objective, and it can be deduced that to learn

about other religions will increase social cohesion. The findings of this report are of particular interest to the current research, which documents the student voice in its exploration of RE at senior cycle in a Catholic post-primary school. Discussion of the relevance of the REDCo report's findings and their consonance with the current research's findings is presented in Chapter 4.

2.10   The Role of Religious Education Revisited

As stated previously, conflicting understandings exist relating to what the purpose, nature and scope of RE ought to be. These divergent understandings regarding the nature and role of RE determine the dominant approach to it in a variety of contexts. This section seeks to offer a brief overview of recent developments relating to RE in the United Kingdom (UK), which may prove useful to the current debate on the role of RE within the Irish context, despite its differing legislative foundations The concluding two sections of this review present two pluralist approaches to RE, which offer a stimulus for how similar approaches might be adapted and adopted by denominational RE.

In 2018 former Minister for Education Charles Clarke and Professor of Sociology Linda Woodhouse) published a revised version of *New settlement: religion and beliefs in schools*, a pamphlet documenting proposed changes to the provision of RE in the UK, which takes account of the changed multicultural context and its implications on education:

> We are living through the single biggest change in the religious and cultural landscape in Britain for centuries, even millennia. It is not simply that the number identifying with non-Christian religions has been growing and the number who identify as Christian falling, but that those who say they have "no religion" (but are not necessarily secular) are now the majority (2018, p.4).

These revised recommendations are the result of a process that originated with the Westminster Faith Debates, established in 2012, "to raise the level of public and political debate about religion and belief", which in turn produced the original *New settlement* document in 2015. The publication of this document was intended "to promote discussion about the best way to update the legal settlement on religion and school education" and was followed by a long consultation process with the significant stakeholders in education (2018, p.10).

The newly revised document recommends that the remit of RE as a school subject is broadened to include ethical and moral education and to be timetabled in all state-run schools as a compulsory subject for study (2018). The statutory curriculum for this "new" subject would combine a theoretical RE with ethical and moral education and be known as "Religion, Belief and Values". The revised document argues that a greater understanding of the diversity of religion, beliefs and values is vital for the common good of society, where inclusivity is paramount. It recognises the prominence of pedagogical approach for this new subject by insisting "the way in which religion is taught in a school

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is central to the promotion of inclusivity and community cohesion" (2018, p. 22). While the revised *New settlement* document recommends clear distinctions in faith (denominational) schools between religious instruction and the newly proposed state curriculum, the authors of the document understand that the academic enhancement of the subject negates any restriction placed on faith development:

> After consideration we think that the issues of religious instruction, formation and education which we raised are in fact better dealt with simply by focusing upon the academic excellence of the teaching of religion, beliefs and values and, as we argue below, by ensuring that all schools, including faith schools, are required to offer the national RE (or RBV) syllabus. (Clarke and Woodhouse, 2018, p. 21)

These proposed recommendations have been met with resistance and opposition, not least from the Catholic Education Service (CES) acting on behalf of the Catholic Bishops' Conference to support Catholic education. Bishop of Leeds Marcus Stock, who has special responsibility for RE, was reported in *The Tablet* magazine (Murphy, 2018) as rejecting the revised proposals on two grounds: firstly, a national curriculum for RE compromises the religious liberty of denominational schools within pluralist societies and secondly, the suggested curriculum contains "no theological content which is at the core of Catholic RE". Bishop Stock rebuffs the revised recommendations as reducing RE to a purely sociological endeavour that denies rich and deep theological engagement.

Rather paradoxically, the National Secular Society was also disappointed, as it considered the recommendations still to be far too deferential to religious communities, whereby not enough emphasis was placed on the distinction between religious knowledge and religious (confessional) instruction. The recent development in the debate in the UK reflects the complexity surrounding RE's appropriate role and function and, significantly, which approach should be adopted. The tension between the inter-religious objective of a theoretical RE, based on the belief that greater knowledge of different religions will lead to a deeper understanding and result in stronger social cohesion, and the aim of a practical RE, which focuses on teaching someone how to be religious within a particular religious tradition, remain fraught. Andrew Wright's work within the UK context critiques what he considers to be a domestication of the study of religions within an RE that is preoccupied with fulfilling efforts of social cohesion.

Wright identifies political liberalism as a rational and reasonable response to the challenge of "ordering a plural society in which there is no consensus about the ultimate nature of reality or the meaning of life" (2007, p.32), and as such, it operates "independently of any wider comprehensive religious or philosophical doctrine" (Rawls, 1993, p.223). Political liberals seek to support an "economy of difference", where not all interpretations of what constitutes the good life are valid, along with the recognition that there is an inequality of opportunity to pursue the good life experienced by some within society, and that the liberal ideals of tolerance and freedom are not ends in themselves but rather, "the means to the greater end of pursuing the good life in a responsible and

informed manner" (Wright, 2007, p.33). A comprehensive liberalism stands in opposition to the above, with its emphasis on what Wright terms "an economy of sameness", where all accounts of how to pursue a good life are endorsed to inevitable reduction (2007, p.33). Wright characterises this as a totalising worldview in itself, which "reifies the principles of freedom and tolerance and establishes them as ends in themselves, rather than as a means to some greater end" (2007, p.33). He exposes the illiberalism of a comprehensive liberalism and agrees with Kekes that it is "the dominant ideology of our time", when "even its opponents now couch their defences of the regimes they favour in evaluative terms that liberals have imposed on political discourse" (Kekes, 1992, p.2). Wright ultimately wants to expose the irony at the heart of liberalism's pervasive and comprehensive doctrine and insist that RE not be made "a vehicle of liberal religious proselytisation" (Barnes and Wright, 2006, p.71).

Hella and Wright insist that there is an intrinsic link of an ontological nature between learning *about* religion and learning *from* religion (Hella and Wright, 2009). They identify that a comprehensive liberal education's adoption of the expressive-experiential approach to RE reduces the beliefs, values, worldviews and spiritualities of the students to mere self-expression (Hella and Wright, 2009). While considering the transition from confessional to liberal mainstream RE, Wright (2007) identifies an ominous impact on the process of "learning about" religion and on how the question of ultimate truth is dealt with in this context. According to Wright, the particularity of religion becomes a scandal and one to be avoided (2007). An example of this "bracketing off" of contentious religious truth claims within this kind of RE is seen in the learning about different religious dress codes in Christianity and Islam, rather than engaging in doctrinal beliefs around Jesus.

Wright summarises what he sees as the defining objective of this kind of liberal RE as follows: "it no longer mattered what pupils learnt about religion as long as it promoted a tolerant society and it no longer mattered what pupils learnt from religion provided the process enhanced their personal freedom" (2007, p.103). Rejecting this as reductionism, Wright develops a theory setting the requirements and parameters of a critical RE, one he feels is attainable within a political liberalism. Answering the question of whether the pursuit of truth ought to play a role in liberal RE, he argues that it should on the grounds of morality, the wellbeing of society, spiritual formation and the intrinsic value of the pursuit of truth (2007).

Within the Irish context, the NCCA encountered similar apprehension and opposition to the proposed introduction of the Education on Religion and Beliefs and Ethics (ERB) subject at primary level. It was proposed that this subject could be taught alongside the patron's practical RE programme in denominational schools, of which 96% of schools are. The Forum, while being a landmark moment in the history of Irish education, provided a unique and timely opportunity for reflection on the nature of

denominational education and the demands of a society growing in plurality. McGrady offers insight relating to the future of RE in the Irish context:

> The particular balance that emerges in the Irish context between "teaching for (into) religion and belief" (denominational religious education), on the one hand, and "teaching about religions and beliefs" (ERB), on the other hand will be of interest to the wider European debate ... It is acknowledged in the Irish context that both approaches are needed and that the precise balance which emerges will depend upon the patronage structure of the school and the actual diversity present at a particular moment in time within an individual school. (McGrady, 2014, p.141).

McGrady astutely identifies what is needed within this context is an Irish answer to an Irish problem. The dominance of denominational education within the Irish State means that an integration of learning *into* and learning *about* and *from* is appropriate for the majority of schools. At post-primary level, the agreed syllabus for RE (2000) is, in theory, suitable to be taught in denominational, multidenominational and nondenominational schools. However, as evidenced in the review of the junior-cycle syllabus, concerns regarding the lack of attention and focus to the inter-religious objective of theoretical RE are justified.

Denominational RE must remain cognisant of its inter-religious purpose, if it is to be of value in contributing to authentic inclusion within these schools and the wider society beyond. Lane suggests that "a new relationship needs to be established between education and religion. This new relationship between religion and education is best understood in terms of a critical dialogue" (2013, p.31). The following section, 2.10.1, explores two approaches to RE which, the author of this research believes, could be adapted to complement RE within a denominational setting.

2.10.1 Ipgrave's Dialogical Approach

The dialogical approach, as developed by Julia Ipgrave (2002, 2004), places particular emphasis on dialogue as a singular methodology within the RE classroom. Ipgrave's appraisal of children as active collaborators and co-constructors of knowledge who are part of a community of learners, is highlighted in her esteem for the voice of the child in educational discourse. Her research, influenced by Bakhtin's concepts of heteroglossia – the way in which language relates to diversity and change, and "living word" (1981, p.428) – is hallmarked with bringing children's voices to the fore to examine the language used when describing their own individual religious identity and that of others.

Criticising the critical approach to RE as promoting a neoliberalist secularism, Ipgrave denies that primary emphasis should be placed on the questioning of one's religious beliefs. Rather, she advocates that individual religious identities be valued with the focus being on what pupils know, experience and believe (Ipgrave, 2016). In doing so, pupils do not have to bracket off their religious identities, nor do they have to interrogate the religious truth claims behind them. Ipgrave insists that a

dialogical approach must remain alert to the sensitivity of issues resulting from religious diversity. When considering the religiously diverse classroom, a distinction between "personal criticism and criticism of ideas" must be upheld. However, where ideas are intrinsic to a person's religious identity, and so are bound to a personal faith and their sense of a relationship with God, their family and a religious community, these beliefs are not to be treated as ideas in isolation from these identity and relational factors.

A threefold approach to dialogue has been developed by Ipgrave, through her research, and incorporated into her pedagogical work:

- Primary dialogue is the acceptance of diversity, difference and change.

- Secondary dialogue involves being open to, and positive about, difference –
  being willing to engage with difference and to learn from others.

- Tertiary dialogue is the actual verbal interchange between children.
  (Ipgrave, 2002, p.212)

Unsurprisingly, the dominant activities within this dialogical approach are discussion and debate. Students are encouraged to reflectively engage with ideas and concepts from different religious traditions. Employing an interfaith dialogue model, Ipgrave's research has organised statements made by students into the categories of: I, We, You and God. The "I" is learning to articulate one's own experiences and ideas about religion; "We" is making connections between one's own experiences and ideas and the wider tradition; "You" is listening to the language of others, comparing and contrasting; and "God" is learning to talk about God and about transcendence (Ipgrave, 2016).

The relevance of this approach to a Catholic denominational RE lies in the inherently relational character of the approach. The lifeworld of the student is engaged with and brought into dialogue with the lifeworld of the "other".

2.10.2 The Interpretive Approach to RE

Jackson's *Religious education: an interpretative approach* (1997), which formed the theoretical background to the REDCo project, with its emphasis on representation, interpretation and reflexivity, advocates both learning *about* and *from* religion. The interpretive approach expounds itself to be a dialectical method where students negotiate new levels of understanding and knowing. Ipgrave identifies that "in this process the clear distinctions between 'self' and 'other', 'insider' and 'outsider' break down. In their place is a more dialogical and constructive paradigm of research" (Jackson, 2004, p.91). Jackson sums up the value of the interpretive approach in recognising "the inner diversity, permeable boundaries and contested nature of religious traditions as well as the complexity of cultural expression and change from individual and social perspectives" (Jackson, 2004, p.162).

Recognising that learning is not neutral, this approach understands that learners bring their own experiences of their religious traditions or other worldviews with them into the classroom: there is no need to "bracket" these off.

In *Rethinking religious education and plurality*, Jackson stresses the importance of coming to understand more fully the "other", when addressing issues of plurality in education. Jackson draws on Said's *Orientalism* (1978), which explores how the Western world has reduced the Eastern world to a handful of images and symbols that are reductive of Eastern culture and the religion of Islam. Said, in turn, was heavily influenced by the Italian philosopher Gramsci, who wrote in his *The prison notebooks*:

> [The] task of interpretation is to give history some shape and sense for a particular reason … to understand my history in terms of other people's history. The great goal is to become someone else – for the self to transform itself for a unitary identity to an identity that includes the other without suppressing the difference. Understand yourself in relation to others (as cited *IN* Jackson, 2004, p.90).

Therefore, the task of interpretation of religious and non-religious identities for the full development of the self, through engagement with the "other", is imperative to the interpretive approach. A paramount objective in this task of interpretation is to resist essentialist portrayals of religious and non-religious beliefs that denigrate the "other" to a stereotyped, one-dimensional entity. Jackson cites the closed view of religions, as influenced by Enlightenment thought which deemed "religions as clearly distinct and internally consistent belief systems", as being dangerous and counter-intuitive to the understanding of plurality and the important endeavour of authentic inclusion (Jackson, 2004, p.90). This idea therefore needs to be abandoned and replaced with a "looser portrayal" of religions (Jackson, 2004, p.90).

Indeed, a stronger emphasis on the intra-diversity present in religious and non-religious worldviews is being advocated for the UK by Clarke and Woodhouse (2018) in the revised *New settlement*. While it may be obvious that there is diversity among world religions, there needs to be recognition of the diversity present in each individual adherent or believer of a religious tradition. An important function of RE is to lead students to a recognition and understanding that religions are not closed homogeneous systems but are traditions that contain a rich plurality and diversity of belief and practice.

Jackson identifies a lack of "self-criticism" as the cause of this misrepresentation, which ultimately leads to a degradation of diversity. He insists upon the approach's inclusive character, which succeeds in bringing students to a deeper religious understanding regarding plurality and diversity. An essential tenet of this approach is the principle of reflexivity. Jackson identifies three aspects to reflexivity within the interpretive approach, as follows:

- Learners re-assessing their understanding of their *own* way of life (being "edified" through reflecting on another's way of life)

- Making a constructive critique of the material studied at a distance

- Developing a running critique of the interpretive process-being methodologically self-critical. (Jackson, 2004, p. 88)

The relevance of such an approach to denominational RE has been considered by Cullen (2013), whose work has drawn on Groome's theological vision of "appropriation" and puts it in dialogue with Jackson's educational concept of "edification", in order to develop an argument for the importance of a theological education, as an appropriate RE for student teachers studying to become post-primary teachers of RE. Cullen considers Groome's Shared Praxis as a conversational approach within a religious community and Jackson's Interpretive approach as allowing the conversation to take place outside of any particular faith community (2013, p. 120). However, the limitations of the interpretive approach, however, recall Wright's criticism of neoliberalist approaches to RE, which side-line truth claims:

> On the level of immanence we find a pragmatic approach to truth, in which religion is taught not as an end in itself, but as a tool for encouraging tolerance and mutual understanding in a culturally divided society. The hidden "truth" here is that religion is no more than a relativistic expression of culture whose primary function is to point beyond itself to our common humanity. On the level of transcendence concerns for social cohesion have often led to the conclusion that, insofar as religion is viewed as a human response to transcendence, the only valid theological option is that of a universal theology in which all traditions are regarded as being equally true. (Wright, 2003, p.287)

According to Wright, the process of learning about religious truth claims constitutes an integral part of the process of learning from these claims and so recognises the reciprocity:

> as pupils strive to develop an understanding of their place in ultimate order-of-things; similarly, reflection on their own beliefs and values will enable them to engage with questions about ultimate reality and come to a better understanding of the beliefs, values and worldviews of others. (2007, p.108)

This is not only conducive to the moral development of the student, but vis-à-vis the overall wellbeing of society. Wright refers to Levinas' appeal to acknowledge the Other as Other in developing "a profound respect for the alterity of the 'sacred space' that divides religious traditions" (2007, p.112). In doing so, RE will refute a reductionist approach and recognise "the full weight of their particular understandings of the ultimate order-of-things", leading to a more authentic inclusive plural society (2007, p.112).

While both Ipgrave and Jackson's approaches can be described as pluralist approaches to RE, in that they are intended for state-run schools, they offer insight into the importance of dialogical and dialectical methods to RE. However, the work of Wright is important to the debate and dilemma regarding attempts to instrumentalise RE, which reduce it to a relativistic comparative study, where different religions are solely interpreted in relation to human experience.

This section has presented approaches to RE across a range of ontological and epistemological foundations; and while each confirms that RE plays an important part in the holistic development of young people, the extent to which each is focused on the needs of the individual and the needs of society varies greatly. This research recognises the positive aspects of each and is equally concerned with the faith-nurturing of Catholic students and an inclusive RE for minority students of religious and non-religious worldviews. The tension in which the research takes place reflects similar tensions felt at school level, as schools grapple with including students of different religious and non-religious worldviews, while remaining true to their religious ethos.

2.11   Conclusion

This review of the literature has attempted to map significant developments of RE in the Irish context. It has aimed to show the values and expectations attendant upon such developments in the area of RE. The first stage of this review explored the unique relationship Irish education has had with the Catholic Church. This allowed for reflection on the considerable influence the Catholic Church has had on education and more particularly RE throughout the history of the Irish State.

The second section of the review concentrated on significant moments which have informed new thinking around the purpose, nature and scope of RE. The introduction of a national syllabus for RE in 2000 and subsequent examination of the subject, along with the 2011 IHRC report and the Forum's 2012 report have been significant and defining moments of development in this regard. This review has highlighted the, at times, conflicting expectations that arise from different stakeholders of RE.

The final part of this literature review widened the scope to consider policy documents pertaining to RE from Europe. It also considered how two pluralist approaches, promoting dialogical and dialectical methodologies, may be appropriate for denominational RE.

Chapter 3, Methodology, details the research design chosen to conduct this research study in its answering of the research question "How does religious education contribute to inclusion in an Irish Roman Catholic post-primary school?"

Chapter 3   Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1   Introduction

This chapter outlines the research design and methods chosen to explore the research question: "How does religious education contribute to inclusion in an Irish Roman Catholic post-primary school?" The research aims to gain an insight into how senior-cycle students of different religious and secular worldviews experience RE within a Roman Catholic post-primary school. It explores how issues of diversity can impact on the experience of RE. The study involves an exploration of diversity in terms of religious and secular worldviews and intra-religious diversity. Along with examining the student voice, this research investigates the perspective of the Religion teachers and how they experience the delivery of RE, as impacted by the diversity of belief within this school setting.

The research ultimately aims to investigate if the RE within this denominational setting contributes to authentic inclusion. Authentic inclusion recognises and engages with the complexities of a pluralism in which there are often incompatible and contested worldviews on the nature of the ultimately order-of-things, by providing opportunities and encounters for true communication and dialogue. An exploration of the experience of RE investigates its contribution to authentic inclusion in this specific context. The guiding questions this research aims to answer are:

- How do senior-cycle students from different religious and secular worldviews experience religious education in a Roman Catholic post-primary school?

- What is the level of intra-diversity among students who identify as being of the same religious or secular worldview in this denominational post-primary school?

- What are the attitudes of senior-cycle students to the study of different world religions and secular worldviews?

- How do Religion teachers experience the teaching of senior-cycle syllabi for LCRE and non-exam religious education?

- What are the challenges and opportunities presented by issues of diversity of belief and non-belief experienced by Religion teachers teaching religious education at senior cycle in a Roman Catholic post-primary school?

The chapter starts by outlining the conceptual framework informing this research and continues with an overview of the chosen research design, along with a rationale for the qualitative research methods employed. It then considers the positionality of the researcher. It then provides a detailed summary of the procedure for data collection and analysis and ends with a consideration of the ethical procedure employed in the research design.

3.2   Conceptual Framework

Jabereen (2009) defines a conceptual framework as a "network, or 'plane', of interlinked concepts that together provide a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon or phenomena". While not determinist in nature, conceptual frameworks do not allow researchers to predict outcomes. Instead, Levering suggests that "the idea that human behavior can be explained and predicted is roughly based on the concept of external factors being caught in an accidental cohesion, and the idea that human actions can be understood, but not predicted, is based on the concept of freedom" (2002, p.38). The conceptual framework of the current study is not used to predict the attitudes or behaviour of the research participants. Rather, it is constructed as a lens through which the researcher seeks to interpret and understand the respondents' contributions which are offered freely. The objective of this conceptual framework is not to provide "hard facts" but a "soft interpretation of intentions' (2002, p.38). A description and subsequent unpacking of the dominant concept of the research study now follows.

3.2.1   Authentic Inclusion as Dominant Concept Framing the Study

The concept of authentic inclusion is pertinent to the study of how students of minority religious and secular worldviews experience RE in a Roman Catholic post-primary school. Authentic inclusion recognises and engages with the complexities of pluralism, in which there are often incompatible and contested worldviews on the nature of the ultimate order-of-things, by providing opportunities and encounters for true communication and dialogue.

The reference to authenticity is informed by Charles Taylor's work on the ethics of authenticity, which identifies that the dominant culture in Western societies of being authentic is ratified as a moral imperative. Critics of the culture of authenticity claim that the narrow focus on the individual promotes a soft relativism that denies anything higher than the allegiance to self-development (1991, p.31). Taylor, however, works to redeem the problematic understanding of the culture of authenticity as one solely dedicated to self-fulfilment by proposing that through dialogical endeavours people can succeed in transcending the boundaries of the self to encounter the "other", and hence achieve human flourishing through shared projects.

Furthermore, the reference to the concept of "inclusion", while prevalent in political and social discourse, is not without its challenges. In order to more fully understand the manner in which inclusion is understood in the context of this study, the perception of the pivotal role education plays in the promotion of inclusion in pluralist societies is explored. The endorsement of inclusive education is critically assessed and the understanding of authentic inclusion in this research is then offered.

3.2.2 The Rhetoric of Inclusion

O'Sullivan examines the rhetoric of inclusion and deliberates on the tension caused by the topic becoming more and more rooted in "individualistic discourses of developmental psychology" (O'Sullivan, 2015, p.4). She insists that a more complex and critical understanding is needed rather than a reification of inclusion, based on the expediency for a "desire for consensus and harmony" (2015, p.4). While the logic of the argument from expediency may seem innocuous, it is important to remain alert to attempts to instrumentalise efforts of inclusion. Cullen identifies a danger of the argument from expediency as resulting in a downplaying of difference where sameness is promoted in a "one culture fits all" mentality (Cullen, 2006, p.995).

Cassidy (2002) asserts that the dominance of instrumental reasoning, with its emphasis on "pragmatic efficiency", driven by the self-assured ethos of an individualist anthropology throughout the Western world is not to be underestimated. Instrumental reasoning, when pushed too far, has the capacity to undermine the positive fruits of an individualist anthropology that recognises and respects the intrinsic worth of the human person. It ignores the innate dignity of the human subject through a strategy of objectification that places a price on everything and everyone. Culture and indeed education ultimately suffer at the hands of such a strong commitment to "cost-benefit analysis", the outcome of which is a society that fails to understand the complex dynamic of human relationship beyond that of narrow self-interest (Cassidy 2001, p.9).

An example of such "cost-benefit analysis" approaches to RE is demonstrated in the frequency with which religious literacy is being assumed by moral arguments, where it is understood as a common good, essential to social cohesion. The rationale of these arguments is based on the assumption that if we know more about one another we will get on better (Richardson, 2017). When overstated, this justification of RE functions to reduce understandings of RE to serve this purpose alone. If RE is to be adequate in addressing efforts of inclusion and creating a space for inter-religious encounters, then it must encompass much more than a religious literacy.

3.2.3 Authenticity and Individualism

Taylor addresses the growing individualism in Western societies in *The ethics of authenticity* and highlights a "dark side of individualism", which can result in a "centring on the self and a concomitant shutting out ... of the greater issues" (1991, p.14). Taylor terms this new anthropology the "individualism of self- fulfilment" operating in an "age of authenticity", and astutely identifies a powerful moral imperative at work (1991, p.14). The prevailing assumed axiom of the age of authenticity is that of "being true to oneself" and gives rise to an expressive individualism that places a high value on feelings and emotions (Taylor, 1991, p.16). This principle, which has been interpreted

and adopted as a modern-day virtue, is highly regarded in all societies of the Western world, albeit in varying degrees.

However, taken too far this individualist anthropology gives rise to an exclusive humanism that inspires relativism, rejects any responsibility to the larger community, and denies the existence of the transcendent. A further problem associated with this "buffered, anthropocentric identity" is the sense that people feel of missing something (2007, p.300). There seems to be a double loss incurred: that of the transcendent and that of meaning. Taylor lists what he recognises as the three forms of the malaise of immanence, the first being the "fragility of meaning", which is expressed in a longing for "an overarching significance" (2007, p.309). The second and third types of malaise concern the "utter flatness" felt in "attempts to solemnize the crucial moments of passage in our lives" and the "emptiness of the ordinary" (2007, p.309).

Citing de Tocqueville, when describing the loss of freedom in modern societies where people may become "enclosed in their own hearts", Taylor warns this may result in a lack of interest and motivation regarding active participation in self-government and voluntary organisations (1991, p.9). This individualistic culture unsurprisingly impacts greatly on education, the policies that underpin it, and the ability to change the hearts and minds of learners and, in doing so, the world itself. Ecclestone and Hayes state the transformative power of education is being undermined by the focus on the self (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009).

3.2.4 A Space for Religious Education

Derrida's work in the area of poststructuralism, culminating in his theory of "deconstruction", is interesting to consider in terms of plurality and inclusion. In his seminal essay 'Différance', Derrida condemns the use of binary oppositions as an element of essentialism that is not conducive to a post-modern pluralist society. Derrida outlines the concept of "différance" as "it is neither *this* or *that*; but rather this *and* that" (in O'Donnell, 2015, p.49). Where *this* is the individual and *that* is an authentically inclusive society, the emphasis is on achieving a synthesis of both (2015, p.49). O'Sullivan considers how Derrida's concept of "différance" is adapted by Bhabha to elucidate the need for a middle ground or third space in which negotiation rather than negation can take place (1994, pp.53-56), creating a safe place where negotiations between different religious and non-religious beliefs are central to a moving towards authentic inclusion in the RE classroom. John Sullivan's description of the unique space RE offers further elucidates this idea:

> RE offers a space like no other: for encounter, explanation, and empathy; for expression, interpretation, and imagination; for interrogation, questioning, and reflection. … It gives an opportunity for students to experience and to bring into dialogue with one another both insider and outsider perspectives with regard to religious issues. It prompts pupils to think about similarities and differences

between people and, in so doing, to reflect upon their own uniqueness and forms
of belonging. (2017, p.7)

Drawing on Bhabha, we can consider the RE classroom as a "third space", where the shared project of inclusion can be negotiated.

Buber insists that dialogue is intrinsic to all educational processes. Therefore, any movement towards mutuality between people demands honest dialogue (O'Donnell, 2015). Impediments to such dialogue may be identified as a reluctance to undermine or threaten "the individual, the self, and specifically [the] self-esteem" (2015, p.54). However, the hallmarks of such dialogue will be a sincere engagement with others, through which one's understanding of the world and one's place in it become much more fluid (2015, p.21). Looney asserts that "active, engaged citizens [is] an idea that still informs our vision of twenty-first-century education, [therefore] the idea of an objective or dispassionate study of anything seems a pedagogical contradiction" (Looney, 2013 p.128). She insists that "schools are places for engagement" (2013, p.128). Therefore, in order for education, specifically RE, to retain its transformative character, it must seek to imbue individualism with the spirit of inclusion that comes from meaningful encounters and engagements with the "other", both inside and outside the classroom.

3.2.5   The Argument from our Shared Humanity

Cullen (2006) proposes the argument from our shared humanity as a more principled justification for initiating dialogue than that of the argument from expedience. However, the extent to which RE classrooms can facilitate this third space for negotiation is questioned by Cullen. She describes the significant expectation society has of schools to create learning spaces where intercultural and inter-religious dialogue can occur as a lofty ideal that is unhelpful in the enterprise of inclusion.

Instead, the "onus is on the wider culture to reflect upon what the purpose and nature and scope of the dialogue" should be (Cullen, 2006 p.999). For Cullen, schools are an ideal place to garner the art of conversation in a safe and trusting environment. Classrooms should, as central learning spaces, invite students into a conversation with the texts, traditions and founding stories of students' own cultural and religious traditions, as well as into conversation with others (Cullen, 2006; Cullen 2017). Cullen's understanding of RE as conversation, the first step to "life-giving dialogue", provides a way of thinking about RE that emphasises the engagement of both the teachers and the students (2006, p.999). Accentuating the relational character of Catholic education offers a lens through which we can explore whether RE in Catholic schools are a testament to the inclusion of all voices in the conversation.

Taylor responds to critics of the age of authenticity who only define it in a way that centres on the self and distances us from our relations with others, through emphasising the dialogical character of

identity formation. He insists that we "define our identity always in dialogue with and sometimes in the struggle against the identities our significant others [parents, peers, teachers] want to recognise in us" (1991, p.33). For Taylor, it is possible for people living in the age of authenticity to transcend the narrow desires of the self and participate in projects that constitute and sustain our shared humanity. This shared humanity is the cornerstone of our identity as human beings in all our diversity.

A significant aspiration of many schools is to be places where the identity-building of its students is assisted, supported and nurtured. The identity of every member of the school community in this current study is defined in relation to the school of which they are a member. The identity of the school as a Roman Catholic school therefore must also define itself in relation its community, in all its diversity. The argument from our shared humanity is apposite in reminding us that the greatest motivation for dialogue is the truly humanising effect it has in upholding the dignity of all the individual identities involved.

3.2.6   Authentic Inclusion in the Conversation that is Religious Education

Current educational discourse and practice involve students as constructors of knowledge and active learners, thus focusing on the experience of the learner and what they bring to the learning environment. It is essential that educators remain cognisant of how an experience of exclusion that compromises one's religious beliefs or worldview can impact negatively on the development of the individual's identity and, hence, degrade the shared educational enterprise.

This study involves the participation of students who are embroiled in their individual search for meaning and self-discovery at an adolescent stage. It is also concerned with the study of RE in a context that is growing in its religious diversity and so the endeavour of inclusion is vital. The research seeks to discover how students of minority religious and secular worldviews experience the RE in this specific denominational context. It investigates whether this RE authentically includes all students in a RE as a conversation that upholds the dignity of all participants.

3.3 Philosophical Underpinnings: Ontological and Epistemological Position

All research is influenced by the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the researcher. These assumptions are inextricably linked, as one's ontological perspective informs one's epistemological position (Crotty, 2003). Different research employs different assumptions that can be placed along a continuum where an objectivist/positivist stance stands in opposition to a subjectivist/constructionist stance. Crotty recognises this to be a more accurate description of the divide than to when quantitative and qualitative methods are situated as polar opposites, since these are different methods now often employed within mixed methods research designs (2003). Nonetheless, such resolution cannot be made between the objectivist position insisting that reality holds an objective meaning and truth that can be discovered through rigorous scientific study with a subjectivist stance, emphasising the

socially constructed nature of reality, which gives rise to a multitude of interpretations, and therefore objective reality can never be captured (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Lyotard illuminates the subjectivist stance further: "concept or meaning is not exterior to Being; rather, Being is immediately concept for itself, and the concept is Being for itself (1991, p.65).

Within the conceptual framework of this study is the recognition that participants of the research hold different ontological and epistemological positions owing to their religious identities. There exist differences relating to the ontological position, the nature of the ultimate order-of-things and epistemological contestation regarding how we come to know the universe and how things really work. The ontological and epistemological position of the researcher isinformed by the subjectivist/constructionist stance (2003). This study is interpretive and subjective, offering a rich, thick description of the case under study. The following consideration of the theoretical perspective informing the research elaborates on such philosophical underpinnings of the research.

3.3   Theoretical Perspective

A theoretical perspective is the philosophical underpinning of a methodology, which provides "a context for the process involved and a basis for its logic and its criteria". It also addresses the "complexus of assumptions buried within the [methodology]" (Crotty, 2003 p.66).

3.3.1   A Constructivist-Interpretive Paradigm

Kuhn's term "paradigm" can be described as "a cluster of beliefs and dictates which for scientists in a particular discipline influence what should be studied, how research should be done, [and] how results should be interpreted" (Bryman, 1988). Social sciences are deemed pre-paradigmatic, as they feature competing paradigms without a singular pre-eminent paradigm at the fore (Bryman, 2016, p.637). As this research is concerned with the experience of students and teachers of RE in a particular educational context, it is suitably informed by a constructivist-interpretive paradigm and is therefore distinct from the objectivist position, whereby an objective truth awaits to be discovered. It is the epistemological conviction of the researcher that meaning is not discovered but constructed, so consequently "there [can be] no meaning without a mind" (Crotty, 2003, p.9).

The epistemology of constructionism asserts 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" (2003, p.41). Constructionists agree with Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty's assertion of "the world always there" (Crotty, 2003). Schwandt states that constructivists "are deeply committed to the contrary view [that of strict objectivism] that what we take to be objective knowledge and truth is a

result of perspective" (2011, p.125). From this position, "objectivity and subjectivity need to be brought together and held together indissolubly" for meaning and truth to be arrived at (2003, p.41).

3.3.2   Contextual Constructivism

Burningham and Cooper (1999) distinguish between a strict constructivism maintaining that there are multiple realities, all of equal value, and a contextual constructivism that acknowledges the possibility of an objective truth. Contextual constructivism is employed in this research study. Underpinning contextual constructivism is the assumption that "the task of research is to interpret a context so as to understand it and maybe learn from it, change it or confirm it" (Cullen 2013, p.21). This study is situated in a specific context: RE in a Roman Catholic school, of which the researcher, as a Religion teacher within this context, is very familiar. Therefore, employing a *contextual* constructivist-interpretive approach allows for a nuanced reading of the real-life situation being studied.

The relationship between the subject and object of the research is a partnership in the generation of meaning. From this epistemological standpoint the researcher and what is being researched are involved in a reciprocal process of meaning-making, the results of which allow for further interpretation from the reader. There is an inseparable nature of the relationship between the researcher and the reality being studied. This research draws on the German intellectual tradition of hermeneutics and the *Verstehen* tradition, in an attempt to offer a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of senior-cycle students' and Religion teachers' experience of RE within a specific school context. This "thick description", as described by Geertz, seeks to provide a description of experience that is complex and multifaceted (Denzin, 1989).

3.3.3   The Interpretive Paradigm

Researchers within the constructivist and interpretative paradigms understand that multiple, socially constructed realities can co-exist and even contradict each other, from the perspective of the participant. This research paradigm is cognisant that there are multiple interpretations of, and perspectives on, all situations. The constructivist-interpretive research paradigm honours the complexity inherent in human situations and resists the temptation to reduce and simplify reality. In its rejection of a positivist position, and the assertion that universal laws govern human behaviour, a constructivist-interpretive approach insists that the social world can be understood from the perspectives of human beings who are part of the ongoing action being investigated. (Crotty, 2003; Cohen,Mannion and Morrison 2007; Creswell, 2012).

Cohen identifies the intention of the interpretive paradigm as "understand[ing] the subjective world of human experience" and therefore makes it a suitable approach for this research, which is grounded in both the students' and teachers' experience. However, it is not without its downfalls (2007, p.21).

Researchers must remain attentive to the dangers of allowing subjectivity too great an influence. It is important that they retain a critical spirit and do not merely describe the world they have studied. The measures taken by the researcher to avoid such downfalls are outlined in section 3.8.2.

3.3.4   Qualitative Methods

In order to investigate the suitability of potential research methods, two pilot studies, one using qualitative methods and the other using quantitative methods, were conducted prior to this research. The qualitative study involved focus group interviews to explore the students' experience of RE and to consider its role in catering for plurality and inclusion at senior cycle in a post-primary context. The quantitative pilot study involved a questionnaire ('Attitudes towards Christianity and religious diversity') employing the Francis Scale of Attitudes towards Christianity, combined with questions measuring attitudes towards religious diversity and the study of religion. The aim was to examine the attitudes that exist among senior-cycle students attending two Roman Catholic voluntary post-primary schools, one was co-educational, while the other was an all-boys' school.

These pilot studies helped to inform the decision to use qualitative research methods for this current research. I learned that as a researcher I am much more interested in engaging deeply with complex human experience. The practice of conducting focus group interviews facilitated a multi-perspectival representation of how RE was experienced by these students. Through discussion of individual experiences, a deeper understanding was gained regarding how these students arrived at their appraisal of the subject. The findings of these pilot studies also informed the questions of the interview schedule used for the focus groups in the current study. Bertram-Troost also recommends a qualitative study, when carrying out research on the topic of religious diversity, in order to "get a closer view of what is really happening in classrooms, on how religious diversity is dealt with in schools and on how this influences young people" (2011, p.208).

Qualitative research shares the assumptions of a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm and so researchers adopting this approach tend to employ qualitative methods. Miles and Huberman recognise the strengths of qualitative data and note that qualitative inquiry into naturally occurring and ordinary events that take place in the natural settings are best placed to generate knowledge about what "real life" is like (1994, p.10). However, some researchers critique qualitative research as being too subjective and susceptible to generalisation and having a lack of transparency (Bryman, 2016). Qualitative research can also be assigned low credibility in relation to reliability and validity and is viewed by some as only a support to the more reliable quantitative methods (Silverman, 2010). Countering such criticism, Creswell identifies qualitative research as:

> a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups
> ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging
> questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data

> analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data ...Those who engage in this form of inquiry support a way of looking at research that honours an inductive style, a focus on individual meaning, and the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation. (Creswell 2009, p.4)

The current research benefits from the employment of qualitative methods, as it endeavours to explore the complexity of human experience from both the student and teacher's perspective of RE within the dynamic of a denominational school. Considering the role of the researcher as Religion teacher within the school community, the use of qualitative methods allowed her to focus on individual experiences while interpreting their meaning within the context as a whole. It became evident in the early stages of preparation for the research process that the most appropriate research design was that of case study.

3.4   Research Design: Case Study

> A research design is a plan that "guides the investigator in the process of collecting, analysing, and interpreting observations. It is a logical model of proof that allows the researcher to draw inferences concerning casual relations among variables under investigation. (Nachmias and Nachmias, 1992, pp.77-78)

This research plan is inherently qualitative in character, as the study seeks to explore the experience of students and teachers of RE. Qualitative research has long been defined in *ex negativo* terms, divorcing it from quantitative research with its emphasis on positivist and post-positivist paradigms (Flick, 2007, p.2). Resisting catch-all definitions, qualitative research, although diverse, can be broadly described as having two distinctive characteristics. Most qualitative research begins from a "naturalistic approach to the world" and has "an interpretive approach" to it (Flick, 2007, p.2). Case study methodology was chosen for this research because of the range of options it offers in terms of focus whether "on a program, event, or activity involving individuals rather than a group per se" (Stake, 1995, p. 3).

3.4.1 Research Methodology: Case Study

Case study research has effectively harnessed rich insights into various fields within social science, not least in educational research. While case studies tend to use qualitative research methods, they are "frequently sites for the employment of both quantitative and qualitative research" (Bryman, 2016, p.61). The primary purpose of this research strategy is to "portray, analyse and interpret the uniqueness of real individuals and situations through accessible accounts" (Cohen et al., 2007, p.85). Case study offers researchers the framework to "focus on understanding the dynamics present within single settings" (Eisenhardt, 2002, p.6). In doing so, the researcher aims to "catch the complexity and situatedness of behaviour" of the case (Cohen et al., 2007, p.85). In case study research, thick description is "an essential part of the process of determining what the particular issues, dynamics,

and patterns are that make the case distinctive. It is one of the foundational blocks in constructing knowledge and interpreting the interwoven strands of signification that comprise the fabric of human understanding" (Dawson, 2010, p.944). Freebody identifies the aim of case study to be carrying out an "inquiry in which both researchers and educators can reflect upon particular instances of educational practice" (2003, p.81). This ensures that a case study methodology is particularly apt, considering the proximity of the researcher to the case under review.

3.4.1 Limitations of Case Study Research

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) address the problematic nature of the conventional view of case study by drawing on Gerring's (2004) identification of the paradox of case study's wide use yet low regard in research endeavours. Case study's reputation as a less scientific methodology has led to a misinformed and reductive view of a methodology that makes a significant contribution in wide-ranging research fields. While it is not the remit of case study to develop "epistemic theory… that is explanatory and predictive", it can succeed in producing concrete, context-dependent, case knowledge, the kind of which can enhance human learning and knowing to that of expertise (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, p.303).

Case study methodology is often charged with containing bias towards verification of the researcher's preconceived notions (2011). As human nature is predisposed to the affirming, rather than the denouncing of, held assumptions, beliefs and conjectures, this remains a challenge for all researchers. While bias towards verification is general, case studies, along with other qualitative methods, are perceived as permitting more space for the "researcher's subjective and arbitrary judgement" (2011, p.309). However, the immediacy of the case study researcher to the case is more likely to result in their subjectivism being challenged by the study objects "talking back", which more often than not results in falsification rather than verification characterising the case study (2011, p.310). The approach taken by the researcher to avert these pitfalls in this particular case study is outlined in section 3.5, Position of the Researcher, in the present chapter.

Further criticism levelled at case study research questions its commitment to rigour, in terms of validity and reliability (Cohen et al., 2007; Bryman, 2016; Creswell, 2016). Stake, Merriam and Yin, three of the foremost contemporary advocates of case study research, address this criticism from different perspectives. Stake and Merriam, both concerned with a qualitative approach to case study research, recognise the challenge that data validation presents and agree that it is "almost impossible to apply the concepts of validity and reliability into qualitative inquiry", since they originate from the positivistic tradition (Yazan, 2015, p.146). Echoing Maxwell (1992), they emphasise the importance of "understanding" as a more suitable term than validity in qualitative research. Resisting an

objectivist position, qualitative researchers consider the views of research participants to be as valid as their own.

However, from a Yinian perspective, case study research is suitable for both qualitative and quantitative research methods and this is reflected in his exacting schema to ensure validity and reliability. The challenge of generalisability is common to most qualitative research endeavours, with Lincoln and Guba asserting "the only generalization is: there is no generalization" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985 as cited in Flick, 2007, p.41). Nonetheless, Yin identifies a similarity between case studies and scientific experiments in the ability to be "generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes" (Yin, 2014, p.21). Nevertheless, qualitative research does not seek to provide statistical generalisation: it is more interested in detailed descriptions of the idiographic (Cohen et al., 2007). The objective of the current research is to review the case under study, so as to gain an in-depth understanding of how students with different religious and secular worldviews and their Religion teachers experience RE in a specific educational context. While the findings of this research are not generalisable to other denominational schools, they are indicative of how students' and teachers' experience of RE can be impacted by issues arising from religious diversity within the classroom.

3.5   Designing the Case

The design chosen for this research is a bounded exploratory single case study. However, Ragin recognises how single cases can be "multiple in most research efforts because of ideas and evidence may be linked in many different ways" (1992, p.225). Yin stipulates the importance of binding the case "to determine the scope of your data collection and, in particular, how you will distinguish data about the subject of your case study (the 'phenomenon') from data external to the case (the 'context')" (2014, p.34). The bounded case of the current research is the experience of RE in a Roman Catholic post-primary school from the perspective of Religion teachers and senior-cycle students with different religious and secular worldviews. A Yinian perspective of the case study research is outlined in Table 3.1 below.

Table 3.1: Designing the Case

Designing the case	
The subject or "phenomenon" under study	a) How students and teachers experience RE in a Roman Catholic post-primary school
The unit of analysis	a) Teachers of senior-cycle RE. b) Students of different religious and secular worldviews studying senior-cycle RE. c) Documentation analysis
The context	A Roman Catholic post-primary school
Illustrative types of theories	a) Societal theories – theories of how RE should be delivered in denominational and nondenominational schools. Theories of intercultural education in a pluralist society. b) Individual theories – theories of religious identity construction in adolescence
Single case study design	"[T]o capture the circumstances and conditions of an everyday commonplace situation" (Yin, 2009, p.48).
The analysis of data	Data analysis must be linked to the original propositions and research questions in the case in order to reflect the purpose of the initial study.

3.6   Positionality of the Researcher

Herr and Anderson identify a range of positions a researcher can occupy when carrying out research. This six-point scale begins with "Insider", where the researcher studies themselves or their own practice and ends with "Outsider(s) studying insider(s), where the researcher is at a remove from the insiders and the inside activity being investigated (Herr and Anderson, 2005, p.31). It is on point 2 of the scale, "Insider in collaboration with other insiders", where I, as researcher, position myself in terms of the current research. While I am not one of the participants of this study, I am a member of the school community and acknowledge the strong identification with the school that I share with the participating students and teachers. In their work, Herr and Anderson recognise that researchers can often have complex relationships with the setting or participants being researched and highlight a concept with particular relevance to the current research – that of the "outsider within" (O'Brien, 2011).While the researcher and participants both share a deep familiarity with the setting for this research and knowledge of the syllabi being delivered, the researcher cannot share the experiences

and perspectives of the participants with regard to how they experience diversity and inclusion within this school context. A challenge that presents itself to such "insider research" is the minimisation of potential bias, which would decrease the objectivity of the research and in turn undermine its validity.

The steps the researcher took to minimise the potential for bias included the writing of a reflective journal. This journal chronicles the personal experience of the researcher in carrying out the research. The act of writing personal opinion, concerns and feelings relating to every stage of the research process allowed for greater awareness of the researcher's own assumptions and underlying values pertaining to the research project. The use of a critical friend and the ongoing guidance from my supervisor further ensured that the research was not unduly influenced or obstructed by the personal perspective of the researcher.

At various times during the research process the proximity of the researcher to the case under study presented challenges which made critical reflexivity essential throughout. When students disclosed uncomfortable findings during the focus group interviews it was necessary for the researcher to allow such responses to emerge and sit with them, so to speak. Indeed, the sharing of the research findings, which present a problematic picture of inclusion within this school community, required the researcher to rely on her reflexive skills to negotiate between her dual identity as author of the research and colleague of the participants. The closeness of the researcher to the case meant her own interpretation of the research process from the initial reviewing of the literature to the final phase of the writing up of this thesis is subject to reflective critique. However, this is understood by the researcher as a richness of the study which sought to authentically interpret the experiences of the participants.

While total objectivity remains elusive in all research, every effort to minimise the impact of potential bias in the research process was taken. Hammersley (2000) recognises this task as requiring the research to be carried out in consciousness of its socially situated character and by making transparent the researcher's position vis-à-vis the research process. The researcher made every effort to adhere to these principles, to ensure greater objectivity and hence validity within the research. Section 3.8.2, Methods of Verification, details further the steps taken to ensure objectivity. Figure 3.1 presents an overview of the research design.

Figure 3.1: Overview of the Research Design
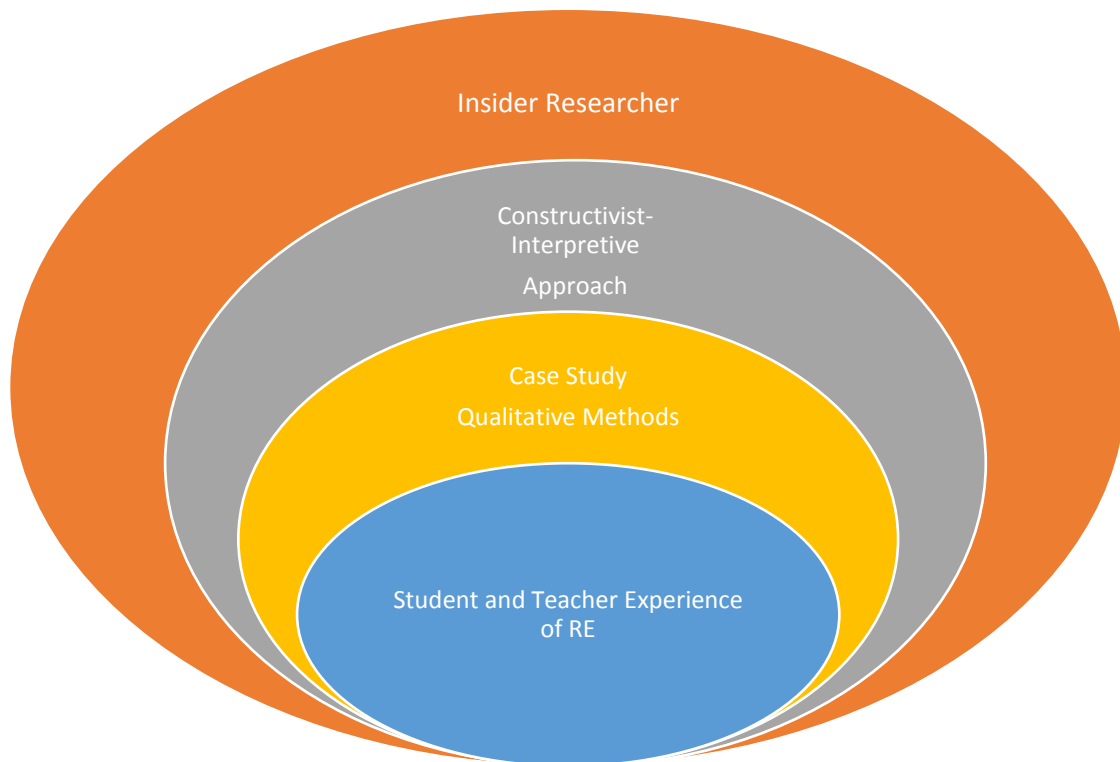
3.7   Data Collection

Yin outlines six common sources that may be considered in the collection of data for case study research. Table 3.2 depicts these sources and outlines the strengths and weaknesses of each source, indicating that no one source has a complete advantage over all the others (2014, p.105).

Table 3.2: Six Sources of Evidence: Strengths and Weaknesses (Yin, 2014, p.106)

Source of evidence	Strengths	Weaknesses
Documentation	• Stable – can be reviewed repeatedly • Unobtrusive – not created as a result of case-study • Specific – can contain exact names, references, and details of an event • Broad – can cover a long span of time, many events, and many settings	• Retrievability – can be difficult to find • Biased selectivity, if collection is incomplete • Reporting bias – reflects (unknown) bias of any given document's author • Access – may be deliberately withheld
Archival records	• Same as those for documentation • Precise and usually quantitative	• Same as those for documentation • Accessibility due to privacy reasons
Interviews	• Targeted – focuses directly on case study topics • Insightful – provides explanations as well as personal views (e.g. perceptions, attitudes, and meanings)	• Bias due to poorly articulated questions • Response bias • Inaccuracies due to poor recall • Reflexivity – interviewee gives what interviewer wants to hear
Direct observations	• Immediacy – covers actions in real time • Contextual – can cover the case's context	• Time-consuming • Selectivity – broad coverage difficulty without a team of observers • Reflexivity – actions may proceed differently because they are being observed

		• Cost – hours needed by human observers
Participant observation	• Same as above for direct observations • Insightful into interpersonal behaviour and motives	• Same as above for direct observations • Bias due to participant-observer's manipulation of events
Physical artefacts	• Insightful into cultural features • Insightful into technical operations	• Selectivity • Availability

The sources of data collection for the case under study involved document analysis, focus group interviews with students, and semi-structured interviews with Religion teachers within this specific educational context.

3.7.1 Documentation

Documents collected during the gathering of the data stage can provide a rich source of evidence. However, caution is advised as some documents may be "selective, partial, biased, non-neutral and incomplete" (Cohen et al., 2011, p.564). Merriam identifies two types of documents that can be used in case study research: primary documents are those created by people closest to the phenomenon under study and secondary documents are created by those not directly involved, perhaps created at a later date (Olsen, 2010, p.319). This research involves the documentary analysis of primary documents. Yin identifies that the most important use of documents is "to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources" (2014, p.107).

Documents as sources of evidence used in this research include:

- Syllabi for senior-cycle RE published by the NCCA

- The Mission Statement of the school under study

- The Religion Department plan of the school under study

- The Faith Development policy of the school under study

- The Admissions policy of the school under study.

3.7.2 Interviews

As this research sought to explore the experience of RE for two separate groups of respondents, it required employing different methods of data collection. Due to the contrasting profiles of the respondents in terms of age and experience, the research involved focus group interviews with students and semi-structured interviews with Religion teachers, in order to facilitate what Patton recognises as the potential an interview has to allow a researcher to "enter into the other person's perspective" (2002, p.7).

Focus Group Interviews
Creswell asserts that focus groups are most successful when "the interaction among interviewees will likely yield the best information and when the interviewees are similar to and co-operative with each other" (2012, p.218). This was considered the most suitable method of data collection, as it was deemed that it would reduce inhibition and increase participation and engagement. The dynamic of the focus group interviews allowed students greater agency, as they responded to each other's experience of the shared context. The interview schedule was organised across the five areas in exploring the diversity that exists among senior-cycle students in relation to

- Conviction of belief

- Participation in religious practices

- Knowledge of other faith groups

- Experience of exam Religion at junior cycle

- Experience of current study of either exam or non-exam Religion at senior cycle.

Each of the six focus group interviews lasted 45-60 minutes. All interviews were transcribed and coded before data analysis began.

Semi-structured Interviews

Gubrium and Holstein recognise the pervasiveness and influence of interviews in contemporary culture, when they ascertain that "the interview is part and parcel of our society" and should not solely to be thought of as a research method (2003, p.29). In order to gain an insight into the Religion teachers' experience of teaching RE in this particular educational setting, the researcher chose to conduct semi-structured interviews. This method of data collection enabled the participants to engage more deeply with the topics for reflection for a longer period of time than a focus group interview would have allowed for. It also allowed for greater confidentiality regarding individual professional practice.

Roberts comments that investigating the world of personal experiences is not the work of "disinterested researchers" and highlights the benefits that insider expertise and intimacy may bring to bear in order to add to the believability of findings (Roberts, 2010, p.644). As this case study involves the experience of delivering RE in a Roman Catholic post-primary school, it is important to consider the positionality of the researcher to the participating Religion teachers as a practising colleague. This will undeniably shape the ensuing narrative of the interview. However, establishing an environment of confidence and trust is important in harnessing the fruitful data.

According to Yin, interviews are essential sources of case study information which should be employed as a form of "guided conversations rather than structured queries" (2009, p.106). Interviews should pursue the line of inquiry in the case but should also encompass a friendly and non-threatening conversation about the subject matter central to the case being studied. It was important the participating teachers did not feel overly burdened, conflicted or compromised in recounting their personal perspectives and the allegiance they hold to their school community. Semi-structured interviews facilitated a reflexive, interviewee-centred, flexible and stimulating discursive environment, as proposed by Sarantakos (1993). The interview schedule was organised across the four key areas in exploring the experience of Religion teachers in a Roman Catholic School:

- Conviction of belief

- Role of faith formation within this Roman Catholic School Community

- The contribution Religious Education can make to authentic inclusion

- Challenges to teaching Religious Education at senior cycle

Semi-structured interviews, lasting approximately 45 minutes, were conducted with five Religion teachers with the necessary experience of teaching Religious Education at senior cycle. These semi-structured interviews were recorded on two devices and subsequently transcribed and coded before proceeding with data analysis.

3.8   Sampling strategy

"The secret to selecting any researchable interest is to isolate a particular perspective and vantage point" (Machi and McEvoy, 2009, p.17).

A characteristic of qualitative research is "to present multiple perspectives of individuals to represent the complexity of our world" (Crewsell, 2012, p. 207). When considering a suitable sampling strategy that would effectively address the research questions it became clear that purposive sampling would create the most "information rich" sample (Patton, 1990, p.169). I decided that purposefully selecting homogenous samples for the student focus group interviews was best way to reduce inhibition and to ensure full participation. For these reasons, I wanted each focus group to comprise of students from a similar faith background or secular worldview. This study explores how senior students from different faith and secular backgrounds experience RE in a Roman Catholic school. The procedure for this purposive sampling involved the school's principal reading the Plain Language Statement (see Appendix C) and inviting students to participate in the research during the fifth year and sixth year school assembly. Any interested students, once parental permission was secured (further outlined in the Ethics section of this chapter), were asked to fill out and submit a short profile detailing their name, age, class group, whether they are studying exam or non-exam religion and their personal religious or non-religious worldview. This allowed each focus group to represent a "common subgroup in the [school] community" (Crewsell, 2012, p.208). In total six focus group interviews were conducted with participation from twenty-nine students of different faith and secular backgrounds. See Figure 3.2 below for the breakdown of student participation in homogenous sampling groups.

Figure 3.2: Student Sample
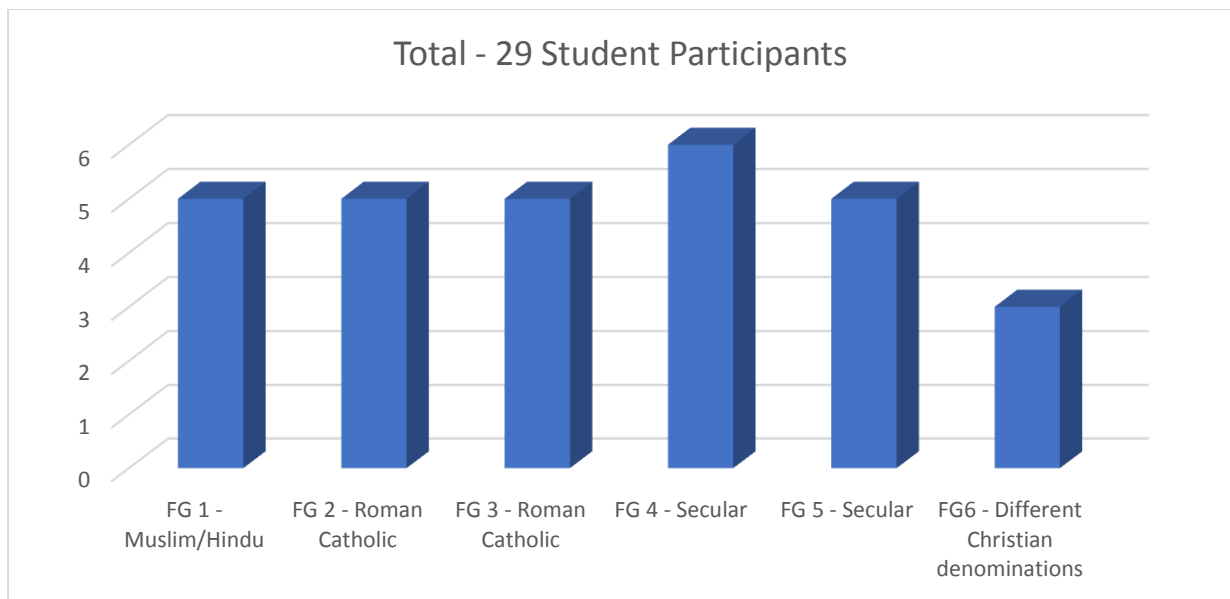
Bryman observes that "most writers on sampling in qualitative research based on interviews recommend that purposive sampling is conducted" (2008, p.458). For participation in the semi-structured interviews, purposive sampling was the most appropriate method as there is only a limited number of Religion teachers with the required experience of teaching Religion at senior cycle in this specific educational context. The procedure for this purposive sampling involved each participant being contacted initially via email with an invitation to participate in the research. The email contained the plain language statement and consent form (see Appendix D) for the research. Once a participant indicated their availability to attend an interview, a list of possible dates was generated for their consideration. The location of the interview was decided upon by the participant, to ensure they felt comfortable and secure in their surroundings. In total, five semi-structured interviews were conducted. The use of purposive sampling for all interviews aided the vital process as emphasised by Yin of binding of the case (2014).

Table 3.3: Participating Religion Teachers in this Study

Participant	Gender	Role	RE Experience
P1	F	Religion teacher	Exam and non-exam RE
P2	F	Religion teacher and head of year	Non-exam RE only
P3	M	Religion teacher	Both exam and non-exam RE
P4	F	Religion teacher	Both exam and non-exam RE
P5	M	Religion teacher and deputy principal	Both exam and non-exam RE

3.8.1   Rigour in Data Collection Stage of Case Study Methodology

Yin's four principles of data collection helped to ensure rigour and reliability within the research design (2014, pp.118-130) in the following ways:

- Using multiple sources of evidence

- Creating a case study database

- Maintaining a chain of evidence

- Exercising care when using data from electronic sources.

Use Multiple Sources of Evidence

A "major strength of case study data collection" is the opportunity to use multiple sources of evidence (2014, p.119). The importance of this principle is further emphasised by Patton's delineation of types of triangulation, the first of which is, data sources (2002). This research is informed by a constructivist-interpretive paradigm that seeks to present a multitude of perspectives. It was therefore paramount that this research should include both the student and teacher perspective in its exploration of RE at senior cycle in a post-primary Roman Catholic school.

Create a Case Study Database

Yin stipulates the importance of separating raw data collected in the gathering process from the generating of the thesis from the data (2014). The raw data collection in this research includes interview recordings, verbatim interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and documents for analysis. As these sources of data were analysed, amended copies were transferred into a different folder, separating them from their "raw" form. The case study database set up on NVivo 11 was therefore "an orderly

compilation of all the data" (2014, p.123). Organisation of this database aids the reliability of the case study as it evidences an audit trial of the entire process from data collection to the final analysis.

Maintain a Chain of Evidence

The third principle Yin outlines is maintaining a chain of evidence that illuminates the research process that links the case study questions, CS protocol (linking questions to protocol topics), citations to specific evidentiary sources in the CS database, CS database, and the CS report (2014, p.128). Each of these stages is linked but operates a two-way system. This procedure provides clarity for an external observer to trace the research questions through to the findings and conclusions of the case study. This was achieved through the use of a critical friend and the research supervisor.

Exercise Care when Using Data from Electronic Sources

Yin's fourth principle refers to the "wealth of electronic information" available to researchers and the importance of exercising discernment and cautious judgement when accessing these sources (2014, p.129). Much of the documentary analysis involved in this research was obtained from the primary generator of the document.

3.9   Data Analysis

> The researcher will ensure a responsibility to government which will be interpreted as striving for accuracy, reporting on all data and disseminating findings. (Merriam, 1998, p. 211)

Data analysis is an iterative process where "often … patterns will be known in advance, drawn from the research questions … [and] sometimes, the patterns will emerge unexpectedly from the analysis" (Stake, 1995, p.78). The data gathered through the focus group and semi-structured interviews was processed by sophisticated computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), NVivo 11. NVivo facilitates the analysis of data but does not conduct the analysis by itself. A text-based analysis approach was used in the analysis of the documentation.

Yin outlines five analytical techniques to apply when analysing both sources (2014, pp.142-160):

- Pattern matching

- Explanation building

- Time-series analysis

- Logic models

- Cross-case synthesis.

Using NVivo11 allowed for a greater efficiency in managing the data collected from the interviews conducted in this research. figure outlining NVivo process

Below, Figure 3.3 represents the initial stages of analysis which involved generating initial codes. These 24 codes were refined and narrowed throughout the analysis process.

Figure 3.3: Phase 2 of Thematic Analysis

3.9.1 Analysis of Documents

Morris and Ecclesfield recognise how qualitative researchers must choose between analysing large textual data at a cursory level or selecting a small subset of data for deeper analysis (2011, p. 241). The researcher of the current study selected only relevant primary documents for analysis, the majority of which are school policies, as previously outlined in 3.6.1. An analysis of the NCCA syllabi was included in the review of the literature in Chapter 2. However, analysis of the other documents also help to inform and direct the literature selected for review. The schools policies

analysed helped to reveal the tension which exists between conflicting expectations of inclusive intercultural education and schools upholding their "characteristic spirit" initially (DES, 1998).

Babbie describes content analysis as "the study of recorded human communications" (2001, p. 304). The researcher reviewed, selected, interpreted and summarised the data without distorting it (Walliman and Buckler 2008). Mayring outlines nine steps to qualitative content analysis as: determination of the material; analysis of the situation in which the text originated; the formal characterisation of the material; determination of the direction of the analysis; theoretically-informed differentiation of questions to be answered; selection of the analytical techniques (summary, explication, structuring); definition of the unit of analysis; analysis of the material (summary, explication, structuring); interpretation (2003, pp. 42-99). The researcher referred to Mayring's steps throughout the analysis process through which the findings emerged.

3.9.2   Analysis of Interviews

Thematic Analysis was employed as the analytical framework for the qualitative data of this study. Braun and Clarke define Thematic Analysis as "a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (2006, p.6). Since it is not tied to any particular theoretical framework, Thematic Analysis is an adaptable and accessible for analysis. Critics of Thematic Analysis have questioned its reliability and its propensity to result in a descriptive rather than a critical report (Bazeley, 2013). Bazeley identifies unsatisfactory practice in qualitative research as follows: "too often, qualitative researchers rely on the presentation of key themes supported by quotes from participants' text as the primary form of analysis and reporting of their data" (Bazeley, 2009, p.6). As the primary objective of this research was to provide a thick description (Geertz, 1973) of how students of different religious and secular worldviews and Religion teachers experience the delivery of RE in a Roman Catholic post-primary school, it was deemed suitable to employ Thematic Analysis to achieve this end. Dawson recognises that "thick description" is "not an exact science; it is an interpretive approach to understanding the many layers of what is going on in the social world" (Dawson, 2010. p.944).

In order to counter the possible downsides and difficulties of Thematic Analysis, the six-phase analytical strategy as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) was applied using NVivo 11. A brief description of this process follows. Once the researcher had become completely familiar with the data during the initial stage, open coding of all interview transcripts commenced, so that the preliminary interpretive process involving the systematic analysis and categorising of the raw research data could begin (Matthews and Price, 2010, p.155). This second phase of coding allowed for concepts – "the most basic unit of analysis" – to be separated from "distinct events, incidents, words, or phrases" in the data (2010, p.155). The third phase of the Thematic Analysis process involved considering and

deciphering relationships "between codes, between themes, and between different levels of themes" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.89).The fourth phase of the analysis process involved "reviewing themes" to identify patterns and to further examine the validity of the "candidate themes", before moving on with a re-coding of the data set (2006, p.92). Figure 3.4 is a screen grab of the Nvivo database during the reviewing of themes as required in Phase 4 of Thematic Analysis.

Figure 3.4: Phase 4 of Thematic Analysis Process

The fifth phase follows with further defining and refining of themes was carried out in a process that involved examining the themes for possible sub-themes that further illuminated and developed the theme. Braun and Clarke explain: "by 'define and refine', we mean identifying the 'essence' of what each theme is about (as well as the themes overall) and determining what aspect of the data each theme captures" (2006, p.92). The four major themes which emerged from this stage of the data analysis are represented in Figure 3.5 below.

Figure 3.5: Phase 5 of Thematic Analysis Process
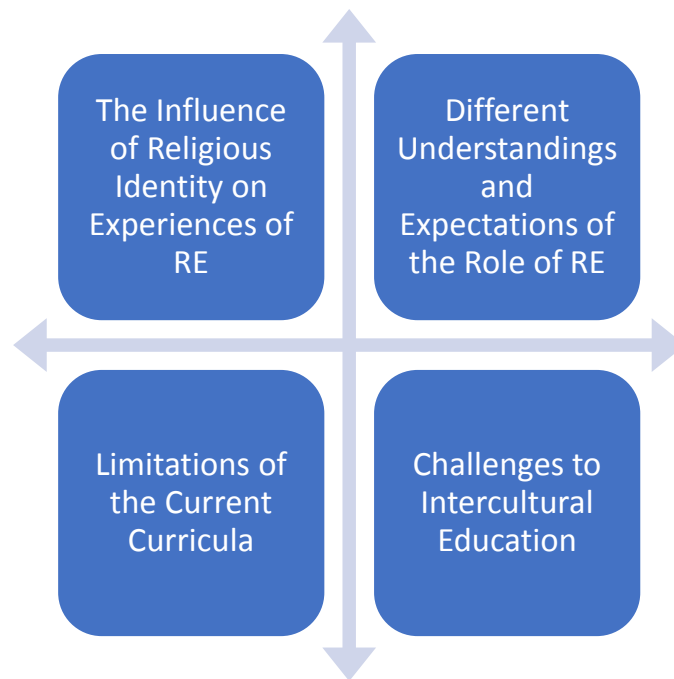
The final phase of the thematic analytical strategy involved the final analysis and the write-up of the report. This report presents a "concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account of the story the data tell[s]", linking to the research questions and cited literature (2006, p.93). Thematic Analysis' six step process is outlines in Figure 3.6 below.

Figure 3.6: Overview of Analysis Process from Raw Data to Findings, Adapted from Braun & Clarke (2006, p. 86)

1. • Familiarisation with the data
2. • Generating initial codes
3. • Searching for themes
4. • Reviewing themes
5. • Defining and naming themes
6. • Producing findings
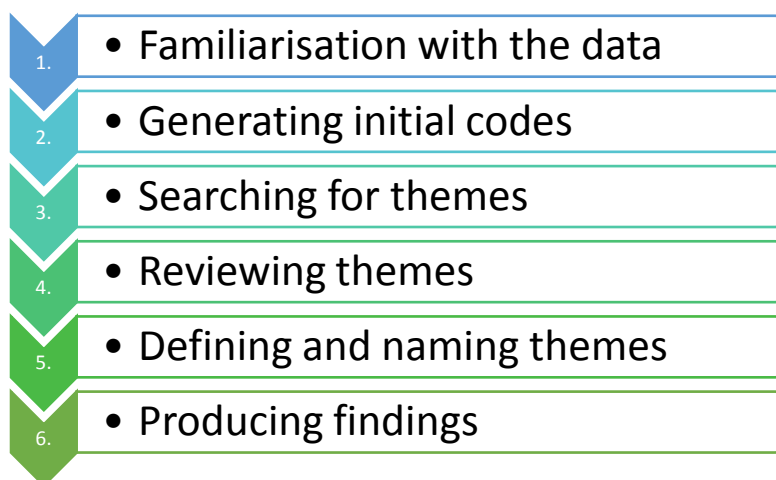
3.9.3   Methods of Verification

"Verification is built into the entire research process with continual checks on the credibility, plausibility, and trustworthiness of the findings" (Merriam, 2009, p.211).

Triangulation

Yin defines triangulation as the "convergence of data collected from different sources, to determine the consistency of a finding" (2014, p.241). In this study, data was derived from documentary analysis and a review of the literature, and transcripts from focus group and semi-structured interviews were collected, analysed, and triangulated. While all sources of data potentially have inherent weaknesses regarding the overall aims of a particular research project and/or practical obstacles that the researcher may encounter (Denscombe, 2003), having multiple sources of evidence led to "converging lines of inquiry" (Yin, 2014, p.120). "Multiple sources of evidence essentially provide multiple measures of the same phenomenon" (2014, p.121). The development of this convergent evidence strengthened the overall construct validity of the case study.

Reliability

The role of reliability is to minimise the errors and biases in a study (Yin, 2014). In order to increase the reliability of this case study, an audit trial of all major decisions regarding the analysis of the multiple sources of data was recorded. The use of analytical software (NVivo) aided this process and helped to reduce bias through the determination of patterns within the data and the frequency of occurrence of such patterns. Fink cites an audit trial as a method which demonstrates "proof of a rigorous research design" (2010, p.144). This audit trail allows for greater stability and reliability of the research process, so that "an independent third party can reproduce the research process from data collection to conclusion" (Wad and Street, 2010, p.802).

Review of Draft Case Study

Another method of verification employed was the presentation of the findings of this case study to the research participants. This practice allowed the participants to review their responses to ensure they were happy with their contribution or to make amendments, where desired. This practice helped to further avoid previously held assumptions and any potential bias of the researcher to inform the research. The researcher also engaged a fellow researcher, not involved in the current study but sensitive to the field, to review the draft case study report, which also increased the credibility and dependability of the work (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Validity of Findings

Larsson (2009) asserts that another way of considering validity in qualitative studies is the "generalisation through recognition of patterns where the reader discovers something s/he has not seen that clearly before and the pattern is also recognized in other cases". Within the current research project, patterns emerging from the data became recognisable as being similar to the findings of other

research studies previously considered in the review of the literature (Jackson, 2009; Darmody, Tyrrell, Song, 2011; Conroy, Lundie and Baumfield, 2012; Stuart-Buttle, 2017; Leslie et al., 2018). While the current research is a small-scale case, study, the transferability of the data, as argued by Mertens (2010), remains unaffected by this approach.

3.10   Ethics

Ethical Review

As the majority of participants were under the age of 18 years old, this research required an application for a full (not expedited) ethical review by the Research Ethics Review Committee of Dublin City University (see Appendix F). This process demanded a rigorous review of all decisions made during the course of the research process, in order to ensure that the principle of "do no harm" was employed throughout. This brought integrity to the project. The guidelines stipulated by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2012) in the publication *Guidance for developing ethical research projects involving children*, acted as a guiding framework when considering the ethical issues of the research. The five core ethical principles of minimising risk of harm to research participants were implemented, namely: obtaining informed consent and assent; ensuring confidentiality and anonymity; upholding child protection and wellbeing policies; maintaining legal obligations and policy commitments in relation to children; and promoting a child-centred, inclusive approach to research (DCYA, 2012).

As this was an example of insider research, the researcher remained alert to the potential impact of her role as a teacher of RE in the school community in developing relations with the research participants, in order to nurture mutually respectful interactions (Sieber, 1992). Drawing on the work of Brydon-Miller, the researcher adopted "covenantal ethics", which was established on the basis that as an insider researcher, she was interested in enhancing current and future students' and teachers' experience of RE (2009, p.244).

Ethical Sampling

Senior-cycle students were introduced to this research project by the school principal during their weekly year group assembly. Participation in the research was emphasised as a non-curricular activity without any academic or other reward or penalty. Students interested in participating were asked to fill out and return an assent form made available to them during the assembly. This form required each interested student to detail their name, age, class group, whether they were studying exam or non-exam Religion, and their personal religious or non-religious worldview. This information allowed the researcher to provisionally select suitable candidates from the interested cohort.

Care and consideration were given with regard to the selection of the sample used in this research. The researcher was aware that her role as a Religion teacher within this school community could

influence the decision of students to participate in the research. While some students might find it flattering to be asked to participate and so be eager to please, others might feel pressurised to participate. It was strongly emphasised that there would be no negative consequence or repercussions for students who refused to participate and that there would always be an opportunity for any student to withdraw from the research at any time. It was also made clear to all participants that they were being asked to provide open and honest responses about their experience of RE within this school community to date.

Sensitivity of Subject

Due to the personal nature of the subject-matter being discussed during the focus group interviews (belief and non-belief in God, experience of inclusion during the study of RE, practice of religious beliefs, etc.), there was potential for some participants to feel exposed in front of their peers. As adolescence is an impressionable and challenging time in a person's life, the researcher sought to reduce the risk of potential discomfort for students by composing each focus group with students who identified with a similar worldview.

However, such personal expression on the topics outlined above may have led students to become emotional or upset at times, as may be expected, for instance, in any ordinary Religion class. In the event of a student becoming upset, the child protection policies of the school were strictly adhered to at all times and the school's guidance counsellors were informed of each student's participation prior to the commencement of the focus group interviews, should they be needed to be available to these students.

The wellbeing and care of all participants, students and teachers alike, were paramount throughout the research. Inevitably, inconvenience was caused to already busy and hard-working Religion teachers, but the researcher endeavoured to minimise this at every opportunity. It was hoped that an opportunity to reflect on practice and to have personal experiences, judgements and opinions listened to and documented, was a benefit of the participation in this research.

Procedure for Obtaining Consent and Confidentiality

Compliance with informed consent and assent procedure was adhered to when selecting participants for both the focus group interviews and the semi-structured interviews. Written permission from parents or guardians of the students was required (see Appendix E). All participants were made fully aware of their right to withdraw their participation at any stage of the research process. The confidential and anonymous treatment of participants' data was in accordance with the British Education Research Association (BERA) guidelines, Children First Legislation (2015) and the Data Protection Act (1998). It is important to note that while confidentiality was guaranteed, the data is subject to the same legal requirements as other research data, including those under the Freedom of Information Act (2014). All participant responses were anonymised and a pseudonym was used to

protect the school's identity. All data gathered was safely stored under lock and key and will be destroyed in a confidential manner after 5 years.

3.11   Conclusion

This chapter has described the epistemological and ontological position of this "insider" research. It has detailed the methodological rigour applied to the research from the research design to data analysis, and the ethical considerations attendant upon the project. Chapter 4 follows with a presentation of the research findings and the subsequent discussion prompted by them.

Chapter 4   Findings and Discussion

4.1   Introduction

As foregrounded in the review of the literature, the tension arising from the different expectations held by key stakeholders in education emerged in the research findings. The student voice of this research echoes the State's position that RE should provide an inter-religious objective which contributes to intercultural education, with the broader aim of enabling greater social cohesion. On the other hand, the teacher voice within this research resonates with the school patron's promotion of Catholic faith formation as an integral aspect of a Catholic education. The findings of this research present these discordant perceptions on what the purpose, nature and scope of RE ought to be.

The Religion teachers' perceptions and understandings of what RE ought to be influence the pedagogical approaches adopted, the curriculum content selected, and how the school policy is informed. Similarly, the dissonant perceptions held by the students impact upon the engagement and motivation levels applied to their study of RE. However, where these perceptions collide it is students of minority religious and secular worldviews who are affected the most.

This chapter presents the findings of the research alongside numerous and at times extensive quotations from the participants of the study. Within case study, one should be able to "hear the sound of voices" (Thomas, 2011, p.7). Considering the paucity of capturing the voice of the RE student and the Religion teacher in research conducted in an Irish context, the researcher wanted to allow the voices of the participants to be heard in the presentation of the data (Creswell, 2012). Since the research explores the experience of young people with minority religious and secular worldviews studying in a denominational educational setting, it was essential that these voices were not "silenced, disengaged or marginalised" (Creswell, 2012, p.285).

In attempting to answer the research questions outlined in Chapter 3, Methodology, the data was coded and analysed. The following themes and subordinate themes emerged as being the most significant in the investigation of RE's contribution to authentic inclusion in this specific context. These themes are captured in Table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1: Representation of Research Findings

Theme 1: The influence of religious and non-religious identity on students' experience of a Catholic school and their subsequent experience of RE	
Sub-theme:	Perspectives of senior-cycle students regarding their religious faith
Sub-theme:	Perspectives of senior-cycle students regarding their secular worldviews

Theme 2: The different understandings and expectations of the role of RE in this school community	
Sub-theme:	Religion teachers' understanding of their role
Sub-theme:	Students' perception of the purpose, nature and scope of RE

Theme 3: Limitations of the current RE curricula	
Sub-theme:	Students' experiences of JCRE
Sub-theme:	The difference in students' attitudes towards the study of Leaving Certificate RE and non-exam RE
Sub-theme:	The study of world religions as an option on all curricula

Theme 4: Challenges to inclusive intercultural education within RE and School Policy	
Sub-theme:	Perceptions of exclusion relating to the prohibition of the hijab
Sub-theme:	The lack of opportunities to study different religions and secular worldviews
Sub-theme:	Conflict of perceptions regarding the role of religious practices

It is a deliberate decision made by the author of the research to present the findings and discussion within a single chapter. The concept of conversation has been foregrounded in this research as significant; therefore it is of utmost importance that the research findings are put into dialogue with the literature and previous research studies, in order for a fruitful discussion to emerge. The researcher wanted to facilitate a conversation between the voices of the research participants and the existing

literature, so that a thicker description and deeper understanding of the lived experience of those experiencing RE as minority groups would be achieved.

4.2   Theme 1: The influence of religious and non-religious identity on students' experience of a Catholic school and their subsequent experience of RE

A significant finding of this research is the role religious identity plays as an influence on a student's experience of RE in the school community under study. This finding is particularly relevant, as participants who identify as belonging to minority faiths or secular worldviews consider the RE they have received to date as exclusionary and partial.

This finding is further explored in the section 4.5.2. It is, however, the purpose of the current section to provide an account of how the students' religious identity was described in terms of personal belief, religious practice and challenges faced. This section also includes the perspectives of students with secular worldviews and how they understand their non-religious identity, along with the challenges they encounter attending a school with a religious ethos.

4.2.1   Perspectives of Senior-cycle Students regarding their Religious Faith

This section offers a description of the different religious beliefs and secular worldviews held by the student participants of this research. It was a deliberate decision of the researcher to include a descriptive piece in order to give some background and context to the diversity and intra-diversity of beliefs that exist in the school under study. This section attempts to shed some light on how the religious identity of these participants has impacted on their experience of RE.

Their experience of RE has influenced their understanding of what the purpose, nature and scope of the subject should be. The conflicting understanding of the role of RE held by Religion teachers and students is presented as a major theme in section 4.5.

Muslim and Hindu Participants' Understanding of their Religious Identity
This focus group represented minority faiths within this school community with four participants identifying as Muslim and one as Hindu. Intra- religious diversity presented within this group in terms of conviction of belief and adherence to religious practices among the four Muslim students.

The Role of Prayer in the Lives of Student Participants
While prayer plays a role in the lives of the all the Muslim participants, they do not always adhere to Salat, the Islamic practice of praying five times a day.

> S4: Like I said I'm not very religious. I consider myself as Muslim, but I don't practise it that much. I pray sometimes when I really, really need it. It's not like a have a routine to pray five times a day or something. [S4 is a fifth-year student]

> S5: When I was really young, like nine or eight, I used to go to my Arabic school. I used to go to every Sunday, but it was for the Muslim children. We used to learn how to read the Qu'ran. We would all play together, all the kids they would teach us how to pray. Then when that stopped I was like ... my thing [the practice of my faith] kind of declined. I was not praying every day. I stopped doing that. Now, I really only pray during Ramadan. [S5 is a sixth-year student]

It is important to note that there was intra-religious diversity expressed throughout this focus group discussion and so no singular narrative on Muslim religious practice emerged. The importance of resisting an essentialist position regarding representation of religions is crucial and particularly pertinent in the portrayal of Islam, which is often subjected to such reduction (Said 1978; Jackson 2004). Instead, these students expressed an individualised account of their personal religious commitment, which was evolving and exploratory, relevant to their adolescent stage of development (Fowler 1981; Kohlberg, 1984). Only one of the Muslim participants described a deep emotional attachment and strong commitment to Islam that informs her daily life and described her emotive experience of completing an Umrah (religious pilgrimage to Mecca) during the discussion.

> S1: I'll say it's the best experience in my life that I actually ever had. When I reached Mecca and I saw the Kaaba, the black cube, in front of me for the first time it was like a stream of tears that could not stop. Amazing. [S1 is a fifth-year student]

It is important to note that all the other students in this focus group became intrigued and engaged with the description Student 1 gave of her experience. The other students asked questions and showed reverence and respect for what was obviously a very significant, emotionally charged and deeply religious experience for Student 1. This part of the focus group conversation provided an apt microcosm of an interesting and engaging discussion that could be facilitated within the RE classroom.

In stark contrast, Student 1 went on to express her dissatisfaction that the school under study does not provide a space for her to carry out her prayers during the school day: S1: "I want to [pray]. If I get the chance I will, but the school does not provide you."

The lack of a suitable space for Muslim students to pray indicated a lack of recognition of the Muslim students who wish to uphold their religious commitments during the school day. This issue is discussed in more detail later in this chapter, when religious practices carried out in the school under study are examined.

Some of these participants, including the Hindu student, stated that their commitment to their faith had declined in recent years, citing as cultural factors, such as attending schools of different religions and living in a society where Christianity and liberal, secular ideologies are the main competing

worldviews, as reasons for this. Student 3, a Hindu student, described her detachment from her previously held religious beliefs:

> S3: I was very religious in my country [Mauritius] but when I come here, [turning to a Muslim participant] like for a Muslim you do have a Mosque and Temple, but I saw nothing for my religion here. It's very hard as well 'cause I know for Christians you do have pictures or little statues of maybe Jesus and Mary and all of that, but I don't have any of that here in Ireland, like I feel I have to go to India, my country, to bring them here. [S3 is a fifth-year student]

When asked about the role prayer plays in her life, Student 3 continued to refer to the sense of cultural and religious misrecognition she feels.

> S3: Yeah. Sometimes, I do sit, even if it's on my bed or on the floor and I'll just start praying. Also, I could just be singing around the house. Most of the prayers in Hinduism they all have a rhythm. It's more like a song when you do have a prayer. I really do enjoy that. Sometimes when I'm home, it might be just in the holidays, my mum will play the song a lot, but as my [Irish- born] stepdad comes she will turn it off. He doesn't pass any comments, but we still feel weird about it.

It is important to disclose that during this discussion Student 3 began to get visibly upset and she was comforted warmly by the other participants. Although none of these students could be described as best friends, it is important to note the solidarity they showed each other while sharing experiences of exclusion and discrimination. A further insight into why Student 3 feels inhibited and self-consciousness regarding her religious identity was gained when negative experiences and religious stereotyping were discussed.

Impact of Stereotyping

The research finds that there are significant challenges for these participants, who identify as religious minorities. The trepidation around disclosing their religious identity to those of different faiths and secular worldviews, for fear of being negatively judged and not accepted, was strongly expressed. Every person in this group could recount a time they were discriminated against because of their religious identity. Incidents of prejudice and discrimination experienced in primary school were discussed. The wearing of the bindi by the Hindu student and the wearing of the hijab by Muslim students at their primary schools resulted in them receiving negative attention from other students. Student 3 described the hurt and exclusion she felt when she encountered this type of xenophobia:

> S3: Just like some Muslims wear a headscarf in my religion we have, well here you can call in a bindi [points to middle of her forehead] – it's black for girls and red when you are married but when I wore it in primary school everyone would laugh at me [begins to get upset].

> Interviewer: [They laughed at you] because it was such a visible symbol of your religion? It's not nice to be laughed at [offers tissue and other participants reassures her she is not alone].

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S3: My sister stopped wearing it as well but my mum she wears it all the time. She doesn't care if people [laugh at her].

The negative portrayal of Islam in the media was cited as a damaging influence on people's perception of Islam. Student 1 is a fifth-year Muslim student who is strongly committed to her faith today, despite experiencing explicit and public opposition in her early schooling.

S1: In [primary] school I had to hide my religious identity to like make friends because to be honest I got bullied in school for being a Muslim and wearing a headscarf … in primary school. I got called a terrorist as well … some people were like, "Oh stay away from her she might have a suicide bomb on her".

Student 2 and Student 5, who had also experienced similar negative stereotyping of their different religious identity, reflected on the impact it had had on their relationships with classmates. Student 2 spoke of how she had learned to be reticent regarding her religious identity for fear of negative judgment. Indeed, Student 5 spoke of an encounter that reflects the prevalence of insensitive and incorrect stereotyping resulting from such pejorative judgement. The fact that these xenophobic incidents involved primary school children indicates a generational prejudice that has the potential to perpetuate a cycle of discrimination.

S2: I think nowadays it is a bit difficult because you are friends with all kind of people, they come from different backgrounds of religions and sometimes you don't want to show them or be all like, I'm Muslim, and maybe you think they are scared they have a bad impression of you and that you might not be that open about your religion and maybe you don't show your religion. [S2 is a fifth-year student]

S5: Yeah I agree as well, I think it is very difficult to be different. I feel if people don't understand something they are quick to judge, like I remember when I was in primary school and like everyone in the class was Catholic and I was the only Muslim. And they were doing their Confirmation and it makes you feel so excluded because like the teacher makes you do a project while they others are doing that. Cos like one time I remember this girl in my class [asked] "Why are you not making your Confirmation?" I had to [tell her I was Muslim] and then she said, "So your dad's a terrorist?" [S5 is a sixth-year student]

The experiences of exclusion recounted by these minority faith students indicate an "othering" that occurred at an earlier stage of their schooling. These experiences were inflicted upon them by the children they worked and played with throughout primary school. In their study of inclusion at primary level, Devine and Kelly (2006) identify that

Children's sensitivity to difference must be located within the general context of child culture and the desire by children to fit in and be the same as their peers. It must also be understood, however, within a broader cultural context in which Irishness is firmly linked with particular traits (to include being white, settled and Catholic) and those outside this norm are clearly perceived as "other" (2006, p.133)

All of the participating students in this minority faith focus group discussion are both religiously and ethnically different to the majority of the school population, which further places them outside the traditional normative of Irishness being "white, settled and Catholic", and therefore making them more vulnerable to "othering" (Devine and Kelly, 2006). The impact of these xenophobic incidents is damaging to these young people's evolving sense of self, especially during such formative years. It is the purpose of this research to investigate if their experience of RE in the Catholic post-primary school under study has contributed to a greater sense of inclusion within the school community.

4.2.2   Roman Catholic Participants

The Roman Catholic students participating in this research represented the dominant religious group. It is important to note that there was an intra-diversity of belief evident among the 10 Catholic participants with regard to conviction of belief and adherence to religious practices. Participants of these groups adhere to the three categories of "practising Catholics", "sliding Catholics" and "lapsed Catholics" (Francis et al., 2016) as outlined in Chapter 2, Reviewing the Literature.

Some of the participants had been actively involved in their local Catholic Church as altar servers or had attended summer camps run by religious organisations, while identification with Catholicism for others was more culturally informed, rather than being predicated on regular observance of religious practice or rituals. Participants spoke of how they felt more inhibited regarding their religious identity at the beginning of secondary school but as they matured they became more confident in claiming it. Given that the RE they have received to date has concentrated mainly on Christianity, and in particular Catholicism, it can be suggested that this has contributed to their faith development and maturation, which has allowed them to become more comfortable with their religious identity. However, other possible contributing factors include the influence of their family and parish, the ethos of the schools they have attended, and their evolving sense of their own identity.

4.2.2.1 The Role of Prayer in the Lives of Student Participants

The role of prayer in the lives of the participating Catholic students varied between students, who spoke of only praying in times of need, to other students more committed to private and public worship.

> S6: I love prayer. I'm in this Roman Catholic group, which I go [to] twice a week.
> [S6 is a sixth-year student]

> S11: I don't think I go to many public prayer services other than Mass, but at home
> I definitely pray mostly every day. [S11 is a fifth-year student]

> S12: I think I prefer at home to pray than going to Mass. At Mass, it's more [that]
> you have other people's opinion on stuff. [S12 is a sixth-year student]

S13: I think I prefer praying at Mass because I don't know … When I pray at home, I always get really distracted and my mind drifts, and I feel like it's really weird to be thinking about something else when you are in the middle of a prayer. [S13 is a sixth-year student]

S14: I feel a lot better whenever I pray. [S14 is a fifth-year student]

4.2.2.2 Challenges to their Religious Identity

The following responses to the question "Do you think it is difficult for young people to have religious faith today?" identify what these young people perceive as obstacles to having a Catholic religious identity:

> S9: I kind of have the same kind of opinion that [S8] has that it's [religious faith] a bit stigmatized. Especially in your teenage years, it is quite hard. I know I used to go to this summer camp and it was done through religion, it's called CCYM. I used to go to that and it was my favourite time of the year … [friends would say] "Oh, you go to holy camp? You go to pray every day?" I don't think people fully understand what it means to be religious without sitting on your hands and knees and praying five times a day. [S9 is a fifth-year student]

> S10: I find that young people, specifically teenagers, would find it hard to say they're religious. I know, myself, would be quite religious but I wouldn't go around proclaiming it to the world, I keep it to myself. I also feel there's kind of a fear in telling people you're religious, fear of offending other religions, especially nowadays. You can't, in this school even ... like it's a very Catholic school, so I know there's some students of other religions that wouldn't proclaim their religion in fear of being frowned upon. [S10 is a fifth-year student]

> S8:I think there is because people kind of seem to judge you. Even if you go to Mass, I wouldn't go too often. You just see older people and the young people really don't have the time for it.

Most participants asserted that it is challenging to have religious faith in contemporary society. They cited the negative perceptions of Catholicism in Irish society at present, which make it challenging for young people to be open about their faith. The participants spoke of how they are reluctant at times to be open about their faith because of the Catholic Church's child abuse scandals but also for fear of being regarded as old-fashioned, unprogressive, and resistant to change. Also, they cited how society's reverence for scientific inquiry and evidence can make religious faith and worldviews look outdated and naïve. With further probing, the researcher tried to further investigate the reasons for why these young people can feel challenged in their faith positions.

> Interviewer: Would you be comfortable telling people who you hang around with, "I'm going to Mass?"

> S8: It's kind of weird, I just think that people judge you so much now you can't really even have ... Same with science as well, so many things can be proved by

science. It's kind of hard to believe because you don't really know, you're kind of pushed around.

S15: A group of us did [altar serving at primary school]. Here [at post-primary school]. I've kind of forgot about it, and that's when I stopped going to Mass because I was like, "No one else is doing it. Yeah, it's like you wouldn't really come into school and start talking about Mass, I went on Sunday. It was more like what else you did. Me personally, I just let it drift away when I came here. I was just like, "I don't need to go."

While not wishing to minimise these students' experience of difficulty relating to their religious identity, the above statements do not convey the same level of exclusion and prejudice experienced by students of minority faiths. However, Student 15's description of how her active involvement in her parish church as an altar server during primary school ended when she came "here" to the school under study, is interesting. Her use of the term "drift away" is indicative of the broader societal drift from churches (Francis, 1996; Davie, 2007, McGrady, 2018). Although this was not explored much further in the focus group discussion, Student 15 did cite that a possible contributing factor of this drift could have been her integration into a new peer group which did not value active participation in the Church at the beginning of post-primary school. Despite this drift, Student 15 still identifies as a Roman Catholic student and values RE within the school community under study enough to electively participate in this research.

4.2.3 Participants from Different Christian Denominations

All three participants in this focus group discussion qualified that they were not very religious but would describe themselves as spiritual. They spoke of individual spirituality and the private practice of prayer as an expression of their Christian faith. While each of these participants self-identified as belonging to the "Protestant" category on the initial consent form, they each belong to different churches within the Protestant tradition, namely the Pentecostal Church, the Seventh day Adventist Church, and the Baptist Church.

The Role of Prayer in the Lives of Student Participants
Similar to, the Muslim students and the Roman Catholic students, we see diversity in adherence to religious practice among the participants of this group.

S27: I do pray regularly, and I sometimes read the Bible. [S27 is a sixth- year student who identifies as a Pentecostal Christian]

S28: I was baptised, so I was told, but baptised at a Seventh-day Adventist church. [But] when my mum passed away, I moved, and I went to a born again Christian church with one of our neighbours that lived with us [who is] a born again Christian. But then when I moved to my auntie's house, I went to a Methodist

church … and then when I came here [Catholic school], I went to Roman Catholic church. [S28 is a sixth-year student who identifies as a Seven Day Adventist]

S29: When I was younger, I'd go to church every week with my mum and dad. Every single Sunday. It was grand, because my sister, my brother and my cousin [were there], it was sort of like a family thing almost. You'd go on a Sunday. But then, when I got into secondary school I'd still go in first year. But when it came to second and third year, especially when I was studying, sometimes I'd be like, "Aw I just don't have time, I have to do my homework on Sunday morning." And now, it'd be a rare occasion ... I wouldn't go that often. [S29 is a fifth-year student who identifies as a Baptist]

While Student 28's statement highlights the precariousness and fluidity of her religious identity, she participated in this research as a self-assigned Seventh day Adventist, despite having no memory of her baptism into this Church or having any subsequent practice in it. This attachment to the Church can therefore be understood in terms of an attachment to her late mother. Through identifying with the Seventh Day Adventist Church, the maternal identification is strengthened.

Student 29, similar to Student 15 from the RC focus group, describes a *drift* from her religious commitments, which began at the start of post-primary school. While Student 27 did not mention attendance at public worship, she described how she nurtured a personal religious commitment through reading Scripture and prayer.

Challenges to their Religious Identity

A challenge to their religious faith raised by these students of different Christian denominations relates to how their different religious identity is not adequately acknowledged in the school community under study.

S29: I think it probably needs to be acknowledged a bit more … Sometimes people think that it's just, everyone's Catholic. And then, it's hard as well, because you know that you've chosen to come to a Catholic school, so you cannot really protest [about it]. [S29 is a fifth-year student who identifies as Baptist]

Student 29 described a downplaying of difference that neglected to recognise the diversity of belief among the school population. Interestingly, these participants felt that as they belong to the religion of Christianity, their diversity is not different enough to be given the same consideration as more diverse ethnic minorities.

All student participants of religious belief spoke of how their faith had changed during their adolescence. They expressed feelings of taking ownership and control of their faith journeys, resulting in decisions either to no longer practice their faith with regular attendance at church or communal worship, but to retain a personal connection to the transcendent, or to continue with a renewed and more personal commitment to their faith and public expression of that faith. The practice of prayer in sustaining religious identity and belief was cited as being part of the lives of all student participants.

The religiosity of these students was expressed in a reflective and meaningful manner and is therefore an important aspect of their individual identities.

This section has provided an insight into the diversity of religious belief that exists in the school community under study. A strong sense of intra-religious diversity was also evident in each of the focus groups in relation to conviction of belief and adherence to religious practices. Nonetheless, this section has served to confirm that religion and religious belief "persists as an important predictor of adolescent values over a wide range of areas" (Francis 2001, p.47). This is not refuted by the analyses of the data from the two secular worldview focus groups to which we now turn.

4.3 Perspectives of Senior-cycle Students Regarding their Secular Worldviews

A range of secular worldviews was expressed by the 11 participating students, including agnostic, humanist, secular and atheist. While the majority of these students described their worldview as agnostic, others self-identified as humanist or atheist.

> S17: I don't know if I believe in anything. It was never forced on me as a child. Like, I made my Communion and I made my Confirmation, that was fine. But Mam and Dad never really forced me to go to Mass or even referred to God that much. I didn't have to say prayers. I don't really think there's anything greater than humans. Like, I don't think there's a higher [power]. [S17 is a fifth-year student]

> S19: When I got to secondary school, I sort of became more aware of, even just through science class, I sort of figured there was something other than religion that would answer the questions. I suppose, just, I didn't feel like I really needed it anymore. [S19 is a fifth-year student]

> S21: I would consider myself agnostic because at this point I don't know, and it wouldn't be really something that troubles me. You know, I wouldn't have that, it wouldn't be priority, because I have other things to worry about. [S21 is a fifth-year student]

The above statements from participating students describe a growing out of a religious belief that was no longer relevant to their lives and represents a strong detachment from a former religious identity than that of the *drift* mentioned previously. However, the following statements reflect a stronger assertiveness regarding individual's non-religious identities.

> S18: I wouldn't consider myself as a believer. I made my Communion, I didn't make my Confirmation, because at that point I had stopped believing. I actually used to be quite into it. I used to be an altar server. Then I just kind of became more scientifically minded, and started [thinking], like, realistically, how would that work? I would consider myself completely atheist. [S18 is a fifth-year student]

S20: I consider myself an atheist. I was very, like, a strong Catholic when I was younger. I would pray every day, I would go to Mass every week, I went to Roman Catholic school, like [S18] I was an altar server. So, yeah, then as I grew older, I came to have a more scientific view. Like, I believe there's no evidence of God. Like, especially going through, like, hard times, I thought, how did God let this happen? [S20 is a fifth-year student]

S25: I would identify as humanist, which is basically you don't believe in a higher power or anything beyond your life on earth, but also as well as that, you kind of do have a moral stance based on what you see from interactions with other people, rather than what someone would tell you to, from a religious sense. [S25 is a sixth-year student]

In coherence with all the other focus group interviews, there was significant intra-diversity present that resisted a single narrative on a "secular" position emerging. Instead, there were fluctuations relating to the strength of conviction and assertiveness of belief within this group.

4.3.1   Challenges to Having Secular Worldviews

When asked if it was difficult not to have a religious faith, the students agreed on difficulties relating to their experience of religious practices carried out during the school day in the Roman Catholic school they attend and the lack of engagement with their worldviews throughout their study of RE.

P19: For us, as non-faith [students], I feel like that, in a Catholic school when other practices are being carried out, you do feel a bit excluded and left out, and sort of unacknowledged. [P19 is a fifth-year student who identifies as agnostic].

This exclusion, experienced because of the required attendance at these religious ceremonies and participation in religious practices, is further discussed in section 4.7.3. Repeatedly throughout this research, students stated how within the school community under study, their minority religious and non-religious identities were not adequately recognised or acknowledged.

4.4   Conclusion

This section has served to give a brief description of the range of religious beliefs and secular worldviews of the students who participated in this research. Significantly, it has demonstrated how an intra-diversity exists both among students belonging to the same religious tradition and those with secular worldviews. Within studies on diversity, it is vital to note this intra-diversity, so that one resists what Adichie identifies as "the danger of the single story", whereby uniqueness is reduced to sameness, often for hegemonic purposes (Ted Talk, 2018). A tension identified in the conceptual

framework of this study in section 3.2 is the pull between the autonomy of the individual and the collective, common good. In Taylor's (1991) analysis of what he calls "the age of authenticity", he recognises the drive of an individualism and its capacity to deplete a communitarianism. However, he does not see the battle between the two ideologies as lost to one or other, but instead emphasises the importance of holding the tension between the two. It is important to remain alert to these nuances, so that a single narrative of either ideology does not emerge as dominant.

In the course of the discussion on the research findings, it becomes evident how a student's self-understanding of their religious identity and the challenges they face informs their understanding of what the purpose and nature of RE ought to be. Religious identity is an influential factor on how a student experiences the life of the school under study and the RE they receive. It is with this in mind that we now turn to the second major theme of this research.

4.5 Theme 2: The Different Understandings and Expectations of the Role of RE in this School Community

A major finding of this research is the dichotomy that exists between teachers and students concerning their understanding of what the purpose, nature and scope of RE ought to be. How the Religion teachers of this study understand their role is vital to gaining an insight into what they perceive to be the most appropriate approach to RE within this denominational educational setting.

4.5.1 Religion Teachers' Understanding of their Role

The research finds that the religious identity of participating Religion teachers impacts on how they perceive their role in delivering RE in a Roman Catholic context. All participating Religion teachers identified as Roman Catholic. Religion teachers spoke of the importance of being role models of the Catholic faith. The following statements are contributions given by the Religion teachers when asked "How does your personal faith impact on your role as a religious educator?"

> T1: For me, personally, it's had a huge impact. I think it allows me to critically engage with what I'm teaching. Not to indoctrinate. I don't mean it like that, but I think personally, I believe in a lot of what I'm delivering. However, I've noticed more recently that I'm challenged on it from the pupils' point of view. It's very easy for me to know where I'm coming from. [I'm] very open to what everybody else believes and it's not that it weakens my faith, but it makes me think about it in a different light. And to learn from it. I find I learn from the pupils. But, I feel maybe my faith allows me to do that. I feel I've a strong faith.

> T4: I think quite a lot because I'm not thrown by questions because I never see it as something that is an attack on my own faith because I've got a very strong sense of faith. I think the main way I see [my role] is to inform and guide.

T2: I like to think is has, in that I hope as such I've been a role model that they [students] can see, perhaps. Whether it's get involved in the liturgical stuff, or just everyday living.

From these contributions, we gain an insight into how the religious identity and commitment of these Religion teachers influence them in their professional role. At interview, all participating teachers placed a strong emphasis on how being a witness to the Catholic faith was a significance aspect in the self-understanding of their role. When asked if they considered faith formation an important part of their role as Religion teachers, all participants agreed that it was.

T1: There never has been a distinction for me. To me, being a religious educator means that, but also means being a catechist … I think it's intrinsically linked with my role as a religious educator.

T2: I suppose the role I'm involved in guiding the students in whatever way I can, with the programme that we have agreed and again the role modelling and been involved in any kind of celebrations. The Church celebrations and organising that and encouraging the students as well as being involved as far as possible. It goes back to a phrase I heard, it's [faith] caught not taught.

T4:To be a person who, I suppose, [who] guides formation in the classroom, and who encourages prayer, encourages kind of a peaceful environments. So, if you are the type of teacher who is constantly saying "We need to be accepting of all people, and we need to be aware of different faiths." And then in class, you're not accepting of that, they see that straightaway. They see the hypocrisy. So, I think that's why I think faith formation's so important and prayer in the classroom as well.

In the above statements, we see Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 describe faith formation in terms of the faith development of Catholic students by attending religious practices and becoming more knowledgeable in their faith, which Teacher 1 sees as "intrinsically" related to her role as Religion teacher. Teacher 4, however, describes faith formation in terms of encouraging prayerful and inclusive environments. While Teacher 4 is cognisant of the importance of modelling inclusive practice within her classroom, some of the research findings discussed later in this chapter question the authenticity of inclusion within the school community under study.

The recognition of faith formation as integral to the role of Religion teachers concurs with the vision of Catholic religious education at senior cycle, as outlined by the Irish Bishops' *Guidelines for faith formation and development of Catholic students* (2006):

A faith based on genuine knowledge and understanding, as well as reflective attitudes and skills, makes an important contribution to the formation of young people. (ICBC, 2006 p.7)

Perhaps it is unsurprising, that in a Roman Catholic school, Religion teachers – all of whom identify as Roman Catholic and completed their teacher education in Roman Catholic teacher education colleges – consider faith formation as part of their role. Moreover, the religious identity of the participants is therefore understood by them as helpful in their professional role (Lewis et al, 2009; Stuart-Buttle 2017). The Religion teachers see a congruence between themselves as Religion teachers and the RE content they teach. They seem to embrace a teaching *into* religion approach, and while this upholds the Roman Catholic Church's position on RE, it can be interpreted as limited in the midst of growing religious and cultural diversity within the school community. This is especially pertinent when considered in light of the views of students belonging to minority faiths and those with secular worldviews. The teaching *into* religion is proving inadequate in catering for the diversity of beliefs and worldviews present in the school community under study.

Franchi (2011) comments that recent magisterial teaching regarding "the distinctive nature of RE has challenged educators to find paradigms that retain fidelity to Church teaching and do justice to the contemporary educational environment" (as cited by Stuart-Buttle in Shanahan, 2017, p. 52). There would seem to be a move from the more inclusive character of *Nostra aetate's* theology of religions to a more exclusivist position from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2000, *Dominus Iesus* (Lewis et al, 2009).[1] Criticisms of Pope Benedict XVI's *Address to the Catholic Teacher*, which sought to uphold the Church's position on the complementarity of catechesis and RE and simultaneously recognise their distinct natures, identify a tension between the Roman Catholic Church's catechetical and evangelical mission and educational values (Franchi, 2011, p.300). While the Religion teachers participating in this study understood their personal religious identities as compatible and complementary to their role as Religions teachers, concerns were raised regarding the interplay between the subject's educational aims and the faith development expectations of the denominational school at the centre of this study.

> T3: The Junior Cert doesn't help ... I don't think it helps the faith formation. It is quite long. I know you can leave out certain bits, but it is generally quite long. And I know [I am trying] constantly, I suppose, bringing up questions of faith and developing of faith, but sometimes you feel [you haven't enough time].

Challenges to this teaching *into* religion approach, along with the perceived duality of their role, were expressed by the participating teachers. Concerns that the "religion curriculum [loses] its catechetical effect" because of the constraints placed by the examination of the subject in limiting more explicit opportunities for faith formation were raised (Groome, 2007). Religion teachers felt comfortable in relation to development of the Catholic faith, the main obstacle to this being time constrictions

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[1] Dominus Iesus, also known as the Declaration on the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church.

resulting from delivering a syllabus for an exam above a concern for the diversity of religious beliefs and secular worldviews present within their classes.

> T1:At the minute I would say [my role entails] a lot is delivering RE programmes, whether that be junior or senior. I also look upon myself as a catechist – I never saw myself as simply a Religion teacher. However, I did notice, in my early years of teaching I was probably looked upon as more of a catechist by the others and maybe myself. I did a lot of faith formation in class, but I do think that's because it was all non-exam [at that time]. The introduction of the exam has affected that. Not necessarily negatively.

> T2: It's [faith development] the kernel of it, the [danger is] the whole thing can get lost in the hustle and bustle of getting past the exam.

Participating Religion teachers did not express a tension between their commitment to developing Catholic faith and the reality of having a diversity of religious beliefs and secular worldviews in their Religion classes. These teachers did not share the concern expressed by other Religion teachers participating in a 2014 study in the UK, that the curriculum they teach is "too Catholic" and therefore limited in responding to religious plurality and other worldviews (Stuart-Buttle, 2017). Instead, Religion teachers of the current study chose to deliver a Christianity focused content from the syllabus to further ensure that they would fulfil their faith development obligations.

The Religion Department of the school under study developed a department plan in 2000, at the time of the introduction of the exam syllabus for JCRE, which stipulates that teachers will omit Section C: 'Foundations of religions – major world religions' from study. However, an informal agreement to cover this section, if time permitted, was alluded to during the interviews with teachers. It is interesting to note that the decision to exclude the section of the syllabus explicitly focused on RE's inter-religious objective has not been revised in the ensuing 18 years. The impact of this decision is discussed later in this chapter. Teacher 1, who was involved with the introduction of the exam syllabus at the time, explained the rationale behind this decision:

> T1: We were one of the first schools to introduce it. I think we were the second group of schools to introduce Junior Cert [exam RE]. We had our first group and we had no textbooks, I know that's hard to believe! The decision was made that we would do Section B: Christianity. Practically, that meant that we could share resources, because we didn't have textbooks. I do think that a lot of that was informed by our ethos as a Catholic school. We would have had a chaplain present at those [meetings]. We met quite a lot to tease all of this out. We did feel, and I would have been one of the people who did, I remember way back that I was one of the people who thought it was very important to do Christianity.

The above statement is helpful in illustrating the contextual factors that contributed to the decision – namely the lack of resourcing and the obligation to the Roman Catholic ethos of the school. However,

18 years on from this time, with a changing student population growing in diversity of belief and secular worldviews, merits a review of such a Catholic-centric approach to RE.

> T1: However, I'm not an expert in this, I don't look upon faith development as just the development of one faith. I think faith development is the development of faith, of all faiths. You don't necessarily have to refer to God, or Allah, or Yahweh, to develop somebody's faith. It's about being a good human being. I think that faith development comes into so many aspects of our life.

Teacher 1's admission that, while considering herself a catechist of the RC faith, she does not see her role limited to developing the faith of RC students alone, raises questions around the nebulous understandings that exist relating to RE. The question of whether a denominational RE, delivered in a teaching *into* religion approach, contributes to the "spiritual and moral development" of students belonging to different religions, is recalled here. This research surmises that where there is not authentic inclusion of religious and non-religious difference within a school community, then such an approach to RE cannot fulfil the syllabus' aim of contributing to students' spiritual and moral development.

The above quotation also provides an interesting insight into the lack of confidence Religion teachers can feel when teaching in religiously diverse contexts. The admission of "I'm not an expert in this" highlights how this teacher feels under-equipped and unsure in their response to religious diversity within their classroom.

This section has discussed Religion teachers' understanding of their role in the school community under study and the important elements that inform this understanding. The significance of their understanding themselves as role models for the Roman Catholic faith and the dual commitment to educational aims and faith development has been identified. Teachers seem to be preoccupied with fulfilling the obligation of faith development at the expense of delivering a more inclusive RE for the growing diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews within the school community. While these Religion teachers are being faithful to the Roman Catholic Church's mandate to develop the faith of Catholic students, the consequence of neglecting content with inter-religious foci is impacting negatively on the students they teach, and especially those of minority religious and secular worldviews. Moreover, neglect of a more inter-religious perspective is negatively perceived by all students, indiscriminate of religious identity, participating in this research.

4.5.2   Students' Perception of the Purpose, Nature and Scope of Religious Education

Participating students perceive RE's purpose and nature in terms of its potential to fulfil an inter-religious objective. They consider the role RE has in teaching *about* religions as critical for social cohesion in pluralist societies with competing worldviews. Student 4 and Student 18 assert the importance of the inter-religious objective of RE:

S4: We should study more about other religions in school. Not just Christianity.
[S4 is a fifth-year student who identifies as Muslim]

S18: The fact that we're going to go out into the world itself, and there's going to be people from a million different cultures. Surely we should know something about it! [S18 is fifth- year student who identifies as atheist]

S6: Religious education is very valuable, but I think it was very biased on Roman Catholic[ism] or Christianity. I think we should have [studied] each religion. [S6 is a sixth-year student who identifies as Roman Catholic]

This echoes the findings from the REDCo project, whose primary aim was to explore if RE in Europe was a factor contributing positively, or indeed negatively, to religious dialogue. The following findings from the REDCo project (2009) relating to RE's inter-religious objective cohere with the findings from this current research:

- Irrespective of their religious positions, the majority of pupils were interested in learning about religion in school

- Pupils believed that the main preconditions for peaceful coexistence between people of different religions were knowledge about each other's religions and worldviews, shared interest and joint activities.

Participating students in this research voiced a similar endorsement of learning about religions and offered the same rationale for it as indicated in the above quotes. However, they identified a Christo-normative bias present in the approach to RE within the school under study (Arweck, 2017). This contention is discussed as a subordinate theme "The study of world religions as an option on all curricula", later in this chapter in section 4.6.4.

The *Young people's attitude to religious diversity project*, conducted by Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit (WRERU), built on data garnered from the REDCo project. While this study offers a more nuanced and sophisticated picture of the internal diversity of religious traditions, not possible with the larger European study, it also reveals the significant expectation young people have of RE to provide inter-religious knowledge to promote social cohesion in pluralist societies. Of the 5,000 13-15-year-olds who participated in the study, 70% of those described as having "no religion" agreed that "studying religion at school [helped them] to understand people from other religions" (Arweck, 2017). This rose to 82% of pupils identifying as Christians, 84% Sikh, 85% Muslim and 92% Hindu.

A central finding of the current research and indeed the REDCo report is that most students would like school to be a place for learning *about* different religions and worldviews, rather than for instruction *into* a particular religion or worldview. Subsequent studies from the Warwick REDCo community of practice explore the important concept of freedom of belief for RE students (Fancourt,

2009; O'Dell, 2009; O'Grady, 2009; Whittall, 2009). These studies highlight how adolescent students are learning to appreciate freedom of belief within the RE classroom. O'Grady asserts that increased awareness of one's own background and assumptions brings about a greater freedom to engage with the beliefs of others, which is needed in a pluralist society, where a diversity cultures and beliefs can exist without being reduced to a homogenous entity (O'Grady, 2012).

Jackson's interpretive approach, which formed the theoretical background to the REDCo project, with its emphasis on representation, interpretation and reflexivity, advocates both learning *about* and *from* religion. The trajectory of such a pedagogical approach, with its insight into the diversity and complexity of religion and society, would seem to be highly valuable, given that a significant finding of this research is the desire in participating students not just to come to know, but to understand, the "other" among them. The potential of RE to include and celebrate the diversity of religious faith and secular worldviews that exists in the school community under study was highlighted by students of every focus group and was emphasised the most by the participants with secular worldviews.

All participating students of this research were adolescents on a journey of self-discovery and personal search for meaning and values. Some were approaching this from a religious background, others were informed by a secular worldview. However, all recognised the vital importance of coming to know the "other". McGrady asserts that "full human development involves a life-long journey from an exclusive concern with the "self" to an openness toward the "other" (Mc Grady, 2006, p.989). The argument from our shared humanity posits this as the authentic basis for the flourishing of humankind. Cullen emphasises the role of conversation in the teaching and learning of RE as suitable to "young people who are only beginning to establish and name their own identity and so need the fluidity that conversation allows rather than the advanced critique essential for dialogue" (2006, p.996). The implication of this for Religion teachers is to adopt a more inclusive approach to RE, involving a diverse pedagogic practice, so that they can more fully engage their students at this formative stage in their development.

4.6   Theme 3: Limitations to the Curricula for Religious Education

RE is studied as an exam subject at junior cycle by most students in the school at the centre of this study. At senior cycle, students can choose to continue to study RE as an exam subject for their Leaving Certificate (LCRE) or to study what is referred to as non-exam RE. While, the focus of this research is on the experience of RE at senior cycle, considering all but one student participating in this research had studied the JCRE and sat the State exam, discussion throughout the focus groups inevitably referred to RE at junior cycle.

The differences concerning how students from Catholic backgrounds experience JCRE compared to those from minority faiths and those with secular worldviews are outlined and discussed first in this section.

Following this, the subordinate theme of the difference in students' attitudes toward the study of LCRE and non-exam RE is discussed. Here, the different focus of the syllabus for LCRE and non-exam RE, and how this impacts on the experience of senior-cycle students, is considered.

A third subordinate theme – the challenges of teaching and learning non-exam RE – is explored, with specific identification of issues relating to motivation, engagement and commitment of both the teachers and the students.

The major theme of "Limitations to the curricula for Religious Education" concludes on the examination of the study of world religions as an option on the curriculum.

4.6.1 Students' Experiences of Junior Certificate Religious Education

It is accurate to say that opinions regarding JCRE were mixed, with a higher proportion of students with minority religious beliefs and those with secular worldviews being the most pessimistic. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the prior acknowledgement of how the Religion Department Plan instructs teachers to omit the section of the syllabus with explicit inter- religious focus, students from minority faith backgrounds and those with secular worldviews report negative feelings of exclusion and misrecognition.

> S1: I do get it that Christianity is the biggest religion right now, but there are other religions in the world that you should be studying as well. You get more information and knowledge. The more knowledge you get it's easier for you to communicate with other people. [S1 is a fifth-year student who identifies as Muslim]

> S5: Yeah, I always felt excluded from the class. [S5 is a sixth-year student who identifies as Muslim]

The above statements from minority faith students indicate what they perceive as exclusion in their study of RE. Paradoxically it seems that the Christo-normative approach to the syllabus studied has succeeded in alienating students with religious sensibilities and responsiveness. These students share an understanding of what being "religious" means, even though they belong to different religious traditions. It seems unfortunate to be depriving these students of the opportunity to self-understand what their religious identity means to them.

Research on attitudes of religious and non-religious Swedish students on the RE they receive in state schools revealed that students from religious worldviews were more positive towards the study of

Religion, compared to those with non-religious worldviews (Sjöborg, 2013). While this could be explained as students with prior religious socialisation being more receptive to the study of something that is familiar to them, Sjöborg recognises that another interpretation could be the ambitious inter-religious objective of the curriculum that RE, that "provides advanced knowledge, as well as greater understanding of people with different religions and views of life", is not being attained (Swedish National School Agency, 2011). The gap in attitudes between the students with faith as a positive and the negative attitudes of those with no religious beliefs, mainly ethnic Swedes, calls into question if RE in this context is contributing effectively to "intercultural understanding" (Sjöborg, 2013, p.50,).

Conversely, in this current research students from secular worldviews were more vocal regarding the desire to learn about different religious worldviews and non-religious interpretations of life. This corresponds with findings from the "Growing Up Female and Catholic" research project, which reported that young Irish females with no religious affiliation talk about religion to their friends more than their religiously affiliated peers (Francis et al., 2016, p.83). As "outsiders" of religious traditions, they see the value and potential of RE to cater for the plurality of belief and none that exists. Student 22, a sixth- year student who identifies as agnostic, deliberated on the value of learning about and from different world religions:

> S22: I think that it just makes us more open-minded to other beliefs and other opinions, and stuff like that. If you were only exposed to one religion and one belief system your whole life you'd be very closed-minded and very ignorant about opinions of other people and maybe it would make you a lot less accepting of that.

Participating Roman Catholic students of this research were more positive towards the RE they had received at junior cycle. This can be partly understood in terms of the self-exploration and self-understanding they were afforded above their peers belonging to minority faith traditions and secular worldviews. Hella and Wright identify this as the outcome of learning *about* and *from* religion within a "confessional" context, where students are thought to share a common worldview and "the knowledge and insights gained from learning about their faith tradition will have direct connection to their own personal beliefs and values' (2009, p.56). However, similar to Sjöborg's study, they identify non-relevance to the lives of students with secular worldviews attending nondenominational schools as the greatest challenges to this approach. The present research, however, does not cohere with these findings but instead finds that students with secular worldviews attending the denominational school under study were very aware of the potential of RE as a subject to enhance their personal development. However, they too were critical of what they perceived to be a limited study of religion.

> S24: For me it's very much like there's so much potential because it's [knowledge of world religions] so important. As someone who has absolutely no faith, I think knowledge of faiths is so important, particularly in the time we live in where

Muslims are being persecuted by people who know nothing about the Muslim faith. [S24 is a sixth-year student who identifies as atheist]

4.6.2 The Difference in Students' Attitudes towards the Study of LCRE and Non-exam RE

This research finds a notable difference in attitudes between those studying LCRE and those studying non-exam RE. This difference in part results from the different focus of the syllabi, despite their shared aims. There is a greater emphasis on "the development of critical questioning with the aim of engaged citizenship" (Cullen, 2013, p. 22), along with a broader and more pluralist perspective of the LCRE syllabus. This inconsistency results in senior-cycle students studying the LCRE syllabus having a different experience of these aims than their peers who were following the non-exam curriculum framework (Cullen, 2013). Students studying LCRE were much more positive in their appraisal of the RE they studied than their peers who were studying non-exam RE. Religion teachers also reported marked differences in their experience of teaching both syllabi.

Leaving Certificate Religious Education
LCRE has become a popular subject of study within this school community. The numbers of students studying LCRE from 2015-2018 are as follows: 30 in 2018, 9 in 2017,[2] 22 in 2016, 22 in 2015. All of the LCRE students who participated in this research reported most positively on their decision to study RE for their Leaving Certificate. They stated that while LCRE builds on JCRE, they feel the subject at senior level becomes more interesting, engaging and challenging. Student 25 is a sixth-year student who identifies as humanist. The following statement describes her positive attitude toward LCRE and its inter-religious dimension:

> S25: I honestly think that … [exam] Religion is possibly the most beneficial subject you can do in school…just because it teaches you so much about other people. As well … there is a lot of information about secular belief systems.

Other students described their interest and enjoyment in studying this subject, with particular reference given to the emphasis on the development of philosophical thought in significant moments throughout history, as studied in Section A: 'The search for meaning and values'. The methodologies employed in the teaching of LCRE in this school community are commended by Student 19:

> S19: It [LCRE] wasn't so much learning off, as it was forming your own opinion and learning to articulate it properly. I just thought I enjoy this, I enjoy this sort of learning style.

This departure from rote learning is also described by Teacher 5 as a strength of LCRE:

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[2] This low figure was due to an untypical small fifth-year group, given the increase that year of TY classes from two to four, as implemented from September 2015.

> T5: Religion was one of the first subjects to move away from the whole rote learning, predictable exam, and its emphasis on knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes. That's where the benefit lies. The knowledge was only an element. The attitudes, and the analysis and the reflection ... I think they're the huge skills that students in all areas of life can apply ...

There was consensus among the participating students and teachers that the LCRE syllabus is conducive to the stage of exploration that these young people have reached, as it enhances their personal search for meaning. When considered this way, LCRE is constructive to the identity-building of students, as it offers opportunities for personal development through knowledge of the other religions and secular worldviews. The fact that the syllabus has a greater inter-religious character makes it appealing to students who, as this research has found, support a learning *about* and *from* approach to RE. Students' experience of LCRE confirms the syllabus' aim of developing cricitical thinking skills around the development of one's faith or worldview, the fostering respect for other worldviews and faith stances, and the promotion and creation of a more inclusive environment (DES, 2003). This research has found there is very much a congruence of opinion held by both teachers and students in their approval of and esteem for the study of the LCRE in the school community under study.

While the subject is well subscribed to in this school, nationally the numbers of students choosing to study RE for their Leaving Certificate are generally low, with only 1,309 students studying it for their Leaving Certificate in 2017 (SEC, 2018). However, in 2013 the chief examiner reported that not only had the number of students studying RE increased but the uptake of those studying the higher level course had also risen (DES, 2013). This indicates that the subject is progressing in terms of the number of candidates for exam and the standard they are striving for (DES, 2013). Interestingly, in light of the argument concerning the demands of an examination and its compromising effect on opportunities for faith development referred to earlier in this chapter (Groome, 2007), the 2013 report identifies possible opportunities for faith development. Moreover, and perhaps more significantly, opportunities that allowed for the deeper engagement of the all students, whether it be their heads or hearts or both, were also noted:

> Many candidates also demonstrated an ability to draw on a wide variety of learning experiences and approaches. In their answers, candidates drew on their experience of participating in or observing religious rites, meditation, retreats, pilgrimages etc. The use of a descriptive approach, with reference to examples or case studies and active learning methodologies, seemed to be particularly effective for candidates engaging with abstract concepts. (DES, 2013, p. 21).

The recognition of active learning methodologies and more dynamic pedagogical approaches as successful in the preparation for an exam causes pause for thought, when one identifies the reality of rote learning for the Leaving Certificate and how it can often be referred to as "one long memory

test". Religion teachers participating in this research highlighted the challenging reality of the extensive course content that must be covered. Opportunities such as those listed in the examiner's report above have traditionally been thought of in terms of faith-forming activities and while they indeed have the potential for this, they are also effective aspects of the constructs of learning *about* and *from* Religion approach to RE for students with religious faith and for those with secular worldviews (Teece, 2010).

Recent research conducted by Burns et al. (2018), evaluating the level of intellectual skills assessed by the Leaving Certificate across a range of 23 subjects from 2005-2010, reports the proportion of lower-order intellectual skills to higher intellectual skills being assessed by the LCRE as 96.9% to 3.1%. Such a weak emphasis (3.1%) on the higher-order intellectual skills that require a student to "Analyse", "Evaluate" and "Create" in the summative assessment of RE undoubtedly impacts upon the approach adopted by teachers, whose results indicate their professional worth within today's education-performative culture.

Non-Exam Framework Curriculum for Religious Education

In sharp contrast, students studying the non-exam framework curriculum in the school community under study exhibited negative attitudes regarding their experience of RE. The potential for the subject to become as engaging and stimulating for students as the exam RE was discussed by most particpants and is highlighted in the following quotation from a sixth-year student, who idenitifies as athetist, studying non-exam RE:

> S24: If there was non-exam Maths, you couldn't engage people in it. If you gave them money to engage them you couldn't get them to engage in non-exam Maths. But Religion is such a fascinating thing, because it's how we interact with the world. It's how we interact with each other. It should be so simple, in theory, to get people to engage with it. I think it's because you hear from people, "Oh do non-exam Religion. It's a doss". So, then you go in with the mindset of it's a doss. But I think if they [the Religion teachers] presented it to us in an engaging way, people would care. Even though it's not an exam topic ... I wish I had studied exam Religion. As someone without religion, I find religions fascinating.

Recent research exploring the experience of minority faith students in Irish Catholic post-primary schools found that while the experiences of JCRE were said to have a Christo- normative bias, senior-cycle students were, for the most part, very positive in their appraisal of the non-exam RE they received (Stapleton, 2018). Students of this research responded positively where teachers had shown effective agency and designed their own short courses. They reported as valuing the open discussions of pertinent topics relevant to their lives that the subject at senior cycle, without the demands of an exam, afforded (Stapleton, 2018).

On the contrary, participating students of the current research spoke of discussions that regularly took place in the non-exam RE classes; but instead of describing them as challenging discourse or

meaningful encounters with issues relevant of their lives, they referred to them dismissively. Students of this research referred to the reputation of non-exam RE classes as a "flop" and a "doss". Conroy's research has identified "how RE can fail in its task to establish meaningful existential discussions and to interpret and negotiate meaning collectively" (Arweck and Jackson, 2014, p.79). Considering the non-exam status of the subject, we are reminded of Conroy's question of whether it is acceptable to us, as religious educators, that classes of RE should be comfortable and enjoyable for students at the expense of a deeper engagement with religious traditions in all their theological richness and otherness (Conroy et al., 2013, p.226).

Condon (2014) recognises as problematic the following issues relating to the study of non-exam RE: the lack of available resources for a non-exam subject, the teaching experience of non-exam RE as stressful as its success depends more on individual teacher performance, and the problem of "teachers tend[ing] to cherry pick the more stimulating parts of the syllabi and neglect others" (2014, p.530). These issues were raised in the current research and there was honest admission from participating teachers of the pressure they felt to engage and motivate what they considered to be the reluctance on behalf of the students. A greater consideration of this is given below.

4.6.3 Issues Relating to Motivation, Engagement and Commitment in Teaching and Learning of Non- Exam Religious Education

This research finds that there exists a considerable dichotomy in how both LCRE and non-exam RE are approached in this school. The issues of motivation, engagement and commitment in a subject where no State examination exists at the end of the study were voiced by all teachers participating in the research as the main challenge to their teaching of non-exam RE. With so much of a senior student's school life being immersed in preparation for the Leaving Certificate, RE as a non-exam subject is an anonmaly. This was echoed in the focus group interviews, where students studying non-exam RE agreed that the subject can become tedious as it lacks exam focus and so fails to motivate them in their learning.

Teacher 5 reflected on his past experience of the difference between exam and non-exam RE at senior cycle:

> T5: The motivation was there [for students studying Exam RE] and that is not there in non-exam Religion, I think that engagement is where the difficulty was. Not so much that it was a difficulty, but that [it] was the challenge. That students were walking in and there was no reason to be there apart from the fact that they had to be there. They weren't choosing to do it and the topic, unless it engaged them, then you were left with a difficulty that you had to engage them with the topic. [T5 identifies as Roman Catholic]

For this Religion teacher the levels of student engagement and motivation fluctuates significantly between exam and non-exam RE and presents a challenge in terms of getting the students to invest in their study of the non-exam subject. A fellow colleague of Teacher 5 also raised the issue of student commitment to the subject:

> T1: They [the students] don't want to do a topic in detail. If you do a particular topic with them on a Monday, they don't want to hear about it on a Tuesday. Often, they feel, "We've done that." It's very hard.

Here, Teacher 1 alludes to the demand for a high volume of content to be delivered during the teaching of the non-exam RE. This can lead to added difficulty in terms of preparing and resourcing content for RE lessons, and the issue of limited resources was also mentioned several times in during the teacher interviews. It could be argued that the challenge to engage students in the content for study is a reality for all subject teachers and integral to the effective teaching and learning of all subjects. However, this challenge was expressed as being greater for non-exam RE, as there is no external summative assessment and no formal recognition of achievement at the end of it.

This school community values RE enough to timetable it as a non-exam subject three times a week and while this helps to give prominence to the subject, T1 questions it:

> T1: I think the three times a week is very important for the status of the subject. Sometimes I do question it. I do wonder, "Could we ourselves, as teachers, be more motivated if we were only to see them twice a week?" It can be difficult to keep up motivation three times.

The motivation levels of Religion teachers teaching the non-exam RE and the organisation of the subject were raised repeatedly by students throughout the focus group interviews. Most of the criticism of non-exam RE was aimed at how the subject was being delivered in what students felt was an under motivated, unprepared and unstructured way. Students from the secular focus groups were the most disparaging in their comments regarding the quality of the subject and therefore its value.

> S21: That's why I think non-exam religion is such a, I don't want to call it a flop, but it's not useful. Because the teachers are not interested, they don't care. I can understand, I mean, they're busy and they have other things, and if we're not getting an exam at the end of it. [S21 is a fifth-year student who identifies as being agnostic]

This quotation echoes sentiments that were expressed by a number of students and agreed on by all studying non-exam RE. The assumption that the level of interest and investment of a teacher relies on the status of a subject as exam or non-exam is evident here. There is a symmetry emerging from the data that highlights the predicament relating to motivation, engagement and commitment to the non-exam RE for teachers and students alike. The problem concerning the lack of student motivation and engagement is related to what students perceive as the appropriate purpose, nature and scope of RE.

As described in section 4.2, these students have a diverse range of religious and non-religious positions. However, where they converge is on the identification that the inter-religious objective of RE is vital and necessary for social cohesion in a pluralist society.

However, the perception that the subject is less valuable because it lacks an external summative assessment, with the implication of assessment as a motivating factor, seems to be another obstacle to the effective and enjoyable teaching and learning of non-exam RE. The role of assessment, or lack thereof, would seem to be a significant factor influencing the approach of both the teachers and students to the subject, resulting in both sides struggling with issues of motivation, engagement and commitment. Teachers did not make specific reference to their personal use of formative and summative assesment in their teaching of this subject. It appears that they may not be utilising their agency in designing meaningful and motivational "portfolio assemssment(s)", as suggested in the curriculum framework for non-exam RE (DES, 2000, p.153). A possible interpretation for this lack of agency is that while teachers try to mitigate the expectations of the NCCA, Catholic patrons and the students, they become depleted of their autonomy.

Teacher 2 also pointed to the nebulous status the subject holds in denominational schools, despite the consitutional rights of the parent regarding the religious edcation of their children:

> T2: Over the last few years I remember, there were some senior students who said they wanted to opt out of that class [non-exam RE] completely … maybe [to] study for an extra subject themselves. Obviously, the Principal has prevented that because then everybody could do that.

The above quote highlights the dilemma of school management in promoting the importance of RE within the school community and upholding the constitutional rights of the parents and guardians of students of the school. The contentious issues surrounding the opting out of RE recently re-entered public discourse, when the current Minister for Education and Skills, Richard Bruton, revisited the issue in a recent circular instructing nondenominational school types, ETBs and community schools, to cater for this right to opt-out in a more explicit and effective way. The most notable change is that these schools are to provide "alternative tuition throughout the school year rather than supervised study or other activities" (DES, 2018). This implies that instead of parents exercising their right to opt out of RE, they will be a part of the process of planning and selection the alternative subject to study. Research in Northern Ireland found that the opt-out option was unsuitable for protecting religious freedom in a diverse and pluralist society, as there is "ignorance surrounding the option, difficulties and concerns about taking it, and desires for more inclusive Religious Education" (Mawhinney et al., 2010).

The parallel between the Religion teachers' and the students' experiences of frustration with teaching and learning in the non-exam RE course is indicative of this subject failing to fulfil the expectations

of teachers and students alike. The majority of the teachers spoke of the challenge of motivating and engaging students of non-exam RE. Interestingly, most teachers spoke of the challenges presented by its status as a non-exam subject in negative terms, not mentioning the flexibility and freedom to teach modules with more varied content that this also affords.

Another challenge for the Religion teachers results from the task they face when students have no previous experience or knowledge of the Religion they teach, in cases where the Religion spoken about in school bears little or no resemblance to the Religion or other worldview of the home (Shanahan, 2017). Teacher 2 described the lack of knowledge she had encountered:

> T2: I remember when I was teaching that first-year course, now it's about five years ago, the students, they thought the Pope could marry … they didn't know the whole thing of [the role of a] parish priest or anything like that. You know the basic kind of things, happenings in the Church, and you know they were baptised Catholics.

It might be argued that the dissatisfaction expressed by teachers of non-exam RE at senior cycle results from the preoccupation of using a teaching *into* approach to RE. As described previously in section 4.3, teachers in this school community see faith formation as very much a part of their role. However, the lack of basic religious literacy, as described in the above quote, highlights the challenge they face. There seems to be a tension between the basic levels of religious literacy being so problematic that the delivery of inter-religious knowledge becomes deprioritised.

However, teachers did refer to how they tried to uphold an inter-religious perspective in their classroom. For example, one teacher noted that when teaching about Scripture, they also made reference to the sacred texts of other world religions. Also, teachers often mentioned the importance of "who was in front" of them, indicating that they would make reference to the other world religions, if students of that religious tradition were present in the class. The rationale behind these statements, while not intentionally separationist, is nevertheless flawed in the way it restricts conversation with the different religious traditions present in the room. It is not an adequate measure to ensure inclusion of different religious and secular perspectives and represents a superficial engagement with the religious diversity present in the school community. It results in a double loss, where students of minority faiths feel their religious tradition is not sufficiently engaged with and the Catholic students, or those with secular worldviews, are denied the opportunity that a deeper engagement and a fuller commitment to attaining a more authentic inclusion would deliver. The impact of having the study of world religions as an option in all curricula is discussed in the next section.

4.6.4   The Study of World Religions as an Option on all Curricula

A significant finding of this research is the lack of advocacy in this school community regarding the study of world religions and how this has impacted negatively on the students' experience of RE. As

previously mentioned Section C: 'Foundations of religion: major world religions' is an optional section for study in the curricula of JCRE, LCRE and the non-exam curriculum framework. All of the students who participated in this research, except one (a student who had joined the school community in fifth year) studied the JCRE course and sat the State exam. Of these 28 students only three had formally studied Section C for JCRE.[3] While this reflects a lack of agency on behalf of Religion teachers in addressing the diversity of religious and non-religious belief present, it also calls into question how a decision to make the section with the greatest inter-religious focus an option for study was arrived at by the NCCA.

However, the decision to make the study of world religions optional has not had the same restrictive consequences in all schools. Research from the *Adapting to diversity: Irish schools and newcomer students* project conducted in 2009 found that "students who participated in RE reported classes often focused on learning about world religions and/or discussing general social issues, reflecting the different focus of the RE secondary curriculum, compared with primary level" (Darmody, Tyrell and Song, 2011, p.141).

In contrast, the findings of the current research indicate a lack of teacher agency in delivering a more inclusive RE, which validates the feelings of exclusion and marginalisation expressed by the students of minority faith and secular worldviews in this study. These students feel that inadequate attention has been given to their religious faith tradition throughout their study of RE in this school community. It also further explains the frustration expressed by students in every focus group regarding the lack of opportunities being afforded to them to study different religious traditions and secular worldviews, as opined by Student 18 below:

> S18: I think it is a bit stupid to skip it [Section C: 'World religions'], because … there are loads of girls from different cultures here, and it's kind of sad that we don't know anything about their cultures, unless we take it on ourselves specifically to learn about that. [S18 is a fifth-year student from a secular worldview]

Minority faith students participating in this research understand that their previous negative experiences concerning their religious identity at primary school were a result of ignorance and a lack of knowledge of their "true" religious identity. Therefore, their feelings of disappointment and irritation when the section on world religions, as outlined in their Religion textbooks, is not studied can be understood. In their study of RE at both primary and post-primary levels, these students have experienced their religious tradition being sidelined, which further exacerbates feelings of exclusion

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[3] Some students had completed Journal Work on Islam as their teacher chose to study a title from Section C: Foundations of religion- major world religions as a way of introducing an inter-religious focus to their study. The Journal Work usually involves a visit to a place of religious significance and teachers have organised visits to the Islamic Centre in Dublin as part of the Journal Work. However, this very much relies on teacher agency. Where these students completed the Journal Work on a title from Section C: 'World religions', they would not have studied this section in much depth outside the purpose of the title requirements.

and frustration. These students from minority faith backgrounds did not express a reluctance to learn about Christianity, although they thought a better balance should be sought. These students are optimistic that an explicit study of world religions would help to counter the lack of knowledge and ignorance of others concerning the minority faiths discussed, namely Islam and Hinduism.

Possible challenges to the teaching and learning of world religions is evident in Student 5 and Student 1's description of teachers' attempts to employ inclusive practice and to look to them for insight when referring to the Islam:

> S5: I would also like to say that in Religion class as well, when the teacher would ask me questions, because she knows [I'm a Muslim]. I would feel under pressure to know everything. I was like, "Miss, I don't know every single thing that you're asking me." Then I would feel bad if I don't answer. She'd be like, "Oh, I thought that was your religion." [S5 is a sixth-year student who identifies as Muslim]

> S1: I went through that as well. My teacher was like that as well. [S1 is a fifth-year student who identifies as Muslim]

This indicates the sensitive nature surrounding the teaching and learning of different religious traditions other than one's own. It also may help to explain the reluctance of some teachers to teach about different world religions in more depth. Indeed, a greater investment is needed not only of individual teachers but also the wider school community, in terms of the provision of professional development or developing appropriate and affective teaching approaches for minority faiths.

Participating Roman Catholic students described missing the opportunity to study world religions in the following statements:

> S9: I would have really liked to study other faiths in more detail 'cause I feel like someone could have been sitting at the back of the class like, "This is my faith, I could tell them," because as students we like to tell people stuff. As teenagers, it's in our culture! [S9 is a fifth-year student studying non-exam RE]

> S10: Going out in the real world, you're not going to be in a world full of just Catholics or just Christians. You're going to meet people of different religions and you kind of want to have a basic understanding of their views. You don't want to have this person [who] seems from a complete different planet to you because you have no idea what they [believe]. [S10 is a fifth-year student studying non-exam RE]

It is clear, that students recognise RE's potential in developing knowledge, skills and understanding of different faith traditions. Students of this research do not endorse a separationist approach to RE, whereby students would be separated for study of their own faith traditions or secular worldviews. On the contrary, students repeatedly asserted the potential benefits to studying world religions in their already religiously diverse classroom. This finding corresponds with international research (Jackson, 2009; Arweck, 2017). Religion teachers did not express the same motivation and desire to utilise this

diversity in the teaching and learning of different religions and thus more fully attain RE's inter-religious objective.

The senior-cycle students of this research admitted to having a limited knowledge of other religious and non-religious worldviews and expressed disappointment and regret at this. A stated aim of both the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate syllabi for RE is "to appreciate the richness of religious traditions and to acknowledge the non-religious interpretation of life", along with contributing "to the spiritual and moral development of the student" (DES, 2000, p. 5). A value of RE is its potential to deepen students' knowledge of their own religious or secular worldview and of those of differing faith and secular worldviews. However, it could be suggested that while the world religions section remains optional on both the Junior and Leaving Certificate syllabi, there is a limitation to the knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes to be attained by students regarding other religious and non-religious traditions.

It must be noted that these curricula issues have been identified more broadly in research undertaken by the NCCA. in preparation for the redevelopment and redesign of RE for the junior cycle. While participating teachers in the NCCA research identified the importance of a course "flexible enough to facilitate schools which differ greatly in terms of school ethos and diversity of students' backgrounds", they asserted the necessity of an increased inter-religious objective as necessary and required in a pluralist society (NCCA, 2017, p. 19). Participants of the NCCA research recognised that more of a balance is needed between teaching about Christianity and teaching about other religions, along with non-religious interpretations of life and worldviews (NCCA, 2017). The students participating in the NCCA's research, akin to those of this research, agreed that a much greater emphasis on the inter-religious objective of RE is required in the new specification.

Regarding the reality of many students identifying as belonging to a secular worldview, criticism was levelled at the current junior-cycle RE syllabi as presupposing faith.

> Teacher from the NCCA study: The course presupposes faith! It should not be an assumption or prerequisite. The course should facilitate students who have faith and allow them to be nourished but equally allow those who don't belong to a religious tradition to engage. (NCCA, 2017, p.19)

Indeed, the dearth of opportunities to study non-religious interpretations of life and worldviews was discussed during the focus groups of this current research. Students spoke of how their worldview was summed up in a definition for learning for the examination. They wryly joked that their worldview was not even an optional section to be ignored, instead these definitions are referred to in the textbook as "challenges" to religious faith. The introduction of a new course for RE, with a greater emphasis on an inter-religious objective and respect for non-religious worldviews, can be interpreted as a positive change and a step towards a greater commitment to inclusive curricular development and practice.

A stated aim of all syllabi for RE at junior and senior cycle is "to appreciate the richness of religious traditions and to acknowledge the non-religious interpretation of life" (DES, 2000, p.5). This research has found that since "world religions" is an optional section of study, it is possible for a student of different religious faith, other than Christianity, not to be afforded the opportunity to study their religious faith as part of their RE at post-primary level. It could also be argued that there is a perceived bias inherent in the curricula that does not value non-religious interpretations of life. Indeed, the syllabi aim, stated above, refers to merely acknowledging these worldviews. The syllabi also refer to these non-religious interpretations of life in terms of presenting challenges to religious traditions. Considering the 2016 census findings that reported an increase of 73.6 % in those in Irish society identifying as having "no religion", the current curricula for RE does not adequately engage with these non-religious interpretations of life and hence is in danger of negating the aim of contributing "to the spiritual and moral development of the student" (DES, 2000, p. 5).

4.7   Theme 4: Challenges to Inclusive Intercultural Education within RE and School Policy

An important finding emerging from the data relates to the challenges to inclusive intercultural education within the school community under study. As considered when reviewing the relevant literature in Chapter 2, intercultural education is committed to "promot[ing] communication, integration and dialogue" between students of majority and minority ethnicity, culture and religious beliefs (UNESCO, 2018). This research involves investigating if senior-cycle RE, in this specific Catholic school, is contributing to authentic inclusion and is therefore enhancing the religious dimension of intercultural education. Contentions regarding practices outside the RE classroom were raised during the focus group interviews. As these issues related to inclusion of minority faith students and those with secular worldviews, they were therefore deemed worthy of further analysis and discussion. An issue that arose in every focus group discussion was the concern and sensitivity for what is perceived by students as exclusionary practice in the school towards minority faith groups and those with secular worldviews. The main examples given by students were the prohibition of wearing the hijab, the lack of opportunities to study different faith traditions and secular worldviews, and exclusionary religious practices during school.

4.7.1   Perceptions of Exclusion Relating to the Prohibition of the Hijab

In 2008, the Department of Education and Skills issued government recommendations on school uniform policy, in an attempt to address public concerns regarding the wearing of religious symbols in Irish schools. While the recommendations state that "no school uniform policy should act in such a way that it, in effect, excludes students of a particular religious background from seeking enrolment or continuing their enrolment in a school", support for "schools [to] decide their uniform policy at a local level, is reasonable, works and should be maintained" was upheld (DES, 2008). The wearing of

the hijab is not permitted in the school currently under study. This issue was raised by participants in every focus group discussion and was offered as the main example of how students of miniority faith backgrounds were inhibited from fully expressing their religious identity within the school community.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the greatest expression of frustation came from the partcipating Muslim students. Student 5 explained how the wearing of the hijab is integral to her Muslim identity and the denial of the wearing of it during school hours consequentially harbours feelings of exclusion.

> S5: I feel the hijab, it's like a symbol of Islam. It's such a great symbol and when you are … told don't wear that you feel like why shouldn't I wear [it]? Is it something bad? It's like shaming you to put it on. I feel like if we allow people to wear the headscarf like that we're opening up to accepting people. People will see that. [S5 is a sixth-year]

The correlation made between the prohibition of the hijab and identity as a Muslim student within this school community is significant and was made by all of the Muslim students in this research. Student 5 perceived that her value as a member of this school community would be lessened if her Muslim identity became more visible. Her perception of how the school views the wearing of the hijab as "shaming" is discordant with the consensus among teachers regarding what they understand as the school's inclusive character. The issue regarding the school's stance on prohibiting the wearing of the hijab was never alluded to by any of the participating teachers.

For Student 5, the inclusive and intercultural objective of the school is being compromised and the "opening up" to the wearing of the hijab would have a deep resonance for the minority faith groups within this school community. Student 5 equates the wearing of the hijab, hence the making of Muslim identity more visible within the school community, with moving towards acceptance of others and inevitably a more authentic intercultural education.

The following statements from other Muslim students highlight the significance of the hijab as not just a religious symbol but a religious obligation (Selim, 2014). It is described as something that is strongly linked to their identity as young Muslim women and the importance of modesty and humility in their religious tradition:

> S1: In Islam you're supposed to cover up in front of men you don't know. Come on, I don't know every single men [male] teacher in the school. You have no relationship with that man. He's just our teacher. To be covered in front of men [male] teachers it's a must. To be covered in front of men you don't know or you don't have relationship with, is a compulsory act in Islam, and you have to do that.

> S1: You get respect by wearing it.

> S2: When you're wearing a hijab you are going to like [me] just for who I am, for what I'm expressing to you, and not for my face or my body, or anything like that.

While considering what would happen if the school rule were to change and allow for the wearing of the hijab, Student 1 described what she predicted would be the benefits:

> S1: It will show that this school does accept other religions as well. Everybody's not Catholic in this school. There are other religions as well. [If I was to wear] a hijab, everybody's not going to judge you. People are nice in the school.

The understanding of making the religious diversity within this school community more visible as a means of enabling greater inclusivity was held by many of the participating students. There was a consensus among students from all religious traditions and those with secular worldviews that the prohibition on wearing the hijab was something they strongly disagreed with and the sight of their Muslim peers removing it in the morning before school and then putting it back on after school at the school gate was unsettling. Student 7 expressed some of the confusion felt by some of the students:

> S7: I understand that this is a Catholic school, the school rules must be obeyed, but I think where does it stop being school rules and where does it become oppression of [their Muslim] religion? [P7 is a sixth-year, Roman Catholic student]

The rhetorical question posed by this student from the dominant faith group highlights the awareness students have of the problematic nature of this particular school rule. Guidelines for Catholic Schools issued in 2010 by the Joint Managerial Body of Catholic schools in Ireland emphasised the importance of accommodation and dialogue between students, parents, teachers and school management in addressing issues relating to religious diversity. With regard to the wearing of the hijab, they considered it acceptable to be worn in Catholic schools but not the niqab, the full veil worn over the face (Mullally, 2010; Rougier, 2013). Indeed, other CEIST schools allow for the wearing of the hijab by Muslim students and have developed policies pertaining to cultural and religious diversity within their school communities. However, this research finds that students of the Muslim faith are not accommodated in the wearing of the hijab in the particular CEIST school under study and, while this is not a written rule of the uniform policy, it is an unwritten rule observed despite requests from some Muslim students. This research finds this restriction is impacting negatively on students' sense of personal identity and belonging, which therefore limits authentic intercultural education in the school.

Research on intercultural education in Irish schools finds that despite the "rhetoric of multicultural and intercultural education schools often adopt an assimilationary approach" (Faas, 2010). Other research also identifies a downplaying of difference to be more commonplace than a more explicit engagement with cultural and religious diversity (Smyth et al, 2009; Bryan, 2010; Rougier, 2013).

This approach seeks to minimise difference and emphasises similarities between all students in an attempt to successfully integrate "others" into the school community. It can also contribute to a reluctance on the part of some schools to develop formal policies relating to cultural and religious diversity (Smyth et al, 2009). The school under study does not have any formal policy relating to cultural and religious diversity. The approach taken by the school ultimately reduces the efficacy of an intercultural education if it negates an integral element of a student's religious identity. The students of this current research asserted that the wearing of the hijab would make the religious diversity more visible and would therefore be a good starting point for greater inclusion in the school community under study.

4.7.2   The Lack of Opportunities to Study Different Religions and Secular Worldviews

When asked the question "How would you describe your knowledge of other faith traditions and secular worldviews?", the majority of the students participating in this research admitted to knowing very little or, as one student put it, "next to nothing". This coheres with the fact only three of the 29 participating students claimed to have studied Section C: 'Foundations of the major world religions' as part of their JCRE. As this was discussed earlier in this chapter, this section concentrates on how this further affects the intercultural endeavour of the school under study. The implications of such a low knowledge base regarding other faith traditions and secular worldviews would seem to weaken not only the inter-religious objective of RE but also the provision of an intercultural education more broadly.

As previously discussed, all students in each of the different focus groups expressed a strong desire to become more knowledgeable about the different religions and secular worldviews existing in the school community and the wider society. Student 24 and Student 7 identified what they saw as the necessity of having knowledge of different religions in a growing pluralist society. They considered that the xenophobia present in the world today can be partly explained as ignorance due to religious illiteracy:

> S7: I think in today's world, a lot of fear of other religions comes from a place of ignorance. People don't understand or haven't learned about where other people come from and so they're afraid of what they don't know. That creates a lot of fear in our world. [S7 is a sixth-year student who identifies as Roman Catholic]

The innate curiosity concerning what the "other" humans have as relational beings is expressed by Student 9:

> S9: I was just thinking there, I'd love to ask people questions about their religion from a knowledge point of view. I'd be so afraid if I asked someone in general a question like, "Why do you wear a headscarf? What's the belief behind that?" Just to ask, as a general question. I'd be so afraid of offending them because ... Maybe

they would take offence, it's all personal. [P9 is a fifth-year student who identifies as Roman Catholic]

Students 9's response is interesting, as it describes the curiosity and attraction we have as human beings around that which is different from ourselves. However, it expresses a trepidation relating to the sensitive issue of religious diversity. The tentativeness this student feels regarding interaction with her peers of different religious traditions is exacerbated by her lack of knowledge of different religions. She refers to the hesitancy she has asking just "general question(s)" in case of causing "offence". This student's statement is reflective of a misinformed reasoning operating on a broader level within the school community. Failure to engage explicitly with the religious diversity present within the school community is perhaps indicative of a lack of confidence regarding how best to address, engage and include this diversity. As expressed by Student 9, there may be a fear of causing offence due to a lack of adequate knowledge concerning religious diversity, which sees the school under study place a greater emphasis on sameness rather than difference.

The lack of knowledge of different religions and non-religious traditions was also evident among teachers participating in this research. All of the particpating teachers agreed that the school population is religious diverse. However, when asked "How religiously diverse do you think the school population is currently?", teachers did not tend to discuss this with specific reference to the religious diversity present in their own classes. Instead, they spoke in general terms referring to a growing religious diversity among the student body.

> T 5: Oh, I would say we were quite religiously diverse. A lot of the new Irish, [if] we [can] call them that, would have been members of evangelical churches, which are quite popular within a certain sector within society. And then, of course, then there's a growing Muslim community, especially from the girls ... let's say the girls who come from xxxx [a direct provision centre for asylum seekers],[mainly] Syria, that we would have here as well.

> T 4: I think it is quite religiously diverse. I think almost all monotheistic, and quite a lot of them are linked back to the Abrahamic faiths. I think there a[re] quite a few different religious beliefs, but I think there is probably more so than students who are Muslim there's a lot more students who are atheist, or have the perception that, "Well, I don't believe in God".

> T3: I wouldn't have said it was particularly getting any more diverse, while it is certainly very diverse.

An anxiety regarding the lack of knowledge concerning the extent of the diversity of belief among the students she teaches was expressed by Teacher 1 as the main challenge this diversity presents.

> T1: I suppose maybe, that it made me think that I should be more aware, about more diverse it is. It would be very aware of the diversity within Christianity. I think that crops up in most of the classes I teach. I'd be aware that the girls come

from different Christian backgrounds. I would be aware, I don't know how big, but I think we have a big Muslim community within the school, and non-religious. At the minute, I'm not aware of other religions. Maybe that's my fault.

Teacher 1's admission that she was not as aware as she could be of the religious diversity present in her classes reflects the downplaying of difference approach the school has taken to the religious diversity of its student population. Promoting sameness-over-difference denies the reality of the differences present and denies opportunities for authentic engagement in an intercultural education. However, it should also be noted that the argument from expediency regarding the religious dimension of intercultural education is not enough for gaining an understanding of faith as a response to religious impulse. To lose sight of this would never suffice and result in an instrumentalisation of RE. Cullen identifies RE as existing because religious faith exists: it will never be enough to deliver a version of RE, devoid of proper engagement with the complexity of different faith perspectives (Cullen, 2013). While a more comprehensive and inclusive RE can certainly seek to address issues relating to religious diversity, the responsibility of a whole-school approach to the promotion of awareness regarding different religious and non-religious worldviews is imperative.

In their responses to the question "What are the challenges presented by issues of diversity of belief and non-belief to the teaching of religious education at senior cycle?", teachers spoke positively of the diversity of belief present in the school community. In what may be described as expected answers, they tended to interpret the "challenges" mentioned in the question as problems; thus, they were quick to refute any problems posed by this diversity. Despite the aforementioned vagueness regarding religious diversity, teachers spoke of how it is not "an issue at all", but perhaps therein lies the problem. This research finds that there is inadequate attention and engagement given to the religious and non-religious diversity present within the school community.

However, it is important to note that some teachers spoke of efforts to include the perspective of religious minority students within their classes. Teacher 3, who is the most recently qualified teacher of the sample, spoke of the importance of allowing students of minority faiths to share their faith experiences with the class. Despite Teacher 3's positive evaluation of this practice, the handing over to Muslim students to become representatives of their religion has been previously discussed in this chapter as problematic. It also highlights the challenges of teaching about different world religions and reveals an insecurity relating to religious diversity that is also evident from other findings in this research.

> T3: I got a third-year in, a Muslim girl, to talk about Hajj to my second years last year, and they love just listening to someone from a different [religion]. And I think the girls who have different faith, again, I'm thinking about the Muslim girls ... They're more than happy to learn, and they're more than happy to give their own examples and the other girls are more than happy to listen to their examples.

In this quote, Teacher 3 recounts what they perceive as a positive and effective learning experience for their students. However, because of the collective decision outlined in the Religion Department Plan to omit for study the section with the greatest inter-religious foci, an individualised approach to the religious dimension of an intercultural education is not enough. When one considers the limited study of world religions and students' perceptions of how their religious and non-religious identities are misrecognised and often overlooked, it can be surmised that engagement with religious and non-religious diversity in the school under study is not adequately providing for the religious dimension to an intercultural education.

Policy documents in Ireland tend adopt the term "intercultural education", highlighting the important role schools can play in the integration of ethnic minorities. In the *Adapting to diversity* study, Smyth et al. explored the extent to which the desired "intercultural education" approach is influenced by the way in which RE is provided in Irish schools and the broader school ethos, that is the day-to-day practices and interactions within the school (2009). This research identifies that while the NCCA's *Intercultural guidelines* (2006) for post-primary schools recognise religious diversity as a feature of Irish society, they do not address how RE should be provided in this context

Indeed, curriculum policy's approach to intercultural education has been heavily criticised and can be described as one of "'accommodation'" rather than genuine inclusion" (Williams and McDonald, 2014, p.250). Bryan goes further, identifying intercultural education, as practiced in Ireland, as a form of "symbolic violence" (2010, p.252). Critiquing the discourse used in social, political and educational policy, which strongly emphasises how minorities ought to be welcomed and embraced into Irish society, Bryan insists that this in itself is asserting the privilege position of a "superior" extending a welcome to the "Other" (2010, p. 254). She calls for a reconfiguration of the curriculum, redesigned and informed from the position of those most marginalised (Bryan, 2008). Williams and McDonald (2014) pointedly surmise how the potential of authentic intercultural education will only be realised when major changes are made to educational policy and the current approach of "add-diversity-and-stir" (Bryan 2009) is abandoned,

> As long as the needs of the curriculum take precedence over the needs of student,
> then the cycle of exclusion and marginalization will be repeated (Williams and
> McDonald, 2014, p.250).

While the school under study does not employ a separationist approach to RE, Student 5 spoke of how she experienced separation from full-class learning because of her religious identity:

> S5: She [the teacher] knew I was Muslim, and she was like, "For the essay
> questions", she said, "Since you're a Muslim you can do your essay on Islam. I'll
> do Christianity with the girls." I felt like because I was on my own in the class
> doing one thing and then the other class were doing [something else]. I felt
> excluded.

The focus group discussion continued with the student's recognition of how the teacher's intention was not to exclude her from the rest of the class but rather, it was an attempt to allow her to include her own faith tradition in her essay answer. The negative effect this well-meaning attempt at inclusion had on this student indicates the need for a whole-Religion departmental approach to an explicit engagement with religious diversity in the school under study. Devine's study (2005) involving primary school children of minority faith traditions found that schools in which pupils were withdrawn from the class during RE or had to remain in class but not participate in the RE lesson highlighted pupil difference in negative terms. Student 5's experience describes how her "difference" was also highlighted in negative terms. This incident also underlines the missed opportunity for other students in the class to learn about Islam. A separationist approach is not compatible with an intercultural education approach. The feelings of exclusion as experienced by students of minority faith and secular worldviews described throughout this study reveal obstacles to integration that undermine this school's intercultural endeavour and do not advocate authentic inclusion.

4.7.3   Conflict of Perceptions Regarding the Role of Religious Practices

The admissions policy of the school under study states that the "school policy clearly defines the Catholic ethos of the school and expects all students to attend religious education classes, retreats and liturgies in XXXX" (Policy on Admissions). It can be argued that such a statement is unconstitutional and impinges on the human rights of students who do not wish to participate in religious practices. For some parents who are not Catholic, the Catholic ethos of schools remains favourable and even preferable, when considered in terms of its emphasis on commitment to academic achievements. For some parents who may belong to different religious traditions, the marriage of faith and education as embodied in the denominational model of education is still desirable, despite the school's religious identity being different from their own. Tensions can arise, however, when some of these students of minority religious and non-religious beliefs do not wish to attend religious practices that are considered as an integral part of their Catholic education.

This research finds that there exists a conflict of perceptions regarding the religious practices celebrated throughout the school year. While participating Religion teachers of this research highlighted the importance of full participation of students in both formal and informal religious practices, some students challenged this requirement. Previous research involving minority belief parents whose children attended Catholic schools found the emphasis on sacramental preparation and celebration problematic (Lodge and Lynch, 1999). While the current research does not include the parent voice, it finds a parallel can be drawn between participants of a secular worldviews and those

of minority faith regarding feelings of exclusion relating to religious practices carried out in the school under study. This research finds that where students acquiesce to these Catholic norms, they experience a crisis of conscience that undermines their sense of authentic self, which complicates identity development. Stapleton (2018) refers to belief-confirming and belie- threatening experiences in an adolescent's life, which either aid or hamper moral and spiritual development. The expectation that the school under study places on all students to participate in Catholic religious practices compromises the moral and spiritual development of some students who belong to minority religious and non-religious worldviews.

Formal Religious Practices

As a Roman Catholic school, the school under study celebrates a number of formal religious practices throughout the school year. These include a November Remembrance Mass, the Christmas Carol Service, weekly Lenten Masses, the Transition Year Graduation Mass, and the Sixth-year and Leaving Certificate Applied Graduation Masses. These religious practices are perceived by Religion teachers to be significant in promoting the Roman Catholic ethos of the school. Teacher 3 described what he considered to be the significance of these school events:

> T3: A challenge is just time, I suppose. But if it's a challenge you don't accept, the whole ethos of the school drifts, and it goes ... You lose the whole identity of a Catholic school if you don't do it. They're so important. [The most important thing is] getting as many people involved as possible. Every time we sit down, try and plan ... Whether it's Mass, we always try to split up prayers of faithful, and then [students to] bring up symbols or gifts or the bread and wine .

Teacher 2 described the importance for all students, regardless of their religious or non-religious identity, to show respect and reverence during religious practices. From the statement the expectation for all students to participate is evident.

> T2: If we have a Mass … in the [school] church or the school gym, you like to see they have a certain manner of decorum and respect.

Efforts to include all students and promote participation in these practices were perceived to be inappropriate by some students of minority faiths and those with secular worldviews. The following statement made by Student 1 during the focus group interview with minority faith students highlighted the "uncomfortable" predicament she found herself in when it was her class's turn to organise a Lenten Mass during second year:

> S1: We had this Mass thing. Then I had to be a part of that and I had to do all the rituals that people do. It was really uncomfortable for me. [S1 is a fifth-year student who identifies as Muslim]

Students with secular worldviews also referred to the difficulty they encountered regarding their required attendance at liturgical celebrations. Moreover, Student 18 spoke of the expectations she perceived the teachers to have of students to receive Holy Communion at these celebrations:

> S18: And there should even be an option, like, not to go to the religious practices, or if you do have to go to them, then, like, you know, you … [shouldn't be] expected to … go up for Communion or whatever else. [S18 is a fifth-year student who identifies as having a secular worldview]

From a human rights' perspective, these students' right to freedom from religion is being compromised if they are obliged to attend and participate in Catholic liturgies (ECHR, 2010). While these students acquiesce to Catholic practices within the school under study, their participation can be interpreted as a conformity based on obedience rather than voluntary participation. Once again, we see perceptions between teachers and students collide with adverse effects for students of minority faiths and those with secular worldviews. The misrecognition these students experience regarding their religious identities is detrimental to their self-understanding during these formative years of adolescence. The impact of these negative experiences can have on an individual's identity development has already been discussed in this chapter.

Informal Religious Practices

Participating students of this research also discussed the informal religious practices of this Catholic school. The prayer said at weekly school assemblies was cited by students from minority faith traditions and those with secular worldviews as a religious practice with which they have a difficulty. The students described what they perceived at times as an expectation to participate and at other times active coercion.

> S3: I remember once, I think it was the Principal, I'm not going to say her name but maybe there [were] some girls who really they were just messing, but we were in the assembly hall. It was during assembly. Afterwards she gave out to all of us, because we weren't doing the prayer, but I feel really bad to do the sign of the cross and do the prayer. It's not my faith. [S3 is a fifth-year student who identifies as Hindu]

> S17: The whole thing at assembly annoys me, the way the Principal will say, why wasn't everyone blessing themselves? Like, there's Muslim girls in our school as well. There's other religions that, it's against their religion, obviously, to practise different religions. [S17 is a fifth-year student who identifies as having a secular worldview]

> S22: I think they're [the Principal and teachers present] more concentrated on those not saying the prayer, rather than who is saying it. I don't feel like it's a malicious thing or anything … but it's kind of like, "Why are you not saying the prayer? [S22 is a sixth-year student who identifies as having a secular worldview]

The above statements describe the frustration students feel when they are expected to participate in Catholic practices. Some students, however, recognise that they must be "mindful" that they had chosen to attend a Roman Catholic school and so must accept the expectation to participate.

> S19: Maybe don't go for Communion if you're not believing in it, or say your prayer at Mass, or whatever. I personally wouldn't actively put myself against it. Because I am in a Catholic school, like, no one is forcing me to come to a Catholic school. I think it's really important to be mindful of that. [S19 is a fifth-year student who identifies as having a secular worldview]

> S25: I understand that when I signed up for Catholic school I was going to have to attend Catholic services. I was fully aware of this. I knew what was coming and I didn't really mind. I was somewhat, I was unsure, I was agnostic at the time. And obviously I progressed in my non-religious sense.

However, although Student 25 agreed that Catholic students have a right to practise their religion in their Catholic school, she did question the lack of provision for other students to opt out.

> S25: I just remember thinking, "I'm trying to respect you and your faith by sitting there quietly and not doing anything. So why can't you respect me and mine by letting me not partake? [S25 is a sixth-year student who identifies as humanist]

It is important to note that Student 22, an agnostic sixth-year student who had only joined the school in fifth year, felt that the school under study was less pedantic when it came to participating in religious practices, compared with the previous Catholic school she attended. While this research is a single case study and only concerned with the school under study, this anecdote reflects research on other Catholic schools that have been perceived to be coercing students of different religious and non-religious beliefs to participate in religious celebrations and practices during the school day (Stapleton, 2018).

> P22: I don't feel there's this pressure on you to be partaking fully in the Catholic ethos of the school.

> Interviewer: And you're saying this in comparison to the other school?

> P22: Yes. [In the other school] you have to say prayers before every class and before and after every meal. It was really staunch Catholic. If you weren't saying the prayer, they [school management] would take real offence to it and they would basically force you to say it and you had to go to Mass. It wasn't voluntary or anything like that. It was all force.

While Student 22 did not elaborate on whether this was the reason she left the previous school to attend the current school under study, the above quote suggests that she was ill at ease with the compulsory participation required. Other students spoke of how they would rather not be encouraged

to say a prayer, as they felt it to be "disrespectful" to the students and teachers of the Catholic faith present.

> S21: It feels disrespectful to me, because I don't believe in this, I don't have this faith. It feels like a farce. [S21 is a fifth-year student who identifies as agonistic]

> S24: For me it's like, I did for a while just kind of put my hands together and mumble a bit. But then like, in my head I'm like so conscious of being disrespectful to other religions. I feel like if I'm doing that, because I'm a bit of a joker, I'm like, I'm just making fun of it and I don't mean to, so I just don't [pray]. [S24 is a sixth-year student who identifies as atheist]

> S22: I don't feel like disrespected that they're making me say it. But I feel like … I'm disrespecting the religion [and] that I'm not being true to myself. [S22 is a sixth-year student who identifies as having a secular worldview]

The above statements from students participating in this research highlights the importance authenticity has for them. They are aware of times when they are not being "true to themselves", when they have acquiesced to the norms of their Catholic school. Participation in these religious practices challenge the identity development of non-Catholic students, rather than supporting it. The implications this has during the formative adolescent stage can be harmful to an individual's developing sense of self.

Students belonging to different Christian denominations raised the issue of saying the Hail Mary as the school assembly prayer. They suggested that the practice of saying the Our Father, the prayer common to all Christian denominations, would be more inclusive of their faith. Student 29 spoke of what she feels is a lack of consideration of the students of different faith and secular worldviews within the school community.

> S29: Even just to acknowledge the fact that everyone's not of the same religion. Even at like assembly or non-exam religion, just so it's acknowledged. At the moment, I don't think it's even acknowledged that we're not [part of] the same religion. [P29 is fifth-year student who identifies as Baptist]

The students of this research perceived a lack of acknowledgement regarding the religious diversity and secular worldviews in the school community being studied here as hampering a greater engagement with intercultural education. The issue of there being a lack of visibility and openness regarding the diversity of faiths and different worldviews that exist was raised here again. The undervaluing of religious diversity within schools undermines and challenges intercultural education (Darmody et al., 2011). Research carried out by Parker-Jenkins and Masterson (2013) reports that post-primary schools are struggling to adequately acknowledge faith traditions and worldviews that are not Catholic. A frustration arising from what is perceived to be a lack of recognition of this diversity was evident in many of the discussions: students do not believe those of different faiths are

valued enough within this community. Student 5 voiced her feelings of exclusion in the poignant statement below:.

> S5: I feel like you're excluded if you're not a Christian in this school. [S5 is a sixth-year student who identifies as Muslim]

This experience of exclusion is counter to the mission of the Roman Catholic school under study in its attempt to "generate a community in the school that is permeated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and Love" (Vatican Council II, 1965). This research finds that there are significant challenges to an authentically inclusive intercultural education within this school community.

Teacher 5, in response to the question on challenges presented by issues of religious diversity, spoke of the responsibility of the school's trusteeship to adequately provide and support the school under study in responding more effectively to the religious and non-religious diversity. The reference to community schools being better equipped to engage with diversity signals the changing time for voluntary schools that are no longer homogenous in terms of the students' faith profile. Teacher 5 went on to question whether the traditional approaches to faith and spiritual development employed by this voluntary school were sufficient:

> T5: The challenge there is for organisations like CEIST to support it [religious education catering for religious and non-religious diversity], support it in the appointment of full-time chaplains, you know what I mean? If you go to a community school they may have a chaplain.
>
> Engagement with plurality, engagement with how students could express themselves, at their stage of lives, like we do it [faith and spiritual development] traditionally through Mass. But maybe we should be doing it other ways. We do retreats, but maybe there are other ways to express it that are more conducive to what young people like, or a little bit more diverse.

The intended ethos of the school under study offers an inclusive vision of an education extended to those on the margins and in the minority. However, the lived experience of this school's ethos, as experienced by the students with minority religious and non-religious identities, speaks of a very different reality. For these students the school's lack of recognition of their religious and non-religious differences was tantamount to exclusion.

4.8   A summary of the findings

The research findings of this study offer new insight into how senior-cycle students with minority religious and secular worldviews experience RE within a Catholic school. While previous studies conducted in the Irish context involved the perspectives of minority students (Devine, 2005, Darmody, Tyrell and Song, 2011, Stapleton, 2018), this study is distinct in its focus on minority

students' experience of RE in a Catholic school delivering the State RE syllabus. Moreover, a significant aspect of this research is the inclusion of the majority voice, as represented by the Catholic teachers and students, which provided the study with an original perspective on how Catholic norms can also be interpreted as hegemonic by Catholic students. This study also provides a new awareness on the role of the Religion teacher within a religiously diverse Catholic school, navigating between State and Church expectations.

- This chapter has presented and reflected on the research findings, through bringing the voices of this research into dialogue with the relevant literature. Throughout this discussion, tension has been omnipresent regarding the differing expectations of the State, student, teacher and school patron relating to what the purpose, nature and scope of RE ought to be. This tension manifested itself explicitly in this research in the dichotomous and conflicting perceptions held by students and teachers regarding the role of RE within the specific school under study. While Religion teachers believe their role involves fulfilling their obligations to the patron's expectation of faith development, their students see the value of RE predominantly in inter-religious terms.

- This research has also found that school policy and practice, written and unwritten, within the school under study has hampered the effectiveness and success of intercultural endeavours. The decision taken by the Religion Department 18 years ago to omit world religions for study has had a negative impact on the experiences of students of minority faiths. These students consider the RE they have received to date as exclusionary and partial. The decision taken by the Religion Department is contrary to European policy on the teaching of Religion, which is informed by international research involving students of majority and minority faiths and those with secular worldviews. This research shows the strong appetite and advocacy students have for inter-religious knowledge and how they value RE's role in bringing them to a deeper understanding of the "other".

- A surprising finding of the research is how far-reaching the consequences of the Religion Department's decision have been. This research suggests that the repercussions of this decision can also be seen on a larger scale, in the study of non-exam RE at senior cycle, where there is no exam incentive to engage students. The low level of student motivation and engagement experienced by teachers can be interpreted as a result of students, by the time they reach senior cycle, becoming disaffected and disengaged with an RE that does not relate to their personal religious or non-religious experience of the world. This research finds that the omission of an explicit inter-religious focus results in a haphazard approach to catering for religious diversity, which succeeds only in diluting the RE of all students, indiscriminate of religious or non-religious identities. References to a lack of teacher motivation and

engagement with the non-exam RE has also raised issues of teacher agency. One possible interpretation of this could be that while teachers try to mitigate the expectations of the NCCA, Catholic patrons and the students, they become depleted of their autonomy.

- The research also finds that a markedly different attitude to the study of RE exists among the cohort studying exam RE, which indicates a more successful engagement with the subject. A congruence between teachers and students on the value of LCRE is evident. Students identified the syllabus' inter-religious approach to the study of different religious and non-religious traditions as a particular strength of the subject.

- Another major finding of this research is how intercultural education is being challenged in the school under study, owing to the dichotomy between the intended ethos of the school and the lived or operative ethos, as experienced by students of minority religious and secular worldviews. There is obvious misrecognition of different religious and non-religious identities within the school community which, as referred to in the review of the literature in Chapter 2, is impacting negatively on the development of students' "authentic selfhood" (Kitching, 2017, p.2). The unwritten school policy of prohibiting the wearing of the hijab was raised in each focus group by students of all different religious and non-religious positions and was described as an example of how minority faith students are being excluded. Students referred to the lack of visibility regarding the religious diversity present in the school community and how the wearing of the hijab is integral to Muslim religious identity. This research finds that the decision made by school management to prohibit the wearing of the hijab is seriously impinging on the positive identity development of Muslim students within the school community.

- The research also finds that the religious dimension of an intercultural education is being undermined due to the lack of knowledge and awareness regarding the religious and non-religious diversity of belief that exist in the school community. A further consequence of omitting world religions for study, and the prohibition on the wearing of the hijab, is the limited visibility of the religious diversity present in the school community. This has a negative impact and indicates a reluctance for robust engagement with religious and non-religious differences in this school community. The approach currently employed, which emphasises sameness-over-difference, reveals an unease regarding the school's Catholic identity and how it should embrace the religious diversity of its student population. The downplaying of difference diminishes students' sense of belonging in the school community and ultimately reduces the broad and inclusive Christian vision.

- This research finds that the expected participation in formal and informal religious practices in the school under study impacts upon minority students to varying degrees. A description of

the opinions expressed regarding religious practice in the school ranges from frustration to antipathy. The unconditional expectation of participation in religious practices is interpreted by some as tolerable, given the religious identity of the school, and by others as exasperating.

The concluding chapter to this thesis outlines the implications and recommendations that emerge from this research study.

Chapter 5   Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1   Introduction

This study emerged from the research question investigating the capacity of RE, within a denominational setting, to contribute to authentic inclusion of minority religious and secular worldviews. In order to address this question, it employed a case study of RE at senior cycle in a Catholic post-primary school and directly engaged with those involved, namely the Religion teachers and senior-cycle students. The case study anchoring the research explored how both teachers and students experience RE in this Catholic school. However, it is important to be cognisant of the fact that this research does not capture the whole spectrum of RE in the school under study. This research specifically investigated senior-cycle RE, with particular attention given to the experiences of participants with minority religions and secular worldviews and so, offers a snapshot of practice at this level. Nonetheless, the research findings have shown how the school's failure to adequately cater for the religious diversity present in its student population has challenged authentic inclusion in this context.

This chapter begins with a consideration of the relevance of this research for current educational research within both national and international contexts. The limitations of the study are then outlined in section 5.3. Following this, the chapter draws out the implications for policy and practice in light of the research findings and makes recommendations for this at both the micro and macro level. Chapter 5 then concludes with implications for further research.

5.2   Relevance of the research

The relevance of this research lies in bringing the voices of both Religion teachers and students to the fore in the debate on what the purpose, nature and scope of RE ought to be. In its analysis of the attitudes and experiences of both teachers and students, the research indicates the fact that conflicting perceptions and expectations exist between the State, students, school patrons and teachers, and how this impacts on students with minority religious and secular worldviews. As identified by Smyth et al., in the study *Adapting to diversity: Irish schools and newcomer students* (2009), there is a dearth of research on the provision of RE at secondary-school level, therefore this current research speaks to this space.

This research is timely, owing to the development and introduction of the new specification for RE (2018) as part of the junior-cycle reform and the current review taking place of senior cycle. The greater emphasis on the inter-religious objective of RE, as proposed in the draft specification for the Junior Certificate, signals a shift of focus, which this research commends. The findings of this study

cohere with the findings of the research undertaken by the NCCA in revealing the eagerness and expectation that exists among students for a deeper study of different religious and non-religious worldviews. These findings are particularly apposite to a review of RE at senior cycle and could prove useful to both the State and church RE objectives.

The relevance of this research can also be seen within the broader international context. As referred to earlier in this research in section 2.9 the review of RE in state schools in England and Wales has resulted in Clarke and Woodhouse advocating a national plan for RE, whereby the subject would include ethical and moral education and become compulsory in all state-run schools. The recommendations of that review are made as a response to the multiculturalism of the societies of England and Wales. The rationale for emphasising the importance of reconsidering pedagogical approaches as vital, is summed up in the assertion that "the way in which religion is taught in a school is central to the promotion of inclusivity and community cohesion" (Clarke and Woodhouse, 2018, p. 22). While the current research does not seek to undermine a denominational education, as is the right of Catholic students who wish to avail of it, it does act as a cautionary tale to stakeholders in education who might be in danger of unwittingly overlooking the religious diversity within school communities. Prior to commencing the research, it had been an expectation of the researcher to have a greater focus on different pedagogical approaches to RE. However, the significant issue of misrecognition of the religious diversity and the promotion of a sameness-over-difference approach, emerged as a much stronger aspect of the case under study than expected.

The sensitivity relating to some of the disclosures made by participants of this research further highlights the pertinence of a deeper engagement with issues pertaining to religious diversity. The discussion concerning the prohibition on the wearing of the hijab in the school under study is an example of an uncomfortable finding of this research. The explanation used by Muslim students as to why they feel women are more deserving of respect from men when wearing the hijab could be interpreted as antagonistic to Western liberal values of equality between the sexes. This seems counter-cultural to educational values of critical thinking, upholding rather than challenging the stereotype of the male gaze as being predominantly concerned with the subjugation of women. These issues are resonant in contemporary Irish society and underscore the importance of this research in highlighting the dangers of neglecting complex issues arising from religious diversity within schools.

5.3   Limitations of the Research

The limitations of this research are clearly defined in the research sample and size of the case under study. The researcher chose to conduct a single case study over multiple case studies, in order to give a thick description of RE as experienced by teachers and students within the particular school community of which she is a member. This necessarily limited the scope of the research. However, it

is important to note that the position of the researcher as "insider researcher" is not considered a limitation. On the contrary, the rich data that emerged from the focus group conversations and semi-structured interviews was assisted by her knowledge of and familiarity with the school setting.

The research sample comprised teachers and students with experience of teaching and learning senior-cycle RE. Among the teacher sample, it was important to include teachers who had experience of teaching both LCRE and non-exam RE, which further reduced the sample size. However, the fact that the participating teachers had experience of teaching both the exam and non-exam syllabi made the comparative element of the analysis between both more cogent and compelling.

Another limitation of this research is the lack of parent voice, which would have offered another perspective on expectations pertaining to the purpose, nature and scope of RE. The inclusion of the parental voice in research of RE is certainly a recommendation for future research.

Despite these limitations, the research provides valuable insights that may have implications for both policy and practice. The following section 5.4 outlines recommendations at both the micro and macro level, starting with the specific school under study and proceeding to educational policy development and curriculum development and design at the national level.

5.4 Implications for Practice within the School under Study

The quotation included in the title of this thesis is both poignant and indicative of the problematic approach to diversity within the school under study. "I think it's very difficult to be different", was articulated by a sixth-year Muslim student describing her experience of school life as a student of minority faith. This statement reflects the shared experience of exclusion expressed by the students with minority religious and secular identities within this study. The sincerity and strength of feeling conveyed by students when speaking of occasions on which they endured experiences of discrimination because of their different religious identities is a significant aspect of this research. For some, it was the first time they formally communicated and recounted these negative experiences, many of which occurred at primary school, as referred to in 4.2 of this thesis. It is notable that these students felt comfortable within the space provided by the focus group interviews to disclose such personal and sensitive experiences. This can be interpreted as reflecting the positive approach taken by the school in encouraging and supporting this research.

Notwithstanding this, the research has found that RE is not fulfilling its potential to contribute to authentic inclusion of students with minority religious and secular worldviews. The reasons for this have already been discussed in Chapter 4 and can be briefly summarised in four major themes:

1. The influence of religious and non-religious identity on students' experience of a Catholic school and their subsequent experience of RE

2. The different understandings of the role of RE in the school community

3. Limitations of the curricula

4. Challenges to inclusive intercultural education within RE and school policy.

The implications these findings are significant for the school under study, at a time of change regarding the increasing religious diversity of its student population and also the pressure to retain its numbers, with the reality of reduced school enrolments. While there may be many contributing factors to a decrease in enrolments, the opening of an Educate Together post-primary school close to the school may be having an impact. The multidenominational and equality based education such a school provides could prove an attractive choice over the school under study's current inflexibility regarding religious dress and compulsory participation in religious practices for prospective students who are not Catholic.

As researcher and member of this school community, I am conscious of the dual responsibility I have. In my role as researcher, I have collected and analysed the data and presented the findings, therefore I must now outline the implications and recommendations I consider to be most effective in moving the school towards authentic inclusion of religious diversity. However, as a Religion teacher within this school community, I recognise that the approach taken by our Religion Department to religious diversity while well-intentioned, may be limited and limiting. Therefore, I make these recommendations not from a position of superiority to my colleagues, but as one who shares the frustration of this failing. These recommendations are made in the hope of arriving at a *shared* understanding of what the purpose, nature and scope of our subject should be.

All of these recommendations, if they are to be effective, can only be applied through a collaborative approach involving the school's trustees, members of the school management, members of the Presentation Sisters still involved in the life of the school, members of the teaching staff, parents, and students.

5.4.1   Recommendations for a Whole-school Approach

This research proposes that a whole-school approach is taken to the significant issue of misrecognition of religious diversity within the school community. The current approach of emphasising a sameness-over-difference approach is inadequate in catering for issues relating to religious diversity. A significant concept of this research is the role of conversation in promoting an openness to religious diversity based on the argument of our shared humanity (Cullen, 2006). An important objective of this study, then, is to begin the conversation of how religious and non-religious diversity can be engaged with and celebrated in the school under study. Moreover, this would assist in promoting a more dialogical culture of learning within the school.

It is suggested that this whole-school approach involves establishing a core working group. Ideally, this group would take a collaborative approach and comprised a representative from CEIST, representatives from the school's board of management, members of the school management team, members of the religious congregation still active in the life of the school, members of the teaching staff, a representative from the school's ancillary staff, and members of the parent and student body. This working group would be committed to the re-evaluation of the school's Catholic identity, as informed by the inclusive vision of the founder of the religious congregation. As referred to earlier in section 1.3.2, the school's mission statement refers to its commitment to providing education to the marginalised. This research recommends that the understanding of those on the margins be broadened to include those of minority religious and secular worldviews within the school community.

The collaborative nature of the working group is key to the revitalisation of the school's Catholic identity, which will impact upon the intended and operative ethos of the school. This research has shown that the profile of religious diversity within the school needs to be raised and become more visible. Student participants spoke of how the believed that an increased visibility of religious diversity would enhance the identity development of every student, indiscriminate of their religious or non-religious identities.

Moreover, this finding resounds in the literature as outlined in Chapter 2, where Lane's work on the Catholic Church's commitment to inter-religious dialogue was reviewed, along with key conciliar church documents. The contemporary understanding of a Christian religious identity as intrinsically involving dialogue with the religious and non-religious "other" is significant in any rumination on this school's Catholic identity. As outlined previously in the conceptual framework of this study, detailed in section 3.2 of this thesis, it is paramount that the identity of this school is defined in relation to all of its members, in all their religious and non-religious diversity. To borrow from the mission statement of the World Parliament on Religions, a harmony rather than a unity among religious and non-religious identities should be the aspiration as, "the problem with seeking unity among religions is the risk of loss of the unique and precious character of each individual religious and spiritual tradition" (World Parliament on Religions, 2018). Therefore, a renewed consideration of the school's Catholic identity will see a greater commitment to inter-religious endeavours, which will further enhance the religious dimension of the intercultural education within the school.

It is suggested that the work of this core group would involve a reconfiguration of the school's faith development plan. In addition, a reconsideration of the written and unwritten rules that influence the operative ethos of the school is needed. At present, the lived experience of the school for students of minority religious and secular worldviews is not fulfilling the school's mission to provide education, in its broadest sense, to those on the margins. Due to the strength of feeling around the prohibition

regarding the wearing of the hijab among all students from every focus group, this research strongly recommends that this rule be reviewed.

The work of this core group could also include an appraisal of the religious diversity present within the school community and a implement measures to enhance the religious dimension of intercultural education. A school policy for intercultural education could be produced in light of this work. The lack of confidence in embracing the religious diversity of the school population, as revealed in the research findings, has highlighted the need for continuing professional development in the area of inclusive intercultural education.

5.4.2   Recommendations for the School's Religion Department

An important finding of this research is the positive appraisal of students studying LCRE for the subject. The value of this subject was expressed by students and teachers in terms of its capacity to promote critical thinking and enquiry, along with its greater emphasis on inter-religious content. A recommendation of this study for the Religion Department would be to adopt and adapt, where necessary, the approach taken to teaching and learning of LCRE for JCRE and non-exam RE at senior cycle. This research suggests a revision of the departmental plan, stipulating the omission of Section C: 'Foundations of religion – major world religions' for study. The research also recommends continuing professional development in the area of teaching world religions as part of in-service education for Religion teachers, to assist with the promotion of RE's inter-religious objective.

As mentioned in section 5.4.1, it is hoped that the reconsideration of the school's Catholic identity will awaken a spirit of enquiry regarding the religious and non-religious "other" within it. Once harnessed, this spirit of enquiry, which is rooted in the school's educational and religious principles, will have the potential to work towards authentic inclusion, based on the argument of the school's shared humanity. Moreover, this would seek to fulfil the syllabi aim of contributing to the moral and spiritual development of every student, along with developing the Catholic faith of students with this renewed sense of the Catholic faith as one of universal inclusion. This would also work to alleviate some of the pressures teachers feel regarding the duality of their role in this school community.

Lane identifies a further insight from *Nostra aetate* and its subsequent reception, as follows:

> an awareness that encounter with other religious traditions has the capacity to enrich the particularity of one's own Christian faith and so offers an opportunity to learn "from" and "with" the other in a way that can deepen Christian faith and the faith of the other from anthropological, soteriological and theological points of view. (2011, p.21).

Accounts from the Gospels in which Jesus engages in dialogue with people of different religious traditions act as blueprints for these inter-religious educational encounters. Jesus' inter-religious

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dialogical encounters with the Syrophoenician woman (Mark 7:25-30), the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:7-26), and the Roman centurion (Luke 7:1-10) emphasise the transformative nature of the conversation for both participants. This approach advocates a learning *about* and *from* different religions, which could also enhance a learning *into* religion for Catholic students. This would support approaches to RE that value positive pluralism, such as Ipgrave's dialogical approach and Jackson's interpretive approach, as previously discussed in the review of the literature. These approaches are informed by a positive pluralism described by Denise Cush as to:

> welcome plurality as an opportunity rather than a problem … Positive pluralism does not teach that all faiths are equally valid like the relativist, or all paths to the same goal like the universalist. It takes the differences and incommensurability of world views seriously, but approaches them from a viewpoint of "epistemological humility" or methodological agnosticism. (1999, p.384)

The importance of opening a conversation regarding the school's Catholic identity and its responsibility to engage with religious diversity has already been noted. However, this research also suggests that teachers may benefit from reflection on their personal philosophy of education. This could be followed by a collaborative re-evaluation of the role of the Religion teacher within a religiously diverse Catholic school, which in turn could harbour fruitful insights for future professional practice. Spillane (2018) identifies the value of meaningful interactions and conversations between colleagues as contributing to social capital, thus increasing efficacy of practice. This research recommends reflective practice and collaborative engagement between colleagues in the hope that a more effective and successful approach to religious diversity might be negotiated.

It is noteworthy that participating teachers do not see the challenges they face in their roles as related to the religious diversity within the school community. This research suggests that by employing a more inclusive, pluralistic and dialogical approach to religious diversity, the problems of student motivation and engagement, as expressed by teachers, could be considerably alleviated. This recommendation is made in light of the research findings on the dichotomy which exists between student and teacher understanding and expectation of what the purpose, nature and scope of RE ought to be.

Another significant finding of this research is the reduced agency teachers experience when trying to fulfil obligations of faith development, as mandated by the Catholic Church, along with the attainment of the syllabus' aim, to contribute to the moral and spiritual development of each student. While this research acknowledges the dilemma attendant upon this dual role Religion teachers of Catholic schools must assume, it finds this unnecessarily exacerbated by the clash in understanding and expectation concerning the role of RE within this specific context which does not adequately engage

with religious diversity. This research recognises the systemic issues at play and how they are disempowering teachers and reducing their autonomy and agency.

Cochran-Smith identifies that teaching quality and teacher accountability are understood in contemporary educational discourse as being inextricably linked (Cochran-Smith, 2003, p. 3). It is important to note that this research acknowledges the considerable demands placed upon teachers who are answerable to the expectations of the Trust board, the Department of Education and Skills and indeed the students and their parents. However, the opening up of a conversation relating to the role of the Religion teacher could lead to a new understanding of the unique role Religion teachers have in catering for the religious dimension of an intercultural education. Cuban's (2017) recognition of teachers as policymakers of classrooms offers insight into how Religion teachers can become instrumental in strengthening intercultural education within their own classrooms.

5.5   Recommendations for Policymakers and those Involved in Curriculum Development and Design

A recommendation of this research is that those involved in educational policymaking and curriculum development and design within the Irish context commit to a more robust engagement with religious diversity. This research offers valuable insight into the negative impact on students with minority religious identities caused by the decision taken by the NCCA to make the 'World religions' section of the syllabus optional. Taking into consideration the multiculturalism that exists in Irish society today, it is no longer acceptable to have an inter-religious section as an option on an RE syllabus. This research recommends a greater commitment to European policy documents on RE that support a learning *about* as well as *from* religions (CoE, 2008; Jackson, 2014).

This research has also shown how superficial engagement with non-religious worldviews, as indicative in the syllabus of the JCRE, further frustrates efforts at authentic inclusion. The positioning of content relating to non-religious worldviews in a section entitled 'Challenges to faith' reveals a faith bias. A recommendation of this research is for future curriculum development to engage more thoroughly with non-religious interpretations of life, rather than merely "acknowledging" their existence (DES, 2000). As referred to in the review of the literature, the CoE publication *Signposts* recommends the inclusion of non-religious worldviews within intercultural education. It further stresses the importance of identifying such worldviews as "cultural facts" which, like religious worldviews, are "complex phenomena" and not "monolithic" (Jackson, 2008, p. 67).

The findings of this research emphasise the negative impact of the current JCRE syllabus on students of RE who identify as having secular worldviews. A recommendation of this research is for those involved in curriculum design to draw from the CoE's *Competences for democratic culture* (2016), as referred to in the literature review of this study, to aid the integration of non-religious worldviews

within the new specification of the junior cycle. It is also recommended that the review of the senior cycle currently underway should take heed of this and not repeat the mistakes of preclusion when it comes to non-religious worldviews. It is paramount that those involved in curriculum design remain alert to curriculum choices which exclude the worldviews of some.

This research recognises the significant challenges attendant in the above recommendations for those involved in education policymaking and curriculum development and design. However, there needs to be a more coherent approach to how we cater for religious diversity within the RE syllabi, which includes the education of teachers on matters of intercultural education and religious diversity. As outlined in the literature review, the offering of "tips" for dealing with the religious diversity that exists in classrooms is insufficient. In order for the religious dimension of intercultural education to be authentically inclusive, greater investment is needed from the Irish Government. Teacher education colleges need to be equipped with the means to provide the necessary knowledge and skills right along the continuum of the professional development of teachers.

Previous decisions made by past governments show a reluctance to take a more definite position on intercultural issues. As highlighted by findings of this research, leaving the decision concerning religious dress for individual schools to permit or prohibit results in some minority faith students feeling discriminated against because of their religious identity. This research recommends that motivation for a more robust engagement with religious and cultural diversity should be born out of the argument of our shared humanity rather than arguments for expediency. Increased awareness and attention need to be given to the political instrumentalisation of religion, in the pursuit of attaining greater social cohesion. The language used, in public discourse, to illustrate why knowledge of different religions is important needs to uphold the argument for our shared humanity. This would ensure that motivation for inter-religious endeavours would be informed by an understanding that one's own religious or non-religious worldview is enriched by mutual exchanges and encounters with the "other".

5.5.1   Recommendations for the Irish Catholic Bishops

The Irish Catholic Bishops are invited to reflect on these findings, which offer insight into RE and school life as experienced by minority groups within a Catholic school. The research has shown that where an the inter-religious objective of RE is neglected, there are significant, negative repercussions for the reception of the subject as a whole. All students participating in this research, indiscriminate of religious or non-religious positions, echoed international research findings in expressing a desire to study different world religions and different non-religious worldviews. It is recommended that a greater focus on the inclusive nature of Catholic school identity be brought to the fore in the visions of the leaders of their schools.

5.5.2   Recommendations for Initial Teacher Education

Religious diversity is a reality within most Irish schools. Therefore, effective initial teacher education (ITE) in the multiple colleges of teacher education need to provide their student teachers with information about different religious and non-religious worldviews. Mullally asserts that future teachers will need to be equipped with the skills of "facilitation and moderation" required to ensure authentic inclusion (2017, p.127) . A review of teacher education programmes is needed to ensure student teachers are being equipped with the necessary skills for intercultural and inter-religious education. This research also highlights the lack of confidence some experienced teachers can feel with regard to their engagement with the diversity of beliefs, cultures and ethnicities present in their classrooms. Therefore this research emphasises the exigency for continued professional development in the area of intercultural and interreligious education.

Teacher education would also benefit from a higher enrolment of students from minority religious groups, to ensure a greater religious diversity within the teaching profession. As referred to in the literature review of this thesis, Devine (2005) has identified the mono-culturalism of the teaching profession in Ireland. The 2016 report, *Study on the diversity within the teaching profession*, produced by the Directorate-General for Education of the European Commission, identifies significant barriers to achieving a greater teacher diversity in many EU Member states. While data was limited, which in itself is problematic, the report finds that "teaching staff with migrant backgrounds are generally under-represented compared to the actual diversity of the learners" (D-G European Commission, 2016). A recommendation of this report to Member states is to strengthen the collection of data on teacher diversity to inform evidence-based policy.

5.6   Implications for Further Research

In light of the research findings and indeed some interesting outlier findings, which do not cohere with previous research in this area, three main areas are identified as fertile ground for future research: namely, the inclusion of the parent voice in studies focused on religious diversity within education; teacher acquisition of intercultural skills; and research focused on pedagogical approaches to RE within the Irish context.

This research recognises that further research regarding the expectations relating to the purpose, nature and scope of RE would be enhanced by the inclusion of a parental perspective. As noted in section 2.4.3 of the literature review, the recent circular relating to the removal of the "baptism barrier" for oversubscribed schools implies a significant change for the representation of diversity within schools on several levels. While admission to these denominational schools will become less restricted for students of different religious and non-religious worldviews, there may also be implications for nominal Catholics, for whom school admission was the greatest motivating reason for

baptising their child. This represents a new departure, which could raise interesting issues concerning how this cohort will identify itself, and how this will be understood and received by the Catholic school. This change to school admission policy signifies a changing time, whereby schools must reflect on how they will cope with increased diversity and how they will best negotiate this change without reducing diversity to a sameness-over-difference approach.

The recent change to the provision of the 'opt-out' of RE applicable to ETBs and Community schools outlined in circular 0013/2018 and amended in circular 0062/2018, further signals this changing time. The clarifications issued on this circular, earlier this month, reflect common misunderstandings regarding the purpose, nature and scope of RE. An interesting outlier finding of the current research is how participating students with secular worldviews more strongly advocated for a learning *about* and *from* religion approach to RE. This finding does not cohere with other research studies carried out in different contexts which found students of religious worldviews to be more supportive of an inter-religious focus to RE (Sjöborg, 2013; Hella and Wright, 2009). Further research could explore how this directive from the DES succeeds in delivering a theoretical RE to all students in these school communities.

The new specification for junior-cycle Religious Education, which will be introduced in September 2019, should continue the practice employed in its development of 'checking in' with teachers and students on the their experience of the syllabus. This would ensure a more responsive approach to the process of curriculum development and design. Curriculum as a living entity needs to be formed and informed by the experience of students and teachers.

Further research on teacher attitudes to diversity could assist teacher education in a facilitation and promotion of intercultural skills for teachers along its continuum. Research is also warranted in the area of pedagogical approaches to RE within Irish post-primary classrooms. . Participating students of the current research do not share the positive appraisal of RE at senior- cycle post-primary level that other students reported in recent studies carried out in the Irish context (Smyth et al, 2009; Stapleton, 2018). This research highlights the importance of teacher agency regarding the inclusion of an inter-religious perspective and the use of dialogical, reflexive and inclusive pedagogy in the study of RE. Further research into the different pedagogical approaches to LCRE and non-exam RE would harbour fruitful findings that could inform future curriculum design for senior-cycle RE. Including various school types in a pedagogical study could harbour interesting insights into the role context plays in determining appropriate approaches. Listening to the student voice will further benefit future pedagogical research in terms of the efficacy of approaches and would also allow students to take greater ownership of their learning.

5.7 The personal learning of the researcher throughout this study

So many people are shut up tight inside themselves like boxes, yet they would open up, unfolding quite wonderfully, if only you were interested in them.

(Sylvia Plath, Johnny Panic and the Bible of dreams: short stories).

Any reflection on the personal learning for me as researcher would be incomplete without the acknowledgement of how privileged I feel to have had the experience of listening to the experiences of all the participants in this research. In order to explore what an authentic inclusion means, I was required to intently and attentively listen to their stories and to step into their shoes and consider things from their perspective. This was by far the greatest influence on my learning as a researcher and my personal development more generally for this demanded that I use a critical reflexivity to confront my personal biases and prejudices in opening up to the positions and perspectives of others. Using a dialogical methodology I sought to bring the voices of the participants into a dialogue with literature from the academy and policy from State and Church. This research project stands as a concrete example of applying dialogical methods, as facilitated by a constructivist-interpretive paradigm, to explore issues of diversity, and how they impact on individuals' experience of RE, from beginning to end. I have learned how challenging this can be and how often it was not the most expedient way forward; however the learning that comes from remaining faithful to an authentic inclusion is rich and deep. Through conducting this research I have learned how a greater emphasis on dialogical and reflexive pedagogy within RE can contribute to an authentic inclusion while catering to the expectations of State and Church within the Irish context.

During the initial stages of this research study and indeed, throughout it, I was required to reflect on how my own philosophy of education has been informed and influenced, as outlined in 1.4. Returning to Freirean thought and conducting research involving minorities, I have gained a much deeper understanding of the importance of conscientization and its role in the humanisation of the 'other'. As previously mentioned above this study has allowed me to share in the experiences of others which raised my critical consciousness regarding the marginalisation of students with minority religious and secular beliefs. The recommendations of this research are concerned with the raising of a critical consciousness of these issues through opening up the conversation regarding religious diversity at micro and macro levels.

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Appendix A: An extract from the school's Faith development policy

Mission Statement

We are a Christian Community founded by the Presentation Order, which is committed to:

- Fostering Gospel values and ensuring a Catholic ethos as the cornerstone of school life in co-operation with parents and the local community.

- Being aware of the Pastoral needs of all the students and providing an environment which will enable them to develop their full potential as individuals who recognize their own dignity, value and worth.

- Reflecting Nan Nagle's mission to education of the marginalized.

- Offering a balanced curriculum of subject choices that will enable each student to develop at his/her own rate and to her/his own potential.

- Delivering the highest standards of teaching, learning and performance.

- Cultivating an ongoing awareness of the beauty of the school surroundings and its maintenance.

Scope

The Policy aims to reflect and promote the work of faith development in the school community. It works to encourage all students to explore and deepen their faith . It works to promote Catholic and Presentation values. It works to outline where and how faith is developed in the life of our community.

Relationship to Mission and Vision

In line with the admission policy, the school's mission statement and Catholic values in education, the school welcomes all students to Our lady's College. Each student attends J.C. religion exam classes. At senior cycle all students participate in religious education . This course reflects the N.C.C.A . and Veritas programmes . Students take a transition year religion programme. Students can choose to take Religion as an exam subject at Leaving Certificate level. Students participate in school liturgies and retreats. Students of other faiths and none are encouraged to observe or participate in these activities as part of the formal religion programme.

Rationale

Faith is a personal insight and response to God at work in our school and in our lives. Our Catholic community life encourages faith to grow through the religious education curriculum, provision of sacraments, concern for the disadvantaged, charity work, prayer, ecumenism and interfaith dialogue. This faith policy reflects the mission and vision of the school and outlines where all the above are a part of our community life.

Goals

The policy aims to specify the activities undertaken in the school to promote the faith of its Catholic students .It also aims to encourage other students to deepen their particular faith . These activities are set out under the following headings **:**1.The Formal RE Programme**,** 2.The Celebration of Faith in our Community and charitable activities. **,** 3.Student Welfare Policies.

Appendix B: Extract from Religion Department Plan

PROGRAMMES AND LEVELS

Junior Certificate Religious Education

Levels: Higher and Ordinary

The Religious Education course at Junior level takes place over a period of three years. It consists of two parts and the sections of the syllabus may be taught in any order.

Part I:

Students take two of the following sections:

Section A   Communities of Faith

Section B   Foundations of Religion – Christianity

Section C   Foundations of Religion – Major World Religions

Students in XXXX study Sections A and B.

Part II:

Students must also take all of the following:

Section D   The Question of Faith

Section E   The Celebration of Faith

Section F   The Moral Challenge

Students also complete a mandatory Journal which is worth 20% of their final Junior Certificate Examination.

TY Modules see Curriculum Content section

Appendix C: Plain Language Statement

Assembly Piece

Ms G. Sullivan is looking for volunteers to participate in a piece of research she will be carrying out in the school as part of a doctoral thesis in DCU.

The research project is entitled:

How are the issues of diversity and plurality impacting on the delivery of senior cycle Religious Education in a Roman Catholic Post Primary school?

The aim of this research is to gain an insight into how **senior cycle students** of different **faith and secular/ non-religious backgrounds** experience Religious Education in a Roman Catholic Post Primary school.

➢ Involves participation in **one** focus **group** interview which will last approximately **45 minutes.**

➢ During these focus group interviews you will be asked to share your personal experience of Religious Education in the school to date.

➢ Both the school's name and your name will not be mentioned in this research.

➢ There is no academic reward or penalty for participation in this research.

➢ You will have the opportunity to withdraw from the research at any time you want.

➢ If you think you may be interested in participating please take one of these forms at the end of assembly.

➢ You will learn more about the research and when you have filled it in you can pop it into the marked box outside X's office in the main hall.

Ms G. Sullivan would like to thank you all for your consideration.

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent: Research Explanation

You are invited to take part in an important study into the experience of teaching and learning Religious Education in a Post Primary Roman Catholic school. The research is being conducted as part of a Professional Doctorate in Education, School of Education, in Dublin City University and its working title is

How are the issues of diversity and plurality impacting on the delivery of senior cycle Religious Education in a Roman Catholic Post Primary school?

Your involvement in the research will involve an audio-recorded one to one interview of approximately 45 minutes in length. You will be provided with the interview schedule 48 hours in advance to ensure you have had adequate time to reflect on your experience of teaching Religious Education at senior cycle. It is hoped that the process of reflection will provide opportunity for personal learning for you as well as providing rich data for the research.

The information disclosed in the research will be coded and confidentially stored until the publication of the research in September 2018, at which point it will be destroyed. It is important to note that while confidentiality is guaranteed the data is subject to the same legal requirements as other research data, including those under the Freedom of Information Act (2014). Upon publication of the research, participants and other interested parties will be invited to a presentation and discussion of the findings of the research.

If you are happy to participate in the research and agree with the statement below, please provide your signature.

Informed Consent

Please indicate by circling Yes/No your understanding of the research:

I have read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to me)	Yes/No
I understand the information provided	Yes/No
I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study	Yes/No
I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions	Yes/No
I am aware that my interview will be audio recorded	Yes/No
I understand that I can withdraw from the process at any point	Yes/No

I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researchers. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research.

Participant's Signature: _____

Appendix E: Letter to Parents

Dear Parent/ Guardian,

My name is Gillian Sullivan and I am a Religion and English teacher in XXXX school. I am also currently in my third year of study for a Professional Doctorate in Education in Dublin City University. I am in the process of completing my doctoral thesis entitled: *How are the issues of diversity and plurality impacting on the delivery of senior cycle Religious Education in a Roman Catholic Post Primary school?* My supervisor for this research thesis is Dr Elaine McDonald, School of Policy and Practice, Institute of Education, Dublin City University.

The aim of this research is to gain an insight into how the issues of diversity and plurality can impact on the teaching and learning of Religious Education at senior cycle in a Roman Catholic Post Primary school. The research will gain an insight into how senior cycle students of different faith and secular backgrounds experience Religious Education within this context.

It is my intention to conduct three focus group interviews. Each group will be made up of between three and six senior-cycle students. Each focus group will be made up of students who share a similar world view, for example Roman Catholics students, Students of no religious faith and Muslim students. Each group will meet once for 45 minutes approximately to participate in a focus group interview which will be audio recorded for transcription. During these focus group interviews the students will discuss their experience of Religious Education within this school community. These focus group interviews will be recorded on two devices, a Dictaphone and Ipad.

I am aware of the importance of ethical considerations with this type of research involving students under the age of 18 years old and so I am writing to ask for your permission that your daughter participate in one of these focus groups. Students will also be made fully aware of their right to withdraw from participating at any stage of the research process. The confidential and anonymous treatment of students' responses will be in accordance with the British Education Research Association (BERA) guidelines and Data Protection Act 1998. All transcripts and interview notes will be coded. All recordings will be deleted at the end of the research.

If you have any questions or clarifications regarding my proposed research please do not hesitate to contact me at gsullivan@xxx.ie or on 0874106770. I will make myself available to meet with you prior to commencement of the research for any further clarifications if needed.

Please sign below if you agree to your daughter participating in this focus group.

Yours faithfully,

Gillian Sullivan

Parent/Guardian _____

        Student _____

Appendix F: Ethics Approval

Ms Gillian Sullivan
School of Policy and Practice DCU Institute of Education

14 November 2016

REC Reference: Proposal Title:

Applicant(s):

Dear Gillian,

DCUREC/2016/171

How are the issues of diversity and plurality impacting on the delivery of senior cycle Religious Education in a Roman Catholic post primary school?

Ms Gillian Sullivan, Dr Elaine McDonald

Further to a full committee review, the DCU Research Ethics Committee approves this research proposal.

Materials used to recruit participants should note that ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee.

Should substantial modifications to the research protocol be required at a later stage, a further amendment submission should be made to the REC.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Dónal O'Gorman

Chairperson
DCU Research Ethics Committee