

**Title**

**Key Factors that Engaged Year 5/6 Students in a Religious Education Curriculum**

Submitted by

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### **Statement of Sources**

This thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.

No parts of this thesis have been submitted towards the award of any other degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of this thesis.

All research procedures reported in this thesis received the approval of the relevant Ethics/Safety Committees.

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## Abstract

The aim of this case study was to identify factors that influenced the engagement of year five and six students (aged 10-12) in a religious education (RE) curriculum. The disengagement of year five and six students was reflected in the results of an RE survey (Catholic Education Office, 2006). Whilst students regarded RE as important and wished to do academically well, they did not find RE lessons to be particularly interesting, challenging or enjoyable.

This qualitative research used a case study methodology. In this research the case was six composite classes of upper primary school students (combined classes of year five / six) and their religious education teachers within the context of a particular Catholic primary school. A case study is consistent with the chosen theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism and the constructionist epistemology underpinning this study. Using a constant comparative method, data from semi-structured and focus group interviews was drawn upon to explore the perceptions of student and teacher participants. Direct classroom observations were utilised to compare and contrast students' and teachers' perceptions.

Six interrelated categories were found to be key factors for the engagement of this group of year five / six students in an RE curriculum: the teacher's promotion of a mastery orientation; the teacher's knowledge; a trusting classroom climate; positive teacher-student relationships; challenging tasks; and ICT-enabled learning. Three interrelated dimensions - affect, behaviour and cognition - constitute a prevalent view of engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). The findings arising from this study show how students were engaged in RE classroom learning across these three dimensions of engagement. As this is the first major research to explore student engagement in RE in an Australian Catholic primary school context, it makes a distinct contribution to the literature regarding student engagement in this particular curriculum area.

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Engagement

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## Abbreviations

AAP	Annual Action Plan
AIM	Achievement Improvement Monitor
CECV	Catholic Education Commission of Victoria
CEO	Catholic Education Office
CEOM	Catholic Education Office, Archdiocese of Melbourne
CC	Congregation for the Clergy
CCE	Congregation for Catholic Education
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
NCEC	National Catholic Education Commission
RE	Religious Education
REL	Religious Education Leader
SCCE	Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education
SIF	School Improvement Framework
SIP	School Improvement Plan
VCAA	Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority
VELS	Victorian Essential Learning Standards
VRQA	Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority

## **A Rationale for the Study**

### **Exploring Factors which Fostered the Engagement of Year Five / Six Students in a Religious Education Curriculum**

#### **Introduction**

This thesis explored factors that engaged year five / six students (aged 10-12) in the religious education (RE) curriculum used in Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne, Australia: *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008). Three factors have led to the development of the current study: the researcher's experience of a group of students who were not very engaged in RE learning; the importance of student engagement in the literature; and the paucity of research on student engagement in RE in the Catholic primary school years.

This study has developed from an issue that arose in the researcher's professional experience and in the context of a Catholic primary school setting. Specifically, students in year five / six were asked by the Catholic Education Office, Melbourne (CEOM) to rate RE classroom learning in terms of enjoyment, interest and challenge. Their response to these items on the *Student Survey – Education in Faith* was low when compared with other items on the CEOM survey such as the importance of this subject and doing academically well in RE learning (Cf. Appendix A: Student Survey – Education in Faith). According to this survey, students regarded RE as an important subject area and wished to do academically well. However, the survey data indicated that they were not very engaged in terms of interest and enjoyment derived from their RE program. Out of this context the researcher became interested in identifying and exploring some of the key factors that facilitated the engagement of year five / six students in RE classroom learning. This interest became the focus of this case study.

Research has highlighted the importance of engagement for middle years learners in curriculum areas such as literacy and maths (Culican, Emmitt, & Oakley, 2001; Siemon, Virgona & Corneille, 2001). Middle years research has shown that student learning slows and even plateaus across these years (years 5-9). It has been suggested that a marked decline in students' enjoyment of school and associated engagement in learning affects their learning progress (Hill, 1999; Hill, Rowe, Holmes-Smith & Russell, 1996). Contemporary pedagogy emphasises student-centred learning. This emphasis necessitates the active engagement of students in the learning process (Edwards-Groves & Hoare, 2012; Smart & Marshall, 2013; Wilson & Smetana, 2011). In Chapter Two, three interrelated key themes for engaging year five / six students in learning are identified from current literature: the teacher (Zhang & Dougherty Stahl, 2012), the classroom community (O'Neill, Geoghegan, & Petersen, 2013), and learning (Watson, 2013). Therefore, a related aim of this study, outlined below, was to investigate the impact of these key themes on student engagement in RE.

The first key theme is the teacher. The role of the teacher and their use of engaging pedagogy were investigated in this case study. The teacher selects and implements engaging pedagogical strategies such as classroom discourse (Smart & Marshall, 2013). The second key theme is the classroom community. Two key elements of the classroom community support engagement: classroom emotional climate and the teacher-student relationship (Delisle, 2012; O'Neill et al., 2013; Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White, & Salovey, 2012). The impact of these elements of the classroom community on the engagement of year five / six students was explored in this investigation. The third key theme is learning. Three significant aspects of learning facilitate student engagement: achievement goal theory; ICT; and the curriculum (Chen, Liao, Cheng, Yeh & Chan, 2012; Fadlelmula, 2010; Watson, 2013). The effect of these aspects of learning on student engagement was considered in this research.



Student engagement is also an important issue for learning in the context of a religious education curriculum. In the past sixty years, the various approaches to the RE curriculum in Australian Catholic schools has affected the engagement of students in RE learning<sup>1</sup> (Lacey, 2011). In Chapter One, an exploration of these approaches provided an understanding of curricula and pedagogical factors that impacted on students using the current curriculum, *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008). Although it was not the primary focus, the engagement of students in RE learning has been reported in two major Australian studies (de Souza, 1999; White, 2004). The majority of Year 12 students did not find the RE program interesting, meaningful or relevant in de Souza's study (1999). Exploration of how to make RE learning more engaging for senior high school students was a major recommendation emanating from this study. The research of White (2004) highlighted the importance of the pedagogical dimension of RE. The engagement of students was listed as one of the four key interactive principles crucial to this dimension (White, 2004). The focus of the present qualitative study was on the factors that facilitated student engagement in an RE curriculum. Findings from this research supported and in some areas extended the literature on student engagement. These findings indicated that six interrelated categories associated with the teacher, the classroom community, and learning facilitated behavioural, affective, and cognitive engagement: the teacher's promotion of a mastery orientation; the teacher's knowledge; a trusting classroom climate; positive teacher-student relationships; challenging tasks; and ICT-based learning.

In the next section, an overview of the researcher's professional background (in conjunction with the scholarly literature, emerging insights from this research were analysed

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter one of this thesis provides a comprehensive overview of the various approaches to RE curriculum in Australia. It also presents the engaging characteristics of these approaches and their limitations / criticisms. Cf. also: Lacey, A. (2011). From catechisms to texts: Engaging students in religious education in Australian Catholic primary schools. *Religious Education Journal of Australia*, 27(1), 16-22.

in relation to the expertise of the researcher), and contextual information related to the school involved in this case study is presented. The research problem for this qualitative study is also identified and defined. Following this, the research purpose, the general research question, and the significance of this study are outlined. This section concludes with the overall structure of this thesis.

### **Researcher's professional background.**

The researcher has been in primary school education for 30 years and throughout this period has worked in various Catholic schools in the south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne, Australia. During this time he has taught in all levels of the primary system from Foundation to Year Six. For the first 13 years he was employed as a full time classroom teacher. Following this the researcher has held various senior leadership positions including Student Wellbeing Co-ordinator, Maths Leader, and Religious Education Leader.

From 2000, as a senior career educator, the researcher has been employed in a large primary school as the full-time Deputy Principal. In this full-time capacity, a number of diverse roles have been undertaken – these ranged from Maintenance and Occupational Health and Safety through to Student Wellbeing Leader. Presently, the researcher has three primary roles: as the Deputy Principal, Mathematics Leader and as the Religious Education Leader (REL).

### **Background to the school.**

At the time the research commenced, in 2009, the primary school that was the focus of this case study was unique within the Melbourne Archdiocese for several reasons. With a population of 700 students the school was significantly larger than most primary schools. The average size of primary schools in the archdiocese was approximately 250 students. In this school over 95% of the students were baptized Catholics; this was well above the average for primary schools. According to Catholic Education Commission of Victoria (CECV) data the

average was 78.4% in 2005 (CECV, 2006c). In 2009 the school fell within a low socio economic area in an outer south-eastern growth corridor of Melbourne. The surrounding housing estates offer relatively affordable housing for low-income earners. Many of the families are newly arrived immigrants. They come mainly from countries such as India, Sri Lanka and the Philippines and many speak a language other than English in the home.

### **Research Problem Identified**

#### **Introduction.**

Student engagement has been identified in the literature as an important educational goal. If students are interested, challenged and find learning enjoyable they are likely to achieve more as learners (CECV, 2006b). Conversely, a marked decline in student engagement in learning across years five to nine has been shown to adversely affect their learning progress (Hill, 1999). Furthermore, if students are not engaged generally, then they will not be engaged and learn effectively in specific curriculum areas (Culican et al., 2001; Dowson, Ross, Donovan, Richards, & Johnson, 2005). For these reasons, it has been argued that educators must meet the challenge of engaging students in, rather than alienating them from, learning (Culican et al., 2001).

However, it may also be argued, and it was the focus of this study, that student engagement is a legitimate “end in itself” (Russell, Ainley, & Frydenberg, 2005, p. 3). Contemporary pedagogy shifts the emphasis to the learner, which necessitates their active engagement in the learning process (Edwards-Groves & Hoare, 2012; Smart & Marshall, 2013; Wilson & Smetana, 2011). It was in this context that the apparent disengagement of year five / six students in RE classroom learning was identified in a particular case. Therefore, this case study sought to investigate the factors which facilitated the engagement of these students in an RE curriculum.

### **Learning and engagement in the middle years.**

The *Literacy and Learning in the Middle Years* report holds that the essence of the middle years discourse is that education should be designed according to the “needs and nature” of the students who are in the middle years<sup>2</sup> (Culican et al., 2001, p. 20). This has implications for education as it is carried out in both the upper primary years and the lower secondary years; curriculum should be responsive to students’ “needs and nature” (Culican et al., 2001, p. 20) rather than students merely adapting to a set curriculum.

It has long been recognized that there is a “plateauing” (Hill, 1999, p. 3) of learning in years five to nine of schooling with progress for some students slowing dramatically and performance declining (Hill, Jane, Mackay, & Russell, 2002; Culican, 2005). The *Victorian Quality Schools Project* found that there was very little growth in student performance in literacy, and that a marked decline in students’ enjoyment of school and associated engagement in learning across the middle years affected their learning progress (Hill, 1999; Hill et al., 1996). Over the course of 1999 to 2000, *The Middle Years Numeracy Research Project* also highlighted concerns with student progress across years five to nine (Siemon et al., 2001). This research found that there was a “dip” in student performance in numeracy from years six to seven and that there was as much difference in student outcomes within a single year level as there was across the middle years (Siemon et al., 2001, p. 98). An analysis of Achievement Improvement Monitor data (AIM – state wide testing conducted at Years three, five, seven and nine in the state of Victoria) in the areas of reading, writing, spelling, number and mathematics for the years 2002 – 2004 highlighted this plateauing, and even declining, of learning across the middle years (CECV, 2006a).

Research purports that this decline was linked with student disengagement and alienation (Hill et al., 2002; Culican, 2005; Dowson et al., 2005). Whilst pedagogical and

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<sup>2</sup> This term is explored in the section, *Research Problem Defined*. At this stage it will suffice to simply state that in an Australian context this term refers to students in Years five to nine.

curriculum change impact, to varying degrees, on student performance (CECV, 2006a), a combination of social, economic [many of which are beyond the control of the school] and educational factors lead to student disengagement (Hayes & Chodkiewicz, 2006; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2004). Furthermore, despite various curriculum reforms, student engagement did not increase significantly from year five to nine (Lokan, Greenwood & Creswell, 2001).

This recognition of the disengagement or alienation of year five to nine students from school, has led to a wide range of views in the literature regarding student alienation and its causes. Four major theoretical perspectives emerged from research into the 1990s: critical theory views, psychological views, post-modern views and feminist views (Cormack, 1996). However, rather than what disengages students, the focus of this study was on factors that engaged students in RE learning.

Whilst the link between student disengagement and student decline in academic performance is an important one, the focus of this study was on factors that facilitated the engagement of year five / six students in an RE curriculum. This is an important issue in its own right; education should be engaging rather than “dispiriting, irrelevant and uninspiring” (Fuller, 2007, p. 55). Furthermore, the active engagement of students is necessary if they are to be effective participants in a contemporary approach to learning (Keimer, Groschner, Pehmer, & Seidel, 2015; Shostak, 2011).

The current research arose from a particular case. The key issue in this case related to the impact of classroom factors on student engagement in RE learning. In the next section, this key issue is identified and explored. The data from two surveys indicated that students, parents and teachers highly valued aspects of the Catholic faith such as prayer and liturgy. However, students indicated that they were not very engaged in classroom RE learning. This issue and how to engage students in RE classroom learning became the focus of this study.

### **Student disengagement in religious education identified in this case.**

All schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne are required to participate in the *School Improvement Framework* (SIF). This framework is designed to meet the dual purpose of accountability to government and sector authorities, and to assist teachers and schools to improve student learning outcomes. It includes an internal process for continuous school improvement and an external component to meet accountability requirements (To be registered in the state of Victoria, schools must meet the standards set by the state government authority: Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority [VRQA]). To meet the requirements of the SIF, schools must develop a four year *School Improvement Plan* (SIP). This plan includes goals and targets that each school endeavours to meet over the next four year period. From this plan schools develop an *Annual Action Plan* (AAP). The AAP outlines strategies and actions to be implemented in the coming year.

To review progress and determine future actions, surveys are administered to the key stakeholders in Catholic schools (students, parents and teachers). One of these surveys issued from the Catholic Education Office (CEO) in 2006 involved a randomly chosen, representative sample of year five and six students. Forty-four students were asked to complete this survey called the *Student Survey – Education in Faith* regarding religious education in their school (Appendix A: Student Survey – Education in Faith). The survey covered items relating to two broad categories: education in faith and religious education. *Education in faith* covered areas such as students' attitude toward, and opportunities for, prayer and liturgy. *Religious education* focused on areas such as how challenging and interesting the teaching and learning program was. Students expressed that many areas of education in faith, such as prayer and liturgy, were highly valued by them. In contrast, results from the CEO (2006) survey were significantly lower on issues related to the engagement of students in the religious education learning and teaching program (this was indicated by items

relating to their interest in, enjoyment of and feeling challenged through the religious education program). The findings of this survey appeared to align with research on the increasing disengagement of students in literacy and maths across years five to nine (Hill et al., 2002; Siemon et al., 2001). The results of the CEO (2006) survey reflected that students were becoming disengaged in RE learning even though the data seemed to indicate that they valued this learning area.

From 2007, the Student Survey – Education in Faith was no longer used by the CEO to inform the SIF. In its place the religious dimension of the school was measured through a component of the *School Improvement Framework Survey* (Insight SRC, 2009). This component was termed *Catholic culture*. According to this survey, the school that is the focus of this case study had a very strong Catholic culture relative to other Victorian Catholic schools (Insight SRC, 2009). This strong Catholic culture is explored in the next section.

***The strong Catholic culture of this case.***

The data collected from the School Improvement Framework Survey (Insight SRC, 2009) is used to identify practices that influence the *teaching climate* of a school (the wellbeing, performance and motivation of staff). It has been suggested that within schools the teaching climate has the largest impact on student outcomes such as wellbeing and academic achievement (Hart, Sutherland, Tan, & Oski, 2014). Furthermore, the *organisational climate* is the key driver of this climate. The organisational climate includes factors such as: supportive leadership, role clarity, teamwork, empowerment, ownership, appraisal and recognition and opportunities for professional growth (Hart et al., 2014). This survey also gathers data related to the Catholic culture of the school.

The survey asks year five / six students, teachers and parents to rate the school according to two indicators of Catholic culture: *importance* and *opportunity*. Each group is asked the extent to which they perceive that celebrating and participating in prayer, liturgy

and sacraments is *important* in the school. They are also asked the extent to which students are provided with the *opportunity* to reflect on their religious views, pray and celebrate liturgies together, and to participate in the sacraments. The results of these questions about Catholic culture are compared with other Catholic schools. This comparison is presented in terms of percentile ranks. According to these two indicators, the school from which the case was derived had a very high Catholic culture relative to other Victorian Catholic schools (Cf. Figure 1). This result is similar to findings from the Education in faith category of the previous *Student Survey – Education in Faith*. Both surveys indicated that opportunities to participate in activities such as prayer and liturgy were highly valued in this school community. However, the religious education category of the *Student Survey – Education in Faith* suggested that engagement in RE learning was markedly lower. The key issue identified in these year five / six classrooms was the low engagement of these students in the RE teaching and learning program despite having a high Catholic culture according to the students, parents and teachers of this school. Within this context, the current investigation explored and identified key factors that engaged year five / six students in an RE curriculum.

**Figure 1. Catholic Culture 2009 – Percentile Rank of School Relative to other Victorian Catholic Schools**

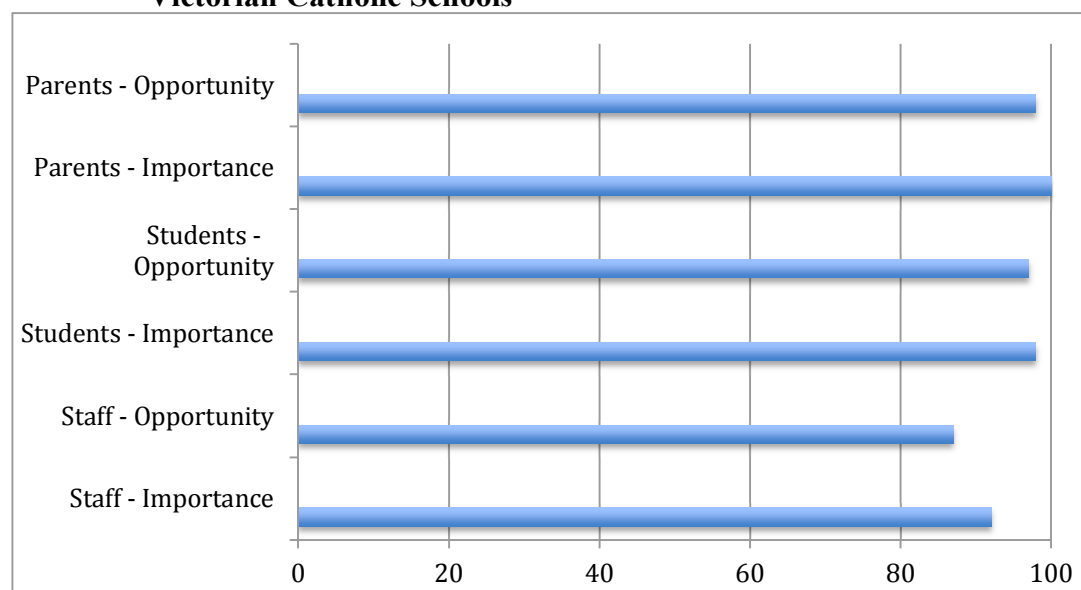


Figure 1. Adapted from the *School Improvement Framework Survey Report 2009* (p. 12) by Insight SRC, Melbourne: Insight SRC Pty Ltd.



Student engagement is influenced by factors outside of the direct control of schools such as socio economic status, parental occupation and education, ethnicity, age and gender (Russell et al., 2005). Parents who are highly involved in their child's learning also affect student engagement and academic outcomes (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Harris & Goodall, 2008; Shoup, Gonyea, & Kuy, 2009). However, given the key issue in this case was identified as the learning and teaching of RE within the classroom, this study focussed on factors within the control of the teacher in the RE classroom. Furthermore, the present investigation sought to identify factors that fostered the affective, behavioural and cognitive engagement of students in RE learning. Three interrelated key themes facilitated the engagement of year five / six students in classroom learning: the classroom community, learning and the teacher (Smart & Marshall, 2013; Watson, 2013; Zhang & Dougherty Stahl, 2012). An aim of this study was to analyse the findings from this investigation in light of the existing knowledge regarding factors that fostered the engagement of year five / six students in classroom learning.

### **Research Problem Defined**

There were some key terms that have been significant in identifying the research problem and were pivotal to the research undertaken. Therefore these terms are the focus of this section. Other terms and definitions are discussed as these occur throughout this thesis.

#### **Middle years learning.**

The middle years are defined as years five to nine in Australian schools. At a state, national and international level much research has been carried out into learning in these years (Barrat, 1998; Cormack, 1996; Hill et al., 2002; Siemon et al., 2001). Findings from such studies have led to recommendations for middle years reform, and to the exploration of such concepts as effective teaching and learning in the middle years (Ne Smith, 2003). Other research has looked at how the findings of middle years reform may be used to re-engage

students in their learning and the relationship between concepts such as connectedness, engagement and learning in the middle years (Hamilton, 2005; Jones, 2005). The essence of the middle years discourse was that education should be designed according to the “needs and nature” (Culican et al., 2001, p. 20) of the students who inhabit these years.

Middle years literature quite often focused on lower secondary students. In this literature these students from years seven to nine were termed adolescent (Faircloth, 2009; McHugh, Horner, Coldit, & Wallace, 2013). In contrast, the focus of this study is on students in years five to six. These students are in the initial phase of the middle years of schooling and have been classed as early adolescents in some of the literature (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011). Whilst there were broad areas of consonance between the literature in the middle years and years five and six, an examination of the literature<sup>3</sup> revealed a different set of key factors impacted upon the engagement of year five / six students. In this context, the middle years literature was used selectively when this applied to both early adolescents (years five and six) and adolescents (years seven to nine).

### **Engagement and motivation.**

Motivation and engagement are related but distinct terms. A person can be motivated to do well and yet be disengaged (Russell, 2003). Motivation is about the energy and reasons preceding student behaviour in relation to learning (Russell et al., 2005). As such, motivated students may or may not be actively involved in the learning situation. In contrast, engagement is more about behaviour; it “describes energy in action, the connection between person and activity” (Russell et al., 2005, p. 3).

Three interrelated dimensions - affect, behaviour and cognition – constitute a prevalent view of engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). Whilst these three dimensions of engagement have been defined in the literature in various ways, the following definitions

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<sup>3</sup> The key themes that facilitated the engagement of year five / six students in learning are explored and discussed in Chapter Two, Review of the Literature.

have been applied to this study of factors that engaged students in RE classroom learning. Affective engagement relates to such emotional responses as enthusiasm and interest in a task (Fredricks et al., 2004). Behavioural engagement refers to student involvement in a learning task, which may be evident in attributes such as student effort and persistence, and participation in class (Russell et al., 2005). This is sometimes termed “on task” behaviour (Munns, McFadden, & Koletti, 2003, p. 3). Cognitive engagement involves “deliberate task-specific thinking” (Helme & Clarke, 2001, p. 136).

It is important to remember “there may be qualitative differences in the level or degree of engagement along each component” of engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 3). For instance, cognitive engagement may range from memorisation to students having an orientation to learning wherein their focus is on learning and understanding (Sullivan, McDonough and Prain, 2005). The engagement of these students is not simply concerned with them following teacher instructions and completing the task. If students are only doing the task because the teacher insists it has to be done (a task orientation), or for other reasons external to the student, then they are not truly engaged even though to the outsider they may appear to be so. Such “procedural engagement” is not the same as students who are “in task” or who have “substantive engagement” (Munns et al., 2003, p. 3). The latter invest themselves in the project of schooling; for them engagement is about “emotional attachment and commitment” (Munns et al., 2003, p. 4) and their view is more long term rather than being focused on the immediacy of a particular task.

At a national level, projects such as the *Student Alienation During the Middle Years of Schooling Project* (and the subsequent report *From Alienation to Engagement*) were implemented to examine the issue of “hidden” alienation of students in the middle years (Cormack, 1996, p. 1). Its purpose was to gain a contemporary understanding of the disengagement of students from learning (Cormack, 1996). At the state level, middle years

research also highlighted the disengagement of students from school, and student underachievement (Hill et al., 2002; Culican, 2005; Siemon et al., 2001). It was further found that if students are not engaged generally, than they will not be engaged and learn effectively in specific curriculum areas such as Literacy (Culican et al., 2001; Dowson et al., 2005).

Therefore: “the need to engage students in learning is a key recommendation emerging from major research into middle years reform” (Culican et al., 2001, p. 13).

### **The Research Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to identify factors that influenced the engagement of years five and six students in a religious education curriculum.

### **The General Research Question**

What factors facilitated the engagement of years five and six students in a religious education curriculum?

### **Significance of the Research**

There have been two major studies that have considered student engagement within the context of religious education in Australia. The first study focused on the perceptions of year 12 students and their teachers as to whether the existing RE program was meeting the needs of students (de Souza, 1999). The majority of students in de Souza’s (1999) case study did not find the RE program interesting, meaningful or relevant. A major challenge issued for religious educators of senior high school students, which emanated from this study, was to explore ways of making RE learning more interesting and to make clearer the importance and usefulness of this subject (de Souza, 1999). The second study emphasised the importance of the pedagogical dimension of religious education in the primary years (White, 2004). The researcher argued that religious education had been dominated by either a catechetical or curriculum emphasis. In response to this, a pedagogical approach utilising the findings of brain-based learning theory was proposed. Through the study, four interrelated principles that

were crucial to effective pedagogy in religious education were identified. Engagement was one of these key principles. According to this research, RE is engaging when: learning is problem-based and personally relevant, learning connections are made through regular teacher feedback, the role of emotion in learning is acknowledged, and risk taking in learning is encouraged (White, 2004).

Some minor studies have considered different ways of engaging students in RE learning. One of these explored the connection between the arts (dance, drama, music and visual art) and RE learning (Goldburg, 2003). The arts have been found to support student understanding and the personal expression of their ideas. RE knowledge can be understood, experienced and communicated through the arts. By including the arts in the teaching of RE it is possible to “re-shape an ancient mode of education for visually oriented students of the twenty first century” and cognitively engage students in RE learning through the arts (Goldburg, 2003, p. 11). An alternate perspective recognized the importance of ICT use for the engagement of adolescent students in RE<sup>4</sup> (Ang, 2012). However, ICT was not listed as one of the four essential elements (knowledge, authenticity, relevance, and relationships) needed to engage adolescent students in RE (Ang, 2012). Research into the effectiveness of ICT in the RE classroom was “less common” than other curriculum areas such as literacy and mathematics (Condie & Munro, 2007, p. 38). In recent years ICT was increasingly being used in England in curriculum areas such as RE (Ofsted, 2009). In schools considered as outstanding, ICT was used across subject areas, including RE, to enhance learning outcomes through increased student engagement (Ofsted, 2011).

The present research sought to investigate factors that supported student engagement in RE learning. Curricula and pedagogical factors such as interest, relevance, challenge, and ICT have been found to support student engagement in learning across various curriculum

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<sup>4</sup> The link between ICT and student engagement in RE learning is outlined more fully in Chapter Two, Review of the Literature.

areas (Enright, 2012; Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2013; Jones, 2012). However, there is a paucity of research into their role in facilitating student engagement in the RE classroom, particularly in the primary years. Therefore, this investigation explored the role of these and other factors in facilitating the engagement of year five and six students in RE classroom learning. Given the lack of research in this area, this study is significant. This is the first major research to explore student engagement in religious education in the primary years and in an Australian context. It therefore makes a significant contribution to the literature regarding student engagement in general, and in particular to an understanding of the factors that engaged primary students in a particular curriculum area.

Insights pertaining to this subject area would be of particular relevance to Catholic schools which educate one fifth of the student population in Australia, as well as other faith based schools who offer RE as a subject. Teachers in primary schools may develop a deeper understanding of how to engage their students in religious education learning. Findings from this study will offer insights about student engagement in religious education that may inform both pre-service primary education and professional development programs.

### **Structure of the Thesis**

This thesis is presented in five chapters. An overview of the major curricula and pedagogical approaches to religious education (RE) in Australia over the past century set the context for this study in Chapter One. The main focus of this chapter was to provide an understanding of how the curriculum framework of the Melbourne Archdiocese, *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008), developed from and was informed by these distinct, yet related approaches. An understanding of this development and the key educational and religious underpinnings of this curriculum framework provided the necessary contextual background for this study which investigated factors that facilitated student engagement in the RE curriculum *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008).

In Chapter Two the scholarly literature regarding factors that enabled student engagement was explored. Three interrelated key themes, which constituted the conceptual framework of this literature review, emerged from the literature as integrally related to the issue of student engagement for year five / six students. These key themes were: classroom community, learning, and the teacher.

In Chapter Three the research design was elaborated. This chapter has seven major sections and provides an overview of the following: the constructionist epistemology underpinning this qualitative study; the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism which informed the methodology; the decision to use a case study methodology and the preferred methods of semi-structured and focus group interviews, and direct observation in classrooms; how the research was conducted; analysis of data and trustworthiness procedures. It concludes with an outline of ethical considerations.

In Chapter Four a discussion and analysis of the findings into factors that facilitated the engagement of year five / six students in an RE curriculum was presented. Six categories of findings emerged from the interviews and subsequent direct classroom observations as significant in understanding the factors that engaged students. These six categories were:

Category One: The teacher's promotion of a mastery orientation

Category Two: The teacher's knowledge

Category Three: A trusting classroom climate

Category Four: Positive teacher-student relationships

Category Five: Challenging tasks

Category Six: ICT-enabled learning

In the final chapter, Chapter Five, a summary of the findings from this research was presented, recommendations were made, limitations and delimitations of this study were outlined and possible areas of future research suggested.

## Chapter One

### The Study in Context: Religious Education (RE) in Australian Catholic Schools

#### Introduction

The main focus of this chapter is to provide a context for understanding the curriculum framework of the Archdiocese of Melbourne, *Coming to Know, Worship, and Love* (CEO, 2008). An understanding of the catechetical and educational underpinnings of this approach provided the contextual background necessary for this investigation of student engagement using this framework. This curriculum framework was informed by and developed from the distinct yet related RE paradigms that preceded it (Buchanan, 2005). Each of these approaches had some distinct attributes that were perceived to influence the engagement or disengagement of students. An understanding of the integrated relationship between these approaches and how each influenced engagement or disengagement provided the context for understanding student engagement in a contemporary, yet related approach to RE learning. Therefore, in this chapter the various approaches to RE in Australian Catholic schools that have impacted upon the development of the curriculum framework will be explored. For each approach the following aspects will be outlined: how the approach developed and any significant social, educational or theological influences that impacted upon this development; the attributes of each that led to student engagement / disengagement in RE learning; and how the limitations and criticisms of each approach have resulted in the development of a “distinct yet related paradigm” (Buchanan, 2005, p. 20).

These various approaches to RE may be categorised as enfaithing or knowledge-centred (Healy, 2011). To facilitate awareness of the difference, an exploration of two underlying key terms is also presented in this section. These two key terms are used in the documents of the Catholic Church to describe the dual purpose of religious education: catechesis (the sharing of faith between believers) and religious instruction. The



complementarity and growing distinction between catechesis and religious instruction, and the impact this had on contemporary religious education using *Coming to Know, Worship, and Love* (CEO, 2008), is discussed (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982, para. 58; Congregation for Catholic Education, 1990, para. 55). This discussion is necessary for an understanding of how RE was taught in classrooms involved in this case study and the influence this had on student engagement.

Parents are considered by the Catholic Church to be the “primary and principal educators” of their children (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1965, para. 3). They can have a substantial impact on the educational outcomes of their children (Fan, Williams, & Wolters, 2011; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). These outcomes include increased motivation, engagement and higher academic achievement (Shoup et al., 2009). An understanding of parental influence on student engagement and their role in this study of factors that facilitated student engagement in RE classroom learning will also be explored.

## **The Doctrinal Approach**

### **Introduction.**

Following the Reformation, with its denunciation of papal authority and the development by Martin Luther of a catechism, the Catholic Church throughout the world reacted with an emphasis on the learning of doctrine through a catechism. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) mandated for the first time in the Catholic Church, the provision of catechesis for children (Jungmann, 1955). The pedagogical approach employed and the content of the various catechisms would have a significant impact on student engagement in RE throughout the period that the doctrinal approach was used.

### **The doctrinal approach and its application in Australia.**

Toward the end of the eighteenth century compulsory education became the norm throughout the world. Central to religious instruction in Australian schools during this time

was the catechism (Lawlor, 2000) and the framework for such catechesis was a “faith-oriented one” (de Souza, 2005, p. 62). It was assumed that the context in which catechesis took place was a community of believers who were endeavouring to live their lives according to the traditions and beliefs of the Catholic Church. Further, that this catechesis would therefore involve a willing dialogue between believers that would lead to a deepening of faith (Engebretson, Fleming, & Rymarz, 2002). As such RE was an “education in faith” (de Souza, 2005, p. 60).

From the 1800s various catechisms were prepared and authorized by Australian bishops. The most popular of these was known as the “Penny Catechism” due to its original price. These catechisms took the form of concise books containing hundreds of questions and answers (Lawlor, 2000). RE used a teaching methodology that was consistent with how other subjects were taught at the time. The text itself, in RE as in other subjects, shaped both content and methodology (Ryan, 1997). For religious education this meant that learning was through a question and answer format (Cf. Figure 2) which emphasized memorizing the content through “mechanical drill” (Hofinger, 1962, p. 17).

**Figure 2. The Question and Answer Format Typical of a Catechism used in the Education of Primary Children**

▪ **The Eucharist as a Sacrament**

**189. What do you mean by receiving Communion?**

By receiving Communion I mean receiving the Sacrament of the Blessed Eucharist.

**190. Is the Blessed Eucharist a Sacrament as well as a Sacrifice?**

Yes: the Blessed Eucharist is a Sacrament as well as a Sacrifice. It is God’s greatest gift to man [*sic*], as well as man’s greatest offering to God.

**191. Whom do we receive in the Sacrament of the Blessed Eucharist?**

In the Sacrament of the Blessed Eucharist we receive Jesus Christ, true God and true man.

*Figure 2.* Extract showing the question and answer format of a children’s Catechism. From *Catechism* (p. 43) by Plenary Council of Australia and New Zealand 1937, Melbourne: Australian Catholic Truth Society.

The consistent use of content and pedagogy involved in this approach impacted upon the engagement of students in RE learning.

### **Engagement of students.**

From the time of European settlement through to the 1960s the doctrinal approach to religious education ensured that generations “experienced a uniform religious instruction based on the catechism” (Ryan, 2002, p. 5). From this situation, wherein whole families, and generations of families, were instructed in the same content using the same methodology, it may be argued that this approach to some degree supported the engagement of students. Certainly, “the catechism...confirmed the sense of identity and solidarity of Church members” (Ryan, 1997, p. 31). It may be that there was some sense of engagement at this level of social cohesiveness and the communal support surrounding this.

However, refinements to catechesis, such as those that follow, cast doubt on the above view. Beginning in Munich and Vienna around 1900, the Catechetical Movement developed what came to be known as the “Munich Method”; in this method the catechist was “advised to use as his (*sic*) starting point an example which appealed to the children and from it to develop the text of the catechism” (Jungmann, 1955, p. 33). Using methods from secular education, the Catechetical Movement later put forward the notion that it is not sufficient that students merely understand catechetical instruction, but that they learn by doing. By the early twentieth century some classroom catechism teaching included innovations from secular education such as “explanation and interaction using teaching aids such as maps and charts” (Ryan, 1997, p. 30). Resources were also specifically developed to support this approach. These included the *Church History Readers* through which students were given an “overview of the story of the church in a way that sought to engage and interest them” (Rymarz, 2003, p. 51), and the *Catechism Workbooks* which emphasised the “participatory learning” of students such as filling in the gaps, crosswords and quizzes (Rymarz, 2003, p. 52). During this

preconciliar period it was becoming more widely held that student engagement required “a method of instruction which was concrete, lively and interesting” (Hofinger, 1962, p. 2).

Unfortunately, as seen from the following criticisms of the doctrinal approach, the above advances in catechesis were not fully realized in religious education in Australia until the advent of a new approach in the 1960s – the kerygmatic approach. Without the implementation of these catechetical advances, students were disengaged by catechisms, their content, and the pedagogy used. As seen in Figure 2, the presentation and layout of the catechism were not very engaging. As early as the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Marist Brothers were calling for new, more engaging, texts in religious education: “These books should be attractively bound, printed and illustrated, and be such as to inspire children with respect for religion, and not be, as is the case now, the most insignificant text book in use” (Doyle, 1972, p. 641). It has been noted that the catechism “provoked little enthusiasm for its contents among students” (Ryan, 1997, p. 33). Not only did it ask and answer questions that may not have been relevant to students, it answered this using language that was inaccessible to many students as it “went over the heads of the children and past their hearts” (Hofinger, 1962, p. 2). In the end, the contents and the method used in this approach “succeeded only in boring them to the point of rebellion” (Hofinger, 1962, p. 2). The over-reliance of the doctrinal approach, in the contexts of home, parish and school, “ensured boredom engendered by repetition” (Ryan, 1997, p. 33). Students were disengaged by the content, method and resources used in this approach.

### **Limitations / criticisms of the approach.**

Critique of the doctrinal approach involved two aspects: its methodology and its content. Educators argued that the teaching of religion, or any subject, needed a better, more engaging method than rote recall. In Australia, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Marist Brothers condemned “Excessive memory work with its attendant ills” (Doyle, 1972, p.

439). Criticism of this method was also expressed by theologians: “To make matters worse, children were generally required to learn these unchildlike catechisms by heart, word for word” (Hofinger, 1962, p. 2). It was generally felt that catechisms used overly abstract language and that the content was too vast; factors that were a hindrance to engagement. These concerns resulted in revisions of catechisms (Jungmann, 1955). Despite such revisions though, the engagement of learners was still limited by the resource itself (Ryan, 1997). As well as these criticisms, theologians such as Josef Jungmann considered that the doctrinal approach had reduced religious education to doctrinal formulas, leading Jungmann (1955) to state that “Christian doctrine can never be an end in itself; it must lead us to God” (Jungmann, 1955, p. 92). Finally, it was felt that much of what was remembered from this approach was the negative aspects of Christianity such as its moral precepts and duties. Taken together, these criticisms of both method and content supported the view that:

Clearly, reforming the method of instruction was insufficient if all it enabled was a clearer sense of the dread of the Christian way of life. A revised theology was also required which proclaimed the joy and good news of Christianity. (Ryan, 2001, p. 2)

The end result of these criticisms was that “teaching religious education via the catechism lost credibility” (Buchanan, 2005, p. 23).

The 1950s saw the end of an era; religious education was no longer seen as being primarily about enabling students “to live out and defend their faith in a hostile world” (Ryan, 2002, p. 5). Furthermore, ideas that developed pre-eminently through the work of Jesuit theologian Josef Jungmann (Jungmann, 1955) facilitated the critical renewal of catechetics in Europe, and these new ideas began to emerge in Australia in the 1960s (Lawlor, 2000). This critique of the doctrinal approach and the critical renewal of catechetics created a new paradigm that became known as the Kerygmatic approach (Buchanan, 2005).

## **The Kerygmatic Approach**

### **Introduction.**

The work in the 1930s of Jesuit theologian Josef Jungmann was pivotal to the development of the Kerygmatic approach. For Jungmann and others the most important focus in Christian teaching should be on its essential message, or as it is expressed in the Greek and from which this approach derived its name, the kerygma (Lawlor, 2000). The kerygmatic approach was based on the premise that children needed to encounter Jesus in a personal way through the Scriptures (Jungmann, 1955). Taking account of some of the criticisms of the doctrinal approach, this new approach provided a more engaging method and content for students.

### **The kerygmatic approach and its application in Australia.**

Theologians in Europe were developing the view that Christianity was about encounter with a personal saviour, Jesus Christ. It was further held that people come to know the joyful message (kerygma), which is central to Christianity, through the scriptures:

Joyful Christian faith...will be possible only when out of the many accretions of the centuries the one single message, the kerygma of the early Church, is once again allowed to emerge. To accomplish this, Christ must be restored to the centre of faith. (Jungmann, 1955, p. 397)

For these theologians, the essence of the Christian message, the “good news”, must therefore be proclaimed. Whilst this approach emphasized the joyful message of salvation, it did not abandon doctrinal knowledge nor the memorization of such which was typical of the doctrinal approach: “memorisation should still be used, but at the end of instruction...after understanding had been attained” (Ryan, 1997, p. 33). Thus doctrinal knowledge was still presented within the new kerygmatic texts for students to learn (See excerpt from the kerygmatic text *My Way to God* in Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Use of Memorisation in the kerygmatic text series *My Way to God***

▪ **For Me to Learn**

*Q. What happens at the Consecration?*

*A. At the Consecration the priest offers the Sacrifice by changing bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus.*

*Figure 3. Extract from My Way to God. Book One: Teacher's Book by Australian Bishops' Committee for Education, 1964, Sydney: E. J. Dwyer.*

The Kerygmatic approach became known in Australia through several different ways. Firstly, Australians visited catechetical centres in Europe and returned with these new ideas. Archbishop James Knox and Fr. John Kelly from Melbourne were among such visitors who supported this new approach (Ryan, 1997). Secondly, theologians from Europe held seminars in Australia and also disseminated their ideas through catechetical journals (Ryan, 2001). In Australia, the De La Salle brothers commenced publication of the catechetical journal *Our Apostolate* in 1953. Johannes Hofinger (1962), a student of Josef Jungmann and influential advocate of the kerygmatic approach, also held International Study Weeks on Catechetics during 1959-1968 in various cities across the world. Eventually these ideas gained support in Australia and the kerygmatic principles were used to write a text series called *My Way to God* (Australian Bishops' Committee for Education, 1964). The Australian bishops approved this series for use in Catholic schools in late 1962 (McGrath, 2005). This text series had several engaging attributes.

**Engagement of students.**

It had been noted that the engagement of students would be enhanced through the attractive presentation and illustration of new texts, and through instruction that took account of the child's psychological development (Doyle, 1972). Such instruction needed to be visual and concrete (Hofinger, 1962). The brightly coloured texts of *My Way to God* (Australian Bishops' Committee for Education, 1964) took account of the views of the catechetical

movement and were engaging in several ways. They contained striking graphics and colourful pictures. They included activities for students such as songs to sing and stories to listen to (Cf. Figure 4). In this approach teachers were encouraged to use teaching strategies used in other curriculum areas such as mime, creative movement, dramatisation, constructing of models, singing and even excursions in order to “engage students’ imagination” (Ryan, 2001, p. 5). It was held that the first principle of good teaching involved the activity of the student (Hofinger, 1962). In keeping with this principle, the teachers of *My Way to God* (Australian Bishops’ Committee for Education, 1964) were invited to:

Remember how important it is to evoke an active response in mind and heart from the child. That response will depend largely on the way she appeals to the imagination of the child and the way she uses activity of hand and voice and body. (Australian Bishops’ Committee for Education, 1964, p. 3)

Teachers were to involve students in a three-stage process of activity: perception – presentation, assimilation – explanation and response – application (Hofinger, 1962). The first stage of this process was considered the most important as “It has to arouse the interest of the student” (Hofinger, 1962, p. 68). Interest could be captured through various ways such as a short story, a current event or interesting student experience.

The engagement of students was not only enhanced through this active and more interactive approach, it was further enhanced by a more personalized pedagogy (Cf. Figure 4). It was vitally important to the kerygmatic advocates that students be made aware of a personal invitation from God: “the child should realize that he is personally addressed and personally invited, not merely by the teacher, but by God” (Hofinger, 1962, p. 20).



**Figure 4. An example of the Personalised and Activity-based Pedagogical Approach**

**A Message for Me. From My Father**

This is My Beloved Son, hear him.

**For Me to Do**

1. Read the story of the feeding of the 5 000 in St John 6, 1-14.
2. Ask your teacher if you could act this story.
3. Draw a picture of this happening.

*Figure 4.* Extract from *My Way to God. Book One: Teacher's Book* by Australian Bishops' Committee for Education, 1964, Sydney: E. J. Dwyer.

Although this approach was clearly more engaging for students than the doctrinal approach, it too contained elements that disengaged students. Each successive year of the *My Way to God* (Australian Bishops' Committee for Education, 1964) texts saw a development of the same topics, in the same sequence. The idea underpinning this design was to ensure that the “dominant ideas stand out unmistakably” (Hofinger, 1962, p. 4) so that students would learn in greater depth the essential ideas as they progressed through the primary school years. Unfortunately, this curriculum design had the effect of disengaging students: “Many students became bored with similar material presented in the same way at each year level” (Ryan, 1997, p. 43). There were other limitations too, which led to the early demise of the kerygmatic approach in Australian Catholic schools.

**Limitations / criticisms of the approach.**

There were educational, social and theological reasons for the comparatively brief existence of the kerygmatic approach. Firstly, teachers were not adequately prepared for this new pedagogical approach or the changed content. Secondly, this approach was so different to how previous generations were taught that parents, and even older siblings, felt unable to support the learning of their child (Buchanan, 2005). Finally, Vatican II's thinking on revelation led to the realization that catechesis was more than just proclamation of kerygma: “if catechesis was to be meaningful for contemporary students in Australian Catholic schools,

it would need to emphasize and take account of the life experience and interests of students” (Ryan, 2001, p. 7). These educational, social and theological factors created the context from which a new approach to religious education would develop, life-centred catechesis. It was the central focus of this approach on the life experiences of the students, which facilitated student engagement.

## **The Life-centred Approach**

### **Introduction.**

From around 1970 religious education used pedagogical approaches that were life-centred. Two of these approaches, which were popular in Australia, were life-centred catechesis (Catholic Education Office, Melbourne 1973, 1984, 1995) and shared Christian praxis (Groome, 1980, 1998, 2007). This emphasis upon personal experience in religious education developed within broader societal, educational and theological emphases on the human person. Out of this context, the life-centred approaches emerged. Life-centred catechesis was the approach adopted in Melbourne. Student engagement was supported through certain attributes of this approach.

### **Life-centred catechesis and its application in Australia.**

Changes in society, education and theology, which are explored in this section, provided a new context for religious education. Out of this context the life-centred approaches emerged. The emphasis upon personal experience was part of a wider movement in society in which authorities were questioned and in their stead personal decision-making was encouraged (Rymarz, 2007). This was supported by the widespread interest of educators in the new humanistic psychology of Rogers (1967), Maslow (1943) and others. From humanistic psychology a “psychological spirituality” developed (Rossiter, 1999, p. 4). This spirituality sought to interpret Scripture and Theology through its relationship with contemporary life. Such a view amplified the more personalistic approach of Vatican II

wherein Revelation and faith were held to be personal activities (Engebretson et al., 2002; Rossiter, 1999).

Vatican II's renewal of theology facilitated a more person-centred religious education that moved away from the notion that religious education was only about the transmission of, and assent to, immutable truths. One of the key documents of the Second Vatican Council was the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* (Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, 1965), which was commonly known as *Dei Verbum* (1965). In this Vatican II understanding of Revelation, God in Jesus Christ reveals himself as a personal God. Our response too, through faith, is a personal one. Furthermore, this view also held that Revelation occurs in the present, through people and in the ordinary events of life (Engebretson et al., 2002).

Further, Vatican II's *Declaration on Christian Education* (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1965) stated that teachers "should also be skilled in the art of education in accordance with the discoveries of modern times" (#8); teachers were to learn about modern approaches to pedagogy from secular education. These "educational insights... (and) advances in theological discernment" (Lawlor, 2000, p. 11) were to have a profound effect on RE in Australia.

In Australia, life-centred catechesis "gained legitimacy through the Australian Bishops' document *The Renewal of Education in Faith* (1970) and *General Catechetical Directory* (1971)" (McGrath, 2005, p. 14). *The Renewal of the Education of Faith* was translated from a statement from the Italian Episcopal Conference. This advocated integrating the faith and life of people through the "concrete situations of their lives" (Australian Episcopal Conference, 1970, p. 102). "The education of faith concerns itself with everyday situations which the Christian is likely to encounter during his life, in order to offer him some guidelines that will enable him to interpret these in the light of Christ's Gospel" (Australian Episcopal Conference, 1970, p. 103). Fr. Amalorpavadass, who was the keynote speaker at

the National Catechetical Congress in Melbourne in 1973, further supported this person-centred view of revelation and faith. In this view “since God reveals in the circumstances of human life, human life is the starting point for catechesis” (Engebretson, 1997, p. 26). His catechetical pedagogy, which was developed from this view, was the basis for the Melbourne *Guidelines for religious education of students in the Archdiocese of Melbourne* (Catholic Education Office, Melbourne, 1973, 1984, 1995). These were commonly referred to as the *Guidelines*.

From the early 1970s life-centred catechesis in Melbourne, in both primary and secondary schools, used the catechetical process from the *Guidelines* (Catholic Education Office, Melbourne, 1973, 1984, 1995) that became known as the four-point plan (Cf. modified extract in Figure 5).

**Figure 5. The Four-point Plan used in Melbourne’s *Guidelines***

- *Experience Shared: Students listen to a picture storybook that focuses on sharing and remembering within the community.*
- *Reflection Deepened: Students reflect on the key elements of the story? What connections can we make between it and the story we celebrate in the Eucharist?*
- *Faith Expressed: In the Eucharistic Prayer, memory, imagination and faith come together. The climax of the prayer is the ‘anamnesis’, the remembering that becomes a reality.*
- *Insights Reinforced: Students bring various types of bread to share. Discuss the differences between leavened and unleavened bread.*

*Figure 5. Modified extract from Guidelines for religious education of students in the Archdiocese of Melbourne by Catholic Education Office, 1973, 1984, 1995, Melbourne: Archdiocese of Melbourne.*

The catechetical process began with an *Experience Shared* (sharing of a life experience related to the RE topic). A *Reflection Deepened* followed this. From this reflection upon the shared experience the process moved to *Faith Expressed*. At this stage connections between life and faith were made. Finally, learnings were consolidated through *Insights Reinforced*

(Engebretson, 1997). As can be seen by the process, the experiences of students were reflected upon and students were supported in moving from these experiences to an expression of faith. The *Guidelines* (Catholic Education Office, Melbourne, 1973, 1984, 1995) provided “structure, substance and method” (McGrath, 2005, p. 14), and as such were a very good example of the systematic catechesis expected by the Catholic Church (John Paul II, 1979, #21). Students were engaged through some of the attributes of this approach.

### **Engagement of students.**

There were many attributes of life-centred catechesis that facilitated student engagement. Its emphasis on religious education as a personal activity to be conducted in an atmosphere of care and concern for all students extended previous boundaries of the teacher – student relationship (Ryan, 1997). Efforts to make the curriculum more relevant to students’ lives had the potential to make the curriculum more appealing to students (Rossiter, 1999). Religious education was made more meaningful by focusing on issues that were important in the lives of students: “Religious education that is meaningful for students in the 1990s must seek to bring the Gospel into dialogue with the concerns of our times and with the distinctive realities, issues and concerns which students experience in their daily lives” (Little, 1995, p. iv). As in other curriculum areas, not only did teachers use modern resources to engage students, they also used such “in order to create an enthusiastic sharing of experiences” (Ryan, 1997, p. 55). For instance, in the Melbourne Archdiocese, the Catholic Education Office produced the educational resource *Let’s Go Together*. This resource included contemporary pictures and stories relevant to students, as well as activities such as Word Finds that appealed to students of this time (Rymarz, 2003). Finally, religious educators were encouraged to make use of the “best of current research, theory and practice in education” (Little, 1995, p. iv), and to utilise such to facilitate an engaging curriculum for students. Although this approach fostered student engagement through a deepened teacher-student

relationship, a relevant curriculum that emphasised the students' life experiences, and the utilisation of modern teaching techniques and resources, it too had its limitations.

### **Limitations / criticisms of the approach.**

Although many welcomed the change in emphasis to students' life experiences, a major criticism of this approach was the "reluctance of teachers to move beyond the experiential world of students" (Rymarz, 2007, p. 63). Critics claimed that the catechetical process did not transcend the sharing of life experiences and therefore key aspects of faith knowledge were not being learnt. It was felt that this was due to the emphasis on the process to the detriment of the place of content (Rossiter, 1999). The catechetical process underpinning this approach relied on a sharing of faith between believers; with religious diversity increasingly becoming the norm in Australian classrooms (Buchanan, 2012), this process became difficult to implement successfully.

While particular religion classes can develop in such a way that a certain level of faith sharing may become natural and appropriate, to presume at the start that a religion class ought to be able to share freely at this level fails to give proper respect to the pupils' personal freedom regarding faith. Such a presumption also fails to appreciate the natural range of variation in faith commitments in pupils who are not necessarily in the religion class by choice. (Rossiter, 1981, p. 7)

Such criticisms led other dioceses to seek a different life-centred approach, shared Christian praxis. Whilst this approach was contextualized in a critical education framework (Buchanan, 2005), some theorists proposed that life-centred approaches were not suitable in an increasingly pluralist society. They proposed that RE required a change in emphasis from its faith orientation to a more educational framework. The phenomenological and typological approaches offered a possible response to this situation, and presented an alternative way of engaging students in RE.

## **The Phenomenological Approach**

### **Introduction.**

In 1944 daily religious instruction in all schools was enshrined in law in the United Kingdom. Originally such instruction was Christian, but as Britain increasingly became a multicultural and multi-faith society, the effectiveness of this approach was questioned. In 1975 the *Birmingham Agreed Syllabus*, which was based on a phenomenological approach, was enshrined in law (Buchanan, 2005). Although contextual influences on religious education in Australia were quite different, it too required an approach to religious education that responded to a growing pluralistic society. Phenomenology provided a way to meet this need.

### **The phenomenological approach and its application in Australia.**

Continental Phenomenology, particularly as developed by Husserl (1958) has had a significant impact on phenomenology as this has developed in classrooms throughout the world (Lovat, 2001a). The phenomenological method has two poles. At one end of the spectrum judgement is suspended. This involves scrutiny of phenomena in an objective and neutral manner devoid of our prejudices and biases. In turn this allows the learner to operate at the other end of the spectrum by subsequently making a renewed judgement that assists in determining the essence of that which is being studied. In this way the method is one that allows movement from objectivity to subjectivity, but the latter is now informed (Lovat, 2001a, 2005). “The point of full-blown phenomenological method is that this judicial, critical and reflective assessment is only possible after the phenomena under investigation have been fully, faithfully and longitudinally described and appraised without prejudice” (Lovat, 2005, p. 48).

The work of Ninian Smart (1968, 1973) has been particularly influential in offering a way of utilizing the descriptive approach of the phenomenological method for religious

education. He set out six dimensions of religion: doctrines, myths, ethical and social beliefs, rituals and practices, experiences, and sentiments and institutions (Smart, 1973) through which knowledge and understanding of the world's religions may be accessed.

In Australia phenomenology has been utilised to study religion from the outside, focusing on its content base, as an aspect of human, social and cultural phenomena (Engebretson et al., 2002). Such an approach is “less contentious” (Elshayyal, 2007, p. 357) within the broader secular educational context of Australia than having to learn religion from within a faith perspective. Thus, in Australia during the 1970s and 1980s the phenomenological approach was influential in the development of various state-based courses in religious education (Buchanan, 2005). A degree of student autonomy was promoted through the phenomenological process; student engagement was facilitated by this freedom.

#### **Engagement of students.**

Contemporary students value autonomy and freedom (Crawford & Rossiter, 1985; Parsons & Ward, 2011; Watson, 2013). Providing them with space for an objective exploration of content, rather than a dogmatic presentation of religious truths, may facilitate student engagement (Lovat, 2001b). Phenomenology supports the engagement of students by providing a “methodology which offers sufficient distance and psychological space from the dogmatics of prescriptive and indoctrinational approaches to religious education... In a word, it allows space for education to happen” (Lovat, 2001b, p. 569). Several limitations and criticisms have been made against this approach.

#### **Limitations / criticisms of the approach.**

Religious education has been “so steeped in an enfaithing heritage” (Lovat, 2005, p. 49) in Australian education, that some claim that the full phenomenological method leading to informed subjectivity has not been fully implemented (Lovat, 2005). It is assumed that faith and religious education are, and should remain, separate realities. But, others critique



this assumption. For these, “religious education, lest it shrivel into esoteric facts taught to schoolchildren, needs both faith and nurture” (Moran, 1989, p. 108).

There is an insistence from those emphasizing the objective aspect of phenomenology to separate the subject matter being studied from the existential lives of students. “But relating the topic in the school curriculum to the learner’s experience is an obvious and unavoidable task in the process of education” (Moran, 1989, p. 105). From an educational perspective, the teaching of religion is far more effective when it relates the experience of the students with the experience of the religious group that is the focus of study (Moran, 1989).

Lastly, content selection in State based religious studies courses have been somewhat confined to the six dimensions of religion: doctrines, myths, ethical and social beliefs, rituals and practices, experiences, and sentiments and institutions, as set out by Smart (1973). This tends to disallow content based on contemporary issues. The exclusion of contemporary issues in RE classroom learning affects the relevance of course content for contemporary students (Rossiter, 1999). Curriculum relevance, when students can see connections between the curriculum and their lives outside of school, or how school relates to real life, is essential for student engagement (Dowson et al., 2005; Enright, 2012).

While the phenomenological approach has focused on content and knowledge, it is the typological approach (Habel & Moore, 1982) that has identified how this could be implemented in religious education classrooms. With its objective approach, typology has provided some unique factors through which students may be engaged in religious education.

## **The Typological Approach**

### **Introduction.**

The phenomenological approach required a method that would support its implementation in the religious education classroom. Two Australian academics focused on

this question and came up with the typological approach (Habel & Moore, 1982). This approach engages students through its particular methodology and content.

### **The typological approach and its application in Australia.**

The typological approach identified “types” or components of phenomena that are common to various religious traditions; these types would form the framework used to gain insight into a particular religion (Buchanan, 2005). In this theory, it was proposed that eight different types were shared by the various religions. These types are: “beliefs, texts, stories, ethics, ritual, symbols, social structure, and experience” (Habel & Moore, 1982, p. 71). Habel and Moore (1982) admitted similarities between their eight types and Smart’s six dimensions, and their indebtedness to the seminal work of Smart. However, they stated that the difference between these two approaches was that their work was specifically about classifying religious phenomena, which was not the intention of Smart. Further, typological theory is focused on providing a method of study of religion in classrooms. Therefore the emphasis is on process rather than content, providing students with the “ingredients with which to construct and evaluate various (religious) theories” (Habel & Moore, 1982, p. 22). The method used in typology, with its emphasis on a process that included both cognitive and affective elements, was a strength of this approach (Lovat, 2001a, 2005, 2009).

The typological method was developed to study religion within the classroom context. This method includes both cognitive and affective components. As outsiders to the religion under study, the method requires a “cross-cultural ‘translation’” through a vocabulary that is technical enough to adequately classify phenomena (Habel & Moore, 1982, p. 49). This classification is to facilitate interpretation. Eight major cognitive skills are used in the study of individual phenomena. These are: “selection, observation, description, component analysis, structural synthesis, functional synthesis, religious synthesis and social synthesis” (Habel & Moore, 1982, p. 51).

Typological method also includes essential attitudinal skills, which have been taken from phenomenology. These affective skills are: “bracketing (or epoche), empathy imaginative identification (or the eidetic vision)” (Habel & Moore, 1982, p. 62).

As well as influencing the development of state accredited courses in religion, the text books in the secondary level of the *To Know Worship and Love* series are underpinned by phenomenological and typological theories (Buchanan, 2005, 2010; Ryan, 2007).

### **Engagement of students.**

A typological approach may be engaging for students through the two interrelated aspects of its methodology, cognition and affectivity. Such allows for use of this method in students’ cognitive and affective development. For instance, students may be involved to a greater extent in learning about a religion through such practices as “action-thinking” (Habel & Moore, 1982, p. 224), whereby they prepare and cook a sacred meal as this may be eaten in a particular religion.

It has been found that student engagement and interest improves when they are involved in an approach based on typology (Ryan, 1997). Reasons for this include the availability of suitable learning and teaching resources and texts. Also, the introduction of topics / content which are different to those previously studied supports student engagement. For instance, students may be engaged through the content chosen, such as the selection of sacred stories that have a “strong ‘entertainment’ value” (Habel & Moore, 1982, p. 223).

As with phenomenology, it has been suggested that a positive aspect of this approach has been the recognition that student engagement requires an approach to religious education that considers their need for “existential privacy” (Habel & Moore, 1982, p. 66). That is, the opportunity to study religion in a context that does not demand too much of a personal nature from students, and allows the freedom to explore religious themes in a critical manner not previously permissible in denominational schools, is seen as supporting engagement.

Others though, believe that the lack of personal relevance and links with personal experiences in this approach lead to student disengagement (Moran, 1989; Rossiter, 1999; Ryan, 1997).

Since they require a dispassionate study of phenomena, the amount of material required which merely describes the various functions and forms of religion can lead to boredom and lack of interest in students who do not learn in analytical or comparative ways...the foundation upon which these studies are based preclude too much involvement of the personal in favour of dispassionate study (Ryan, 1997, p. 111).

As will be explored further in the next section, an approach to religious education that relies on the typology of Habel and Moore (1982) may be limited by other factors.

#### **Limitations / criticisms of the approach.**

Firstly, it will be difficult for teachers to depth the language and logic of more than one religion; many people take years to gain mastery of one religion (Moran, 1989). Similarly, it will be extremely challenging for students to engage in a descriptive and analytical study of several religions, when they may yet be literate in one religious tradition (Ryan, 1997). Secondly, with its emphasis on a social science methodology, and to the extent that it does not transcend descriptive content, typology has been criticized for being more like a social studies program than religious education. Finally, in contrast to objective studies of RE such as typology, other approaches have highlighted the need for an experiential or existential approach to engage students. Proponents of these approaches were concerned with making religion “interesting, and relevant to the student’s life” (Moran, 1989, p. 97; Rossiter, 1999).

In contrast with the preceding approaches, other theorists have proposed an approach that utilizes aspects of the objective and / or experiential approaches, but with an emphasis on

an educational approach to religious education. An educational approach to religious education has much to offer in terms of engaging students.

## **A Text-based Educational Approach**

### **Introduction.**

Proceeding from the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) the Congregation for Catholic Education made a distinction between religious and secular education (Buchanan, 2015). Secular education seeks to develop physical, moral and intellectual capabilities. Whilst Christian education also pursues these educational aims, it has the following as its principal purpose: that students grow in their knowledge of God, and that they worship and give witness to God in their lives (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1965). Religious education in this context aims to foster an education in faith. It is about catechesis: the sharing of faith between believers. It therefore emphasises and seeks to develop the faith of the believer and “a total commitment of one’s whole being to the person of Christ” (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 50). Classroom RE in a Catholic school has a distinct responsibility to nurture this purpose.

Discussion regarding religious education from the two perspectives of faith and education had been occurring amongst educational theorists for some period, and has continued into more recent times (Buchanan, 2012). Beginning in the 1970s, some theorists were calling for an “educational reappraisal of the activities of the religion classroom” (Ryan, 1997, p. 85). Theorists sought an educational emphasis in the teaching and learning of religious education (Barry, 1997; Barry, Brennan, & Sunter, 2003; Rossiter, 1981). In the writings of the Catholic Church’s Congregation for Catholic Education, a distinction between catechesis and religious instruction, and the most suitable context for each, was developing (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1990; Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982). In the Melbourne Archdiocese this distinction was realized in the introduction of a

knowledge-centred, text-based, educational approach to religious education (Buchanan, 2003). This approach has had significant implications for the engagement of contemporary students in religious education.

**A text-based educational approach and its application in Australia.**

***Informed by the complementarity and distinction between catechesis and religious instruction.***

The curriculum framework *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008) was influenced by the enfaithing and knowledge-centred approaches to religious education which have been surveyed in this chapter. The enfaithing approaches emphasised the development of faith and were underpinned by a catechetical context in which it was presumed that believers were able to share their faith with each other (Engebretson et al., 2002). In contrast, knowledge-centred approaches emphasised the cognitive and educational aspects of religious instruction (Rossiter, 1999). In this section the complementarity and growing distinction between catechesis and religious instruction, and the impact this had on religious education, is explored.

In 1982 the Congregation for Catholic Education published the document, *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith*, in which it was suggested for the first time that a distinction existed between catechesis and religious instruction: “the teaching of the Catholic religion, distinct from and at the same time complementary to catechesis so-called, ought to be part of the curriculum of every school” (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982, para. 58). This distinction was further developed by the Congregation in its 1990 publication, *The religious dimension of education in a Catholic school*. This stated that catechesis and religious instruction were complementary yet distinct from each other: “there is a close connection, and at the same time a clear distinction, between religious instruction and catechesis” (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1990, para. 55). It was argued that

religious education could be considered from two viewpoints (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1990). The first was from the point of view that religious education is about an education in faith, which took the form of a faith oriented, catechetical approach. The aim of this approach was spiritual maturity. The most likely context for this was the local church community. In contrast, “the aim of the school, however, is knowledge” (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1990, para. 55). The Congregation for the Clergy (1997) nuanced this further by advocating for an intellectually demanding religious education. Therefore, RE in schools should “appear as a scholastic discipline with the same systematic demands and the same rigour as other disciplines” (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, para. 73). Thus in the second viewpoint, wherein religious education is concerned primarily with an education in religion, the educational perspective and knowledge are emphasised (Rossiter, 1999). In contemporary religious education, an education in faith and catechesis are not excluded or denied, rather the emphasis is on the educational elements of religious education (Buchanan, 2015; Engebretson et al., 2002). Rather than excluding the faith dimension, an emphasis on knowledge of the Christian tradition may in fact support faith development according to Fowler’s *Faith Development Theory* (Durka, 2004; Fowler, 1981, 2004). This theory posits that faith has patterns or stages of development that are broadly distinguishable and which persons may progress through over the course of their lives (Fowler, 1981, 2004). According to this theory “Movement in stage development, properly understood, is a by-product of teaching the substance and the practices of faith” (Fowler, 2004, p. 417). A creative interaction between the two viewpoints of RE was sought.

A clearer differentiation between religious education and catechesis could foster more authentic and creative development of both aspects (catechesis and religious education)...a revision of the foundations for religious education in Catholic schools would not want to exclude catechesis but would want to critically determine the

possibilities and limitations for ‘faith-sharing’ within the matrix of a more educational role for religion in the school...a creative tension or dialectic between faith-oriented and educational concerns is needed. (Rossiter, 1981, p. 2)

This creative tension was realised in the Archdiocese of Melbourne through the production of the curriculum framework *Coming to Know, Worship and Love. A Religious Education Framework for Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne* (CEO, 2008). Whilst catechesis remained as the broad goal of religious education, this framework was underpinned by an educational approach with a cognitive emphasis.

***An educational approach and a cognitive emphasis within a catechetical framework.***

With the introduction in Australia of outcomes based education, learning in all areas of the curriculum has become more focused on knowledge outcomes and the cognitive aspect of learning (Rossiter, 1999). In religious education too, the need for an approach that was more cognitive was being called for (Rymarz, 2007). A cognitive approach would pass on the knowledge, the “riches of the wisdom tradition” (Finlay, 2002, 2005, p. 23). Many diocesan RE programs in recent years have emphasized the cognitive domain (de Souza, 2005; NCEC, 2008). The cognitive dimension was the emphasis in the Melbourne Archdiocese with the introduction of the text-based series *To Know Worship and Love* (CEO, 2001). The archbishop at this time, Archbishop Pell, intended to introduce into the Melbourne Archdiocese a text-based curriculum that would be implemented in both primary and secondary schools. This approach would have a “distinctive emphasis on the cognitive dimension of learning, that is, on knowing the content of Catholic teaching on faith and morals” (Pell, 2001, p. 5).

Whilst this approach emphasised knowledge, this was to occur within a catechetical framework (Buchanan, 2012; Pell, 2001). Therefore, the perceived role of religious educators



in the Archdiocese of Melbourne was expressed in terms which described them as educators in faith: “The task of the religious educators then, is to effectively draw from these fields of revelation and to make them meaningful for students, leading them to respond in faith to the God who calls” (CEO, 2001, p. 3). The importance of catechesis is highlighted in the text-based curriculum for RE, *To Know Worship and Love: Teaching Companion* (CEO, 2001). It stated that “catechesis remains the broad goal of religious education in the primary sector” (CEO, 2001, p. 1). As explained further on in this resource, in Levels One and Two of the primary years (Preparatory to Year Two) the approach is “essentially catechetical” (CEO, 2001, p. 6). Whilst a more educational focus does develop over the course of the compulsory years of schooling, the catechetical framework remains: “As the program evolves the focus becomes more educational. This is clearer in levels three and four, and stronger in the secondary years, but the catechetical goals remain as the motivating vision’ (CEO, 2001, p. 6). Therefore, the educational aspect of religious education was emphasised, but this was still to occur within a catechetical context (Buchanan, 2006). These dual aspects of this approach were reiterated in the *Archbishop’s Letter* in the subsequent curriculum framework *Coming to Know, Worship and Love. A Religious Education Framework for Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne* (CEO, 2008). This states that the curriculum framework is to support both an “education in faith” and “the educational approach of the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS)” which was the curriculum framework for all students in the state of Victoria at that time (CEO, 2008, p. iii). An educational emphasis was advocated, but this was to occur within a catechetical context. The distinguishing feature associated with learning and teaching in classroom religious education was this interplay between knowledge and an educational emphasis with catechesis and an education in faith.

The curriculum framework *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008) is a “distinct yet related paradigm” (Buchanan, 2005, p. 20). It has developed from previous

approaches to religious education and has also been influenced by the thinking of the Catholic Church's Congregation for Catholic Education and educational theorists regarding the relationship of faith and education with religious education. Catechesis and an education in faith remain as the broad goal of religious education (CEO, 2008). Therefore, an orientation toward the development of faith is essential in this approach to contemporary RE classroom learning (Buchanan, 2012). Within this catechetical framework, its curriculum and pedagogy is aligned with the educational approach of all other disciplines in the Victorian state curriculum. As with these other subject areas, it is a knowledge-centred, outcomes-based approach. An educational approach has certain engaging elements for contemporary students.

#### **Engagement of students.**

An educational approach to religious education may engage students through either its pedagogy or curriculum. With this approach the possibilities for engaging students are the same for RE as they are for other curriculum areas. Therefore RE may employ educational ideas and approaches that have been successfully used in other subjects to facilitate student engagement (Ryan, 2005). This may be as simple as the use of stimulus materials which may assist in motivating students, the use of art to engage the imagination and to reflect on and / or motivate us to transform reality, or as involved as an open, critical inquiry (Crawford & Rossiter, 1985; Durka, 2014).

When teaching adolescents, consideration needs to be given to the "sense of freedom, individuality and autonomy which is celebrated and valued in their culture" (Crawford & Rossiter, 1985, p. 12). Students will be disengaged therefore by an approach that they feel imposes upon or restricts their personal freedom. A method that takes seriously student autonomy and choice is also more engaging for primary students (Delisle, 2012; Parsons & Ward, 2011; Watson, 2013). It has been suggested that such a method is one that allows for

open-ended, critical investigations; the more objective focus of such an approach is engaging as it also facilitates the personal involvement of students (Crawford & Rossiter, 1985). Inquiry-based learning has been found to be an engaging strategy in the primary sector (Ireland, Watters, Brownlee, & Lupton, 2012). An inquiry-based pedagogy underpins *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008).

Similarly, with regard to curriculum content and student engagement, students' experiences and their interests need to be recognized and included in religious education (Crawford & Rossiter, 1985).

The 1960s were not entirely wrong in their demand that the students' experience and interests be recognized. If one is going to teach religion, the attitudes of today's youth cannot be the curriculum content; but neither can those attitudes be neglected when curriculum designers try to present a particular religion (Moran, 1989, p. 97).

An educational approach to religious education can be inclusive of students' experiences and interests; such an approach may facilitate student engagement. Students were engaged in other curriculum areas when learning incorporated the interests they had and was responsive to their lives (Enright, 2012).

The current study sought to identify factors that influenced the engagement of years five and six students in the religious education curriculum framework, *Coming to Know, Worship, and Love* (CEO, 2008). Given the catechetical framework and the educational emphasis underpinning this approach, a related aim of this study was to ascertain factors that may be unique to RE and those that may align with other curriculum areas.

Parents have a significant role in religious education. They are considered by the Catholic Church to be the "primary and principal educators" of their children (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1965, para. 3). In the next section parental influence on

student engagement will be explored and their role in this study of factors that facilitated the engagement of students in RE classroom learning will be outlined.

### **Parental Influence on Student Engagement.**

Parents can have a substantial impact on the educational outcomes of their children (Fan & Williams, 2010; Fan et al., 2011; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). These outcomes include increased motivation, engagement and higher academic achievement (Shoup et al., 2009). However, there is a distinction between parental involvement with the school and parental engagement with their child's learning. It is the latter that influences student engagement (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Harris & Goodall, 2008).

Parental involvement with the school is about the various ways that they may be active with the school through their physical presence (Harris & Goodall, 2008). These ways include assisting with school activities such as participation in working bees or attendance at parent – teacher interviews. In contrast, parental engagement with their child's learning involves the support and interest a parent gives to their learning at home. It is this type of interaction that has the greatest impact on student outcomes such as engagement (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). The actions which typify parental engagement do not occur in response to the dictates of the school, but rather through parents' perception that this is part of their role: "This point is characterised by the greatest exercise of parental agency. Parents' actions may be informed by the school, or based on information provided by the school, but the choice of action and involvement remains with the parent" (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014, p. 405). In the following section, the role of parents in this case study is explored.

### **The role of parents in this case study.**

As stated in the Introduction to this thesis, in the year prior to the collection of data using the *Student Survey – Education in Faith*, over 95% of the students from the school that is the focus of this study were baptized Catholics; this is well above the average (78.4% in

2005) for primary schools (CECV, 2006c). According to the School Improvement Framework Survey (Insight SRC, 2009), the parents from this school highly valued religious activities such as prayer and the celebration of liturgies relative to other Victorian Catholic primary schools (Cf. Figure 1). Given this data it is possible that parents were highly interested in what their child was learning in the RE classroom. It may be that this interest influenced the preparedness of students to engage in the RE classroom. However, the parents have had little, if any, influence on student engagement in the RE classroom experiences of learning and teaching. The focus of this case study was oriented toward the students' and teachers' perceptions of the factors that engaged students in RE classroom learning; it was directed toward what is happening inside the RE classroom to engage students in learning rather than on possible outside influences such as that of parents. This research was delimited to year five / six students and their RE teachers in a particular Catholic primary school in Melbourne, Australia. Therefore, the impact that parents may have on student engagement in RE learning is beyond the parameters of this research.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter was to contextualise current RE pedagogy and curriculum, expressed in the curriculum framework *Coming to Know, Worship, and Love* (CEO, 2008), within the development of past curricula and pedagogical approaches to RE in Australia. Knowledge of these distinct yet related approaches has enabled understanding of their influence on the current approach to RE. An exploration of these past approaches revealed a broad range of elements that led to student engagement / disengagement in RE learning. The present investigation of factors that facilitated the engagement of year five and six students in an RE curriculum was therefore situated within this broad understanding. Three major influences impacted on the current approach to pedagogy and curriculum in the Melbourne Archdiocese: enfaithing approaches, knowledge-centred approaches, and an

educational emphasis in religious education. The impact of each of these will be summarised in this conclusion.

Two major paradigms of religious education have been explored in this chapter: enfaithing approaches and knowledge-centred approaches (Healy, 2011). The curriculum framework *Coming to Know, Worship, and Love* (CEO, 2008) was explicitly linked with past enfaithing approaches: it has a catechetical framework and catechesis is the broad goal in the primary years (CEO, 2001, 2008).

Knowledge-centred approaches and the recognition of the need for a more cognitive emphasis was another major influence in RE. Whilst the textbooks in the secondary level of the *To Know Worship and Love* series are underpinned by phenomenological and typological theories, the primary texts are not (Buchanan, 2005). However, the curriculum framework used in the primary years has been influenced by these knowledge-centred approaches and the call for a more cognitive approach to RE (Rymarz, 2007). The framework was designed to have a “distinctive emphasis on the cognitive dimension of learning, that is, on knowing the content of Catholic teaching on faith and morals” (Pell, 2001, p. 5). Knowledge of content is one of the major emphases in the framework.

*Coming to Know, Worship, and Love* (CEO, 2008) was also influenced by a call for an educational emphasis in religious education (Engebretson et al., 2002; Rossiter, 1981; Ryan, 1997, 2005). In contemporary religious education, an education in faith and catechesis are not excluded or denied, rather the emphasis is on the educational elements of religious education (Buchanan, 2006; Engebretson et al., 2002; Rossiter, 1999). *Coming to Know, Worship, and Love* (CEO, 2008) was aligned with the curriculum framework used for all students in the state of Victoria, the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS). This educational alignment provided RE teachers with the opportunity to engage students through methods and strategies successfully utilised in other curriculum areas.

The curriculum framework used in the Archdiocese of Melbourne was influenced by past approaches to RE pedagogy and curriculum. Exploration of these approaches identified a broad range of elements that led to student engagement / disengagement in RE. The focus of this research was on determining some key factors that engaged year five and six students as they participated in the current RE curriculum framework *Coming to Know, Worship, and Love* (CEO, 2008). The insights from past approaches have contributed to a contextual understanding of these factors.

In the next chapter the literature that contributes to an understanding of this investigation into factors that engaged students in RE learning is explored.

## Chapter Two

### Review of the Literature

#### Introduction

There has been a range of approaches to RE in Australia over the past century. In the previous chapter, student engagement / disengagement was explored in relation to these past interrelated approaches to RE, and to the current curriculum framework in the Archdiocese of Melbourne, *Coming to Know, Worship, and Love* (CEO, 2008).

The purpose of this chapter is to explore literature that contributes to an understanding of this study. As the aim of this qualitative study was to identify factors that influenced the engagement of year five / six students in an RE classroom curriculum, this chapter will review literature concerned with the engagement of middle years students in classroom learning. In the Australian educational context, the middle years refer to students in years five to nine (Culican et al., 2001); years five and six are the last two years of primary schooling (the initial stage of middle schooling) whilst years seven, eight and nine are the first three years of secondary schooling. Within this broad context of the middle years, upper primary students have been distinguished from adolescent secondary students, in some of the literature, through use of the term early adolescents (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011). Therefore this review will also explore pertinent literature specifically related to the engagement of upper primary students. This literature review provided the necessary background for exploring, discussing and analysing the factors that engaged year five / six students in an RE curriculum.

As outlined in the introduction to this thesis, engagement is a multidimensional construct; three interrelated dimensions - affect, behaviour and cognition – constitute a prevalent view of engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). Whilst these three dimensions of engagement have been defined in the literature in various ways (Fredricks et al., 2004), the following definitions have been applied to this study of factors that engaged students in RE



learning. Affective engagement relates to emotional responses such as enthusiasm, enjoyment and interest in a task (Fredricks et al., 2004). Behavioural engagement refers to student involvement in a learning task, which may be evident in attributes such as student effort and persistence, and participation in class (Russell et al., 2005). Cognitive engagement includes “deliberate task-specific thinking that a student undertakes while participating in a classroom activity” (Helme & Clarke, 2001, p. 136). Research that fosters engagement in these terms will be the focus of this literature review. The following conceptual framework provides a new perspective on the literature and has been used to further determine the inclusion and exclusion of literature.

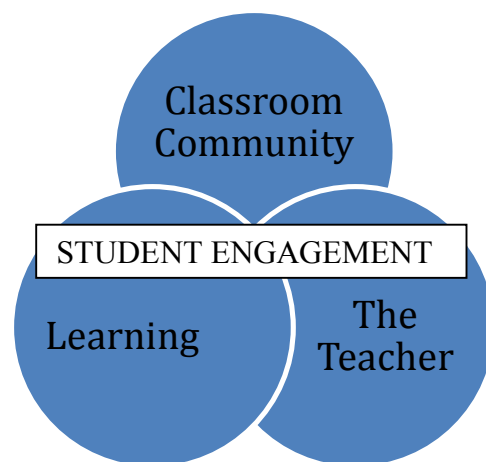
### **Conceptual Framework**

The initial stimulus for the conceptual framework of this study came from the report on the research project *Literacy and Learning in the Middle Years* (Culican et al., 2001). Culican et al., (2001) provided a framework that consisted of three key themes. The key themes were: identity, community, and learning. Identity was understood as the students’ understanding of “who they are” and their core beliefs and values (Culican et al., 2001, p. 28). The community of adolescent learners built on “real life” experiences in social, local community and global contexts (Culican et al., 2001, p. 83). Learning and the cognitive development that typified middle years’ learners, such as authenticity (relating the curriculum to real life contexts) also supported student engagement (Culican et al., 2001). These themes emerged from the authors’ review of the research into engagement and learning in the middle years of schooling. As these themes were integrally related to the issue of student engagement in the middle years, this framework initially resonated with the present study of selected factors that engaged year five / six students in an RE curriculum.

Whilst accepting the validity of this framework for the engagement and learning of literacy for students in the middle years, the report of Culican et al. (2001) emphasised

adolescent learners who were in the final stages of the middle years. In other literature secondary students from years seven to nine were termed adolescent (Faircloth, 2009; McHugh et al., 2013). In contrast, the upper primary students in this study were in the initial phase of the middle years of schooling; these students have been classed as early adolescents in some of the literature (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011). A further examination of the literature revealed a different set of key factors impacted upon these students. This review identified that three interrelated key themes were important for the engagement of year five / six students in classroom learning: the classroom community; learning; and the teacher. These key themes and their interrelationship are represented diagrammatically in Figure 6.

**Figure 6. Three Interrelated Key Themes from the Literature Facilitated Student Engagement in Years 5 and 6.**



Following data collection and analysis this conceptual framework was tested to see if it provided a useful framework to discuss and analyse factors which influenced the engagement of year five / six students in a classroom based RE curriculum. This process confirmed that this conceptual framework, rather than that of Culican et al. (2001), was the most appropriate for this study. Whilst both frameworks, and this study, confirmed the importance of learning as a key factor that supported student engagement (Parsons & Ward, 2011; Watson, 2013), there were significant points of departure between the two frameworks.

Although student identity has been identified as supporting engagement in the primary years (Faircloth & Miller, 2011), identity was more prominent in studies related to adolescent engagement (Culican et al., 2001; Faircloth, 2009; Sullivan, Tobias, & McDonough, 2006) and was only an emergent factor in this study. Rather than the broader community of adolescents supporting engagement (Culican et al., 2001), year five / six students were engaged through the interactions and relationships within their classroom community both within this study and in the literature (Reyes et al., 2012; Zhang & Dougherty Stahl, 2012). While implicit in the framework of Culican et al., (2001), the teacher's role was significant for student engagement in this study and in the literature (Fadlelmula, 2010; Ireland et al., 2012). Therefore, in the following section the pertinent literature related to the three interrelated key themes that constitute the conceptual framework of this literature review – classroom community, learning and the teacher – is explored.

## **Classroom Community**

### **Introduction.**

The *classroom community* consists of teacher-student and student-student relationships and interactions. These classroom relationships and interactions have had a significant influence on student engagement (McHugh et al., 2013; Reyes et al., 2012; Zhang & Dougherty Stahl, 2012). The aim of this study was to identify factors that influenced the engagement of year five / six students in the curriculum framework *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008). A related aim of this study was to explore the potential for the classroom community to impact on student engagement in the religious education classroom. In the literature the following key elements of the classroom community supported student engagement across the middle years. They were: a sense of belonging (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Faircloth, 2009; Juvonen, 2006); classroom emotional climate (Reyes et al., 2012; Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008); the teacher-student

relationship (Delisle, 2012; McHugh et al., 2013); peer relationships (Faircloth, 2009; Wang & Eccles, 2012); and classroom discourse (Smart & Marshall, 2013; Wilson & Smetana, 2011; Zhang & Dougherty Stahl, 2012). Due to the central role of the teacher in classroom discourse this element of engaging practice will be discussed as part of the third key theme, the teacher. Furthermore, for reasons outlined in the next sub-section, a sense of belonging and peer relationships were excluded as they were not central to this review.

Over the past two decades scholars have argued that students are likely to be motivated and engaged through a sense of belonging (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Faircloth, 2009; Juvonen, 2006; Newman & Newman, 2001). Belonging – or connectedness – is understood to involve an affectively positive, personal connection between a student and their learning experiences and environment. This connection is perceived by some students to be supportive of their engagement in learning in that setting (Faircloth, 2009). Peer and teacher-student relationships supported affective outcomes such as a sense of belonging at both a school and classroom level (Hughes & Chen, 2011). Affective engagement has been defined in some of the literature in terms of belonging (Wang & Eccles, 2012). However, as outlined at the beginning of this chapter, affective engagement in this study relates to emotional responses such as enthusiasm, enjoyment and interest in a task (Fredricks et al., 2004) rather than a sense of belonging. A sense of belonging was not an affective outcome that this study sought to investigate.

Belonging and peer relationships featured in the literature as important factors for adolescent engagement (Faircloth, 2009; Sullivan et al., 2005, 2006, 2009; Wang & Eccles, 2012). The adolescent search for identity was found to facilitate belonging (Faircloth, 2009). Feelings of support and acceptance by peers also promoted this outcome (Wang & Eccles, 2012). The focus of this study was on year five / six students. Therefore this aspect of the literature was not essential for this study. Furthermore, rather than peer relationships, it was

peer learning interactions which supported the engagement of year five / six students in this study.

The following section will therefore focus on the two key factors, about which both this study and the literature concur, have impacted positively on the engagement of year five / six students: classroom emotional climate; and the teacher-student relationship.

### **Classroom emotional climate.**

#### ***Introduction.***

Student engagement in learning is increased when they are in a positive and supportive *classroom emotional climate*. Classroom emotional climate (CEC) is “characterised by warm, respectful, and emotionally supportive relationships” (Reyes et al., 2012, p. 710). Typically classrooms with high CEC have created a sense of community where positive relationships are observable and students’ needs are met. Positive relationships are personal; students perceive that others in the classroom community know and care about them as learners and as people (Blum, 2005). Students in these classrooms are engaged and interested learners (Reyes et al., 2012).

#### ***Classroom emotional climate and self-determination theory.***

Self-determination theory has been used to explain why CEC is instrumental to student engagement (Faircloth, 2009; Reyes et al., 2012). According to this theory, major human drives (i.e., competence, relatedness, and autonomy) must be fulfilled before positive schooling outcomes such as motivation and engagement are consistently realised (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 1985). Using Maslow’s (1999) hierarchy of needs to explain this theory, when the basic human need for relatedness is realised, motivation and engagement may ensue (Anderman & Freeman, 2004; Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Juvonen, 2006). As posited in the theory of self-determination, students in classrooms where CEC was apparent and their need for relatedness was met, expressed interest and enthusiasm toward

their learning and were more engaged than students with poor relationships in the classroom (Curby et al., 2009; Klem & Connell, 2004).

***Classroom emotional climate: positive climate, teacher sensitivity and regard for student perspectives.***

In a study involving fifth and sixth grade students in the United States of America, it was found that students were more engaged in classrooms with high CEC than those with low CEC (Reyes et al., 2012). Three dimensions of the classroom emotional climate were analysed following classroom observations: positive climate (warmth of classroom relationships); teacher sensitivity (teacher responsiveness to students' social and academic requirements); and teacher regard for student perspectives (student interests and ideas were considered in the classroom). Students in classrooms with these features (i.e. high in CEC) were engaged in learning (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Reyes et al., 2012; Skinner et al., 2008).

Studies involving pre-school and early primary students have measured CEC using classroom observation (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Hindman, Skibbe, Miller, & Zimmerman, 2010; Mashburn et al., 2008). However, other research in this area has primarily relied on measuring CEC through student ratings (Reyes et al., 2012). This is problematic given that CEC is a classroom, rather than individual, level variable. Reyes et al. (2012) overcame this limitation through observation and analysis of CEC at a classroom level. Classroom observation was also used in the current multi-method study. However, whilst the approach of Reyes et al., (2012) focused on teacher actions which influenced CEC and student engagement, this study also sought to understand whether other aspects of CEC and / or student actions, impacted on the engagement of year five / six students in the RE classroom.

Students in classrooms that are high in CEC (positive climate, teacher sensitivity and teacher regard for student perspectives) are more engaged than those with low CEC (Hindman et al., 2010; Reyes et al., 2012; Skinner et al., 2008). As posited in the theory of

self-determination, student engagement is also enabled when students' need for positive relationships are fulfilled (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 1985). Positive relationships occur in classrooms that are high in CEC. Students were engaged in these learning environments (Reyes et al., 2012). This study investigated aspects of the classroom emotional climate that engaged year five / six students in the RE classroom. Positive teacher-student relationships are an important aspect of CEC that facilitate student engagement (Klem & Connell, 2004; Wang & Eccles, 2012). Teachers also use this relationship to demand student effort and engagement through academic press (Lee, 2012). The next sub-section will explore this link between the teacher-student relationship and student engagement.

### **Teacher-student relationship.**

#### ***Introduction.***

Across three decades the teacher-student relationship has been found to have a significant effect on student engagement (Juvonen, 2006; Hill et al., 1996; Wang & Eccles, 2012). This relationship may be understood in terms of two dimensions: responsiveness and demandingness. The dimension of responsiveness is concerned with the teacher responding to students' personal and academic needs (Blum, 2005; McHugh et al., 2013; Wang & Eccles, 2012). The dimension of demandingness involves the setting of high expectations for student achievement. This demandingness or academic emphasis on student achievement by teachers is known as academic press (Lee, 2012). These two dimensions of the teacher-student relationship are outlined in this sub-section.

#### ***The responsiveness of the teacher.***

For more than twenty years concerns have been raised about the apparent decline in school engagement across the middle years (Hill, Holmes-Smith, & Rowe, 1993). It has been determined that this is a developmental trend rather than due to cohort differences (Wang and Eccles, 2012). Whilst supportive teachers reduced these declines (Wang & Eccles, 2012), it

appears that the teacher-student relationship is deteriorating by the time students reach the end of their primary schooling (Spilt, Hughes, Wu, & Kwok, 2012). However, teachers' awareness of and response to students' personality and their social and academic needs may facilitate a relationship that enhances student engagement in the upper primary years (Zee, Koomen, & Van der Veen, 2013).

The teacher-student relationship quality (TSRQ) impacts on the degree of student engagement (Hughes, Luo, Kwok, & Loyd, 2008). A meta-analysis of 99 studies from 1990 to 2010 supported the association between TSRQ and student engagement (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011). However, most studies of primary aged students have relied on teacher reports of TSRQ (Hughes, Wu, Kwok, Villarreal, & Johnson, 2012), commonly using surveys to measure this association. Hughes and Chen (2011) typify this approach. They used a teacher survey to gauge positive affective relationships between teachers and their grade two to four students. The TSRQ survey had two scales: support and conflict (an example item for support was: "I enjoy being with this child", and for conflict: "I often need to discipline this child"). Rather than being reliant solely on teacher report of relationship quality, some studies have also surveyed primary aged students (years two to five) using the two scales of support and conflict (Hughes et al., 2012; Wu, Hughes, and Kwok, 2010). When both teachers and students reported their relationship to be positive, students were more engaged than peers who rated this relationship as low (Wu et al., 2010). This relationship has a positive effect on all elements of engagement.

Teacher responsiveness promotes the behavioural and affective elements of student engagement (Reyes et al., 2012; Wu et al., 2010). Whilst studies attest that the cognitive engagement of students also increased when they perceived that they had the support and involvement of their teacher in their learning (Hill et al., 1996; Stipek, 2002; Wang & Eccles, 2012), this connection between teacher responsiveness and cognitive engagement was



questioned in Wang and Holcombe's (2010) study of year seven and eight students. However, rather than measure the two aspects of teacher responsiveness (academic and social), the three items measuring responsiveness on the self-administered questionnaire focused only on students' perceptions as to whether teachers supported them when they had personal or social difficulties.

An alternative, current approach to measuring the teacher-student relationship involves adult observation of the classroom using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) (Hamre & Pianta, 2005, 2010; Mashburn et al., 2008; Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008; Reyes et al., 2012). One of the dimensions of this tool is *teacher sensitivity*. Teacher sensitivity measures the extent to which teachers were observed in the classroom showing awareness of and responsiveness to students' social and academic needs. This form of responsiveness promoted student engagement in learning (Reyes et al., 2012). While it is recognised that such studies provide some important data regarding the link between teacher-student relationships and student engagement, they lack students' perspectives and experiences as to what aspects of this relationship enhanced their engagement in learning (McHugh et al., 2013). Open-ended surveys and focus group discussions have been used to explore these perspectives (Faircloth, 2009; McHugh et al., 2013). Whilst the subjects of these studies were adolescents, students' perspectives provided a possible point of comparison with what teacher responsiveness may look like in a year five / six composite classroom; for this reason these studies were included in this review.

The quality of the teacher-student relationship was enhanced through teachers' effortful engagement (McHugh et al., 2013). This involved the active and deliberate efforts to relate with students on an interpersonal level and show care. Recognition by students of these efforts which enacted care impacted on their decision to engage in learning or not (Faircloth, 2009; McHugh et al., 2013). Caring is central to a supportive teacher-student relationship.

However, a distinction needs to be made between “aesthetic care” and “authentic care” (Toshalis, 2012, pp. 3-4). Aesthetic care is expressed through sentimental language that fails to result in effective care-giving. Authentic care results in actions that show genuine consideration of the needs of the one being cared for. These efforts may have been as small as assisting a student with a challenging task or taking the time to enquire as to how a student was feeling. Through these interactions students could see that their teacher cared about them and their success in the classroom (Faircloth, 2009; McHugh et al., 2013). Students’ perception of how respectfully they believed their teacher was treating them was also important for the engagement of middle years students.

The extent to which efforts are made (and seen to be made) to communicate respectfully with students in a way which recognises and accepts ‘where they are at’ is a key factor in whether or not middle year students are prepared to engage (Siemon et al., 2001, p. 109).

Students will engage if they perceive that their teacher responds to them through respectful interactions.

A limitation of these studies was that they all involved adolescent students; therefore, this investigation sought to explore this gap in the literature and to ascertain whether teacher effort and authentic care had a similar impact on the engagement of year five / six students in the RE classroom. As well as developing an understanding of student perspectives regarding the impact of positive and supportive teacher-student relationships on student engagement, the present study sought to enrich these perspectives through the views of teachers and to deepen the understanding of salient themes through classroom observation. Teacher demandingness, which is explored in the next sub-section, also supported student engagement.

### *Teacher demandingness or academic press.*

As discussed in the previous section, many recent studies have reported that teacher responsiveness facilitates student engagement (Hughes et al., 2012; Reyes et al., 2012; Roorda et al., 2011; Zee et al., 2013). Supportive teacher-student relationships have long been associated with positive student outcomes such as engagement and academic success (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995; Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Other studies have emphasised the importance of academic press (teachers' high expectations of students and the pressure they place on students to achieve academic excellence) for student engagement and learning (Goddard, Sweetland, & Hoy, 2000; Ma, 2003). The work of Goddard et al. (2000) extended the findings connecting academic emphasis and learning in middle and secondary school settings to include the engagement of students in the primary setting (Hoy & Sabo, 1998; Hoy, Tarter, Kottkamp, 1991). These polarised positions of teacher responsiveness and academic press led to a debate concerning which of these factors mattered most for student engagement (Gill, Ashton, & Algina, 2004; see Shouse, 1996 for a historical perspective on the development of this debate). The suggestion was made that it is the combination of these factors that has the most profound effect and which better reflect the complex reality of schooling (Gill et al., 2004; Luyten, Visscher, & Witziers, 2005). Gill et al. (2004) advocated for use of both responsiveness and academic press to facilitate the engagement of middle years' students.

Whilst the participants in a recent study were from the ninth and tenth grade, Lee (2012) sought to answer the key elements of the above debate through exploration of the association between a responsive teacher-student relationship, academic press and behavioural engagement (Lee, 2012). The teacher-student relationship supported student engagement in the current study. The results of Lee's (2012) quantitative study, which follow, were therefore used as a point of comparison with the younger cohort of students in

the present qualitative research. In Lee's (2012) study, both the responsive teacher-student relationship and academic press resulted in behavioural engagement (defined as the level of effort and perseverance students put into their learning). Behavioural engagement was more likely when classrooms exhibited high levels of academic press. Students' effort and perseverance also increased when they had a positive relationship with their teacher. The teacher-student relationship and academic press were found to have independent effects on student engagement. Both are important for engagement. However, students who perceived higher levels of both demandingness and responsiveness of teachers (i.e., authoritative style) presented the highest levels of effort and perseverance in learning. Thus, an authoritative school environment seems to provide optimal conditions to facilitate a student's behavioural engagement (Lee, 2012).

While these findings suggest the optimal social environment for student engagement, they were limited to the extent that they were based on students' responses to fixed survey items. Such quantitative approaches in this area have been criticised as "the prevailing empirical-analytical approach ... (which) ignores the values and life experiences of research participants and pays no attention to the meanings that they give to events" (Luyten et al., 2005, p. 262). Rather than measuring predetermined survey items the current study sought to ascertain the characteristics of the social environment which facilitated student engagement in religious education through interviews with students and teachers; findings derived from this method were based upon the perspectives of students and teachers and in this way extended and enriched prior quantitative research in this area.

The aim of this study was to identify factors that influenced the engagement of year five / six students in a religious education curriculum. The classroom community was identified as one of the key themes supporting student engagement. Two key elements of the classroom community that support student engagement have been explored in this section:

classroom emotional climate; and the teacher-student relationship. The present investigation sought to provide insights into the aspects of the classroom community that engaged students in an RE curriculum. In the next section of this literature review, the second key theme identified in the literature as essential for the engagement of year five / six students will be explored. This key theme is *learning*.

## **Learning**

### **Introduction.**

Characteristics associated with learning and cognitive development provide another lens through which student engagement can be explored (Culican et al., 2001; Fadlelmula, 2010; Gambrell, 2011). Learning is about the development of knowledge, skills and understanding through thinking processes and strategies (Condie & Munro, 2007; Sullivan et al., 2005). With its origins in Vygotsky's social constructivism, contemporary learning has been conceptualised as a social and interactive process between the learner and their learning environment through which knowledge is constructed (Liu & Matthews, 2005; O'Neill et al., 2013; Vygotsky, 1978). Two broad frameworks have been used to explain student engagement in learning. The first upholds the primacy of curriculum and pedagogy in student engagement (Cumming, 1996; Pendergast et al., 2005; Sullivan et al., 2009). Educators need to develop curricula and pedagogical practices that enable students to engage in learning (Neal, 2005). The second framework considers student engagement to be facilitated through socio-cultural and psychological factors (Ames, 1992; Dweck, 2000; Sullivan et al., 2005; Walker & Greene, 2009).

A socio-cultural approach has been one way of explaining student engagement over the past three decades (Delpit, 1988; Gutierrez, 2008; Lee, 2007). The lived experiences of students, which include their identity, community and culture, can be disconnected from the academic world of schools. This can create a sense of alienation, marginalisation and

disengagement (Sullivan et al., 2009; Faircloth & Miller, 2011). The space between the lived and academic experiences of students has become known as the third space (Gutierrez, 2008). Adolescents were engaged in learning when third spaces were constructed in the classroom and they were enabled to connect the curriculum with aspects of their identity and culture (Faircloth, 2009; Lee, 2007); “connecting who they are to what they do in school” (Faircloth & Miller, 2011, p. 267). Whilst the literature supported the importance of student identity for the engagement of adolescents, this was not a prevalent factor for year five / six students in the literature or the present study.

In contrast, these two broad frameworks did connect with other aspects of the current study in relation to engagement and learning. The theory of achievement goal orientation explained student engagement in RE learning from a psychological perspective (Fadlelmula, 2010). From a curricular perspective, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and aspects of the curriculum such as challenge also facilitated student engagement both in the literature and in the current study (Gambrell, 2011). These psychological and pedagogical / curricula factors will therefore be explored in this section as they help to explain the engagement of year five / six students in RE learning. Therefore, this section will examine how achievement goal orientation impacts on student engagement. Following this the importance of curriculum and pedagogy for student engagement will be explored through sub-sections on Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and Curriculum.

### **Achievement goal orientation.**

#### ***Introduction.***

According to the theory of achievement goal orientation, motivation plays an essential role in the engagement of students in learning (Fadlelmula, 2010). When faced with an achievement or learning situation, students’ motivation may be explained in terms of their choosing one of two possible goal orientations: mastery (learning) or performance orientation

(Sullivan et al., 2009). Early theorists who held this two goal perspective theorised that mastery orientation always had a more positive impact on educational outcomes than performance orientation (Dweck, 1986; Nicholls, 1984). However, developments in goal theory this century have led to a more complex multiple goal perspective which has divided each goal into approach and avoidance components (Harackiewicz, Barron, Pintrich, Elliot, & Thrash, 2002). Research has consistently found positive adaptive outcomes such as student engagement for mastery goals, maladaptive outcomes for performance-avoidance goals, and mixed results for performance-approach goals (Senko, Hulleman, & Harackiewicz, 2011; Urdan, 2004). The impact of achievement goal theory on student engagement will be explored in the following section.

***Two goal perspective: mastery orientation and performance orientation.***

In situations of learning, it was identified that students were motivated by one of two achievement goal orientations: mastery orientation or performance orientation. Mastery orientation is also known as learning orientation, mastery learning or task-involvement goal orientation (Dweck, 1986; Fadlelmula, 2010; Sullivan et al., 2006). Performance goal orientation is also known as ego-involvement goal orientation (Nicholls, 1984).

Underpinning this theory are two views regarding intelligence: in the first, intelligence is seen as being fixed (entity theory) and genetically derived and determined; in the alternate perspective, intelligence is viewed as something which can change and develop (incremental theory) (Dweck, 1986, 2000).

These views affect a student's orientation to learning. Those who hold to the entity theory wish to perform well (performance goals) and look clever. They rely on tasks that are not overly challenging to appear successful and perception of recognition is important for self worth. For such students challenging tasks are to be avoided as ability is measured through success with little effort (Dweck, 1986, 2000).

Students who hold to the Incremental theory tend to focus on the learning of new things and aspire to learning or mastery goals (Dweck, 1986, 2000). These students believe that their success at school is related to their effort and that failure may be overturned with a change of strategy (Sullivan et al., 2009; see also Ames, 1992).

Mastery orientation has a focus on learning and developing knowledge, skills and understanding. Students with this orientation focus on the task and aim to understand what they are presently learning by relating their new learnings to what they have learnt in the past (Sullivan et al., 2005). There is a strong correlation between motivation and effective learning, but the link is not direct (Neal, 2005). Increased motivation is mediated through such factors as learner autonomy, self-regulation, and metacognitive and higher-order cognitive skills (Davies, Hayward, & Lukman, 2005; Sullivan et al., 2009). It is the development of these skills that leads to greater engagement with learning (Condie & Munro, 2007). Students with this orientation tend to have a positive self-belief and believe that effort will result in mastery or success (Middleton & Midgley, 1997). The findings for mastery goals have generally been associated with adaptive behaviours in learning such as interest in class, persistence in the face of challenge, and use of deep learning strategies (i.e. elaborating and connecting concepts) (Darnon, Butera, & Harackiewicz, 2007; Hulleman, Schrager, Bodmann, & Harackiewicz, 2010; Pekrun, Elliot, & Maier, 2006). A mastery orientation also positively affects the depth of processing in online learning contexts (Chen & Wu, 2012).

In contrast, students with a performance goal orientation are motivated by external goals such as demonstrating their competence, comparing their achievements against peers and receiving the endorsement of their teacher for tasks completed correctly (Fadlelmula, 2010). A performance approach leads to an emphasis on results, grades and outperforming others rather than learning. These students tend to use strategies and learning approaches which are superficial such as memorisation through rote learning (Covington, 2000). Early



findings on performance orientation were mixed as to whether this approach led to adaptive (Elliot & Church, 1997) or maladaptive (Ames & Archer, 1988) outcomes. Studies such as Elliot and Church (1997), showing positive outcomes from performance goals, led Harackiewicz, Barron, and Elliot (1998) to propose that achievement goal theory should consider the benefits of both mastery and performance goals (Senko et al., 2011). Around the same time other theorists reframed each goal according to approach and avoidance forms (Elliot, 1999; Pintrich, 2000). These revisions led to a multiple goal perspective.

***Multiple goal perspective.***

According to this perspective each achievement goal orientation has an approach and avoidance form (Senko et al., 2011). Therefore, performance orientation has two dimensions: performance-approach (students are motivated to appear competent) and performance-avoidance (students are motivated to avoid appearing incompetent). Mastery orientation also has two dimensions: mastery-approach (endeavoring to improve learning or skills) and mastery-avoidance (endeavoring to avoid learning or skill decline). When considered according to this form, mastery-avoidance and performance-avoidance both lead to maladaptive outcomes such as low task engagement (Elliot, 1999; Hulleman et al., 2010; Van Yperen, Elliot, & Anseel, 2009). In contrast, performance-approach and mastery-approach have led to adaptive outcomes such as student engagement. Whilst some studies have shown that students with a performance-approach exhibited engagement in the form of task persistence (Wolters, 2004), from the 1980s to recent times, many studies have supported the view that student engagement results from a mastery-approach. Students with a mastery-approach held high levels of interest in learning (Middleton & Midgely, 1997), had a positive attitude to tasks (Turner & Patrick, 2004), persisted longer with difficult tasks (Elliot & Dweck, 1988), self-regulated effectively and used deep learning strategies (Senko et al., 2011).

Overall, research has consistently found a positive association between a mastery orientation and student engagement. “Students who pursue mastery goals, *compared to those who do not* (emphasis added), often find their classes interesting, persist when facing difficulty ... use deep learning strategies ... and perceive tasks as valuable” (Senko et al., 2011; Urdan, 2004). This overall finding highlights the importance of a mastery orientation for student engagement. Teachers may support or constrain the development of this orientation.

***Teachers may support or constrain mastery orientation.***

Achievement goal theory has implications for the role of teachers in facilitating student engagement. Teachers’ use of *goal structures* (messages in the classroom which overtly support students’ goal orientations) has influenced the goal orientation of students (Fadlelmula, 2010; Turner, Midgely, Meyer, Gheen, Anderman, & Kang, 2002).

Theorists have proposed an association between goal structures and students’ goal orientations (Ames, 1992; Anderman & Midgely, 1997). When teachers make the development of skills and knowledge a salient feature of the classroom, they create a mastery goal structure (Urdan, 2004). Students tend to develop a mastery orientation when they perceive that the focus of their teacher is on deep understanding of the subject matter (Bong, 2001). A mastery orientation is facilitated through an emphasis on understanding concepts, learning from mistakes and on thinking processes in the classroom (Fadlelmula, 2010; Urdan, 2004). Whilst most research in this area uses survey methodology, a study involving observation in primary classrooms (Turner et al., 2002) found that those with mastery goal structures had a negative association with reported avoidance strategies (i.e. avoidance of help seeking). Teachers in these classrooms were observed emphasising learning, understanding, and student responsibility for learning. They encouraged students to persist when learning was challenging and to use mistakes as a learning opportunity. In contrast,

when teachers use normative evaluations of student progress, the varying ability of students becomes the focus of the classroom; this practice supports a performance orientation (Urduan, 2004). A performance orientation is also promoted through closed questions (questions which have only one answer or only require a yes or no response) that focus on right answers. These send the message that only the correct answers are valued (Fadlelmula, 2010; Turner et al., 2002). Urduan's (2004) study of middle years' students questioned a causal link between classroom goal structures and students' mastery orientation. However, he was still able to state, "when teachers make concerted efforts to promote mastery goals in the classroom ... students are able to perceive and respond to those messages" (Urduan, 2004, p.231). More recently, the association between goal structures and mastery orientation has been affirmed for both primary and middle years' students (Bong, 2009). Given the theoretical link between goal structure, students' goal orientations and their engagement, a related aim of the present qualitative study was to investigate whether teacher actions, which promoted mastery goals (i.e. an emphasis on thinking and understanding in RE), facilitated student engagement in RE learning.

It has been argued in mathematics education that learning should emphasise thinking and understanding, rather than a narrow focus on right answers, as such an emphasis supports a mastery orientation and student engagement in learning (Fadlelmula, 2010). Rather than a narrow view of learning as the production of right answers, the current approach to religious education in the Melbourne Archdiocese, *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008), emphasises the formation of "deep religious understandings" through thinking skills and processes which "enable students to form new concepts and understandings about the relationship between God, themselves and the world" (CEO, 2008, pp. 12-13). A mastery goal structure would support the development of this emphasis on understanding and constructivist learning in RE. The aim of this study was to identify factors that supported

student engagement in classroom RE. Given the impact of a mastery orientation (with its emphasis on understanding) on student engagement, this study sought to explore the role of this factor in engaging students in an RE curriculum which also emphasises understanding. Whilst some of the past research in this area has been “experimental” (Butler, 1987; Elliot & Dweck, 1988; Harackiewicz & Elliot, 1993; Jagacinski & Nicholls, 1987), and a few studies have focused on middle years’ students using qualitative methods (Turner et al., 2002; Urdan, 2004), the majority has correlated students’ self-reported goals with outcomes such as achievement and engagement (Shih, 2005; Senko et al., 2011, p. 27). However, rather than use student self reports, this qualitative study identified factors through interviews and direct classroom observation. This enabled the identification of teacher actions, and classroom situations and processes which promoted a mastery orientation and engagement in the RE classroom. Information and Communication Technologies also feature as a means of engaging students in learning. This is explored in the following section.

### **Information and communication technologies (ICT).**

#### ***Introduction.***

Contemporary classrooms in Australia have access to a range of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT or technology). These include: ICT tools or hardware, such as computers and digital cameras, and software applications such as Microsoft Word; and connectivity such as access to the Internet (Toomey, 2001; VCAA, 2005). These are used for “accessing, gathering, manipulating and presenting or communicating information” and may be used to enhance thinking and learning in all curriculum areas (Toomey, 2001, p. 1; VCAA, 2005). A frequently cited finding over the last ten years is that use of ICT also has a significant impact on the engagement of students in learning (Becta, 2005; Burden & Keuchel, 2004; Chen et al., 2012; Passey & Rogers, 2004). ICT facilitates student engagement in learning across a range of curriculum areas such as English, maths, science,

languages and the humanities (Condie & Munro, 2007). Upper primary students were highly motivated and spent more time on-task when they used ICT (Becta, 2005; Burden & Keuchel, 2004). The impact of ICT on student engagement will be explored in this sub-section.

***ICT engages primary students.***

ICT engages primary students. They find its use to be “highly motivational” (Burden & Keuchel, 2004, p. 9; Curriculum Corporation, 2005). The positive impact of ICT on students includes “greater engagement and persistence, (and) more on-task behaviour” (Condie & Munro, 2007, p. 4), more active participation in learning tasks and enjoyment of learning (Chen et al., 2012), and a focus on the process of learning (Passey & Rogers, 2004). ICT also made learning more interesting across a range of subject areas (Passey & Rogers, 2004).

***ICT makes learning more interesting.***

Primary students in England stated that ICT made lessons more interesting (Passey & Rogers, 2004). Various reasons were given for this. Students’ perceived that understanding was increased and that they were positively affected by using ICT because it involved learning through games. All primary pupils interviewed believed that ICT made learning more interesting. These students were affected by the auditory, visual and kinaesthetic elements of ICT. Their attention was drawn to the colour and sound features. Students perceived that learning increased when sound was included in ICT. Visual aspects of ICT, such as animation and moving imagery, increased understanding and facilitated students’ memory. Learning activities such as researching were more engaging because many resources were visually based. Students reported that their learning was enhanced when they were able to contact screens either directly or through use of a pen (Passey & Rogers, 2004). The multi-sensory nature of ICT has also been found to support the engagement and learning

of students across the various curriculum areas through increased understanding of concepts (Condie & Munro, 2007).

*Student interest was enhanced in a game-based context.*

Students' interest was also enhanced when learning was set within a game-based context (Chen et al., 2012). These contexts include a game framework or a blending approach. A game framework contextualises student learning within a narrative or adventure context, and may include role-playing and a goal to achieve. A blending approach integrates learning activities within a game-based context; students progress on a board game when they successfully complete activities. Computer games have been used successfully to facilitate student engagement and learning in the classroom (Sandford, Ulicsak, Facer & Rudd, 2006).

*Virtual learning environments enhanced student interest.*

Specific features of virtual learning environments enhanced student interest and engagement (Ainley & Armatas, 2006). A characteristic of virtual learning environments is their representation of real-world environments. Virtual environments range from computer learning programs that assist and mediate learning using two dimensional screens through to simulations of real-world environments that students may interact with and influence (Ainley & Armatas, 2006). The following features of virtual environments enhanced student engagement: the multi-sensory experience, the immersion in a three-dimensional environment, and being able to visualise a real-world experience from multiple perspectives (Salzman, Dede, Loftin, & Chen, 1999).

Virtual learning environments may include features designed to enhance engagement such as the context within which learning occurs. In a study of grade four students in Taiwan, students progressed through the same learning materials in an online environment (Chen et al., 2012). However, one group moved through these maths activities using a simple drop down menu, the other completed these in the context of a quest. Quests are role-playing

adventures. Students take on the role of a particular character and must perform certain tasks to complete a given objective. Students involved in the quest found learning to be more enjoyable. They were also more active participants than students not involved in the quest version. Their active participation and enjoyment of tasks was explained by the subordination of task completion in pursuance of completing the game quest (Chen et al., 2012). Whilst this study indicated that student engagement was enhanced through game quests, certain limitations were apparent: its method relied solely on a student questionnaire; and this questionnaire had not been tested previously for reliability and validity. A review of empirical research on virtual learning environments from 1999-2009 revealed that the majority of these studies referred to science, maths and technology (Mikropoulos & Natsis, 2011). The present qualitative study sought to explore this gap in the literature and ascertain whether ICT such as virtual learning environments supported student engagement in the RE classroom. Irrespective of the type of ICT used, a student-centred pedagogy is vital for student engagement.

***ICT and the importance of a student-centred pedagogy.***

The pedagogy underpinning use of ICT has important implications for student outcomes such as engagement (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2013). Primary students in the United Kingdom and Australia were more likely to be engaged when ICT was strategically used to support teaching and learning (Clarkson, Dunbar, & Toomey, 1999; Ofsted, 2004b; Passey & Rogers, 2004). From the 1990s there has been a call for a pedagogical rather than a technological focus in the use of ICT (Becker, 1994; Hadley & Sheingold, 1993).

Current theorists, as well as reviews of recent empirical research, emphasise the use of ICT tools to enable learning (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2013; Fisher, Denning, Higgins, & Loveless, 2012; Mikropoulos & Natsis, 2011). Teachers are encouraged to “engage students in ... technology-enabled learning” (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2013, p.

176). Frameworks for teaching and learning using ICT have been developed in countries such as England, Australia, and Norway to support teachers in the purposeful use of ICT in the classroom (Fisher et al., 2012; Krumsvik, 2008; Starkey, 2010). However, recent evidence suggests that it is a student-centred pedagogy, which is the essential element required for authentic technology use and engagement in contemporary primary classrooms (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2013; Ertmer, Ottenbreit-Leftwich, Sadich, Sendurur, & Sendurur, 2012; Hermans, Tondeur, van Braak, & Valcke, 2008). Authentic learning has been described as “real world learning” involving real-life situations such as video conferencing to communicate in a foreign language to students from that particular country (Clarkson et al., 1999, p. 22; Condie & Munro, 2007).

In a review of 48 research studies, it was found that teachers reported insufficient hardware and lack of training as the most common barrier to technology use in the classroom (Hew & Brush, 2007). However, a recent review of European countries revealed increasing access to a wider range of updated ICT such as virtual learning environments (Wastiau, Blamire, Kearney, Quittre, Van de Gaer, & Monseur, 2013). Rather than hardware and training, it has been found that teacher pedagogical beliefs and practices were the decisive factor as to the prevalence of students’ technology use in the classroom (Ertmer et al., 2012). Students’ use of technology was limited in traditional classrooms with teacher-centred practices (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2013; Keengwe, Onchwari, & Wachira, 2008; Palak & Walls, 2009). Despite the association between authentic technology use and engagement (Ertmer et al., 2012; Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2013), ICT use in the RE classroom has been limited and infrequent.

### ***ICT in the RE classroom.***

There exists a range of views regarding the place of ICT in the RE classroom (Ang, 2012; Carroll & Collins, 2005; Ofsted, 2004a, 2009, 2011). In Australia, it has been argued



that ICT may increase the availability of resources and extend the zone of discourse (McGrady, 2002; Ryan, 2001; Visser, 2003). Reflecting on the relationship of ICT with learning in the RE classroom, the centrality of the human person and community has been emphasized (Carroll & Collins, 2005). As indicated by the above viewpoints, in the early years of this century ICT was not promoted primarily as a teaching and learning tool for student engagement and learning in RE. A more recent view recognizes the importance of ICT use for the engagement of adolescent students in RE: “Needless to say, it is absolutely vital to keep up to date with the latest developments in information and communication technology if you want to be an engaging teacher” (Ang, 2012, p. 20). However, ICT was not listed as one of the four essential elements (knowledge, authenticity, relevance, and relationships) needed to engage adolescent students in RE (Ang, 2012).

Whilst ICT was increasingly being used in literacy and numeracy lessons in British classrooms early this century, its use in RE classrooms was infrequent (Ofsted, 2004b). When it was utilized in secondary RE classrooms, teachers perceived that ICT “opened up some new and effective learning opportunities for students” (Ofsted, 2004a, p. 4). Despite this view, ICT was not an integral part of the teaching and learning process (Ofsted, 2004a). Research into the effectiveness of ICT in the RE classroom is “less common” than other curriculum areas such as literacy and mathematics (Condie & Munro, 2007, p. 38). In recent years ICT is increasingly being used in England in curriculum areas such as RE (Ofsted, 2009). In schools considered as outstanding, ICT was used across subject areas, including RE, to enhance learning outcomes through increased student engagement (Ofsted, 2011). The present research sought to investigate factors that supported student engagement in RE. Whilst ICT has been found to support engagement in learning across various curriculum areas, there is a paucity of research into the role of ICT in facilitating student engagement in

the RE classroom, particularly in the primary years. Therefore, this investigation examined its role in facilitating the engagement of year five / six students in an RE curriculum.

ICT increases student motivation and engagement (Chen et al., 2012), but to sustain motivation and interest requires more than the disposition of students and the engaging nature of ICT (Burden & Keuchel, 2004; Passey & Rogers, 2004). A student-centred pedagogy and authentic technology use (related to life situations) are essential elements in engaging ICT practice in contemporary primary classrooms (Ertmer et al., 2012; Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2013). Students are also engaged through the curriculum and various aspects of learning activities such as challenge (Jones, 2012; Watson, 2013). In the next section the role of the curriculum and task characteristics in facilitating student engagement is considered.

## **Curriculum.**

### ***Introduction.***

The curriculum may be utilised to make learning more engaging for students. To achieve this, the curriculum should be authentic (Parsons & Ward, 2011), allow a degree of choice (Watson, 2013), encourage a sense of autonomy (Patall, Cooper, & Wynn, 2010) and be relevant (Enright, 2012; Faircloth & Miller, 2011). Students are immersed in learning through challenging tasks, and a thinking curriculum (Gambrell, 2011; Hill et al., 2002; Jones, 2012). In this section, the relationship between these aspects of curriculum and student engagement in learning is explored.

### ***Authentic tasks, choice and autonomy.***

Authentic tasks that allowed a degree of choice in third grade science classrooms were associated with increasing student engagement (Parsons & Ward, 2011). To be authentic the learning must relate to life situations, essential learnings, and be responsive to the lives and interests of students (Tytler, 2004). Students were also engaged when they had

some autonomy or control over the learning task (Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010; Tadich, Deed, Campbell & Prain, 2007).

*Choice and autonomy: open and closed tasks, and open and directed approaches.*

Rather than reading about organisms in a textbook, primary students in a science classroom explored living organisms in their local environment (Parsons & Ward, 2011). They had a degree of choice over what and how to research, and how to present their findings. Such tasks have been called open (Parsons & Ward, 2011; Turner & Paris, 1995). They are student directed: problems are framed and solutions determined by the students with the support of their teacher. Closed tasks are teacher directed and students work toward the one solution. When students were given open tasks in the science classroom, student engagement was enhanced (Parsons & Ward, 2011).

Students will engage with tasks that offer a degree of choice (Delisle, 2012; Turner, 1995; Watson, 2013). According to students in a junior secondary English class in Melbourne, Australia, they were much more engaged in learning tasks and motivated to read when they were given open tasks (Watson, 2013). Similarly, student autonomy was enabled when fourth grade students were given the opportunity to select their own books. These students put more effort into their reading (Guthrie, Hoa, Wigfield, Tonks, Humenick, & Littles, 2007). These findings are consistent with literature on motivation which has found that choice and autonomy support student engagement (Guthrie, 2008; Lam & Law, 2007; Patall et al., 2010). Student engagement was enhanced when they were involved with authentic tasks that had a degree of choice and autonomy (Parsons & Ward, 2012; Watson, 2013). Curriculum relevance is also important.

***Relevant and meaningful learning.***

Curriculum relevance is essential for student engagement (Enright, 2012). Relevance occurs when students can see connections between the curriculum and their lives outside of

school, or how school relates to real life (Dowson et al., 2005). To be relevant, curriculum content must be meaningful to students. Learning is meaningful when it is embedded in a real-world context (Enright, 2012).

For curriculum to be engaging for students it should include learning tasks that may be considered by them as meaningful. The learning from these tasks will be “substantive in content, useful in the future, and linked to the broader world” (Ares & Gorrell, 2002, p. 267). English tasks were made relevant and meaningful when students could see connections between the text they were reading and their lives outside of school; students were more engaged in comprehending texts they considered relevant (Hulleman, Godes, Hendricks & Harackiewicz, 2010).

*Three approaches which facilitated relevant and meaningful learning.*

Three approaches have been identified as facilitating relevant and meaningful instruction for students: connecting instruction to students as they are, as they want to be, and with the complexities of the modern world (Enright, 2012). Students are engaged when: learning incorporates the skills and interests they have now; they are given the opportunity to connect their learning with roles and identities of interest to them now and in an imagined future; and when learning reflects real-world problems and contexts.

Students were engaged when tasks were authentic and relevant, provided opportunity for choice and gave students a sense of autonomy (Chen, 2012; Enright, 2012). This study of year five / six students sought to investigate factors which engaged them in the RE classroom. Through interviews and direct classroom observation the impact of RE tasks on student engagement was considered. The specific qualities of tasks that engaged students, and their association with authenticity, relevance, choice, and autonomy, were explored. Students are also engaged in learning through a thinking curriculum (Jones, 2012).

## ***Thinking curriculum.***

### *Introduction.*

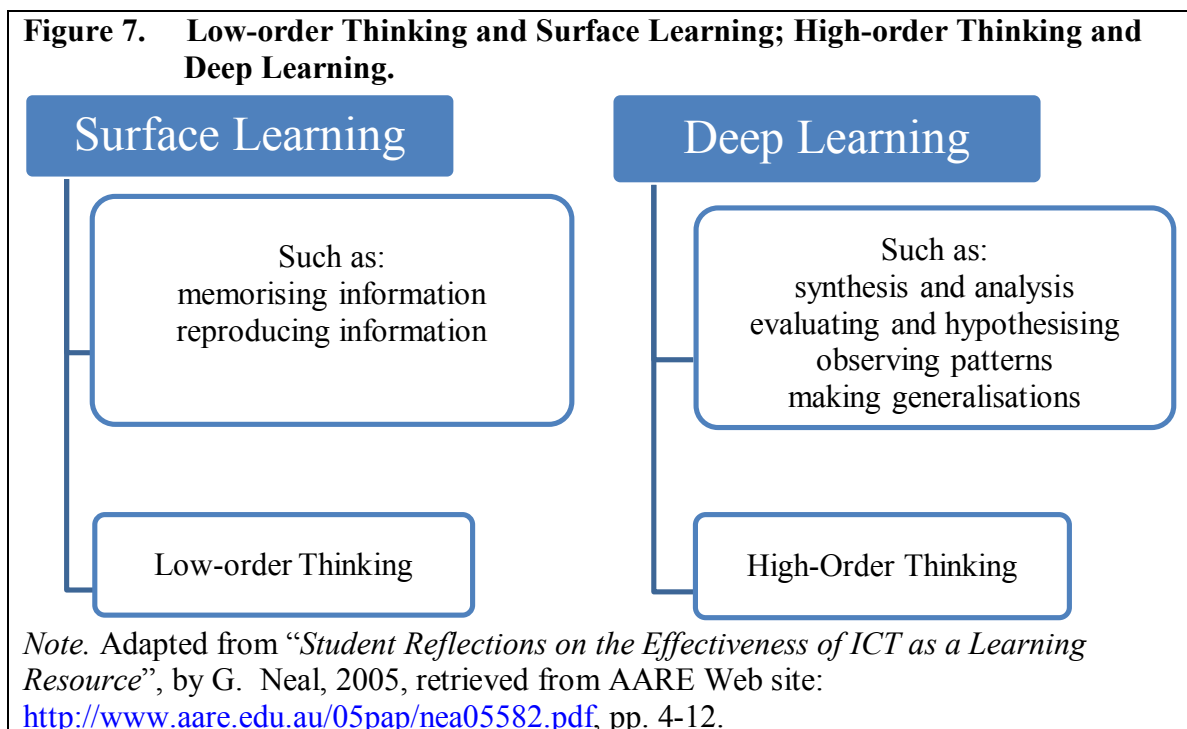
The Middle Years Research and Development (MYRAD) Project identified that a thinking curriculum was the approach most likely to provide learning experiences that would engage learners (Hill et al., 2002). A thinking curriculum, or thinking-centred classroom (Jones, 2012), requires cognitive effort and high level thinking to complete challenging tasks. It involves deep learning through high-order thinking skills (Neal, 2005). Student learning and engagement is promoted through a thinking curriculum and strategies that facilitate higher-order thinking (Jones, 2012; Tytler, 2004).

### *Cognitive effort, thinking processes and deep learning.*

Students are immersed in learning when the curriculum is challenging and requires cognitive effort (Delisle, 2012; Faircloth & Miller, 2011; Jones, 2012). Tasks offer challenge when there is an expectation that a goal or end is achievable, with some effort (Gambrell, 2011; Maehr & Braskamp, 1986). To make them challenging and stimulating, tasks need to have a degree of complexity, but be within the range of ability of students (Delisle, 2012).

Students are likely to be engaged when they experience having to work hard to solve a problem or understand a complex idea. In a middle school mathematics classroom, this process was defined as requiring “significant cognitive effort” (Chen, 2012, p. 464). The experience of solving challenging tasks through significant cognitive effort leads to a willingness to engage in mathematical processes and thinking (Chen, 2012). In contrast, observations of middle school students in the mathematics classroom revealed how teachers provided too much help (Chen, 2012). The mathematical tasks in the study involved high-order thinking, but the teachers’ attempts to guide students’ thinking actually reduced the cognitive demand of the task and diminished student engagement.

Thinking-centred science classrooms may also be characterised by cognitive effort and active engagement in learning (Jones, 2012). However, rather than reducing cognitive effort these classrooms are promoted through the teaching of high-order thinking skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, synthesis, and analysis (Jones, 2012). These skills supported intellectual effort, the active engagement of students in the science classroom and promoted deep learning (Jones, 2012). In contrast, surface learning approaches involve low-level thinking such as memorising facts and reproducing information (Neal, 2005). Figure 7 shows the association of low-order thinking strategies and surface learning compared with high-order thinking strategies and deep learning.



Middle years’ students are engaged when learning involves high-order thinking skills and deep learning; greater intellectual quality leads to greater student engagement (Jones, 2012; Munns et al., 2003).

Research continues to affirm the view that middle years’ students are engaged through a thinking curriculum (Chen, 2012; Hill et al., 2002; Jones, 2012). A thinking curriculum involves students in cognitive effort, high-order thinking such as analysing and synthesising,

and leads to deep learning. The Melbourne archdiocesan religious education curriculum *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008) was designed to have a cognitive emphasis (Pell, 2001). Bloom's (1956) taxonomy was utilised in the learning outcomes of this curriculum (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956). However, students do not learn, particularly in religious education, solely through the cognitive dimension (Buchanan & Hyde, 2006); they also learn through the affective (reactions, feelings and emotions of the learner) and spiritual dimensions (connectedness of self with others, the world and possibly the transcendent). When learning in religious education includes all three dimensions, students may be engaged and understandings deepened (Buchanan & Hyde, 2006). This study sought to identify factors which engaged year five / six students in the RE classroom. Instances of classroom situations which promoted cognitive effort, or tasks and learning processes which required high-order thinking and deep learning in the RE classroom, were examined for their impact on student engagement in RE learning.

From the literature reviewed in this section it has been argued that a mastery orientation, use of ICT, and certain aspects of the curriculum and the learning task facilitate the engagement of students in learning. This study therefore sought to explore factors associated with learning which promoted student engagement in the RE classroom. The teacher also played a pivotal role in student engagement. In the next section the role of the teacher in developing engaging pedagogy is explored.

## **The Teacher**

### **Introduction.**

The role of the teacher is pivotal to student learning outcomes and engagement in learning (Buchanan & Hyde, 2006; Ingvarson, 2003; Shostak, 2011). Teachers use their pedagogical knowledge to select from a range of learning strategies that have been shown to effectively engage students in the classroom (Shostak, 2011). Engaging strategies include

inquiry-based learning (Ireland et al., 2012) and classroom discourse (Smart & Marshall, 2013). A key aim of this study was to investigate teachers' use of such strategies to support student engagement in religious education. Classroom discourse facilitated student engagement both in the literature and in the present research study. This is explored in the following section.

### **Classroom discourse.**

#### ***Introduction.***

Students across the primary and middle years were more interested in learning when tasks involved interacting with peers (Ames, 1992; Gambrell, 2011; Gambrell, Hughes, Calvert, Malloy, & Igo, 2011). Social interaction supports affective engagement as the comments of peers may pique their interest, and working with peers may make tasks more appealing (Faircloth, 2009; Turner & Paris, 1995). Interacting with peers also promoted cognitive engagement. Rather than rely on indirect measures of student engagement such as questionnaires and surveys, a study by Helme & Clarke (2001) of middle years' students in the maths classroom used analysis of videotape and interview data to identify indicators of cognitive engagement (defined as deliberate task-specific thinking). Four distinct classroom situations were found which promoted cognitive engagement: individuals working in parallel; collaborative small group activity; small group interactions with teacher; and whole class interactions with teacher. The researchers concluded that greater possibilities for quality cognitive engagement were apparent when tasks involved peer to peer rather than teacher-student interaction (Helme & Clarke, 2001).

With its origins in Vygotsky's social constructivism, contemporary teaching and learning has been conceptualised as a social and interactive process (Liu & Matthews, 2005; O'Neill et al., 2013; Vygotsky, 1978). In this view learners are actively involved in the process of constructing knowledge through classroom discourse (Shostak, 2011). Classroom



discourse entails the interaction between students and their teacher through which perspectives give rise to meaning. This learner-centred discourse supports student engagement when the learning process includes “learning-through-interaction” (Edwards-Groves & Hoare, 2012, p. 98; Smart & Marshall, 2013). Teachers guide this interactive process and assist students to co-construct meaning through classroom discourse which utilises various scaffolding strategies (Kiemer et al., 2015; O’Neill et al., 2013). These strategies include *Questioning as Thinking*, *Collaborative Reasoning* and *scaffolding conversations* (Ferguson 2012a; Wilson & Smetana, 2011; Zhang & Dougherty Stahl, 2012). In this sub-section the impact of classroom discourse on student engagement will be examined.

***Teacher-dominated interaction patterns.***

Traditional pedagogy involved the teacher transmitting key knowledge to passive students (Shostak, 2011). The teacher dominated classroom interactions and a three phase learning process was implemented. This sequential process included initiation, response and evaluation (Chen & Looi, 2011). Having imparted knowledge the teacher *initiates* the process by calling on student/s. The student *responds* to the teacher’s question and the teacher then *evaluates* their response (Wilson & Smetana, 2011). This process has been criticised for promoting unproductive and boring classroom interactions that lead to passive and disengaged learners (Chen & Looi, 2011; Wilson & Smetana, 2011). Rather than the focus being on the teacher, contemporary pedagogy shifts the emphasis to the learner.

***A learner-centred pedagogy.***

Students were engaged in the mathematics classroom through a learner-centred pedagogy (Chen, 2012). Year seven students were given a maths problem with no numbers. Whilst initially confused with this unconventional problem, they were given time to discuss the problem in groups. Students had to think, interact with peers and ask questions. They had

to create necessary contextual and auxiliary information. Students dominated classroom interactions whilst the teacher guided their thinking where necessary. Students were cognitively engaged in this process (Chen, 2012). In contrast, student engagement and learning was impeded when teachers dominated classroom interactions in an attempt to make tasks easier to complete. Prescriptive procedures, doing the thinking for students and the explanation of minor details by teachers disengaged students from learning (Chen, 2012).

Two major approaches to a learner-centred pedagogy are clarifying discourse and the scaffolding of student ideas (Walshaw & Anthony, 2008). The objective of clarifying discourse is to engage students in classroom conversations. Teacher questioning can be used to achieve this goal. Open-ended questions which give students scope to explore their thinking and understandings support student engagement (Jurik, Groschner, & Seidel, 2014). Scaffolding involves the teacher giving feedback to students' ideas which moves them forward in their thinking or providing students with strategies which support their thinking and involvement in the learning process (Ferguson, 2012a, 2012b; Jurik et al., 2014). Quantitative studies of inquiry-based science teaching affirm that student engagement is promoted through clarifying discourse and student scaffolding (Furtak, Seidel, Iverson, & Briggs, 2012). Several studies also highlight the association between teacher scaffolding, constructivist learning, and the engagement of middle years' students (Chen, 2012; Wilson & Smetana, 2011; Zhang & Dougherty Stahl, 2012).

***Classroom discourse, teacher scaffolding, and constructivist learning theory.***

Students learn better and are more engaged in learning when they are involved in an interactive process of creating or constructing knowledge with others (Wilson & Smetana, 2011). This approach to learning is known as *constructivist learning theory* (Shostak, 2011). Students are engaged when classroom discourse occurs within a constructivist framework and is supported by teacher scaffolding. Questioning as Thinking, Collaborative Reasoning and

scaffolding conversations are three ways that teacher scaffolding promoted classroom discourse, constructivist learning, and supported student engagement.

*Questioning as thinking.*

A metacognitive framework, Questioning as Thinking (QAT), was developed to engage students in reading comprehension (Wilson & Smetana, 2011). Metacognition in this context involves thinking about the cognitive processes and strategies required to comprehend text. In the QAT framework the teacher models metacognition using a *Think Aloud* strategy and *Question Answer Relationships*. When using the Think Aloud strategy the teacher verbalises to students the thinking required to comprehend text. The Question Answer Relationships strategy provides a language that enables students to discuss different types of questions. Questions are identified according to their relationship to the text; a question whose answer is in the text is called “right there”. The teacher models these strategies and scaffolds students’ use of them. Over time classroom discourse becomes a collaborative and interactive process between students and the teacher using the strategies of QAT to construct knowledge. Students from fourth to eighth grade were actively engaged in reading when they were enabled to construct knowledge through strategies that supported student-centred classroom discourse (Wilson & Smetana, 2011). Teacher scaffolding using the strategies of QAT facilitated this student-centred classroom discourse. Students were also engaged through the scaffolding strategies used in Collaborative Reasoning.

*Collaborative reasoning.*

Collaborative Reasoning (CR), a peer-led small group discussion process, is one strategy that has been under investigation (Zhang & Dougherty Stahl, 2012). It was designed for use in elementary (USA) or primary (Australia) schools. Students read a text and then discuss a chosen issue. Students learn how to involve themselves in meaningful discussions through skills such as supporting positions with evidence, and listening to others and

evaluating their opinions (Zhang & Dougherty Stahl, 2012). Teachers support students and enable their active participation by scaffolding useful strategies such as clarifying ideas, challenging opinions and summarising ideas (Chin, Anderson, & Waggoner, 2001; Jadallah et al., 2011). While teachers are active participants, they aim to support students' ability to control the conversation and to use reason in small group discussions (Chin et al., 2001). The engagement of fourth grade students, as measured through analysis of taped classroom observations, was higher when students used CR than teacher led discussions of the same students; student engagement was evidenced in increased rates and amount of talk, elaborations on arguments and use of text to support discussion (Chin et al., 2001). These results were affirmed in a more recent quantitative study; according to questionnaire results, year five students who participated in CR were more excited about classroom discussions and learning than peers in a control group (Zhang, Anderson, & Nguyen-Jahiel, 2010). Two possible reasons for increased student engagement were proposed (Chin et al., 2001): freedom of choice and autonomy (Delisle, 2012; Turner & Paris, 1995; Watson, 2013) and opportunity for argumentation and disagreement (Nussbaum & Sinatra, 2003; Smith, Johnson, & Johnson, 1981). Research in these areas also supports the potential of student choice and argumentation to engage students in the upper primary years (Guthrie et al., 2007; Herrenkohl & Guerra, 1998). The scaffolding conversations of teachers also enhanced student engagement.

#### *Scaffolding conversations.*

Within a constructivist understanding of learning, students were engaged through “scaffolding conversations” (Ferguson, 2012a, p. 242). Scaffolding conversations are about the interactions between the teacher and student through which the teacher seeks to respond to and help students to construct conceptual understanding and thinking (Ferguson, 2012b). Students were engaged when teachers scaffolded their ideas by giving individual feedback

that moved their thinking forward (Jurik et al., 2014; Walshaw & Anthony, 2008). In the primary mathematics classroom two of the key factors, which supported teachers' effective use of scaffolding conversations, were teacher knowledge and teachers' response to students' prior knowledge (Ferguson, 2012b).

Three forms of teacher knowledge are important for learning and teaching: content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge (O'Donnell et al., 2016). Content knowledge is about knowing the subject matter. Pedagogical knowledge is about knowing how to teach. Pedagogical content knowledge is about knowing how to make content understandable to students (O'Donnell et al., 2016). Teacher knowledge was utilised during a scaffolded conversation in the following way. The focus of a year five maths lesson was on the relationship between fractions and decimals. The teacher conversed with a struggling student using a decimat (rectangle divided into 1000 parts which could be used to represent tenths and hundredths) to scaffold their understanding. The teacher's content knowledge (relationship between fractions and decimals) and pedagogical content knowledge (use of an appropriate representation of this relationship) engaged the student and assisted them to extend their understanding of the mathematical concept involved (Ferguson, 2012b).

The teacher in a year five class responded to a student's prior knowledge of multi-digit multiplication. The teacher scaffolded the student's preferred approach to multiplication: repeated addition ( $3 \times 87 = 87 + 87 + 87$ ). They assisted the student to see that multiplication is the repeated adding of the same number. The teacher allowed the student to experience an inefficient strategy before approaching the student later in the lesson with a more efficient alternative. The teacher and student then had a conversation that extended the student's understanding of multiplication. The teacher used their knowledge of the student's current understanding in maths to engage them in a learning activity and then scaffolded their understanding of a more efficient strategy. Teachers used their knowledge of mathematical

concepts, appropriate representations, and students' prior understanding to engage them and to scaffold and extend their understanding of mathematical concepts (Ferguson, 2012b).

Students were engaged through classroom discourse. This discourse was learner-centred and based on constructivist learning theory. Teachers used discourse to extend student understanding and to assist them to construct knowledge. Teachers guided classroom discourse through scaffolded strategies such as Questioning as Thinking, Collaborative Reasoning and scaffolding conversations (Ferguson, 2012b; Wilson & Smetana, 2011; Zhang & Dougherty Stahl, 2012). The present study sought to identify factors which engaged students in the RE classroom. The impact of classroom discourse on student engagement in RE was explored. Interviews and observations of classroom practice revealed how students and teachers used discourse in the RE classroom to engage students in learning through the extension of student understanding and the construction of religious knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

Three interrelated key themes for engaging students in a classroom curriculum have been identified from the middle and primary years' literature. These key themes were: the classroom community, learning, and the teacher.

The classroom community was identified as the first key theme supporting student engagement. The classroom community includes teacher-student and student-student relationships and interactions. Two key elements of the classroom community support student engagement and were explored in this chapter: classroom emotional climate and the teacher-student relationship (Delisle, 2012; O'Neill et al., 2013; Reyes et al., 2012). This study explored the impact of these elements of the classroom community on the engagement of year five / six students in the RE classroom.

The second key theme in this review was learning. Student engagement in learning is facilitated by three key areas: a mastery orientation; Information and Communication

Technologies (ICT); and the curriculum. According to achievement goal theory, students who use a mastery orientation are likely to be more engaged than students who choose a performance orientation (Fadlelmula, 2010; Sullivan et al., 2009). Use of ICT also has a significant impact on the engagement of students in learning (Chen et al., 2012). They are engaged by its visual, auditory and kinaesthetic dimensions (Passey & Rogers, 2004) and through online learning environments such as digital games (Chen et al., 2012; Sandford et al., 2006). Students are also engaged in learning through aspects of the curriculum. To engage students the curriculum should be: authentic (Parsons & Ward, 2012); allow a degree of choice and autonomy (Patall et al., 2010; Watson, 2013); and be relevant (Enright, 2012; Faircloth & Miller, 2011). Students may be also immersed in learning through a thinking curriculum; this requires cognitive effort, high-order thinking and deep learning (Jones, 2012; Neal, 2005). This study considered the impact of achievement goal theory, use of ICT, and the curriculum and learning tasks on the engagement of year five / six students in an RE curriculum.

The third key theme was the teacher. Whilst other elements of the previous two key themes were emphasised, the teacher had an important role to play in both the classroom community and learning. As well as these roles, the teacher also selects and implements engaging pedagogical strategies in the classroom. Engaging strategies include classroom discourse (Smart & Marshall, 2013). Teachers' use of engaging pedagogical practices in the RE classroom numbered among the factors that engaged year five / six students in this study.

In this chapter the three interrelated key themes of this literature review and how these impacted on student engagement in the RE classroom were explored. In the next chapter, Research Design, an overview of the research approach to this study is provided.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Research Design**

#### **Introduction**

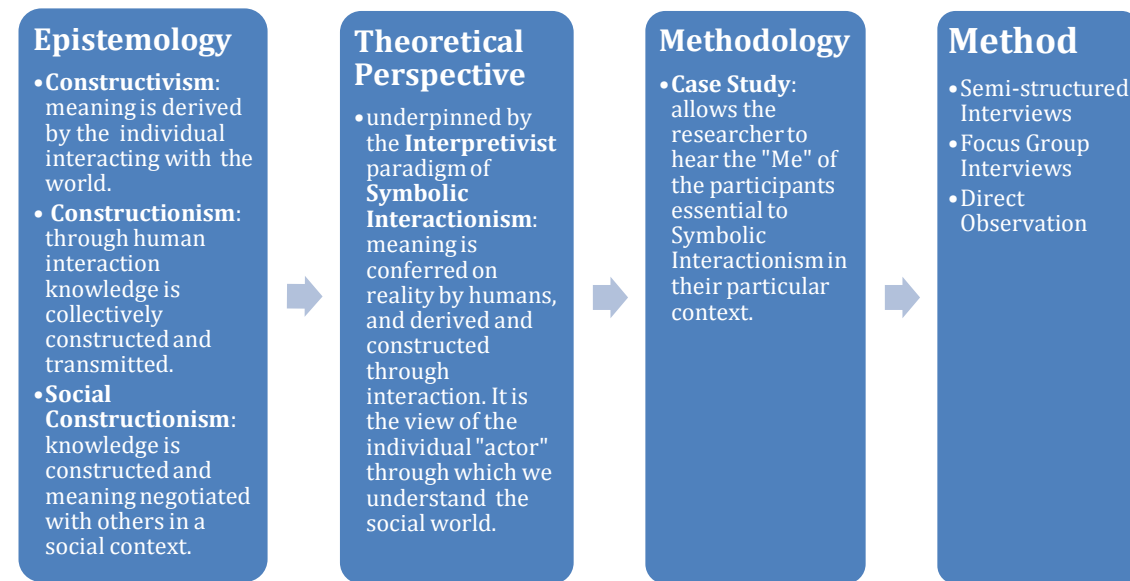
In this section of the thesis an overview of the research approach to this study is provided. The focus of this study was to identify key factors that engaged year five / six students (aged 10-12) in an RE curriculum. The curriculum used in the Archdiocese of Melbourne, Australia was *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008). This investigation sought to ascertain the perspectives of students and their religious education teachers as to what engaged them in this RE curriculum. A qualitative approach was employed to capture these perspectives.

Qualitative research seeks to understand the world from the perspectives of those living in it ... to capture the perspectives that actors use as a basis for their actions in specific social settings ... (therefore) the perspectives or voices of participants ought to be prominent. (Hatch, 2002, p. 7)

Social reality is interpreted from the viewpoint of participants (Basit, 2010). It involves “understanding and portraying the meaning that is constructed by the participants involved in a particular social setting” (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2010, p. 420). This study sought to gather and interpret the perspectives of year five / six school students and their teachers. These perspectives were then explored “within the contexts of their natural occurrence” as observed in the RE classroom (Hatch, 2002, p. 7).

The purpose of this chapter is to express the rationale for selecting the epistemology, theoretical framework, theoretical perspective and research methodology underpinning the research design of this qualitative study. Figure 8 presents an overview of this research design and shows how the various elements relate to each other.



**Figure 8. Overview of the Research Design**

*Note.* Adapted from “*The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*”, by M. Crotty, 1998. Allen & Unwin Pty Ltd.

This chapter has seven major sections. It provides an overview of the: epistemology; theoretical perspective; methodology; method; how the research was conducted; analysis of data and the trustworthiness of the study. It also outlines the ethical considerations of this study.

### **Epistemological Foundations**

Research is informed by an epistemology, a theory of knowledge. In holding a particular epistemology, researchers make knowledge claims regarding how and what they will learn through their research (Creswell, 2002a). This qualitative research was underpinned by constructivist / constructionist epistemologies. The epistemologies of constructivism and constructionism are often used interchangeably. To resolve this difficulty, Crotty (1998) proposed a distinction of these terms. Constructivism is about the meaning derived by the individual in interaction with the world they are interpreting. Constructionism

recognises that meaning is generated and transmitted in a social context (Crotty, 1998). These two interrelated epistemologies, which informed this study, are explored in this section.

### **Constructivism.**

A central tenet of *constructivism* is that individuals seek to know and understand the world (Creswell, 2002a). Meaning is not discovered or created by individuals; rather, it is constructed through individual engagement with objects in the world (Crotty, 1998). This relationship between subject and object is essential as according to this view, “no object can be adequately described in isolation from the conscious being experiencing it, nor can any experience be adequately described in isolation from its object” (Crotty, 1998, p. 45).

Therefore in a constructivist paradigm, ontology and epistemology can only be separated in theory (Gough, 2002).

Subjective meaning is constructed through each person’s experience of the world (Pring, 2005; Singer, 2009). As a result, multiple and varied meanings and interpretations may be possible (Neuman, 2006; O’Donoghue, 2007). Qualitative researchers endeavour to understand the context of research participants so as to recognise how this context may have shaped participants’ interpretation (Crotty, 1998).

### **Constructionism and social constructionism.**

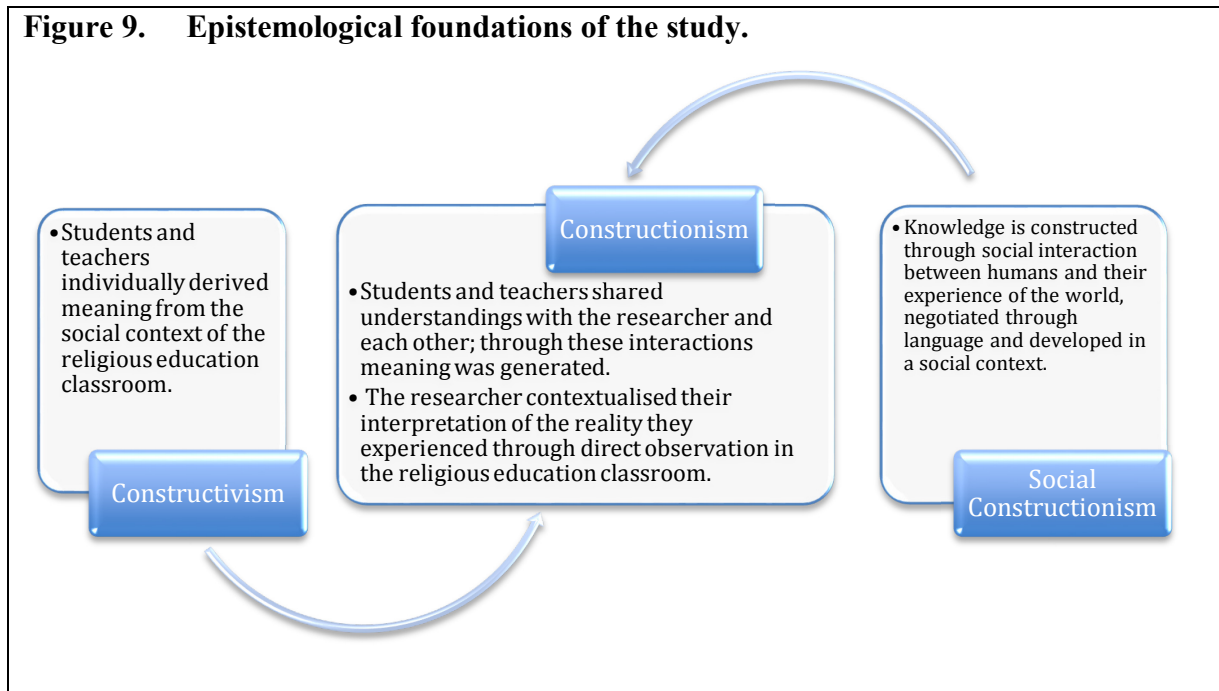
*Constructionism* extends and nuances the notion that “there is a real world out there independent of our interest in, or knowledge of, it” to state what is real is “meaningfully constructed” (Smith & Deemer, 2000, p. 880). It posits the “constructed nature of all social reality... (and that) truths are the products of human subjectivities” (Harrison, 2014, p. 230). In this perspective, people “develop subjective meanings of their experiences” (Creswell, 2002a, p. 8). This is an acceptance that what we perceive as ontologically real is knowledge that is always “embedded within our historical, cultural, and engendered ways of being” (Smith & Deemer, 2000, p. 886). In other words a constructionist view is relative in that it

sees reality as being context and time bound: as interpretations affected by both culture and history rather than as eternal and universal truths (De Koster, Devise, Flament & Loots, 2004). Two key ideas emerge from this understanding. Researchers may be assisted to make sense of the perspectives that others have of the world if they “seek to understand the context or setting of the participants through visiting this context and gathering information personally” (Creswell, 2002a, p. 9). Secondly, in this perspective, it is possible to develop differing valid interpretations of the same phenomena (Smith & Deemer, 2000). Such an understanding had implications for this research. Students and / or teachers may have experienced the same phenomena, and yet drew differing conclusions from this. These differing viewpoints were still valid as they represented their interpretation of the reality they had experienced. The interpretations of researchers are also affected by “their own personal, cultural and historical experiences” (Creswell, 2002a, pp. 8-9). Consequently, different researchers could also derive differing yet equally valid interpretations from what they found through the research process.

*Social constructionism* refers to the view that knowledge is constructed within a social context (Crotty, 1998). We do not have “unmediated access to reality” (Gibbons & Sanderson, 2002, p. 24). The culture into which we are born endows reality with meaning; reality, therefore, is socially constructed and derived from the consensus of a community (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). In this sense knowledge is seen as a “negotiated creation of meaning” (De Koster et al., 2004, p. 75). An object (a chair in this instance) may exist in reality, but it only exists as a chair if we hold it to be such; as a chair it, too, is constructed through social life (Crotty, 1998). Meaning is generated and transmitted in a social context (Creswell, 2002a). Social constructionism posits that knowledge is constructed through social interaction between humans and their experience of the world, negotiated through language and developed in a social context (Ary et al., 2010; De Koster et al., 2004).

The diagram in figure 9 illustrates the interconnectedness between constructivism, constructionism and social constructionism that underpin the epistemological foundations of this study. Whilst accepting this complex understanding of epistemology, the term constructionism will be used to denote this study's theory of knowledge.

**Figure 9. Epistemological foundations of the study.**



From this understanding of constructionist epistemology, two key ideas will be essential in guiding this research. Firstly, the research design will need to be one that features the perspectives of student and teacher participants and provides opportunity for their views to be constructed in interaction with others. Secondly, the research design should provide the researcher with the opportunity to gain some understanding of the context of the research participants.

### **Theoretical Perspective: Interpretivism**

The theoretical perspective often combined with constructionism, and grounding this study, was interpretivism (Creswell, 2002b). In an interpretivist approach it is the view of the individual participants through which we gain an understanding of the social world (Candy, 1989). The researcher aims to understand how others view the world (O'Donoghue, 2007).

Therefore, the focus is on the “experience and inner reality of the people being studied” and accurately conveying participants’ perception of their reality (Gibbons & Sanderson, 2002; Neuman, 2006, p. 91). “The researcher’s intent, then, is to make sense of (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world” (Creswell, 2002a, p. 9). Such an approach was clearly aligned with the focus of this study. This study sought to make sense of the perspectives of year five / six school students and their respective teachers as to the factors that facilitated student engagement in an RE curriculum.

The interpretivist paradigm consists of different perspectives such as hermeneutics, phenomenology and symbolic interactionism. Hermeneutics is concerned with the interpretation of both written texts, and unwritten texts such as human events and situations. Phenomenology suggests that a person may engage directly with and make sense of the essence of an object / phenomenon. Symbolic interactionism involves deriving meaning through interaction, primarily via language, with others in the social world (Crotty, 1998). Symbolic interactionism underpinned this study.

### **Symbolic interactionism: reasons for selecting this interpretivist paradigm.**

In contrast to nineteenth century positivist sociologists, understanding was stressed in the social analyses of the German intellectual tradition. From this tradition the philosophical beginnings of qualitative research evolved (Hatch, 2002). Qualitative research emphasises the meaning that individuals ascribe to social knowledge. Symbolic interactionism arose as a particular method of exploring the individual’s understandings in a systematic manner (Hatch, 2002).

Symbolic interactionism was present in the research approach of the Chicago school in the early part of the last century. Pragmatist philosopher John Dewey and George Herbert Mead were among significant contributors to its development. From these early stages Mead is the most cited source. Although the Iowa School of symbolic interactionism is based on

quantitative research, symbolic interactionism is synonymous with qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Herbert Blumer, a student of Mead, wrote a seminal text on symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969). This set out key premises of this approach. Firstly, the world does not possess its own meaning. Meaning is conferred on reality by human beings. People then act toward that reality according to the meaning it has for them (Blumer, 1969). For instance, a television may be defined by an educational technologist as a device for showing instructional content to students. For a teacher the television may be defined on some occasions, such as the last day of term, as a device for entertaining students (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Secondly, meaning is derived and constructed from social interaction (Blumer, 1969). “Individuals interpret with the help of others ... but others do not do it for them” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 27). Rather the person must interpret these meanings for themselves (Blumer, 1969).

To understand what is happening we must understand the perspective of the other. “The real world exists but ... it can only be known through studying the perspectives of those experiencing that world” (Hatch, 2002, p. 28). One of the central notions of symbolic interactionism is “taking the place of the other” to understand this perspective (Crotty, 1998, p. 84). Rather than ascertaining this perspective by taking the role of the other, this role taking is enacted through interaction. This interaction is symbolic because it occurs through “significant symbols” (Crotty, 1998, p. 75) such as language. It is “through dialogue ... one become(s) aware of the perceptions, feelings and attitudes of others and interpret(s) their meanings and intent” (Crotty, 1998, pp. 75-76). Symbolic interactionism links well with the constructionist epistemology underpinning this study. This epistemology holds that meaning is constructed through social interaction between humans and their experience of the world. Symbolic interactionism maintains that language and interaction with others are crucial to the

gaining of knowledge “Because all knowledge is the result of negotiation through interaction” (De Koster et al., 2004, p. 75).

Symbolic interactionism’s emphasis on the other’s view made this theoretical perspective the right approach for this study with its focus on what students and teachers perceived to be factors that facilitated student engagement in an RE curriculum. This perspective enabled the researcher to “interpret(s) social reality the way it is viewed by the research participants” (Basit, 2010, p. 14).

Understanding the context within which participant views are formed is essential for symbolic interactionism (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This purports that the self can be identified and discussed as the “Me” of each person. Furthermore, each person consists of multiple “Me’s”: “Who I am depends on which Me is experienced as the most salient at the time ... on the Me that is called forth by the social context” (Bowers, 1988, p. 37). This research was interested in the most salient “Me” of the person as student in the RE classroom or teacher of RE (Blumer, 1969; Bowers, 1988; Gouldner, 1970; Mead, 1934). Therefore, being cognisant of the social context of student and teacher perceptions assisted in understanding the meaning that they ascribed to social phenomena. The following example of eating lunch in school illustrates the importance of social context for the drawing out of the most salient “Me”. For a teacher in a school, eating lunch may either be interpreted as a welcome break from work, or an opportunity to prepare for the next lesson. In contrast, for a student it may represent how long till they can go home, or how soon they will have to finish a day that was full of exciting learning opportunities (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

This theoretical perspective had implications for the selection of an appropriate research methodology. This needed to be one that facilitated hearing the perspectives of the student and teacher participants. At the same time, this methodology had to enable the most salient “Me” of student and teacher participants to be observed, discerned and described

within the social context of the RE classroom. The purpose of this research was to ascertain the factors that engaged year five / six students in a classroom religious education curriculum. A case study methodology was consistent with the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism and the research purpose of this study.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Introduction.**

A central tenet of symbolic interactionism is that meaning is derived and constructed through social interaction and dialogue (Blumer, 1969). This theoretical perspective required a research methodology that enabled the researcher to interact with participants and involved participants in interactions with each other “so that the participants can construct the meaning of a situation, a meaning typically forged in discussions or interactions with other persons” (Creswell, 2002a, p. 8). The chosen methodology also needed to facilitate understanding of the most salient “Me” called forth from the social context of students in the RE classroom and teachers of RE (Bowers, 1988, p. 37).

Qualitative inquirers argue that human behaviour is always bound to the context in which it occurs ... (therefore) qualitative inquiry seeks to understand and interpret human and social behaviour as it is lived by participants in a particular social setting. (Ary et al., 2010, p. 420)

A case study methodology is consistent with a constructionist epistemology and the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism (Crotty, 1998). This methodology supported participants to construct meaning derived from the social context of the RE classroom, enabled the researcher to contextualise the most salient “Me” of the RE student / teacher, and assisted in understanding the meaning that they ascribed to the social context of the RE classroom. The next section of this chapter provides an account as to why case study



was the most appropriate methodology for this study, and outlines the subsequent methods that were used.

### **Case study.**

#### ***Introduction.***

A case may be defined as “a single unit, a bounded system” (Merriam, 1998), a “phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context” (Punch, 2009, p. 119) or as “the study of an instance in action” (Basit, 2010, p. 19). In this research the case was six composite classes of year five / six students and their RE teachers within a particular Catholic primary school. A researcher may choose to study a case for intrinsic reasons such as its uniqueness (Punch, 2009). Alternatively, a case may be selected for instrumental reasons such as it provides insight into a particular issue (Stake, 2005). The following section will outline the reasons for choosing a case study methodology and the type of case this study involved.

#### ***Intrinsic case study.***

A case study may be defined by an intrinsic interest in the individual case (Stake, 2005; Bassegy, 1999). In terms of this study, the research problem had arisen from a particular case. As explained in the Introduction to this thesis, a group of year five / six students from the researcher’s school were surveyed by the Catholic Education Office, Melbourne, regarding aspects of the school’s RE program. Analysis of the survey suggested a high level of interest in the religious practices of the school such as participation in prayer and liturgies, but only a moderate level of engagement amongst students with regard to the RE program (see Appendix A: Student Survey – Education in Faith). This study was undertaken because the researcher had an interest in and wanted “a better understanding of this particular case” (Punch, 2009, p. 119). To understand this case the researcher needed to hear the “perspectives of those experiencing that world” (Hatch, 2002, p. 28) and to “interpret(s) social reality the

way it is viewed by the research participants” (Basit, 2010, p. 14). However, there were also instrumental reasons for investigating this case.

***Instrumental case study.***

An instrumental case study involves research into a particular case so that an understanding may be gained of an issue that also exists outside of the case (Bassegy, 1999; Stake, 2005). It may be that “a general question, an issue, a problem that we are interested in, and we feel that an in-depth study of a particular instance or case will illuminate that interest” (Merriam, 1998, p. 65). In 2008 a new RE curriculum framework, *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008), was provided for use in all primary schools within the Archdiocese of Melbourne. An understanding of factors that engaged students in this case study offered possible insights into the issue of student engagement in RE learning in other classrooms using this framework. In this sense the particular case was instrumental in understanding an issue in the class it represented (Bassegy, 1999).

***Case study and generalisability.***

Some may be tempted by notions of generalisability and to this end may consider exploring a number of cases (a multiple case study or collective case study), or not using a case study at all because of its apparent lack of generalisability. Firstly, it should be stated that rather than generalising beyond the case, the focus of an intrinsic case study is an in-depth understanding of the case in all its complexity and in its context (Punch, 2009; Stake, 2005). An instrumental case study can lead to generalising and theorising: according to “*fuzzy generalisation*. This is the kind of statement which makes no absolute claim to knowledge, but hedges its claims with uncertainties” [Italics by original author] (Bassegy, 1999, p. 12). However, the focus of a case study should not shift to theorising at the expense of understanding the case in all its complexity. In the first instance, the researcher had an

intrinsic interest in understanding the factors that affected student engagement in RE in this particular case.

***Information-rich case.***

Central to choosing a case study methodology for this research, and the choice of the particular case, was that it was an “information-rich case ... from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (Merriam, 1998, p. 61). The issue of central importance to this research was the identification of key factors that engaged year five / six students in an RE curriculum. In this sense this research was an instrumental case study as the “particular case is examined mainly to provide insight into an issue” (Stake, 2005, p. 445). This study involved “*deliberate or purposive sampling*” [italics by original author] (Punch, 2009, p. 252). That is the participants and the setting, year five and six students and their RE teachers, were purposefully chosen by the researcher because these participants “provide(d) maximum insight and understanding” of the research question (Ary et al., 2010, p. 428): what are the factors that engage year five / six students in an RE curriculum?

***A justification for a case study methodology.***

Case studies may be underpinned by an ethnographic methodology (Singer, 2009). In the following section three key features of ethnography will be explored: research in the field, participant observation and thick description (Harrison, 2014). Reasons for choosing a case study rather than an ethnographic methodology will then be discussed. In the final section some other key ideas in support of a case study are offered.

Ethnography is both the process and product of writing about and describing a culture (Harrison, 2014). It has been described as “field research that requires long term engagement in a natural setting” (Bailey, 2007, p. 206) and “participating, overtly or covertly in people’s

daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 1).

Ethnographic research occurs in the everyday context of people’s lives and therefore “the researcher goes to the data, rather than sitting in an office and collecting it” (Singer, 2009, p. 191). This requires gathering data in the field rather than in formalised ways set up by the researcher such as structured interviews or observations (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Whilst data may be collected from various sources, on site observation and interviews are the most common data gathering techniques (Singer, 2009).

Participant observation is a central practice of ethnographers (Singer, 2009). The researcher lives and participates in people’s daily lives. From this vantage point the researcher observes social reality. As both participant and observer, “Ethnographers intrinsically operate in the physical, social, and psychological spaces of the in-between” (Harrison, 2014, p. 237). Whilst the subjectivity of what is seen by the researcher is acknowledged, as a participant they are enabled to interpret the social world in much the same way that other participants do (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Singer, 2009).

An interpretivist theoretical perspective generally informs ethnography. Therefore, ethnography is guided by the “constructed nature of all social reality... (and that) truths are the products of human subjectivities. As such, cultural and contextual specifics are critical to understanding” (Harrison, 2014, p. 230). This understanding has implications for observation: this must be more than just physical description; data must be contextualised through the development of thick description (Singer, 2009). An example of the difference between an eye twitch and a wink illustrates this. As a physical description these two actions may appear to be the same, but properly contextualised they are very different (Harrison, 2014). Contextualisation therefore includes attributes that transcend the merely physical such as the intention and impetus underlying action.

Theoretically, both ethnographic and case study methodologies could be used to explore the identified case in this research. Both methodologies may be underpinned by the constructionist epistemology informing this study. Furthermore, native ethnography (studying the community to which one belongs) has been carried out in high school and university contexts (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000). However, the researcher's administrative role in the school in which the case occurs, makes such an approach implausible; the researcher cannot act as either a student or a teacher. As well as the researcher's administrative role, the research purpose and the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism informing this study justify the choice of a case study. These aspects are considered in the next section.

To achieve the research purpose of this study and identify the factors that engage students in RE classroom learning, the researcher sought the perspectives of the students and teachers experiencing that world (Hatch, 2002). This approach was informed by the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism and entailed hearing "the Me that is called forth by the social context" of the participants as either a student in the RE classroom or the teacher of RE (Bowers, 1988, p. 37). This supported the researcher to "interpret social reality the way it is viewed by the research participants" (Basit, 2010, p. 14).

This contrasts markedly with "ethnography's guiding vantage point, participant observation", which "starts from an act of intervention into the fabric of daily life... (as both participant and observer" (Harrison, 2014, p. 237). As the researcher was a full-time administrator in the school, participant observation was not an appropriate form of observation; the researcher could not participate as a student or as a teacher. For the ethnographer, this approach means "we can come to interpret the world more or less in the same way they (participants) do" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 8). The researcher's role in the school precluded him from interpreting social reality from the perspective of a participant. Whilst observation was used as a method in the final stages of this study, the

perspectives of participants, gained through semi-structured and focus group interviews, guided the researcher's classroom observations. This was to ensure that the researcher heard the voice of the participants rather than being obscured by his everyday knowledge of the classrooms in the case as an administrator. "It can be more difficult to suspend one's preconceptions" when dealing with familiar experiences (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 81). Furthermore, familiarity can obscure observation: "Those who come to research from a career in the classroom may, initially, find it difficult to regard the environment with the detachment necessary to explore in a sharply focused manner" (Lovey, 2000, p. 130). For these reasons semi-structured observation (informed by participants' views) in the latter stages of the research process of this study was chosen over participant observation as the most appropriate form for observing students and teachers in the RE classroom (Basit, 2010)<sup>5</sup>.

A case study methodology assisted the researcher to gain an understanding of experiential knowledge through the chosen theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism. The participants revealed and gave testimony to their experience. Given sufficient time and access observing in RE classrooms the researcher came to know the case personally, its activities, relationships, contexts and such. This knowing was gained through "what others reveal(ed) as their experience" through interviews, and through subsequent direct observation of the "social experience" of the case (Stake, 2005, p. 454).

A case study methodology was also chosen because of its "detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information" (Creswell, 2006, p. 61). Whilst remaining true to symbolic interactionism and being prepared to accept the meanings that the participants ascribed to their understandings of social phenomena (Crotty, 1998), these multiple sources of information ensured student and teacher perceptions were expanded and

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<sup>5</sup> An outline of semi-structured observation and the reasons for using this method appear in a later section in this chapter entitled, *Conducting the interviews / observations*.

contextualised within the complexities of the case. It was expected that teachers and students would perceive a range of realities and meaning as to the factors that engaged students in an RE curriculum (Kervin, Vialle, Herrington, & Okely, 2006). “Case studies recognise the complexity and embeddedness of social truths. By careful examination of social settings, case studies can look at discrepancies between participants’ perceptions” (Basit, 2010, p. 20). To recognise and depth the complexity of this case with its range of realities and meanings, this study lent itself to the multiple methods of a case study: interviews (semi-structured and focus group) with students and teachers to hear their voice, and direct observation of students and teachers in the RE classroom to contextualise their voice.

## **Method**

### **Data gathering strategies appropriate to this study.**

Case study research is not limited to particular methods of data collection and analysis. Researchers using this methodology tend to be rather eclectic and pragmatic in their selection of data gathering methods. They tend to focus on methods according to how “appropriate and practical” these methods are for the research (Bassegy, 1999, p. 69). It is important though, to collect multiple sources of data for both methodological and verification reasons (outlined in a later section of this chapter titled *Trustworthiness*). “Regardless of the purpose of the case study, one of the keys to an effective, rigorous case study is utilising multiple data collection sources” (Kervin et al., 2006, p. 70). Whilst six sources of data have been proposed (Yin, 2003): documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation and physical artefacts, not all sources are relevant for all case studies (Yin, 1994). For reasons outlined below, interviews and direct observation were chosen as the most appropriate sources of data collection for this study.

The theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism, which guided this research and the search through the latter to hear the “voice” of the participants, impacted on the

choice of data gathering strategies. “The case will not be seen the same by everyone. Qualitative researchers take pride in discovering and portraying the multiple views of the case. The interview is the main road to multiple realities” (Stake, 1995, p. 64). Interviews using broad, general and open-ended questions enabled participants to construct meaning through interaction and discussion, and the researcher to hear these multiple perspectives (Creswell, 2002a). Individual and focus group interviews were used in this study as these facilitated participant perspectives to be generated and transmitted in interaction with the researcher, and in the case of focus group interviews, in dialogue with other participants (Kervin et al., 2006).

Direct observation in each classroom was also selected because this enabled participant perspectives to be contextualised; “constructivist researchers... also focus on the specific contexts in which people live and work in order to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants” (Creswell, 2002a, p. 8). These observations also assisted the researcher to confirm perceptions and examine the discrepancies of participants as revealed through semi-structured and focus group interviews (Basit, 2010). The data gathering strategies used in this case study are shown in Figure 10. Each of these methods, and why they were most appropriate for this study, will be outlined more fully in the following section.

**Figure 10. Data Gathering Strategies Used in this Case Study.**

<b>Data Gathering Strategies</b>	<b>Semi-structured Interviews</b>
	<b>Focus Group Interviews</b>
	<b>Direct Observation</b>



### **Reasons for selecting semi-structured and focus group interviews.**

This intrinsic case study sought to understand the perspectives of year 5/6 students (aged 10-12) and their teachers in regard to what engaged students in an RE curriculum. Gaining insight into these perspectives was imperative. Interviews gave participants the opportunity to “illustrate what it is like to be” in their particular situation (Gillham, 2005, p. 8). “The strength of interviews is that they allow insight into participant perspectives. If capturing those perspectives is a goal, than interviewing at some level seems imperative” (Hatch, 2002, p. 97). Participant perspectives were essential to hearing the multiple realities of the case and understanding it in all its complexity. Therefore it was determined that interviews would be a substantial source for the gathering of data in this case study. Semi-structured and focus group interviews were chosen to gather data in this investigation of factors which engaged year five and six students in an RE curriculum. The reasons for selecting each type of interview as an appropriate method for this case study are outlined below.

#### ***Semi -structured interviews.***

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with year five and six students and their classroom teachers during the initial phase of data collection. Interview scripts with some predetermined open-ended questions characterize semi-structured interviews (Kervin et al., 2006). These questions are used to guide the interview (See Appendix I for the student script, and Appendix J for the teacher script. A selection of questions from these scripts and further explanation of the interview process is contained in a later section in this chapter titled, *Conducting the interviews*). Semi-structured interviews also include “supplementary questions” or what may be termed as prompts and probes (Basit, 2010, p. 103; Punch, 2009). These questions were used during the interview to follow up on participant responses to the scripted open-ended questions and to “probe the answers to ascertain additional information”

(Kervin et al., 2006, p. 88). They encouraged participants to answer a question at a deeper level, to give detail, to provide elaboration or to give examples (Hatch, 2002).

In this study the researcher sought to uncover the perspectives of students and teachers as to factors that facilitated the engagement of year five / six students in an RE curriculum. This required a method that used open-ended questions. “Qualitative researchers seek to capture participant perspectives, so formal interview questions need to be open-ended. They should be designed to get informants talking about their experiences and understandings” (Hatch, 2002, p. 102). Semi-structured interviews are an excellent tool when trying to capture what a person (both adult and child) thinks / feels about a particular topic as it allows the interviewer the freedom to interact with participants and clarify / depth their thinking through dialogue:

... as the aim is to capture as much as possible the subject’s thinking about a particular topic or practical task, the interviewer follows in depth the process of thinking posing new questions after the first answers given by the subject. (del Barrio, Gutierrez, Hoyos, Barrios, van der Meulen & Smorti, 1999, p. 2)

As such this method with its focus on opening up a dialogue between the researcher and the interviewee was consistent with this study’s chosen theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism. This method also enabled the interviewer to seek examples, clarification and expansion of ideas from the interviewee following their response to scripted questions (del Barrio et al., 1999). Such an approach supported participants’ construction of meaning through interaction with the researcher (Creswell, 2002a).

According to the constructionist epistemology underpinning this study, meaning is constructed in dialogue and interaction with others (Crotty, 1998). This theory of knowledge supported use of focus group interviews. Focus group interviews were important for this case study as “well facilitated group interaction can assist in bringing to the surface aspects of a

situation that might not otherwise be exposed” (Punch, 2009, p. 147). In the following section reasons for selecting these interviews are outlined.

***Focus groups.***

Focus groups were used as part of the data gathering process. Gathering data through a focus group interview involves interviewing a group of approximately four to six people (Creswell, 2002b). Focus group interviews were chosen as these have advantages with regard to “group support and group dynamics” which increase both participation and discussion and engage reluctant participants (Morgan, Gibbs, Maxwell & Britten, 2002, p. 16; Peterson & Barron, 2007). The supportive nature of these interviews for student participants was another key factor in their selection. “When interviewing children, a focus group structure is often useful as it allows for the children to interact with each other as responses from their peers can support and encourage articulation of individual perspectives” (Kervin et al., 2006, pp. 88-89).

Group interaction has other advantages. It can “stimulate people in making explicit their views, perceptions, motives and reasons. This makes group interviews an attractive data gathering option when research is trying to probe those aspects of people’s behaviour” (Punch, 2009, p. 147). These interactions may also challenge, stimulate or reinforce the ideas of group members (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). This can be particularly important when individuals have not previously given much thought to a particular issue and so are in the process of constructing a view in dialogue with others (Bassegy, 1999). Also, when used “in series” with other data gathering strategies, these interviews can be effective in exploring the same topic from different perspectives (Hatch, 2002, p. 133). Focus groups were used in this study to explore the topic from the “multiple perspectives” of the participants and to uncover perceptions not necessarily revealed in individual interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p.

108). It was hoped that new data would be generated using this method and that perspectives revealed through semi-structured interviews might be deepened.

Focus groups have long been used with adults. They are an excellent method of data collection when there is a need to ascertain the group's "shared understandings, perceptions, feelings and common knowledge about a topic" (Peterson & Barron, 2007, p. 140). Whereas researchers may have been reluctant in the past to use focus groups with students, in contemporary times they are being used increasingly often as "children are generally comfortable and familiar with the process of discussing matters in groups" (Darbyshire, MacDougall & Schiller, 2005, p. 420).

Focus groups were a rich source of data collection for this study. They provided student and teacher participants with the support and the stimulation of a group context. This context facilitated the participation and discussion of participants. They revealed perceptions that had remained concealed during earlier semi-structured interviews (Morgan et al., 2002). However, these were not the only source of data as "like other methods of data collection they can only provide a partial account and may require to be supplemented by other data" (Morgan et al., 2002, p. 18).

Observation of the case was also an essential method for gathering data. This study sought to investigate the factors that facilitated student engagement in an RE curriculum. Direct observation of the students and their teachers in the RE classroom provided insight into these factors. The reasons for selecting observation as an appropriate method for this case study are outlined in the next section.

#### **Reasons for selecting direct observation.**

In addition to the participants' perceptions being sought through semi-structured and focus group interviews, there were advantages in the researcher directly observing and describing the functioning of the selected case and the context that influenced it (Stake,

2005). Direct observation required the researcher to carefully observe firsthand what participants did and said in their particular setting; in this research that meant observing students and teachers during RE classes (Hatch, 2002).

Cases respond differently according to complex situational factors within which they are bound; these contexts require the scrutiny of observation to facilitate depth of understanding of their complex nature.

Observation can guide the researcher to a deeper understanding of what is happening as it is embedded within the context in which it naturally occurs. This then enables the researcher to gain understanding of what actually happens within that particular setting. (Kervin et al., 2006, p. 85)

Observation assisted the researcher to gain an understanding of the case from the perspective of those being observed. “Observation ... allows access to participants’ views of the world ... the reason for selecting observation as a data collection tool is to try and see the phenomena under investigation from the viewpoint of those being observed” (Hatch, 2002, p. 82). This qualitative study investigated the factors that supported student engagement in an RE curriculum. These factors existed within the particular context of the RE classroom. To understand the case in all its complexity, an understanding of this context was essential.

Qualitative researchers have strong expectations that the reality perceived by people inside and outside the case will be social, cultural, situational, and contextual – and they want the interactivity of functions and contexts as well described as possible. (Stake, 2005, p. 452)

Such description was essential when attempting to convey the experience of the participants in all its complexity. Experiential, situational and contextual narrative gives a vivid description of the case and shows the researcher’s grasp of the case as an “experiential knowing” (Stake, 2005, p. 452).

Direct observation in each classroom was selected because this enabled participant perspectives to be contextualised:

Qualitative inquirers argue that human behaviour is always bound to the context in which it occurs ... (therefore) qualitative inquiry seeks to understand and interpret human and social behaviour as it is lived by participants in a particular social setting. (Ary et al., 2010, p. 420)

Through the interpretivist paradigm of symbolic interactionism this research sought to understand the most salient “Me” of the person as student in the RE classroom or teacher of RE (Blumer, 1969; Bowers, 1988, p. 37; Gouldner, 1970; and Mead, 1934). The researcher sought to hear and interpret participants’ perspectives through interviews. These perspectives became the lens “to try and see the phenomena under investigation from the viewpoint of those being observed” (Hatch, 2002, p. 82). To gain a deeper understanding of participants’ perspectives required direct observation of student and teacher participants in the classroom as their perceptions arose from and were contextualised in the RE classroom.

As well as developing an understanding of the context and how the participants perceived this, observation complemented the semi-structured and focus group interviews used in this research. Through observation “The researcher has the opportunity to see things taken for granted by participants and would be less likely to come to the surface using interviewing or other data collection techniques” (Hatch, 2002, p. 72). It was hoped that new data would come to the surface through direct observation.

Finally, direct observation empowered the researcher to confirm perceptions and examine discrepancies of participants, to ascertain to what extent participants “act as they say they do” (Basit, 2010; Burton & Bartlett, 2005, p. 140). Major themes or categories were developed from the initial categorisation of data from semi-structured and focus group interviews (Gillham, 2005). These major themes became the basis of a classroom observation

checklist (see appendix K). The observation checklist was used as a lens to assist the researcher to observe from the perspective of participants, to identify perceptions from interviews which occurred in the classroom (and areas of consonance and dissonance between these two data sources), and to detect any additional factors which supported the engagement of students in the RE classroom. The data gathering process used in this research is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. *The Data Gathering Process*

<b>Stage of Data Collection</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Collection Method</b>
Stage 1 – Initial Phase	All 5/6 teachers	Semi-structured Interviews
	Four students from each of the six 5/6 classes: 24 students in total	
	All 5/6 teachers	Focus Groups
	Five to six students from each of the six 5/6 classes: 30-36 students in total	
Stage 2 – Secondary Phase	All six 5/6 classes	Direct Observation
	Daily observation of each RE class for one week: 30 observations in total	

## **How the Research was Conducted**

### **Deciding the participants.**

A central reason for choosing this case was because it was an “information-rich case” (Merriam, 1998, p. 61). The case was one from which the researcher could learn a great deal about issues which were central to the research purpose of this study (Merriam, 1998). The purpose of this research was to investigate factors that facilitated the engagement of year five / six students in an RE curriculum. Therefore, participant selection from the case site for interviews was from year five / six students and their classroom teachers; all of these people were involved in the teaching and learning of the curriculum *Coming to Know, Worship, and*

*Love* (CEO, 2008). Therefore, they were able to provide information central to the research purpose of this study. Similarly, direct observation was of students and teachers in year five / six RE classrooms.

### **Seeking permission to conduct research in a school.**

Following Ethics Approval from Australian Catholic University (Appendix B) in 2009, permission was sought from the Director of Catholic Education, Melbourne, Mr Stephen Elder, to approach year five / six teachers and students for their permission to be interviewed and / or observed during a number of RE lessons (Appendix C). Subsequent to the Director's approval (Appendix D), a letter was sent to the Principal of the school seeking their approval to conduct research in the school (Appendix E). Once this approval was secured (Appendix F), the researcher sought the participation of students and teachers in this research.

### **Inviting students / teachers to participate in interviews / class observations.**

An information letter was prepared for students (Appendix G) and teachers (Appendix H). This letter detailed the research purpose, provided a description of the types of interviews, detailed what classroom observations would involve, and outlined the approximate amount of time these activities required. From an ethical perspective, it was essential that the researcher did not deliberately obscure research goals or what participation would entail in order to persuade students or teachers to agree to participate in the study (Karnieli-Miller, Strier, & Pessach, 2009). The researcher visited each class in July, 2009, gave out the Information Letter to Parents and Student Participants to all year five / six students and answered any student questions. At these visits the researcher explained what would be involved for participants who agreed to take part in the interviews or classroom observations. Students were encouraged with verbal reminders from their teachers to return consent forms. Ten to twelve students from each of the 5/6 classes expressed a willingness to



participate in this research through interviews, and returned consent forms confirming this. All students returned consent forms allowing the researcher to observe them in their RE class.

Similarly, the researcher gave year five / six teachers an information letter with an explanation of the research at their Professional Learning Team (PLT) meeting in early July, 2009. The ensuing questions and discussion assisted in further informing teachers of the purpose of the research, and of what involvement in this research would require of them. This was the only invitation issued to teachers. As the researcher was an administrator in the research site, contact was made with possible teacher participants on a daily basis. This contact concerned work matters unrelated to the research. Contact was not made with teachers regarding their participation in this research unless initiated by individual teachers. Teachers were encouraged to return their consent forms through a reminder on their weekly PLT agenda. As the researcher was the Deputy Principal of the school, questions may arise around the extent to which participants freely consented to participate; being in a work relationship with the researcher may also have made some feel obligated to participate (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009). Six of the year 5/6 teachers returned consent forms indicating that they were prepared to be involved in this research. An indication of the relative freedom of teachers to participate or not, was evident in the decision of one teacher from the Level not to participate. They made clear to the researcher that they did not feel comfortable being involved in interviews or direct observation in the classroom. They were informed that their decision would be respected and that they would not be asked to participate in the future. In the next section how the interviews and observations were conducted is outlined.

### **Conducting the interviews / observations.**

#### ***Semi-structured interviews.***

Semi-structured interviews involved interview scripts with open-ended questions. These questions were used to guide the interview (Appendix I for students, and Appendix J

for teachers). Open-ended questions provided scope for participants to suggest the factors that they perceived promoted student engagement in an RE curriculum. Whilst the script ensured that all participants had the opportunity to respond to the same open-ended questions, at the same time it provided the interviewer with the freedom to interact with participants and clarify / depth their thinking through dialogue (Ary et al., 2010; del Barrio et al., 1999).

During interviews the researcher listened attentively to the initial responses of the participants. Where appropriate, the interviewer asked them to give examples, to illustrate further their ideas and / or to clarify these. The views of participants were explored at a deeper level through these supplementary questions, or prompts and probes (Basit, 2010; Punch, 2009). The interviewer returned to the interview script following these discussions. Figure 11 lists a sample of the open-ended questions used with students.

**Figure 11. Excerpt from Semi-structured Interview Script for Students.**

- What makes learning in RE interesting for you?
- What makes learning in RE challenging for you?
- When does the content of RE lessons become interesting for you?
- What activities help you to be more involved in RE lessons?

Similarly, Figure 12 shows a sample of the open-ended questions directed to teachers during their semi-structured interview.

**Figure 12. Excerpt from Semi-structured Interview Script for Teachers.**

- What aspects of curriculum facilitate student engagement?
- What aspects of the learning/teaching approach in RE support student engagement?
- What classroom activities seem to really engage students?
- What qualities of a task seem to facilitate student engagement?
- How may we use learning technologies to engage students in learning?

As well as exploring participant views through semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews were also conducted. These interviews assisted in exploring the research focus from different perspectives and uncovering perceptions not necessarily revealed in individual interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Hatch, 2002). The following section details how focus group interviews were conducted during this research.

***Focus groups.***

The aim of the focus group interviews was to enable an “interactive, open discussion” in a group context that supported participants to construct a view in dialogue with others (Bassey, 1999; Peterson & Barron, 2007, p. 140). Through the interaction with and support of peers it was anticipated that individual perspectives would be stimulated, affirmed or even challenged (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The researcher employed a “participative technique” involving the use of sticky notes to ensure that the voice of all participants was heard, particularly those who may have been hesitant or unsure how to make their view explicit (Morgan et al., 2002, p. 12; Punch, 2009). This approach had been used successfully with both children and adults in other research studies (Peterson & Barron, 2007).

Sticky notes were used to promote input from all participants and to facilitate new perspectives not uncovered through individual interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Peterson & Barron, 2007). Participants were asked to individually list what they perceived facilitated student engagement in RE. They were invited to use one sticky note for each separate idea. They could write as many ideas as they liked. Sticky notes were then placed on a whiteboard so that all could easily view these. Sticky notes with a common idea were then categorised by the focus group. Each category was then discussed in turn and all members were encouraged to explain and / or illustrate how this category supported student engagement in RE. To facilitate discussion and deeper exploration of these ideas, the researcher used supplementary questions, or prompts and probes (Basit, 2010; Punch, 2009). When new ideas were created

from these discussions, these too were written on a sticky note and placed on the whiteboard for discussion. This process continued until each focus group member was satisfied that their ideas had all been listed and clarified through a group discussion.

This process gave all participants the opportunity to share their perceptions. It also promoted lively, interactive group discussions. These discussions supported participants to construct and deepen initial perceptions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Punch, 2009). These interactive group discussions generated data that explored the same topic from a different perspective to individual interviews (Hatch, 2002). The multiple perspectives derived from both individual and group interviews were essential in gathering rich, deep data. Observation was also essential for understanding student and teacher participants' views of the factors that facilitated student engagement in an RE curriculum (Hatch, 2002). Investigating these factors within the context in which they occur "can guide the researcher to a deeper understanding of what is happening" (Kervin et al., 2006, p. 85). The following section details how direct observation was conducted during this research.

#### ***Direct observation.***

Unstructured observation is often used in qualitative research. This involves taking field notes when activity pertinent to the study is observed. This approach can be particularly useful in the early stages of an investigation in assisting the researcher to determine the precise focus of the research (Basit, 2010). In this qualitative study, observations occurred in the final stages of the research process. The reasons for selecting direct observation as a method, previously outlined in the section titled *Data gathering strategies*, impacted on the type of observation implemented in this study. Given the place of direct observation in this study, semi-structured observation was selected as the most appropriate form for observing students and teachers in the RE classroom (Basit, 2010).

Semi-structured observation involves the researcher having some clear ideas about what to observe whilst at the same time being open to any other relevant phenomena (Basil, 2010). Use of an *Observation Checklist* supported researcher observations. The observation checklist (Appendix K) was developed from the initial categorisation of data from individual and focus groups interviews. It enabled the researcher to use the perspectives of participants as a lens to observe the social reality of the classroom. Table 2 shows an excerpt from this checklist. During each classroom observation, field notes were written as the researcher observed individual items on the checklist. At times these observations confirmed participant perceptions from interviews. They also highlighted discrepancies between participant views and actual practice. New data was also gathered through observation. This process of semi-structured observation facilitated the gathering of rich, deep data in all its complexity.

Table 2. *Excerpt from Observation Checklist*

Engagement & Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Allows for our personal story</li> <li>- Allows for a personal response</li> <li>- Allows for both intrapersonal and interpersonal reflection</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Learning           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- New ideas and topics</li> <li>- Relevant to student lives</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Learning Tasks           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Unique (different) and interesting</li> <li>- Open-ended</li> <li>- For differing abilities yet challenging</li> <li>- Creative focus; allow for a creative response (e.g. posters)</li> <li>- Learning styles</li> <li>- Enjoyable</li> <li>- Allow ideas / feelings to be expressed through artwork</li> </ul> </li> <li>• ICT           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Facilitates research</li> <li>- Supports student creativity</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Cognitive Domain           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Thinking / ideas are developed as a group</li> <li>- Questions to help focus our thinking</li> <li>- Arts support thinking</li> <li>- Graphic organizers and other means of stimulating thinking skills</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
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As an observer in the field researchers may take various levels of involvement in the research setting. This can range from full participation to nonparticipation. Full participation entails living in the social context as a member of that group and observing from the inside. Nonparticipation requires observation of the social context from outside the social context; participants are unaware that they are being observed. In between these two extremes a researcher may act as a passive observer (passive presence) with a degree of limited interaction with participants when clarification is necessary (Kervin et al., 2006). The researcher in this investigation adopted this latter approach.

#### **Following each interview / observation.**

After each interview, (semi-structured and focus group interviews), the researcher listened to and transcribed the audio tape recording of the interview. Transcriptions were edited so that the flow of the interviews was not interrupted by unnecessary pauses such as “like, um, yeah”. Member checking was used to ensure that these deletions did not alter the intended meaning expressed by the interviewees. Participants were given a copy of the transcript and invited to add, delete or change the transcript if such changes captured more fully their thinking on the factors which engaged students in an RE curriculum. This process also ensured that the researcher had accurately represented participants’ views (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Any suggested changes were subsequently made to transcripts by the researcher.

#### **The insider status of the researcher, control and power relations.**

Constructionist approaches emphasise a researcher-participant “co-construction of knowledge” (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009, p. 282). As such researchers using this epistemology “seek to obtain participants’ genuine participation” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 175). Issues of control and power relations between the researcher and participants are therefore important considerations for constructionist research (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009;

Lincoln & Guba, 2000). This was particularly so for this current investigation given that the researcher held an administrative role (Deputy Principal) in the case setting and the participants were year five / six students and their classroom teachers. When the researcher has an established relationship with participants, or is part of the community they are researching (insider status), the transition to researcher can be difficult; participants may react negatively to this changed role (Anderson, Herr & Nihlen, 1994; Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000). Therefore, throughout this investigation the researcher had to be mindful of issues related to control and power, and to consider any actions needed to be taken to lessen the possible negative effects of the insider status of the researcher.

Research into the various life settings of people may be “fraught with tensions and misunderstandings” (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000, p. 163). Participants may mistrust the motives of the researcher or not wish to provide “insider” information (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000). The building and maintaining of the relationship between the researcher and participants is important for qualitative research as this can affect the “quantity and quality of the data shared with the researcher” (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009, p. 282). To facilitate the active participation of students and teachers in this case study, the researcher sought to develop a relationship wherein the voice of all participants was valued and respected. “The feeling of true participation is based on... acknowledgement of one’s equal right to contribute knowledge and an experience that matches the message... (that is, the researcher’s) genuine respect for individual perceptions and experiences” (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009, p. 285). As well as actively listening and responding to participants during individual interviews, semi-structured interviews provided participants with the opportunity to take an “active role” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 175) and “shift the focus of the conversation” (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009, p. 283). These actions affirmed that participant views were valued and that they had some control over what was discussed.

The supportive and interactive nature of focus group interviews also fostered participant involvement. In general, the supportive group context contributed to a safe environment that in turn increased participation, and engaged reluctant participants (Morgan et al., 2002; Peterson & Barron, 2007). Group dynamics further stimulated discussion of perceptions and reasons (Punch, 2009). Being able to interact with each other facilitated the active involvement of students as “responses from their peers can support and encourage articulation of individual perspectives” (Kervin et al., 2006, p. 89). As described more fully in the previous section entitled, *Conducting the interviews / observations*, the researcher also employed a “participative technique” (Morgan et al., 2002, p. 12) involving the use of sticky notes to ensure that the voice of all participants was heard, particularly those who may have been hesitant or unsure how to make their view explicit (Punch, 2009). This approach had been used successfully both with children and adults in other research studies, and enabled participants to decide the topics to be discussed and take control of the ensuing group discussion (Peterson & Barron, 2007).

The theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism informed this research. According to this perspective “Who I am depends on which Me is experienced as the most salient at the time ... on the Me that is called forth by the social context” (Bowers, 1988, p. 37). This research sought to understand the most salient “Me” of the person as student in the RE classroom or teacher of RE (Blumer, 1969; Bowers, 1988; Gouldner, 1970; Mead, 1934). To facilitate this, semi-structured interviews with teachers were held in the learning space of the RE classroom at a time decided by each individual teacher. The teachers’ focus group interview also occurred in a learning space of their choice. Similarly, semi-structured and focus group interviews with students were held in a learning space they shared with the class next door; students often used this space when they worked in groups during RE classes.



It was important that student and teacher participants were aware of when the researcher was acting in the role of observer in their classroom. The researcher was aware that this knowledge would have an influence on participants' behaviour (Hatch, 2002). To minimise this impact the researcher clarified the nature and extent of these observations with both student and teacher participants. Notes of observations were discussed with teachers following each observation to determine their fairness and accuracy. Also, whilst aware that the researcher's presence would have an impact on the participants in their natural setting, the researcher sought to act as a passive presence for the most part in order to minimise this impact. Limited interaction did occur when the researcher required clarification of what was happening in the setting (Kervin et al., 2006).

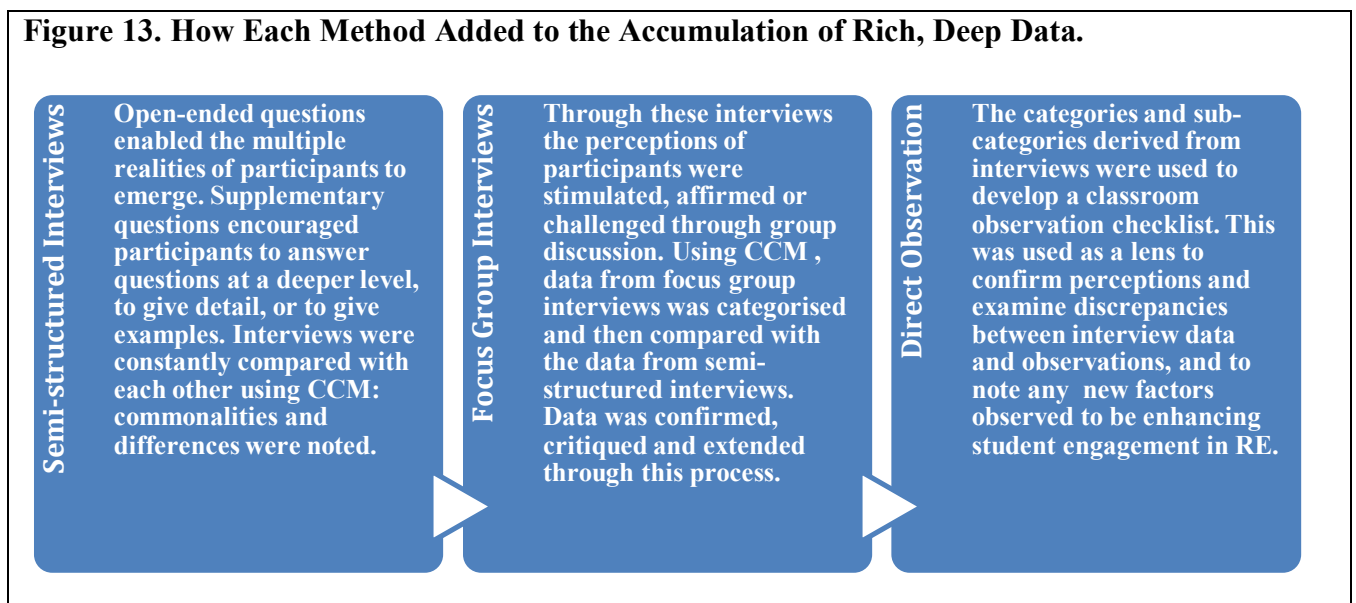
An "insider perspective" can be advantageous in understanding complex settings. It can also lead to the researcher not seeing things that have always been there: "It can be more difficult to suspend one's preconceptions" when dealing with everyday experiences (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 81). Researchers involved in the setting need to ensure that they investigate beyond their preconceived ideas and understandings to ensure that generated data is not considered merely subjective and biased (Basit, 2010, p. 124). Use of the observation checklist, generated from participants' perspectives, assisted the researcher to transcend preconceived notions. In this research various additional devices were used to ensure the reliability of collected data, and to minimise researcher bias and simplistic interpretations (Scott & Usher, 1999, p. 102). These devices included triangulation using multiple perspectives and methods. "The notion of triangulation, or the inclusion of multiple perspectives, guards against viewing events in a simplistic or biased way" (Anderson et al., 1994, p. 31). These issues will be discussed more extensively later in this chapter in the section pertaining to *trustworthiness*.

### The relationship between data gathering strategies.

Using Constant Comparative Method (CCM – this is explored in greater detail in the next section, *Analysis of data*), the initial categorisation of data from semi-structured interviews was compared with later focus groups interviews (Bowen, 2008). Through this process of comparison, categories and sub-categories emerged and were confirmed.

Categories and sub-categories from semi-structured and focus group interviews were used to develop a classroom observation checklist (Appendix K). As the researcher observed individual items on the checklist, or any new data, field notes were written. These field notes (taken in October and November, 2009) were then compared with data from interviews to confirm perceptions, examine areas of dissonance, and to note any new factors that facilitated student engagement in RE. Figure 13 summarises this process.

**Figure 13. How Each Method Added to the Accumulation of Rich, Deep Data.**



This research approach involved several levels of data collection including thirty semi-structured interviews (24 students and 6 teachers), seven focus group interviews (a teacher group and 6 student groups), and thirty classroom observations. The intensity of each of these methods required a substantial amount of time in the field. The longevity of this study (2009-2016) was justified in the subsequent elicitation of credible results.

## **Analysis of Data**

### **Introduction.**

In order to make sense of the data, it must be analysed and condensed into meaningful or “analytical statements” (Bassegy, 1999, p. 70). These tentative statements then need to be compared against the data. Through this process some of these statements were verified, others required modification and some were rejected. New data was continually compared with previously analysed data (Bowen, 2008). Data analysis was therefore an iterative process that continued until the researcher was confident that their interpretation was trustworthy (Bassegy, 1999). Trustworthiness is outlined in detail later in this chapter.

### **Constant comparative method.**

Several methods of data analysis may be used with case study. These include: analysing evidence on the basis of theoretical propositions; using the case description as an organizational framework; pattern matching, whereby the pattern of collected data is compared with a predicted pattern; and categorical aggregation (Yin, 1994). The major aspects of constant comparative analysis (CCA) (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) or constant comparative method (CCM) (Bowen, 2008) were implemented in this study. This approach facilitated analysis from the multiple perspectives expressed in the case (Tellis, 1997).

The use of CCM in this investigation was given an “interpretive twist” (O’Connor, Netting & Thomas, 2008, p. 30). The focus was on interpretive understanding and the “creation of contextualized emergent understanding rather than the creation of testable theoretical structures” as in classical grounded theory (O’Connor et al., 2008, p. 30). CCM has been implemented to gain “perspectival knowledge based on the lived experience of the participants” (O’Connor et al., 2008, p. 30).

CCM is about the systematic comparison of data with all other data in the data set (O’Connor et al., 2008). It is the “micro-analysis of data through constant comparison”

whereby every line, sentence and paragraph of transcribed interviews is reviewed and compared (Bowen, 2008; O'Connor et al., 2008, p. 31). To increase verification and traceability, a description of how CCM was used in this study, (rather than merely a description of what it is), follows.

This research sought to understand the experience of students and those directly responsible for their learning (their classroom teachers). As such, the level of analysis shifted from the group of students, to the teaching group, and then to a comparison of the two. Texts from transcriptions of interviews and focus groups were subjected to two activities, that of fragmenting and connecting (Boeije, 2002). In this process separate themes were firstly coded and analysed outside of the interview as a whole (fragmented). Subsequently, the context and the interview as a whole became the analysis level (connecting).

A three-step analysis procedure based on the work of Boeije (2002) was developed and implemented to analyse semi-structured and focus group interviews. This procedure is diagrammatically represented in Figure 14.

**Figure 14. Three-step Analysis Procedure.**

Step 1: Internal Comparison -  
Each interview was analysed and compared within itself.

Step 2: Same Group Comparisons -  
Student interviews were compared with each other.  
Teacher interviews were compared with each other.

Step 3: Different Group Comparisons -  
Student and teacher interviews were compared with each other.

*Note.* Adapted from “A Purposeful Approach to the Constant Comparative Method in the Analysis of Qualitative Interviews,” by H. Boeije, 2002, *Quality and Quantity*, 36(4), p. 395.

Step one involved analysis of every passage within each semi-structured or focus group interview to determine what had been stated and labelling these accordingly. Through comparison of every passage, commonalities, differences and repetitions were noted. This internal comparison facilitated categorizing and represented an attempt to understand the parts within the context of the entire interview.

The second step began once two or more interviews had been analysed. In this step interviews within the same group, that is, those who shared the experience of student or teacher were compared. This meant that the interviews of year five / six students were compared with each other. Similarly, the interview scripts of the teachers were compared with each other. At this stage patterns were discerned so that clusters and typologies were formed, for example, a typology of students who were engaged in a particular way.

Step three involved a comparison between different groups. The perceptions of students were compared with those of teachers. Similar categories between groups were noted and further explored for differing / similar underlying factors, broadened and contextualised understandings, or differing / similar experiences or examples within the category.

The analysed data from semi-structured and focus group interviews provided a lens through which the researcher sought to understand and interpret the most salient “Me” of the participants, as student in the RE classroom or teacher of RE, in the social setting of the RE classroom (Blumer, 1969; Bowers, 1988, p. 37; Gouldner, 1970; and Mead, 1934). Field notes from classroom observations were compared with data from interviews to confirm perceptions, examine areas of dissonance, to note any new data, and to guide the researcher to a deeper understanding of participants’ perceptions.

## **Trustworthiness**

### **Introduction.**

Although variously named in the literature, authenticity, goodness, verisimilitude, adequacy, plausibility and credibility, in this research rigor criteria will be known as *trustworthiness* criteria (Creswell & Miller, 2000). For case study research, rigor criteria or verification procedures, are about the processes which ensure that what we say we have observed, is what happened in actuality and the extent to which our account of participants' views of social reality are authentic to them (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002; Creswell & Miller, 2000). Credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability have been proposed as elements of trustworthiness criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness may also be viewed from three different standpoints. The "viewpoint" or "lens" (Creswell & Miller, 2000) of the researcher, the participants and / or those external to the research. In the following section these viewpoints and the elements of trustworthiness criteria will be outlined.

### **Credibility.**

*Credibility* in this study refers to the extent to which others can be confident that the interpretations, conclusions and findings of the researcher represent the realities of the participants and their context. That the findings seem credible (believable) adds weight to the trustworthiness of the overall study (Ary et al., 2010). The researcher decided on data collection methods and analysis, the length of time spent in the field and the extent to which he returned to the data, cross checking the data with his analysis. Thus it was through the researcher that data and the "sense-making process interact" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 125). This sense-making was verified and made credible to the extent that there was a match between the "constructed realities of respondents and the reconstructions attributed to them" by the researcher (Guba, 1989, p. 237). The processes of prolonged engagement, persistent

observation, member checks and triangulation were used in this study to verify the credibility of the findings (Anfara et al., 2002; Guba, 1989).

*Prolonged engagement in the field* is a trustworthiness procedure valuable to the constructionist approach used in this research; the focus in this procedure is on the lens of the participants. “Constructivists recognize that the longer they stay in the field, the more the pluralistic perspectives will be heard from participants and the better the understanding of the context of participant views” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 128). The researcher attended each class in the case study daily for a week. In total there were thirty separate observations of approximately one-hour duration. These observations occurred over a six week period. Such prolonged engagement in the research site assisted the researcher to become familiar with the context of the teachers and students and their feeling increasingly comfortable with the researcher observing them in their RE classes. From the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism, which informed the methodology of this study, prolonged engagement in the field also enabled rapport to be established with participants. Rapport with participants was necessary in order to “uncover constructions” and facilitate depth of communication between the researcher and participants (Guba, 1989, p. 237). Confidence and rapport supported student and teacher participants to express and show forth the most salient “Me” of the person as student in the RE classroom or teacher of RE (Bowers, 1988; Gouldner, 1970; Blumer, 1969; and Mead, 1934).

The notion of *persistent observation* was also important for the credibility of this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This involved identifying the most significant factors contributing to the engagement of students in RE. Through the process of constant comparison of texts from the various interviewing methods with data from classroom observations, properties and categories that were most relevant to this study emerged, were verified and accepted, or rejected.

The constructionist epistemology of this study underscores the importance of ensuring that participants' views have been accurately represented, and to this end participants need to be actively involved. A valid way of doing this is through *member checking* which has been described as “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). Throughout this study participants were able to view transcripts, comment on their accuracy and edit or develop their previous ideas. Adult participants were further asked whether emerging categories were reasonable and supported by evidence in the preliminary stages of data analysis. Furthermore, a focus group consisting of the five / six teachers was convened to review the findings of this study. Teachers were asked to comment on whether the findings made sense to them and whether they accurately represented factors that facilitated the engagement of students in RE. Relevant comments from teachers, which further support the credibility of the findings in this report with regard to participant views, were included in this report.

In this study the researcher also used *triangulation* as a trustworthiness criterion to address credibility. Triangulation uses several sources of data collection and the many voices of groups of participants and searches for convergences amongst these (Anfara et al., 2002; Creswell & Miller, 2000). It is through these “multiple forms of evidence” that a qualitative “account is valid” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127). Corroborating evidence in this study was provided in two ways: by triangulating across the data sources, that is, by finding common categories across the multiple voices of groups of participants (teachers and students); and through commonality of themes collected through the multiple methods of data collection which were implemented in this research including focus group interviews, unstructured and semi-structured interviews and direct observation (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Not relying exclusively on any one data method also “neutralise(d) or cancel(led) ... biases inherent in any single method” (Creswell, 2002a, p. 15). Similarly, not relying on only



one data source “neutralize(d) any bias inherent in a particular data source” (Anfara et al., 2002, p. 33). Therefore, such an approach increased the trustworthiness of the data.

“Increasingly, as the limitations of single methods are appreciated, the use of multiple methods, different kinds of evidence, as in case studies, is seen as a more adequate account” (Gillham, 2005, p. 7). Corroboration between multiple methods and multiple voices assisted in developing credibility in this study.

### **Transferability.**

*Transferability* refers to the extent to which the findings of a qualitative study may be applicable in other contexts or groups (Ary et al., 2010). Whereas positivist paradigms refer to the external validity or generalisability of a study, constructionist epistemologies refer to transferability. This notion of transferability “is always relative and depends entirely on the degree to which salient conditions overlap or match” (Guba, 1989, p. 241). That is, the more similar the context, people and epoch is to the context, people and epoch of the original study, the greater is the transferability. Those reading the findings judge the extent of this transfer. Therefore, the study must be sufficiently detailed to allow the reader to make such a comparison of contexts (Ary et al., 2010).

Rather than being chosen because of its demonstrable typicality, this research was a case study precisely “because of its interest to the researcher” (Bassey, 1999, p. 75). Therefore, issues of transferability were not particularly meaningful to this research. However, from the viewpoint of those external to the report transferability was established through thick, rich description (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The report of this study provided a thick, rich description of such aspects of the research as the participants, their setting and the categories established through the data. Such a detailed, rich account facilitated the vicarious participation of the reader who, through such thick description, will be able to imagine him / herself in the setting or situation being described. “With this vivid detail, the researchers help

readers understand that the account is credible” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 129). With regard to detailing themes from interviews, “direct quotations helps the reader experience the participants’ world” (Ary et al., 2010, p. 500). Rich detail through vivid description and direct quotes from participants provided the reader with sufficient information to decide whether or not trustworthiness had been established and to imagine whether judgements may be transferable to their own and / or other situations.

### **Dependability.**

*Dependability* in qualitative research refers to the consistency of the findings with the data. This is not in the sense of quantitative research where researchers would expect similar findings if a study was replicated. In contrast, qualitative researchers expect different contexts to lead to variability in findings. Rather, consistency in qualitative research “is viewed as the extent to which variation can be tracked or explained” (Ary et al., 2010, p. 502); the extent to which the findings are linked to the data (Basit, 2010).

Whilst it is argued that demonstrating credibility in a study will ensure the study’s dependability as well (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), this study also used an audit trail to address the issue of dependability. This study documents the process of inquiry that occurred over time. Such an audit trail made clear the reasons / thinking behind particular decisions and the choice of activities and strategies throughout the study. Although outside of member checks only the researcher viewed the texts from interviews and observations, the texts were viewed on many occasions throughout the analysis phase of this research. Emerging understandings were constantly compared within and between texts, and back to the original texts over time to ensure that findings were dependable. It is anticipated that the audit trail will provide a reader sufficient information to determine the dependability of this study.

**Confirmability.**

*Confirmability* relates to an assurance that the data collected and the interpretations of this data may be located in the persons and contexts of the study (Guba, 1989). The researcher's supervisors assisted in assuring that emerging categories and properties, and the interpretation of these, were based on the collected data from the case study and were not the result of the researcher's bias or failure to adhere to the methodological approach or methods previously outlined in this chapter (Ary et al., 2010). In this way it can be confirmed that through data collection processes and analysis of the data as previously described, the findings of this study have their source in the original data (participants of this study and their context).

**Conclusion.**

The trustworthiness of this study lies firstly in the consistency of the constructionist epistemology with the chosen theoretical perspective of interpretivism, and of the case study methodology and methods selected to investigate this research. Furthermore, rigor criteria or verification procedures have ensured the trustworthiness of this study. Trustworthiness refers to the extent to which written accounts of what was observed, happened in actuality (Anfara et al., 2002) and the extent to which the account of participants' views of social reality were authentic to them (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability are all elements of trustworthiness criteria used in this study to ensure that trustworthiness has been rigorously established. As well as ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research, it is essential that all research be conducted ethically. An outline of how this research was conducted ethically is presented in the next section.

**Ethical Issues**

Freedom to investigate, to express ideas and to publish findings is essential to research. These freedoms are subject to researchers having respect for the truth, for persons

and the communities that they are investigating (Bassegy, 1999; Berg, 2004). Institutions need to be assured that research is conducted with due regard to these sometimes conflicting aspects of research ethics.

As such the following guidelines were followed in the course of this research:

1. Approval to conduct research was sought from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Australian Catholic University.
2. Permission to conduct case study research in a Catholic school was sought from the Director of Catholic Education and the Principal of the school.

Moral responsibility is central to the research process for those following a constructionist epistemology, as “one must be morally responsible for what one constructs” (Smith & Deemer, 2000, p. 886). Therefore, it is essential that researchers do not “distort the meaning of participants’ views” (Karnieli- Miller, 2009, p. 285). As this study utilized a constructionist epistemology it was essential that the research ethic of “respect for truth” be rigorously observed (Bassegy, 1999, p. 74). This meant that data collection, analysis and findings of the study were presented truthfully. Deception of others (including oneself), even if unintentional, was not acceptable. This raised ethical issues surrounding the notion of accountability. The latter calls for transparency not with regard to epistemological, and other, influences on this research, but particularly with the “interpretive processes” that were employed in the construction of knowledge (Doucet & Mauthner, 2002, p. 134). It is in this context of a constructionist epistemology that the notion of trustworthiness, as previously outlined, became significant (Bassegy, 1999).

Therefore, the following guideline was followed:

1. The words and / or actions of participants were not entered into the case record until each participant had the opportunity to read the draft and amend aspects which he / she considered did not represent the truth or their thinking. Although this “validating

the evidence” (Bassey, 1999, p. 78) may not usually be done for children, given that the student participants were in upper primary, the researcher believed that they, too, were capable of reflecting on their thinking. Reflection upon their thinking and learning was an established practice with students in the case study.

As well as respect for truth, freedom of inquiry and other related freedoms offered in a democratic society are also subject to the ethic of “respect for persons” (Bassey, 1999, p. 74). This entails respecting participants’ initial ownership of data and treating them with the respect, dignity and right to privacy due to fellow human beings. In this regard participants were made fully aware of the extent to which data collected from them would be used in the case report.

Therefore, the following guidelines were followed:

1. All participants (in the case of students this included their parents) were given a written overview of the nature and purpose of the study, of the processes that were to be implemented, and of what was required of them as participants. They were asked to sign a form stating that they had received sufficient information regarding the aforementioned and that their consent was, therefore, informed. In the case of students, the “active consent” of parents was also sought (Berg, 2004, p. 54). Parents were fully informed as outlined above and returned a formal written permission for their child to participate.
2. The right to refuse to be involved in the study or to withdraw at any stage without the need for explanation, or penalty was affirmed with each participant (Glesne, 2006).
3. Pseudonyms were used to conceal the setting and participants.
4. Confidentiality was strictly upheld; indiscriminate discussion of data at the level of “the specifics of what you see and hear” did not occur (Glesne, 2006, p. 138). Also,

identifying lists were destroyed as soon as these became superfluous. The researcher signed a confidentiality agreement to this effect.

5. All data has been stored and secured according to procedures described by Australian Catholic University with access restricted to those authorized by the researcher.

## **Conclusion**

This present investigation sought to identify key factors that engaged year five / six students in an RE curriculum. In this chapter the constructionist epistemology and the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism underpinning this study was outlined. The underlying assumption of this research was that meaning is conferred on reality by humans, and is derived and constructed through interaction with others in a social context. The perspectives of students and teachers in their social context were heard through a case study methodology using the methods of semi-structured and focus group interviews, and direct observation. Participant understandings were constructed through the dialogue and interaction of these interviews. Direct observation in each classroom contextualised these perspectives (Basit, 2010). These observations also assisted the researcher to confirm perceptions and examine the discrepancies of participants as revealed through interviews. Using a constant comparative method, as detailed in this chapter, the findings of this study were generated through constant comparison of all data within the data set.

In Chapter Four, which follows, a discussion and analysis of the emerging insights from interviews and classroom observations are explored, and key findings as to factors that engaged students in an RE curriculum are identified.

## Chapter Four

### Findings and Analysis

#### Introduction

In Chapter One the context of this study was outlined. This presented major curricula and pedagogical approaches to Religious Education (RE) which have been utilised in or influenced the teaching of RE in Melbourne, Australia. For each approach, factors which engaged students in RE and the limitations / criticisms were highlighted. This research investigated factors that facilitated student engagement in the current approach to teaching RE in the Melbourne Archdiocese, *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008). An understanding of previous approaches to teaching RE and their alignment with the current framework contextualised possible factors impacting on student engagement.

In Chapter Two the scholarly literature regarding factors that enable student engagement was explored. Three interrelated key themes, which constituted the conceptual framework of this literature review, emerged from the literature as integrally related to the issue of student engagement for year five / six students. These key themes were: the teacher, the classroom community, and learning.

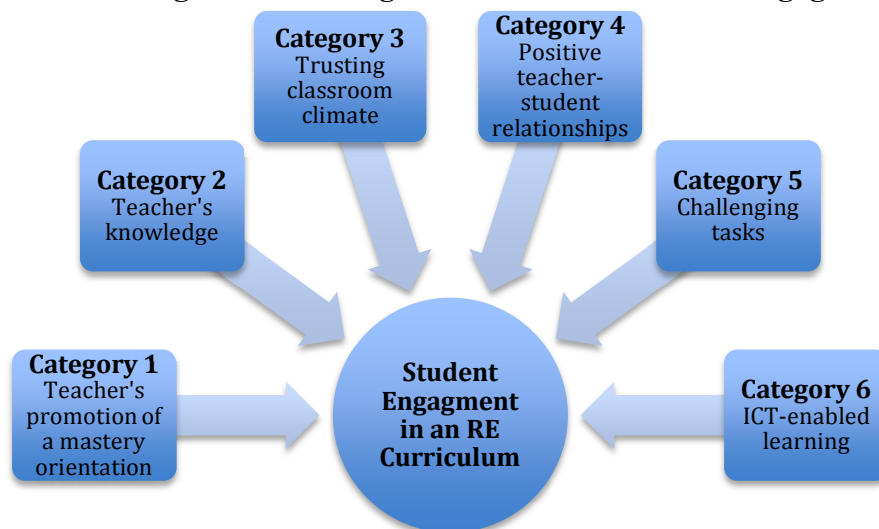
In Chapter Three the rationale for the research design was expounded. This research was underpinned by a constructionist epistemology and used the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism. Using a constant comparative method, data from semi-structured interviews and subsequent focus group interviews were used to affirm, extend and challenge the perceptions of student and teacher participants. Finally, direct classroom observation confirmed perceptions and examined discrepancies from the interview data. These methods were used to answer the general research question of this case study: What factors facilitated the engagement of year five / six students in an RE curriculum?

Through interviews the perspectives / voices of the participants were heard. The researcher then sought to interpret participants' understandings of social reality (Basit, 2010; Creswell 2002a). The participants were generalist classroom teachers with the responsibility of teaching RE to their class, and students in the final two years of primary schooling (year five and six in the state of Victoria, Australia). The students were 10-12 years of age. The perspectives of participants arising from interviews provided insight into student engagement in an RE curriculum. Through direct observation in the RE classroom these insights were explored and analysed as they occurred in the natural classroom setting (Kervin et al., 2006).

The context of this study was the religious education classroom. The curriculum used was *Coming to Know, Worship, and Love* (CEO, 2008). To minimise repetition, simplified references to participants, the context and the curriculum are used in the following chapters. For instance, rather than religious education content, the simplified term content was used.

In this chapter (Chapter Four) the findings are presented and analysed. The focus of this research was on factors which facilitated the engagement of year five and six students (aged 10-12) in an RE curriculum. Six categories of findings emerged from the interviews and subsequent direct classroom observations as significant in understanding the factors that engaged students. These categories are presented in Figure 15.

**Figure 15. The Six Categories of findings that facilitated Student Engagement.**





Three interrelated key themes underpin these categories and facilitate engagement: the teacher, the classroom community, and learning. Categories one and two highlight the role of the teacher. Categories three and four underscore the importance of interactions and relationships in the classroom community. Categories five and six illustrate how learning, through curriculum and pedagogy, impacts on engagement. However, whilst each category may emphasise one of these key themes, all three often intertwine. For instance, the category trusting classroom climate in this research places stress on peer interactions in the classroom community. At the same time the role of the teacher in setting up a safe learning environment and the importance of peer interactions being focused on learning are also associated with this category.

As described in detail in the introduction to this thesis, three interrelated dimensions – affect, behaviour and cognition – constitute a prevalent view of engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). Whilst these three dimensions of engagement have been defined in the literature in various ways (Fredricks et al., 2004), the following definitions have been applied to this study. Affective engagement relates to emotional responses such as enthusiasm and interest in a task (Fredricks et al., 2004). Behavioural engagement refers to student involvement in a learning task. This may be evident in attributes such as student effort and persistence (Russell et al., 2005). Cognitive engagement has been defined as the “deliberate task-specific thinking that a student undertakes while participating in a classroom activity” (Helme & Clarke, 2001, p. 136). The findings arising from this study show how students were affectively, behaviourally or cognitively engaged in RE classroom learning. While each of the categories may facilitate all of these dimensions, the most overt dimension has been highlighted.

The aim of this research was to explore the factors that contributed to student engagement. Insights into the perspectives of students and teachers were derived from interviews. These perspectives provided a context for understanding the subsequent

researcher's classroom observations. Therefore in each category the perspectives and emerging insights from the interview texts with the students and then the teachers will be outlined prior to those gained from the researcher's observations. The emerging insights from interview and classroom observation data will then be discussed and analysed in the context of current research in this area. In the next section of this chapter, Category one: The teacher's promotion of a mastery orientation is explored. The other categories will then be presented in turn following the same format.

### **Category One: The Teacher's Promotion of a Mastery Orientation**

#### **Introduction.**

The role of the teacher has been identified as being integral to student engagement both within this study and within the existing body of literature (Buchanan & Hyde, 2006; Ireland et al., 2012; Smart & Marshall, 2013). Year five / six students were engaged in an RE curriculum through their teacher.

In this category the teacher's promotion of a mastery orientation is explored. As discussed in Chapter Two, students with this orientation focus on learning and developing understanding (Sullivan et al., 2009; Sullivan et al., 2005). Teachers promoted this orientation through an emphasis on thinking in the RE classroom. This emphasis was evident in the use of thinking processes and classroom discourse. Teachers suggested that they used a range of thinking processes such as de Bono's (1985) *Six Thinking Hats* and Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956). They encouraged classroom discourse involving discussion of ideas between students leading to multiple solutions and responses. These actions facilitated students' cognitive engagement.

In this section the perspectives of students, teachers and the researcher's classroom observations are explored. This will be followed by a discussion and analysis of these insights in the context of current research.

### **Student interviews: thinking processes and classroom discourse.**

Thinking and understanding were emphasised in the RE classroom. Students suggested that teachers supported this emphasis in two ways: utilising thinking processes and encouraging and leading classroom discourse. Insights from student data related to these two teacher actions are explored in this section.

#### ***Thinking processes.***

Teachers' emphasis on thinking was conveyed to students through the utilisation of thinking tools such as graphic organisers in the RE classroom (See Figure 16 for an example of a graphic organiser). Students named several types of graphic organisers that they used in the RE classroom: a Y Chart (reflecting on an idea from three perspectives such as: I Think, I Feel, I Wonder, or Sounds Like, Looks Like, Feels Like); a T Chart (a two step process for considering knowledge on a topic: I Now Know; I Wonder); and a Venn Diagram (comparing two ideas and showing what is unique about each, and what they have in common). Students perceived that teachers used these tools to facilitate a cognitive emphasis. This view is reflected in the following comments from focus group discussions about why thinking processes were used in RE learning: "The teacher is trying to make you think and understand more about your own opinions" (F / B); "(The teacher was) asking us to reflect... to think more deeply about RE learning and to expand our knowledge" (F / A). These processes enabled students to reflect on their perspectives and learning; the following section explores how this occurred.

Students were able to express how thinking processes were used to facilitate reflection. A focus group explained how teachers used a Venn Diagram to promote reflection upon previous learning. "We would learn something yesterday and the teacher would get us to use a Venn Diagram or something the next day to make us think about our learning (F / A)." This process involved use of high-order thinking skills such as comparing and

contrasting. Another focus group described how a Scripture Think Pad made them contemplate learning in multiple ways.

What I enjoy in RE is doing Scripture Think Pads. So we read a Gospel story and we look at the main idea of the story, and we draw pictures and symbols and we write about how it relates to our life right now. (F / F)

Teachers' emphasis on thinking was evident in the use of these processes. They also encouraged thinking through classroom discourse.

*Classroom discourse.*

Teachers encouraged and led classroom discourse. A focus group discussed this in relation to whole class discussions in the following way: "People are encouraged (by the teacher) to express themselves. We get to hear everybody's side of the story so that we get to know what everyone's thinking about it. Then we understand it better" (F / E). As well as encouragement, focus groups suggested that teachers implemented processes that enabled them to share and ponder ideas with each other: "Teachers lead a class brainstorm and everyone's ideas are listed. Then we use these ideas to make a concept map" (F / B); "With class discussions we share ideas and expand on these by giving examples. Then the teacher might lead us in a debate about one of these ideas" (F / A). Teachers guided initial student discourse and then used a process such as concept mapping (grouping ideas together and showing the interrelationship of these ideas) or debating to foster further thinking through student discourse. Teachers had promoted the RE classroom as a place where student thinking was shared and understanding was developed through classroom discourse.

The data from student interviews indicated that they perceived that learning and thinking were valued and emphasised in the RE classroom. This recognition was derived from two teacher actions: the implementation of thinking processes such as graphic organisers; and encouraging and leading classroom discourse. In the next section, teachers'

perceptions that they promoted mastery orientation through thinking processes and classroom discourse are explored.

**Teacher interviews: Thinking processes and classroom discourse.**

Teachers indicated that RE learning was about constructing meaning rather than focusing on right answers. This perspective was expressed in the teacher focus group in the following way. “I believe it’s the thinking and understanding that happens along the way because I think with RE there doesn’t have to be one answer; it’s about meaning-making and deepening their understanding” (F / T). Teachers used two main approaches to promote this emphasis. They used thinking processes and they encouraged and modelled classroom discourse. Insights from teacher data related to these two key actions that supported students’ mastery orientation and cognitive engagement are explored in this section.

***Thinking processes.***

Teachers were aware that they needed to provide students with different processes that supported thinking and reflection from multiple perspectives. The teacher focus group recognised this importance: “It’s not just looking at it in one way; it’s using de Bono’s Thinking Hats and Bloom’s Taxonomy to think about it in a variety of ways” (F / T). These processes ranged from looking at information from different perspectives, such as the positive and negative attributes of an idea, through to reflecting on ideas using high-order thinking strategies. Teachers perceived that that the advancement of thinking was an essential aspect of RE pedagogy. Classroom discourse was also used to encourage thinking.

***Encouraged and modelled classroom discourse.***

Classroom discourse fostered divergent thought and multiple responses. As understood in the teacher focus group, it was about “Keeping discussions open... You’re not just expecting one response. I think as a teacher, you have to be flexible about the range of responses you are expecting” (F / T). For teachers this meant being open to the possibilities

that students may come up with. As explained by the following teacher, students may respond to the same stimulus such as a story in quite different ways: “All their interpretations from one story can be incredible; it just depends on how it relates to them” (T / C). Teachers promoted diversity of interpretation and thought. As one teacher stated, this began with teachers themselves: “Be open, yourself, to new ideas” (T / E); teachers’ openness to learning reinforced its intrinsic value.

The sharing of multiple perspectives was an important part of contemporary RE learning. It shifted the focus from teacher-dominated talk to discussion among students and between the students and their teacher. The link between student learning and classroom discourse is reflected in the following comment from a focus group discussion. “It is important for student learning that they share their ideas so that they can hear others’ perspectives and think about what they know and what they want to know” (F / T). Teachers promoted these classroom interactions as an integral part of the teaching and learning process.

Teachers promoted a mastery orientation in two ways: by using thinking processes that facilitated student reflection on learning from various perspectives, and by modelling and encouraging students to learn through classroom discourse.

Students and teachers constructed their understanding of factors that engaged students in an RE curriculum (their perspectives or voice) through semi-structured and focus group interviews. The researcher then sought to make sense of (interpret) student and teacher voice. These emerging insights from student and teacher interviews (the voice of the researcher), provided the context from which the researcher observed in the RE classroom. The voice of students, teachers and the researcher are summarised in Table 3. Following this summary, insights from the researcher’s observations in RE classrooms are explored.

Table 3.

*The voice of students, teachers and the researcher derived from semi-structured and focus group interviews.*

<p><b>Voice of the students</b>            “We would learn something yesterday and the teacher would get us to use a Venn Diagram or something the next day to make us think about our learning (F / A).”            “People are encouraged (by the teacher) to express themselves. We get to hear everybody’s side of the story so that we get to know what everyone’s thinking about it. Then we understand it better” (F / E).            “Teachers lead a class brainstorm and everyone’s ideas are listed. Then we use these ideas to make a concept map” (F / B)</p>	<p><b>Voice of the researcher</b>            Students were cognitively engaged in RE classroom learning when teachers provided thinking processes such as graphic organisers and promoted classroom discourse. This discourse enabled students to share their perspectives and to build knowledge and understanding.</p>
<p><b>Voice of the teachers</b>            “It’s not just looking at it in one way; it’s using de Bono’s Thinking Hats and Bloom’s Taxonomy to think about it in a variety of ways” (F / T).            “Keeping discussions open... You’re not just expecting one response. I think as a teacher, you have to be flexible about the range of responses you are expecting” (F / T).            “It is important for student learning that they share their ideas so that they can hear others’ perspectives and think about what they know and what they want to know” (F / T).</p>	<p><b>Voice of the researcher</b>            Students were cognitively engaged in RE learning when teachers promoted a mastery orientation. They did this by: using thinking processes such as de Bono’s (1985) <i>Six Thinking Hats</i> which encouraged students to think about learning from various perspectives; and modelling and encouraging open discourse about RE learning.</p>

**Researcher observation: cognitive engagement through thinking processes and classroom discourse.**

In this section the key insights of the researcher from direct observation in the RE classroom are reported. Classroom observations indicated that students were cognitively engaged in learning when teachers emphasised thinking through two dimensions of learning: a thinking process, and classroom discourse.

In a lesson from the unit “Life is Good”, from *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008), students chose an issue (aggressive behaviour in the school yard) to explore through de Bono’s (1985) *Six Thinking Hats*. Each hat is a different colour and represents a

way of thinking about an issue: white (facts); red (emotions); black (negative view); yellow (positive view); green (creativity); and blue (thinking about thinking). The class was split into groups of four students. Each group reflected on the issue from the perspective of a particular hat prior to presenting their views to the whole class. A class discussion about insights followed. In the next sub-section the impact of this thinking process on students' mastery orientation will be considered.

***A thinking process.***

The teacher ensured that each group had the opportunity to present their thinking to the class from the perspective of one of de Bono's (1985) *Six Thinking Hats*. This sharing made students aware that the issue could be thought about from multiple perspectives prior to reaching any conclusions. This highlighted the importance of thinking deeply about issues. The perspective of each group was markedly different. The group reflecting from the perspective of the white hat (facts) provided facts such as: the types and frequency of aggressive behaviour observed over the past week. Those using the black hat (negative) presented some of the consequences of aggressive behaviour such as: students being scared and aggression often resulting in physical violence. In contrast, those using the yellow hat (positive) reported that aggressive behaviour was sometimes met with an assertive response; students named the behaviour and demanded it stop. It was apparent that each group's perspective was quite different.

This thinking process enabled students to consider the chosen issue from several different perspectives. It highlighted to students the importance of thinking about and hearing people's differing views on the same issue. However, this process was not used in isolation. In the next sub-section, the teacher utilised these multiple perspectives to extend student thinking through classroom discourse.



### *Classroom discourse.*

Students experienced how reflecting on an issue from alternate perspectives may result in very different points of view. Through the lens of these various perspectives, students were then able to think about and discuss this issue in light of multiple interpretations and to develop meaning together. The teacher guided this classroom discourse and ensured that each perspective was presented. Following this, the teacher facilitated a discussion of these perspectives and the co-creation of meaning.

The teacher ensured that each group had the opportunity to present their view without interruption. They modelled how to validate perspectives by linking them back to the particular thinking hat. After a couple of examples, they asked students how each group's perspectives linked back to particular hats.

The teacher then asked for ideas that supported or offered an alternate view to that presented. They guided the subsequent discussion by summarising arguments and then asking questions that directed students to consider the argument in light of the other perspectives. The classroom discourse enabled several valid points of view, developed by students, to be shared with the whole class. These included: aggressive behaviour often leads to further aggression; when two parties act aggressively, often an escalation of aggression occurs; and acting assertively diminishes violence. The teacher showed students how to link arguments with the various perspectives presented and to develop meaning through these interactions. The teacher actively guided this process and facilitated a learner-centred discourse; the focus was on students thinking about an issue in interaction with peers and the teacher.

Students were given a thinking process that supported the development of multiple perspectives. The teacher guided subsequent classroom discourse by asking students to consider other possibilities and perspectives rather than telling them answers or asking closed

questions. Teachers used a thinking process in conjunction with classroom discourse to promote thinking in the classroom and facilitate a learner-centred discourse.

The emerging insights from direct observations in the RE classrooms are summarised in Table 4. In the next section, the emerging insights from student and teacher interviews and the researcher's direct observations in classrooms will be discussed and analysed.

Table 4.

*Emerging Insights from Direct Observations in RE Classrooms*

<b>Data gathering method</b>	<b>Emerging Insights</b>
Direct Observations	<p>Students were cognitively engaged in RE classroom learning when they used a thinking process in conjunction with classroom discourse.</p> <p>The factors that supported this engagement were: the teacher provided a thinking process that encouraged students to develop multiple perspectives on an issue; and the teacher guided classroom discourse to facilitate thinking about an issue from these various perspectives. They modelled discourse by summarising perspectives and asking students to consider their point of view in light of others' perspectives. Teachers supported a learner-centred discourse and the co-creation of meaning.</p>

**Discussion and analysis of category one: The teacher's promotion of a mastery orientation.**

The insights gleaned from student and teacher interview scripts provided the framework from which the researcher observed in the RE classrooms. In the following section the findings from interviews and classroom observations will be discussed and then analysed in light of the related scholarly literature. Findings from the current study which are consistent with, differ from and / or extend this literature are explored.

Analysis of the interviews and the classroom observations of the researcher revealed that students were cognitively engaged in the RE classroom through the teacher's promotion of a mastery orientation. Teachers promoted this orientation through an emphasis on, and the

linking of, two key processes: thinking processes and classroom discourse. They used these two processes to develop students' knowledge and understanding of an issue related to their RE topic. In the following section these two key actions are discussed and analysed in the context of what these mean for engagement in an educational, knowledge-centred approach to religious education.

### ***Thinking processes.***

In an educational approach to RE, teachers may employ educational ideas and strategies that have been successfully used in other subjects to facilitate student engagement (Ryan, 2005). De Bono's (1985) *Six Thinking Hats* were used in the RE classroom to give students the opportunity to investigate and think about an RE issue from multiple perspectives. This approach fostered student engagement in this case study. Theorists had sought an educational emphasis in the teaching and learning of religious education (Barry, 1997; Barry et al., 2003; Rossiter, 1981). Exploration of knowledge and a focus on thinking and understanding are integral to an educational approach (CEO, 2008). The use of thinking skills and the promotion of deep understanding in RE reflects the alignment of the curriculum framework with the educational approach of the VELs (CEO, 2008).

The cognitive dimension of learning is accentuated in an educational approach (Rymarz, 2007). A cognitive emphasis is evident in *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008). This emphasis facilitated the engagement of year five / six students in an RE curriculum. It has also been found to support a mastery orientation and student engagement in learning (Fadlelmula, 2010). However, this emphasis involves more than the recall of knowledge content. According to the Congregation for Catholic Education (1990) and the text-based series *To Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2001), a key aim of religious education is to facilitate students' "knowing the content of Catholic teaching" (Pell, 2001, p. 5). This knowing is not about memorising and recalling the doctrines (authoritative teachings) of the

Catholic Church as occurred through the Doctrinal and Kerygmatic approaches (Hofinger, 1962; Ryan, 1997). The emphasis in an educational approach to RE is on thinking and understanding: “The religious education classroom... has a different starting point: the invitation for students to explore, understand and come to know the essential elements of the Christian tradition” (CEO, 2008, p. 3). A cognitive emphasis, which involved the exploration of an issue related to students’ RE topic in this case study, promoted thinking and engagement in the curriculum.

Following the use of a thinking process, the teacher then used classroom discourse to guide further reflections on these perspectives and to enable students to compare, contrast, analyse and synthesise their understandings. The teacher promoted a mastery orientation through this learning sequence involving thinking and discourse.

#### ***Classroom discourse.***

Teachers used de Bono’s (1985) *Six Thinking Hats* to stress the importance of thinking in RE learning. They also used classroom discourse to facilitate thinking. This cognitive emphasis facilitated engagement. An association between teacher actions, mastery orientation and student engagement was observed in primary classrooms (Turner et al., 2002). Teachers in these classrooms emphasised understanding and encouraged students to persist when learning was challenging. More recently, this association has been affirmed for both primary and middle years’ students (Bong, 2009). Teacher participants suggested that in a contemporary approach to teaching RE, classroom discourse was about sharing multiple perspectives and promoting student-centred interactions. Teachers facilitated this discourse by encouraging and modelling the sharing of various points of view, and leading students to reflect on their own understanding and constructing knowledge in interaction with others. These perspectives and classroom practice align with the educational approach of *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008). They highlight the importance of a learner-centred

pedagogy for student engagement. This pedagogy, and the teachers' role in this, differs markedly from the traditional teacher-dominated paradigm (Jurik et al., 2014).

Traditional pedagogy focussed on the teacher transmitting key knowledge to students using a teacher-dominated interaction paradigm: having imparted knowledge, the student responds to the teacher's question and the teacher then evaluates their response (Wilson & Smetana, 2011). This process has been criticised for promoting unproductive and boring classroom interactions that lead to passive and disengaged learners (Chen & Looi, 2011). Rather than the focus being on the teacher, contemporary pedagogy shifts the emphasis to the learner (Walshaw & Anthony, 2008). A student-centred classroom discourse, guided and modelled by teachers, was observed in RE classrooms. Use of contemporary pedagogy with its focus on exploring an issue from multiple perspectives fostered an engaging RE learning experience. Theorists have long argued for the use of relevant issues and interests in the RE classroom (Crawford & Rossiter, 1985; Moran, 1989). However, understanding of contemporary issues is not the goal for RE. Whilst an educational approach to RE uses processes and tools available to other curriculum areas, and may use relevant issues and interests, it uses these to explore Catholic teaching and to assist in faith development.

***Mastery orientation, knowledge and faith formation.***

Teachers emphasised a mastery orientation through the use of thinking skills and the promotion of student-centred discourse. They were observed using these processes in the RE classroom to deepen students' understanding of an issue. Teacher participants' classroom practice reflected their perspective that RE learning was about sharing ideas, perspectives and "meaning-making and deepening their understanding" (F / T). Whilst *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008) supports the view that RE is about "seeking understanding" (p. 2), it further states that this is about understanding of the Catholic faith tradition. Teachers

did not make explicit this direct link between understanding and the Christian tradition, nor was this always evident in classrooms.

An activity from the unit “Life is Good” (CEO, 2008) suggested that students investigate an issue related to this RE topic from the perspective of de Bono’s (1985) *Six Thinking Hats*. It also asked how this issue related to the Christian tradition. As stated previously, this issue was discussed using the multiple perspectives gained from the thinking process. However, these perspectives were not used to deepen understanding of the Christian tradition. *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008) emphasises the formation of “deep religious understandings... (through the) exploration of religious truths” (CEO, 2008, p. 12). Knowledge in this curriculum framework is about knowing the content of the Catholic faith tradition and deepening understanding through exploration using contemporary educational processes (Ryan, 2005). Furthermore, knowing is related to the catechetical goal of RE, which ultimately is about the possibility of affecting students’ formation in faith (Buchanan, 2009; CEO, 2008). Rather than excluding the faith dimension, an emphasis on knowledge of the Christian tradition may in fact support faith development according to Fowler’s *Faith Development Theory* (Durka, 2004; Fowler, 1981, 2004). While teachers were using contemporary educational practices and a relevant issue to engage students in learning, an educational approach to RE also seeks to deepen understanding of the Christian tradition and to facilitate faith formation.

Given the association between teacher actions and mastery orientation has been affirmed for both primary and middle years’ students (Bong, 2009), a related aim of this qualitative study was to investigate whether teacher actions which promoted mastery goals (i.e. an emphasis on thinking and understanding in RE) facilitated student engagement in RE learning. Whilst some studies have focused on middle years’ students using qualitative methods (Turner et al., 2002; Urdan, 2004), the majority correlated students’ self-reported

goals with outcomes such as achievement and engagement (Shih, 2005; Senko et al., 2011). Rather than use student self-reports, two key teacher actions that promoted a mastery orientation and the cognitive engagement of students in an RE curriculum were identified through interviews and direct classroom observation in this case study. These actions involved use of a thinking process and the teacher's subsequent guidance of student-centred classroom discourse in a whole class context. However, an educational, knowledge-centred approach to RE does not regard engaging students through thinking about contemporary issues as the end point. Rather it seeks to use such processes and a mastery orientation to facilitate understanding of the Christian tradition and open up the possibility of positively impacting on students' formation in faith.

The key findings from this category, the teacher's promotion of a mastery orientation, are summarised in Table 5. In the next section, category two: the teacher's knowledge is presented.

Table 5.

*Key Findings from Category One: the Teacher's Promotion of a Mastery Orientation*

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**Key Findings**

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Year five / six students were cognitively engaged in an RE curriculum when the teacher promoted a mastery orientation (i.e. an emphasis on thinking and understanding). Two key actions of teachers promoted this orientation: use of a thinking process, and guidance of classroom discourse in a whole class context.

Teachers used a thinking process, de Bono's (1985) *Six Thinking Hats*, to emphasise thinking and a mastery orientation. They promoted and validated the diverse perspectives gained through this process and used these to guide students' thinking and the co-creation of meaning through student-centred classroom discourse.

*Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008) aligns with the VELs and encourages the use of contemporary educational processes and relevant issues to engage students (Crawford & Rossiter, 1985; Ryan, 2005). However, an educational, knowledge-centred approach to RE does not regard engaging students through thinking about contemporary issues as the end point. Rather it seeks to use such processes and a mastery orientation to facilitate understanding of the Christian tradition and open up the possibility of positively impacting on students' formation in faith. Therefore, educational processes must be used more clearly to engage students in learning through "exploration of religious truths" (CEO, 2008, p. 12).

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## Category Two: The Teacher's Knowledge

### Introduction.

In this category how teacher's knowledge was used to facilitate the behavioural engagement of year five / six students is explored. Three forms of teacher knowledge are important for learning and teaching: content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge (O'Donnell et al., 2016). Content knowledge is about knowing the subject matter. Pedagogical knowledge is about knowing how to teach. Pedagogical content knowledge is about knowing how to make content understandable to students (O'Donnell et al., 2016). Students and teachers concurred that engagement was fostered when teachers had an understanding of key RE content knowledge. Students suggested that their involvement in tasks was supported by teachers' clear explanations and meaningful examples. Teachers emphasised knowledge of content; they perceived that they used this knowledge to support the involvement of students in tasks. Students and teachers indicated that student-centred discourse in small groups supported engagement. Teachers suggested that they enhanced this discourse by interacting with students through the use of discussion and questioning. These interactions and use of teacher knowledge enhanced student participation in tasks.

Prior to an exploration of insights from individual and focus group interviews with students, a brief explanation and example of expected teachers' content knowledge required for teaching this RE curriculum will be presented.

In the unit "Waiting for the Messiah", from *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008), expected teachers' knowledge was outlined in two sections: the Doctrinal Focus and Additional Reading for Teachers. An example of this content knowledge, which teachers were observed using during classroom observations, is outlined in Table 6.



Table 6.

*Example of Expected Teacher's Content Knowledge*

Unit Title	Content Knowledge from <i>Doctrinal Focus</i>	Content Knowledge from <i>Additional Reading for Teachers</i>
Waiting for the Messiah	The title 'Christ' means 'Anointed One' (Messiah). Jesus is the Christ, for "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power" (Acts 10: 38). He was the one "who is to come" (Lk 7: 19), the object of "the hope of Israel" (acts 28: 20).	Isaiah is a prophet. Isaiah 11: 1-9 prophesies the coming Messiah. The text envisions a time of peace, when everyone, even the animals, will be at peace together. At the time of the writing of this text it is probable that the Israelite people were in exile in Babylon. The Messiah is associated with peace, harmony, self-determination, hope and justice. This is reflected in the imagery of the text.

Note. Adapted from the unit "Waiting for the Messiah", *Coming to Know, Worship and Love*, by P. CEO (Ed.), 2008, pp. 139,148.

**Student interviews: clear explanations, meaningful examples and classroom discourse.**

The curriculum, *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008), emphasises the knowledge and understanding aspects of RE. To immerse themselves in RE tasks, student understanding of content was essential. Students perceived that teachers used their content knowledge to facilitate understanding in two key ways: through use of clear explanations and meaningful examples; and through use of classroom discourse to co-construct student understanding. In the following section how teachers used their content knowledge in these two key ways is explored.

***Teachers used their knowledge of content to facilitate understanding through clear explanations and meaningful examples.***

Teachers' knowledge of content supported the understanding of students. They explained key content in a way that was intelligible to students and provided examples that assisted understanding. Students were better able to involve themselves in learning activities when they understood this content.

Teachers' explanations and examples facilitated understanding. As suggested by the following student, the teacher's explanation replaced confusion with understanding. "I sort of had a confused feeling at the start because I didn't know what it was about. Then (teacher's name) explained it to me and I got it" (S / D). On other occasions teachers provided an example that gave students a clearer insight into the task: "If we get stuck for ideas the teachers always give us a way to work. If we don't understand, they will give us an example" (F / A). As discussed in the following focus group, lack of understanding such as knowledge of key words and concepts led to students' inability to fully involve themselves in tasks such as reading and comprehending Biblical texts.

If we don't understand a word in a Bible reading, then we go up to the teacher and they explain the word to us. I remember last year a word was constantly coming up in our reading and we didn't understand it. When the teacher explained it we were able to understand the reading. (F / B)

Teachers used their knowledge to respond to the learning needs of students. Their response enabled students to immerse themselves in the set task. Student-centred discourse also supported engagement. Teachers interacted with small groups to promote this discourse.

***Teachers interacted with small groups to promote student-centred discourse.***

Students often spoke of opportunities for classroom discourse (interactions between peers, and students and their teacher) and how these assisted them to work on tasks. They indicated that the teacher interacted with small groups of students to foster discourse. In the following section these interactions are explored.

Rather than providing students with explanations or examples, teachers interacted with students through small group discussions to build knowledge. This is reflected in the following statement from a focus group: "If you don't know anything or if you're not sure, she (the teacher) discusses it with our group" (F / E). Students suggested that the teacher

discussed ideas with them; knowledge was constructed together. In a focus group discussion students outlined how the teacher worked with them using open-ended questions to build their understanding.

We had to write the meaning of what the author was trying to say, but we couldn't do it so we had to ask the teacher for some hints and clues and that helped us: (The teacher asked) 'What part stood out? What was the most interesting?' (F / D)

In such instances teachers used open-ended questions to promote further student-centred discourse within their small group rather than imparting set answers.

The data from student interviews indicated that engagement was enhanced when teachers used their knowledge of content to support student understanding. Teachers enhanced student understanding and facilitated task involvement in two ways: through clear explanations and meaningful examples, and by enabling student-centred discourse through interactions with students using open-ended questions and discussion. The resultant student understanding supported the immersion of students in tasks. In the next section, teachers' perceptions regarding how they used their content knowledge to support the engagement of students are explored.

#### **Teacher interviews: knowledge of key content and interaction involving questioning and discussion.**

Teachers emphasised knowledge as a necessary part of effective teaching and learning. They perceived that they used it to promote student learning through discussion and questioning. In the following section these perceptions of teachers are explored.

#### ***Teachers' knowledge of content was fundamental to effective pedagogy.***

Teacher participants were aware that their content knowledge was fundamentally important for effective teaching and learning; students needed knowledge to engage in tasks.

It was considered essential that teachers were knowledgeable about what they were teaching. This importance was emphatically articulated in the teacher focus group: “You have to know the content! You can’t use all those other things if you don’t know what the content is” (F / T). Teachers understood that making content intelligible to students was directly related to their own understanding of this. It was the effective teaching of key concepts that enabled students to involve themselves in subsequent activities. This perspective was articulated in the teacher focus group in the following way.

I know when students had to write their own creed, I looked at: what are creeds? A statement of beliefs. I gave them the background knowledge and teaching so that they could write their own. We looked at examples and pulled them apart to see how they were worded so that they could write their own creeds. (F / T)

Teachers used their content knowledge to pass on essential understandings to students. This teaching enabled students to participate in tasks such as the writing of their own creed. The teacher focus group also identified that teachers interacted with students through discussion and questioning to enhance understanding.

***Interacted with students through discussion and questioning.***

Teachers suggested that they used their knowledge to facilitate student learning through discussions and clarifying questions. Whilst students were working on tasks, teachers moved around the class ready to support those having difficulty and to deepen understanding of others.

Teachers recognised that understanding RE concepts was a challenge for some students. They indicated that they actively sought out these students and involved them in discussion to facilitate understanding. These ideas were reflected in the following teacher’s comment: “I rove around and assist those students who are struggling to understand. I have a discussion with them, trying to guide them, supporting them” (F / T). Once teachers had

ascertained the issue, they guided the discussion in a way that built up student understanding. They also used questioning to stimulate and guide thinking and to move students beyond surface learning. This is suggested in the following comment from a focus group discussion, “One on one conferencing – asking a few more questions of them: why do you think that; what makes you think that; what makes you feel that – getting them to think a little deeper” (F / T). Teachers perceived that they actively led interactions that assisted all students to deepen their own thinking and move beyond surface learning (See Figure 7 for an explanation of the relationship between low-order thinking and surface learning).

Teachers stressed the importance of knowing RE content. They saw a direct link between their knowledge and effective pedagogy; knowledge enabled them to facilitate student understanding and involvement in tasks. They perceived that they enabled behavioural engagement through discussion and questioning of students.

Students and teachers constructed their understanding of factors that engaged students in an RE curriculum (their perspectives or voice) through semi-structured and focus group interviews. The researcher then sought to make sense of (interpret) student and teacher voice. These emerging insights from student and teacher interviews (the voice of the researcher), provided the context from which the researcher observed in the RE classroom. The voice of students, teachers and the researcher are summarised in Table 7. Following this summary, insights from the researcher’s observations in RE classrooms are explored.

Table 7.

*The voice of students, teachers and the researcher derived from semi-structured and focus group interviews.*

<p><b>Voice of the students</b>          “If we don’t understand a word in a Bible reading, then we go up to the teacher and they explain the word to us. I remember last year a word was constantly coming up in our reading and we didn’t understand it. When the teacher explained it we were able to understand the reading” (F / B).          “We had to write the meaning of what the author was trying to say, but we couldn’t do it so we had to ask the teacher for some hints and clues and that helped us: (The teacher asked) ‘What part stood out? What was the most interesting?’” (F / D)</p>	<p><b>Voice of the researcher</b>          Students were behaviourally engaged in tasks when teachers used their content knowledge to support student understanding. Teachers enhanced their understanding and engagement in two key ways: through clear explanations and meaningful examples, and by enabling student-centred discourse through interactions with small groups using open-ended questions and discussion.</p>
<p><b>Voice of the teachers</b>          “I know when students had to write their own creed, I looked at: what are creeds? A statement of beliefs. I gave them the background knowledge and teaching so that they could write their own” (F / T).          “I rove around and assist those students who are struggling to understand. I have a discussion with them, trying to guide them, supporting them” (F / T).          “One on one conferencing – asking a few more questions of them: why do you think that; what makes you think that; what makes you feel that – getting them to think a little deeper” (F / T).</p>	<p><b>Voice of the researcher</b>          Teachers made a direct link between knowledge and pedagogy; teacher knowledge contributed to effective teaching and learning. Increased student understanding supported their behavioural engagement. Teachers facilitated student understanding through discussion and questioning.</p>

**Researcher observation: the role of teacher knowledge in student-centred, small group discourse.**

Classroom observations revealed that teachers used their knowledge to interact with small groups of students through open-ended questions and scaffolding conversations. These interactions supported students’ involvement in a task from a unit called “Waiting for the Messiah” from *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008). Following the initial reading of a text from the Christian Bible (Isaiah 11: 1-9), students were placed in groups of

four and given the task of completing a Scripture Think Pad. This task involved responding to the Biblical text in four ways: words, symbols, pictures, and thinking.

The teacher supported students' understanding of the text and subsequent involvement in the activity by interacting with small groups through open-ended questions and scaffolding conversations. Open-ended questions have more than one possible answer and often require high-order thinking (Sadker, Zittleman, & Sadker, 2011). Scaffolding conversations are those between the teacher and small groups that respond to students' conceptual understanding and thinking (Ferguson, 2012b). Once the teacher has ascertained what a student knows, their role is to "build the student's knowledge through carefully crafted questions, (and) well-phrased explanations" (Sadker et al., 2011, p. 113). In the following section classroom observations of how the teacher used content knowledge through these two approaches are explored.

### ***Open-ended questions.***

A teacher used open-ended questions to promote student-centred discourse and facilitate engagement in the Biblical text and related activity. Although the teacher did not directly teach this, their questions implied some knowledge that the text was about the Jewish exile in Babylon and that justice was a central concept. The teacher asked open-ended questions such as: "In what ways was their situation as slaves unjust?" and "What sort of future did they imagine for themselves once they escaped from captivity?" Questions such as these indicated that the teacher had most likely read the *Additional Reading for Teachers* from *Coming to Know, Worship, and Love* (CEO, 2008; see excerpt from this section in Table 6). Other questions suggested that the teacher had knowledge that a central theme of the text was justice: "What imagery does the text use to describe a just future?"; "What does your symbol using balance scales suggest?"; "How did you arrive at justice as an important issue?" As the teacher moved around the classroom from group to group, they looked at each group's Scripture Think Pad and asked questions, such as those listed above, in response to

what students had written or drawn. Whilst such questions prompted further discourse amongst some groups, they were not as successful with others.

Some of these open-ended questions, such as “What imagery does the text use to describe a just future?” were examples of probing questions. Such questions are designed by the teacher to go beyond a student’s initial response to ascertain what students know and don’t know (Sadker et al., 2011). However, teachers did not use them in this way. On most occasions teachers used these probing questions to promote student-centred discourse; having asked the question, and received a response, they left students to discuss the possibilities. These probing questions prompted further discussion amongst some groups, which assisted them to continue with the Scripture Think Pad. However, other groups struggled to respond to the question; when the teacher left them, they generally ceased conversation on the teacher’s question. On one occasion a teacher stayed with a group and used their RE content knowledge to have a scaffolding conversation.

### ***Scaffolding conversation.***

The teacher used their knowledge to lead a group of students through a scaffolding conversation. They used open-ended probing questions such as: “How do they describe this place of peace, justice and harmony? What are the images?” They used these questions to ascertain student knowledge. When it appeared that students were unsure or lacked key knowledge, the teacher provided cuing questions (Sadker et al., 2011); these are designed to lead students to the right answer and contain hints or more information. The teacher used cuing questions such as the following: “The Jewish people were slaves in Babylon - Where is the messiah going to lead them?” and, “The wolf would usually eat the sheep – what does this image mean?” The teacher used their knowledge and these various questions to respond to students’ understanding through a scaffolded conversation. This conversation appears in the next section.



The teacher showed their knowledge of the text and its historical context during the following scaffolded conversation with a group of students. The teacher referred to the word messiah on the groups' think pad: "The Jewish people were slaves in Babylon - Where is the messiah going to lead them?" Students: "To a place of peace ... freedom". Teacher: "How do they describe this place of peace, justice and harmony? Student: "They use images". Teacher: "What are the images?" Student: "The wolf and sheep sit together". Teacher: "The wolf would usually eat the sheep – what does this image mean?" Students: "Enemies will be united ... They'll be friends ... Enemies won't be enemies". Teacher: "So it's making us think about a different future for the exiles in Babylon. They will be taken to a place of peace and harmony". The teacher used their knowledge, probing and cuing questions to guide this conversation and facilitate students' responses.

Teachers used RE content knowledge to develop open-ended questions. Their use of open-ended probing questions promoted discussion with some groups, but hindered those who lacked understanding and required further teacher support. Teachers also used their knowledge to engage students in a scaffolding conversation. The teacher used both probing and cuing questions to develop student understanding which enabled students to add and refine ideas on their Scripture Think Pad.

The emerging insights from direct observations in the RE classrooms are summarised in Table 8. In the next section the emerging insights from student and teacher interviews and the researcher's direct observations in RE classrooms are discussed and analysed.

Table 8.

*Emerging Insights from Direct Observations in RE Classrooms*

<b>Data gathering method</b>	<b>Emerging Insights</b>
Direct Observations	Students were behaviourally engaged in tasks through the teacher's knowledge of content. Teachers used content knowledge to interact with small groups of students through: open-ended questions intended to promote student-centred discourse; and scaffolding conversations using probing and cuing questions designed to build student knowledge.

**Discussion and analysis of category two: The teacher's knowledge.**

Analysis of student and teacher interview scripts and the classroom observations of the researcher revealed that students were behaviourally engaged in tasks through the teacher's content knowledge. Teachers tried to use this knowledge to engage small groups of students in student-centred discourse in two key ways: through the use of open-ended questions; and, through the use of scaffolding conversations using open-ended probing and closed cuing questions. Scaffolding conversations required more extensive teacher content knowledge than open-ended questions and were more effective in fostering student engagement. In the following section these two key actions are discussed and analysed.

***Open-ended questions and student-centred discourse.***

Teachers in this case study emphasised a learner-centred pedagogy by facilitating student-centred discourse in small groups. They used their content knowledge to create open-ended questions designed to encourage discussion amongst students that supported their participation in a Scripture Think Pad. This approach to RE reflects contemporary pedagogy, which shifts the emphasis to the learner (Chen & Looi, 2011; Wilson & Smetana, 2011). Open-ended questions facilitated student-centred discourse on some occasions, and on others they did not. The type of question used by the teacher impacted on student discourse and engagement.

With some groups of students, teachers' use of open-ended questions encouraged group discussion and supported their involvement in the RE activity. This aligns with the findings of Jurik et al. (2014). Open-ended questions, which gave students scope to explore their thinking and understandings, supported student engagement (Jurik et al., 2014). However, teachers often used a form of open-ended questions called probing questions, and these did not always enhance student-centred discourse. Probing questions are designed to ascertain what students know and don't know (Sadker et al., 2011). In other curriculum areas teachers have used this type of questioning to ascertain what students know, and then used this knowledge to extend their understanding (Ferguson, 2012b). However, rather than guiding, supporting and assisting students to reflect more deeply through questioning, as suggested by teachers in the focus group discussion, they generally asked a question and then left groups of students to discuss this amongst themselves. This approach did not enhance student discourse when groups lacked understanding.

As the curriculum framework *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008) emphasises knowledge and understanding through a constructivist pedagogy, it is important that teachers ascertain what students know so as to inform future teaching and build upon their current understandings. With its origins in Vygotsky's social constructivism, contemporary teaching and learning has been conceptualised as a social and interactive process (Liu & Matthews, 2005; O'Neill et al., 2013; Vygotsky, 1978). Use of probing questions was an opportunity for teachers to interact with students, ascertain current knowledge, and to build upon this through appropriate teacher instruction. The explicit and systematic teaching of key RE content provides students with the opportunity to be "exposed to some key understandings that could deepen and extend their thinking" (Rymarz, 2007, p. 68). Teachers, however, did not generally use probing questions and their subject specific knowledge in this way.

Although teachers were emphatic that knowledge of RE content was essential, they found it difficult to articulate their role in a knowledge-centred curriculum. This was reflected in their teaching practice. They appeared to be either reluctant to share their content knowledge through direct instruction of students due to an over-emphasis on student-centred discourse, or lacked confidence in their ability to impart key RE content knowledge. As a result, they sometimes missed the opportunity to extend students' knowledge and facilitate their engagement. Classroom observations indicated that scaffolding conversations were a more effective way of using questioning to engage students in an RE task.

***Scaffolding conversations using probing and cuing questions.***

According to teachers, student understanding was enhanced when they led questioning and discussions with students. Teachers described these interactions in general terms such as “discussing, guiding and supporting” students (F / T). These discussions did not follow a set process or use any identified strategies; they were informal conversations. Although teachers did not use this term or describe this process, classroom observations revealed that when a teacher confidently used their knowledge of RE content in a scaffolded conversation with a group of students, they facilitated student engagement and understanding.

A teacher used a scaffolded conversation to ascertain what students knew and to try to develop their thinking. They used open-ended probing questions to find out students' current level of understanding. Then they used closed cuing questions to respond to and extend student thinking. These questions were underpinned by the teacher's historical and textual knowledge, such as that contained in the *Additional Reading for Teachers* section of the framework (CEO, 2008, p. 148; See also Table 6). While primary teachers in the state of Victoria undergo teacher training as generalist classroom teachers, subject specific teacher knowledge is necessary if teachers are to be able to offer clear explanations of complex concepts and teach for understanding in specific curriculum areas (Grossman et al., 2004;

O'Donnell et al., 2016; Stodolsky, 1988). Knowledge of the Christian tradition is also necessary for effective teaching and learning in RE (CEO, 2008; Rymarz, 2007). The scaffolded conversation between the teacher and the students showed that the teacher had a good grasp of key RE content for this topic, and had the confidence to share this with students. In the classrooms of this case study, teachers used textual and historical knowledge, and open-ended probing and closed cuing questions to extend students' thinking and understanding through a scaffolded conversation.

Year five / six students and their teachers recognised the importance of teachers' content knowledge for the behavioural engagement of students. When teachers had a clear understanding of key concepts, they were able to explain these and use examples that were intelligible to students. In the RE classroom students needed an understanding of key concepts so that they could immerse themselves in tasks such as a Scripture Think Pad. One way of supporting student understanding and engagement in the RE classroom is to use direct instruction to explicitly teach key RE concepts (Rymarz, 2007). According to the curriculum framework (CEO, 2008), an important implication for teaching and learning for year 5 and 6 students is "providing an informed and in-depth presentation of our faith tradition" (CEO, 2008, p. 21). However, teachers were not observed teaching key RE concepts to students in such ways. They emphasised a learner-centred pedagogy using discourse.

Teachers promoted student-centred discourse. They actively led interactions using open-ended questioning to facilitate and enhance this discourse. In this way they sought to assist all students to deepen their own thinking and learning through interaction with each other. Whilst this approach reflects contemporary pedagogical practice (Wilson & Smetana, 2011), it had mixed success in terms of engaging students in an RE task. It was when teachers confidently used their knowledge of RE content and a combination of open and closed questions to involve students in a scaffolded conversation that understanding and the active

participation of students in a Scripture Think Pad occurred. In this approach teachers used their content knowledge and different types of questions to actively guide student-centred discourse. Teachers directed classroom discourse in middle years English classes through scaffolding approaches such as Questioning as Thinking and Collaborative Reasoning, and through scaffolding useful strategies such as clarifying ideas and challenging opinions (Jadallah et al., 2011; Zhang & Dougherty Stahl, 2012). In this case study, teachers used their content knowledge, open-ended probing questions and closed cuing questions to scaffold a conversation which guided student-centred discourse, and facilitated the understanding and behavioural engagement of year five / six students.

The key findings from this category, the teacher's knowledge, are summarised in Table 9. In the next section, engagement through a trusting classroom climate is explored.

Table 9.

*Key Findings from Category Two: the Teacher's Knowledge*

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### **Key Findings**

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Year five / six students were engaged in tasks when the teacher used content knowledge to enhance student-centred discourse with small groups of students. Teachers used two key strategies to enhance this discourse: open-ended questions and scaffolded conversations. Whilst open-ended questions facilitated engagement for some groups of students, they were not successful with others. A more effective practice involved teachers confidently using content knowledge in a scaffolded conversation to guide student-centred discourse.

Teachers were adamant that content knowledge was essential for the teaching and learning process in RE. This knowledge underpinned and informed their use of open-ended questions and scaffolded conversations. Current trends in classroom RE learning place a certain emphasis on the achievement of knowledge-centred outcomes (Buchanan, 2003; CEO, 2008). Knowledge of the Christian tradition is regarded as a vehicle to faith formation (Buchanan, 2009; Durka, 2004; Fowler, 1981, 2004). However, teacher knowledge was not imparted to students in a systematic and explicit manner such as through the use of direct instruction. Teachers seemed to have limited understanding of effective ways to use content knowledge in RE learning.

A teacher used a scaffolded conversation to increase student understanding and facilitate their involvement in an RE task. They used historical and textual knowledge, and open-ended probing questions and closed cuing questions to ascertain and then build upon students' knowledge. This conversation guided and facilitated student-centred discourse.

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### **Category Three: A Trusting Classroom Climate**

#### **Introduction.**

Classroom relationships and interactions have a significant influence on student engagement (McHugh et al., 2013; Reyes et al., 2012; Zhang & Dougherty Stahl, 2012). The following key elements of the classroom community supported student engagement across the middle years. They were: a sense of belonging (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Faircloth, 2009; Juvonen, 2006); classroom emotional climate (Reyes et al., 2012; Skinner et al., 2008); the teacher-student relationship (Delisle, 2012; McHugh et al., 2013); peer relationships (Faircloth, 2009; Wang & Eccles, 2012); and classroom discourse (Smart & Marshall, 2013; Wilson & Smetana, 2011; Zhang et al., 2010).

In this section the engagement of year five / six students through a *trusting classroom climate* is explored. Students suggested that in this climate peer interactions were supportive, involved teamwork in small groups, and sought to build understanding through collaboration. Whilst individual teachers linked trust with students' willingness to share life experiences, the teacher focus group discerned that a safe classroom climate was the essential feature that fostered interactions amongst students. According to teachers, a safe climate was one where students were reasonably confident that learning insights would be respectfully shared. These perspectives are compared with the observed features of a trusting classroom climate prior to a discussion and analysis of these emerging insights.

#### **Student interviews: a classroom climate that featured teamwork and trust.**

Students were interested in learning that involved the sharing of perspectives with peers. Two key features of the classroom climate facilitated these interactions: teamwork and trust.

Teamwork was enhanced when students listened to each other and actively shared their insights on a given topic or issue. Working as a team involved seeking clarification and

sharing their understanding of RE content. This insight was illustrated by the following comment from a student focus group.

Discussing ideas in a group and working together as a team is good because you get to learn what other people think and to share your ideas with them. We work well in a group when we feel comfortable with them. (F / F)

This type of student-instigated teamwork appeared to depend upon students feeling at ease when discussing ideas with peers. This required trust.

The student focus groups suggested that they felt comfortable interacting with peers when they were able to trust each other. This view is reflected in the following comment:

“When you’re with people who you know and trust, and work with more often, you can ask them questions and try to understand what they’re telling you, just as they try to understand what you’re trying to say” (F / D). Trust developed over time when students experienced peers seeking to understand their perspectives rather than criticising or diminishing these. A trusting climate was evident when students confidently shared perspectives with each other.

A climate of trust was an essential feature of an engaging RE classroom. Trust was developed through interactions with supportive peers. Supportive peers sought to understand each other and to develop ideas through teamwork. In the next section, two essential features of classroom climate are described by teachers: a trusting climate and a safe climate. These two features reflected very different understandings of RE pedagogy held by teachers.

#### **Teacher interviews: a trusting and safe classroom climate.**

Teacher participants conveyed that two distinct features of classroom climate were necessary: *trust* and a *safety*. Trust was essential for the sharing of life experiences, whilst a safe climate supported a learning focus in the RE classroom. These perspectives and their impact on student engagement are presented in this section.



*A trusting climate.*

Teachers suggested a different kind of trust was necessary in the RE classroom. This trust supported personal disclosures related to RE topics. The following comment illustrates that teachers typically connected trust and students' sharing of personal experiences. "I feel really privileged that students will let me be a part of what's going on in their lives because that shows a great trust" (T / D). Some teachers indicated that trust may underpin a pedagogical approach that is unique to RE. As suggested in the following comment, some teachers perceived that RE emphasises the sharing of students' life experiences. "There needs to be trust between people in RE because it's a subject where you really reveal a lot of yourself and your experiences. So you have to have built up that element of trust" (T / A). According to these teachers trust was necessary for students to willingly share their experiences. Drawing on these insights from individual teachers, the teacher focus group was asked what the essential feature of an engaging classroom climate was: they concluded it was a safe climate.

*A safe climate.*

A safe classroom climate had two essential characteristics: students willingly shared and responded respectfully to each other's ideas; and the focus was on learning together. Students were encouraged to offer their perspective when they were reasonably confident of how peers would respond; whilst they may disagree, as indicated in the following comment, their response would be respectful:

Students have to know they are in a safe environment where they can discuss learning and others will respect their contribution. They're entitled to an opinion and others may agree or disagree, but there's a respectful way in which we go about that. (F / T)

As suggested by teachers, learning interactions were dependent upon respectful encounters between peers. In this safe environment negativity toward individuals because of the ideas

they held was not to be tolerated. In the following excerpt from a focus group discussion, teachers indicated that learning involves building knowledge through interaction, and that this is enhanced when respect is promoted:

The classroom must be an environment that will support their learning, where they can try to achieve more by having a go at RE learning and where they are comfortable to speak and share with each other. So students need to be respectful of each other and not put each other down when they contribute ideas. (F / T)

In a safe climate underpinned by respectful encounters students were encouraged to engage in learning through peer interactions, rather than be discouraged by the negative responses of peers to their perspectives.

Individual teachers held the view that trust supported the sharing of students' life experiences. These experiences were an important dimension of RE learning. The teacher focus group discerned that a safe classroom climate, which included respectful encounters between students, was the essential feature that fostered their engagement in RE learning. There were similarities between students' trusting classroom climate and teachers' safe classroom climate: both involved supportive peer interactions and the building of knowledge through these interactions.

Students and teachers constructed their understanding of factors that engaged students in an RE curriculum (their perspectives or voice) through semi-structured and focus group interviews. The researcher then sought to make sense of (interpret) student and teacher voice. These emerging insights from student and teacher interviews (the voice of the researcher), provided the context from which the researcher observed in the RE classroom. The voice of students, teachers and the researcher are summarised in Table 10. Following this summary, insights from the researcher's observations in RE classrooms are explored.

Table 10.

*The voice of students, teachers and the researcher derived from semi-structured and focus group interviews.*

<p><b>Voice of the students</b>  “Discussing ideas in a group and working together as a team is good because you get to learn what other people think and to share your ideas with them. We work well in a group when we feel comfortable with them” (F / F).  “When you’re with people who you know and trust, and work with more often, you can ask them questions and try to understand what they’re telling you, just as they try to understand what you’re trying to say” (F / D).</p>	<p><b>Voice of the researcher</b>  In a trusting classroom climate peer interactions were supportive, involved teamwork in small groups, and sought to build understanding through collaboration.</p>
<p><b>Voice of the teachers</b>  “There needs to be trust between people in RE because it’s a subject where you really reveal a lot of yourself and your experiences. So you have to have built up that element of trust” (T / A).</p> <p>“Students have to know they are in a safe environment where they can discuss learning and others will respect their contribution. They’re entitled to an opinion and others may agree or disagree, but there’s a respectful way in which we go about that” (F / T).  “The classroom must be an environment that will support their learning, where they can try to achieve more by having a go at RE learning and where they are comfortable to speak and share with each other. So students need to be respectful of each other and not put each other down when they contribute ideas” (F / T).</p>	<p><b>Voice of the researcher</b>  Individual teachers identified trust as an important element of an engaging classroom climate. They connected trust with students’ willingness to share life experiences with each other.</p> <p>The teacher focus group perceived that a safe classroom climate was essential. Features of this climate included students’ willingness to share perspectives, responding respectfully to peers’ ideas, and focusing on learning together.</p>

**Researcher observation: a trusting classroom climate.**

Classroom observations indicated that a trusting classroom climate facilitated the engagement of students. Three key characteristics were indicative of this climate. These three characteristics were evidenced by classroom interactions that were: reciprocal, supportive, and constructivist. Reciprocal interactions were evident when students willingly shared their ideas and perspectives and responded to those of peers. Supportive interactions were observed when students explored ideas rather than diminishing or dismissing the ideas of

others. Constructivist interactions were apparent when perspectives were discussed, challenged and built upon. These characteristics were evident in students' response to an activity from the unit "Waiting for the Messiah" from *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008).

The activity required students to read and discuss a passage from the Christian Bible about the coming messiah (Isaiah 11: 1-9). Students were asked to discuss this text in small groups and to respond in three ways: to write some key words or phrases; to draw symbols and / or a picture which illustrated the meaning of the text; and to write what they thought this text suggested about the messiah. Each group was then asked to share their ideas with the whole class as part of a class discussion.

Student interactions were reciprocal. In the literature reciprocal interactions were defined as listening to each other and sharing ideas (Alexander, 2008). Reciprocal interactions were evident in the class discussion of pictorial / symbolic insights presented by groups. A group shared their picture of a lion and a lamb sitting next to each other. Other groups subsequently shared pictures they had drawn, such as a baby placing its hand in a snake hole. These pictures symbolised the imagined world of the future that the text from Isaiah implied. A discussion followed the sharing of their images; this focused on how these creatures were acting in a way that was contrary to their nature (i.e. they did not harm each other). Students were interested in the pictures and the ideas they expressed.

Interactions between peers were supportive. According to Alexander (2008), supportive interactions involve exploration of ideas without fear of peer negativity when errors are made. Student participants trusted peers to explore their ideas rather than react to these in a negative manner. The image of the lion and lamb that was presented by one group was a literal drawing of the text. Rather than being rejected or criticised because it was a copy of the text, this idea was willingly shared with, and accepted by, the class. Trust was

reinforced through the positive manner in which such ideas were explored. An example of this explorative approach is presented in the next section that examines constructivist interactions.

Student interactions were constructivist. Derived from the work of Vygotsky (1978), social constructivism has been defined as the process of constructing knowledge through interaction with others (Shostak, 2011). Students interacted with peers to construct perspectives. This process involved students challenging some of the interpretations presented by class members. Subsequent discussion and argumentation of these interpretations amongst students resulted in the development of more complex understandings. This occurred when a group compared the idea of justice with the image of balance scales. For them, justice was about balancing two sides. Therefore, justice demanded that all offenders receive the same punishment for the same crime. As other students did not agree, a discussion about justice followed. When necessary, the teacher guided this discussion using questions such as: “What makes you say that?” This directed arguments to evidence. In response to the image of the balance scales, some students pointed out that the circumstances of the crime and the motives of offenders varied; consequently, the same punishment could not always be applied to the same offences. Rather than dismissing or diminishing one group’s simple understanding of justice, this concept was explored and developed by class members through a teacher-guided discussion. Students were engaged in this discussion; they responded to others’ perspectives and thinking by offering their own ideas and comments and building knowledge together.

These emerging insights from direct observations in classrooms are summarised in Table 11. Following this summary, the insights from student and teacher interviews and classroom observations are discussed and analysed in light of current research in this area.

Table 11.

*Emerging Insights from Direct Observations in RE Classrooms*

Data gathering method	Emerging Insights
Direct Observations	Students were engaged in learning through a trusting classroom climate. This climate was evident in reciprocal, supportive, and constructivist peer interactions.

**Discussion and analysis of category three: Trusting classroom climate.**

Trust was a key feature of classroom climate for religious education. This climate supported the affective engagement of year five / six students in an RE curriculum. Whilst students and teachers perceived that trust was essential, they differed in their reasons as to why this was so.

Students felt able to express, discuss and construct their knowledge and understanding with each other when they sensed that they were in a trusting climate. They were interested when learning involved these peer learning interactions. This constructivist view aligned with the pedagogy of the current RE framework, *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008); the learning and teaching process in this framework has an emphasis on sharing and building upon students' knowledge. In this knowledge-centred approach learning is measured through the attainment of learning outcomes (Buchanan, 2009). However, reason and emotion work in concert with each other. Therefore, in contexts characterised by care and trust, reason and learning are facilitated (Fleming & Lovat, 2015; Narvaez, 2010).

In contrast, some teachers in this case study perceived that RE was unique as a subject because it involved personal sharing. However, other subject areas also invoke personal sharing, and responding and connecting subject matter to life (Faircloth & Miller, 2011; Zhang & Dougherty Stahl, 2012). It is possible that these teachers did not fully understand the paradigm shift that had occurred in RE from the previous life-centred approach (based on the sharing of life experiences) to the current educational, knowledge-centred approach

(Buchanan, 2007). The previous approach was criticised for not moving students beyond their experiential world to knowledge of the Catholic faith tradition, and for having an over-reliance on the sharing of faith (Buchanan, 2009; Rossiter, 1981; Rymarz, 2007). While the curriculum framework is an educational, knowledge-centred approach, the interplay between life and religion is important for RE learning (CEO, 2008). Therefore learning and teaching should provide opportunities for connecting students' life stories and experiences with the story of Christian faith. However, whilst the present approach does provide students with opportunities to name, share and make sense of the life experiences they bring to a topic, and accepts that some faith sharing may be appropriate (Rossiter, 1981), it is with a view to building upon these experiences and developing new knowledge and understandings (CEO, 2008).

Drawing upon these insights from students and teachers, a trusting climate is necessary for the sharing of knowledge and experiences, and some level of faith sharing. In line with the thinking of RE theorists and Catholic Church teaching on religious education, the current curriculum framework considers RE from two viewpoints: an education in faith and an educational perspective (Buchanan, 2015; Congregation for Catholic Education, 1990; Engebretson et al., 2002). It displays "a creative tension or dialectic between faith-oriented and educational concerns" (Rossiter, 1981, p. 2). A trusting classroom climate fosters the sharing and connecting of life experiences with the story of Christian faith that is necessary in an education in faith, and it also promotes the sharing and building up of knowledge that is emphasised in an educational perspective. Student participants were engaged through the sharing of knowledge, experiences, and at times faith, that occurred within a trusting climate.

The climate of the classroom supported student engagement in this qualitative study (trusting classroom climate) and in the scholarly literature (classroom emotional climate). In the next section commonalities between trusting classroom climate and classroom emotional

climate (CEC), and ways in which the findings from the current study extend the research on CEC, are discussed.

*Classroom emotional climate.*

In the present investigation, trust was the key feature of an engaging classroom climate. In such a climate students were affectively engaged, interested in the experiences, insights and perspectives of peers, through peer learning interactions. Trust in peers gave students the confidence to share their learning with each other.

Teacher participants involved in the focus group discussion were emphatic that students required a safe environment to be confident and willing to share ideas. This environment was underpinned by respectful interactions where people were never demeaned for the perspectives they held or the ideas they shared. In a similar way, it is suggested in *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008) that the learning environment of the RE classroom should be one that “builds respectful relationships that value each person’s perspective and experience” (CEO, 2008, p. 6). According to Hattie (2012), a respectful classroom climate is a prior condition of learning. In this climate “students feel safe to show what they do not know, and have confidence that the interactions among other students and with the teacher will be fair and in many ways predictable” (Hattie, 2012, p. 70). A key finding from the current exploration of factors that supported student engagement in an RE curriculum was that trust was developed between peers when they sought to understand each other through supportive interactions. This was consistent with the findings of Alexander (2008); peer learning interactions were supportive when perspectives were explored rather than reacted to in a negative manner. Supportive interactions were indicative of a trusting classroom climate; it was in this climate that students felt safe to share ideas with peers. This also complements the work of Cornelius-White (2007), which posited that trust was developed between the teacher and their students when teachers showed that they understood



students' perspectives and insights, and extends it to all members of the classroom community.

Research on CEC indicated that willingness to share perspectives was promoted in a positive climate (Reyes et al., 2012). Three characteristics were indicative of CEC: positive climate (warmth of classroom relationships); teacher sensitivity (teacher responsiveness to students' social and academic requirements); and teacher regard for student perspectives (student interests and ideas are considered in the classroom). In a classroom with a positive climate, year 5 and 6 students in the USA experienced the classroom as a safe place to share their perspectives (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Rather than a positive climate with warm classroom relationships, findings from this study suggested that it was the supportive interactions of a trusting climate that gave students the confidence to share ideas in the RE classroom. These interactions were underpinned by respect and focused on exploration of perspectives. Findings from the present investigation also extended the research in CEC. In the next section these findings are discussed and analysed.

*A student-centred, trusting classroom climate.*

Findings from this study extended the research in CEC in two fundamental ways: trust was found to be the key characteristic of classroom climate; and, rather than the focus being on teacher actions, as it is in CEC (Reyes et al., 2012), student actions were the focal point. Year five / six students were affectively engaged in RE learning through peer learning interactions that were enabled in a trusting classroom climate. These interactions were student-centred and were underpinned by social constructivist pedagogy (Shostak, 2011; Vygotsky, 1978); student learning occurred through peer interactions that sought to build knowledge and understanding.

In contexts that featured care and trust, the diligence and learning of students improved; it was determined that these outcomes were the result of the "greater calm and

emotional self-regulation impelled by the ambience (of the classroom)” (Fleming & Lovat, 2015, p. 216; Lovat, Dally, Clement, & Toomey, 2011; Lovat, Toomey, Dally, & Clement, 2009). In the present investigation teacher participants had an influential role in developing and maintaining a trusting classroom climate. They encouraged students to share insights. They guided classroom discussions and kept the focus on developing ideas and knowledge. Such actions facilitated what teachers had called a safe environment. Whilst these actions had a significant and positive impact on students, it was the key characteristics of a trusting classroom climate (reciprocal, constructivist, and supportive peer interactions), which further encouraged students to confidently share their learning perspectives with their peers.

Students were encouraged to share their perspectives in the context of a student-centred pedagogy underpinned by social constructivism. They were enthusiastic about RE classes that involved peer interaction, the giving and receiving of thoughts and ideas, and the construction of knowledge. In the study of CEC by Reyes et al. (2012), year five and six students were encouraged to express their ideas in classrooms where teachers had high regard for student perspectives. Without diminishing the role of the teacher, a key finding from the present study was that students also had a significant role to play. However, rather than peer social support assisting students to develop the confidence to share and critique each other’s perspectives (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Wang & Eccles, 2012), student participants gained this confidence through the supportive interactions with peers which occurred in a trusting classroom climate.

Trust was a key feature of the classroom climate in this study. Three characteristics were indicative of this climate: interactions were reciprocal, constructivist and supportive. Students were willing to share their experiences and learning, which they found engaging, in this climate. Characteristics of classroom emotional climate such as a positive climate and teacher regard for student perspectives were also evident in the RE classroom. Whilst

affirming the significant role of teachers in creating and sustaining a trusting classroom climate, findings from this study indicated that when this climate was underpinned by a student-centred, social constructivist pedagogy, this impacted positively on the affective engagement of year five / six students in an RE curriculum.

The key findings from this category, trusting classroom climate, are summarised in Table 12. This is followed by an exploration of the next category, positive teacher-student relationships.

Table 12.

*Key Findings from Category Three: A Trusting Classroom Climate.*

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### **Key Findings**

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Trust was the essential feature of classroom climate that engaged students in an RE curriculum. In such a climate the sharing of students' experiences and insights into the Christian faith tradition were fostered. In a trusting climate students also had the confidence to participate in reciprocal, constructivist and supportive learning interactions with peers. They displayed characteristics of being affectively engaged such as the sharing of religious knowledge, life experiences and understandings about the Catholic faith tradition.

Findings from this study complemented and extended those from the research in classroom emotional climate in two ways. Firstly, trust was the key feature of classroom climate which provided students with the safe environment necessary to share experiences, their insights into the Christian faith and religious knowledge in the RE classroom. Supportive interactions where students sought understanding and exploration of peers' perspectives built up this trusting climate. Secondly, rather than relying on teacher actions as occurs in CEC (Reyes et al., 2012), a student-centred, social constructivist pedagogy facilitated student engagement.

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### **Category Four: Positive Teacher-Student Relationships**

#### **Introduction.**

The behavioural engagement of students was influenced by a positive teacher-student relationship. Teacher participants exhibited this relationship when they showed high support for the learning needs of students. This dimension of the teacher-student relationship is often referred to as responsiveness (McHugh et al., 2013; Wang & Eccles, 2012). Teachers

suggested that they used knowledge of their students as learners to adapt tasks and make these academically challenging for all. Engaging students through high academic expectations is known as demandingness or academic press (Delisle, 2012; Toshalis, 2012; Zee et al., 2013). In the following section the role of the teacher-student relationship in the engagement of students is explored.

### **Student interviews: Teachers demand and support.**

Students suggested that teachers generally employed two complementary approaches to ensure their engagement: demand and support. The demanding approach emphasised student effort and persistence with challenging tasks. The supportive approach was understood as one that encouraged students to focus on their learning. These two approaches are presented in this section.

#### ***Demanding approach.***

Students used terms such as “pushes” and “pressures” when describing how the teacher kept them focussed on their work through a demanding approach. The following student comment provides an insight into the terminology used by students to describe how teachers enacted this approach: “My teacher pushes you to work” (S / Sh). Teachers enacted this approach through their monitoring of students’ progress. They ascertained each student’s progress by asking him or her questions about their responses to the task. The students were aware of the teachers’ interactive approach as the following insight from a student focus group reveals: “They walk around to see how much we’ve done and ask us questions about our work” (F / B). These students felt that their teacher was uncompromising with regard to task completion. In their words this monitoring process was how the teacher “pressures us to do our work” (F / B). Teachers monitored student effort to ensure that this was commensurate with their expectation of students. Teachers also engaged students through a supportive approach.

***Supportive approach.***

Teachers also displayed a supportive approach to keeping students actively involved in tasks. They did this by responding to their academic learning needs. According to a student focus group, a positive teacher response provided a clear explanation of content or offered an idea which enabled students to proceed with the task: “We ask for help. She explains it in a way that we can understand and she gives us ideas to help complete our work” (F / D). As indicated in the following comment, students suggested that teachers focussed on responding to those with academic needs: “The teacher goes around the class and gives help to those who need it” (F / A). Whilst students suggested that teachers often supported those who did not understand, they did not give any indication that teachers challenged students through academic press (high expectations for student achievement).

The data from student interviews suggested that they were engaged when teachers demanded and monitored effort on task, and assisted those with academic learning needs. In the next section, teachers indicated that they used a positive teacher-student relationship and task adaptation to influence students’ behavioural engagement.

**Teacher interviews: a positive relationship, and adapting RE tasks to meet individual needs.**

Teachers fostered a positive teacher-student relationship and used this to influence student effort and persistence with tasks. They also had to relate to and know students as learners. Using this knowledge, teachers perceived that they could use academic press with students by adapting tasks to suit the varying abilities of individual students.

***Positive teacher-student relationship.***

Teachers perceived that a positive relationship could be utilised to influence student engagement. This relationship was evident when teachers showed that they valued students as individuals and as learners. As one teacher stated, to develop this relationship requires getting

to know students as unique individuals: to “actually engage students on a personal level and get to really know them as real people...to learn the things that make each of them different” (T / F). These efforts by the teacher built up the relationship and showed each student that they were valued. Teachers leveraged this relationship to affect students’ engagement. As expressed in the teacher focus group “Often they want to please you. If you’ve got a positive teacher-student rapport, they want to work and get things done to make you happy and get that positive feedback” (F / T). Teachers were aware that a positive teacher-student relationship supported students’ behavioural engagement. However, engagement was also contingent on teacher knowledge of each student as a learner of religious education.

***Using knowledge of student ability to provide academic press through task adaptation.***

Teachers used their knowledge of students as learners to engage them through academic press. The teacher focus group discerned that to set high expectations for students of varying abilities, tasks would have to be adapted accordingly: “We have to tailor tasks to their individual needs” (F / T). Teachers would need to ascertain each student’s level of ability with particular RE tasks and then adapt these as necessary so that all students experienced academic press (high expectations).

Teachers perceived that two aspects of the teacher-student relationship were essential factors for students’ behavioural engagement. Positive relationships were utilised to encourage students to put more effort into tasks. Teachers also used their knowledge of students’ individual capabilities to adapt tasks to their standard and academically press them.

Students and teachers constructed their understanding of factors that engaged students in an RE curriculum (their perspectives or voice) through semi-structured and focus group interviews. The researcher then sought to make sense of (interpret) student and teacher voice. These emerging insights from student and teacher interviews (the voice of the researcher),

provided the context from which the researcher observed in the RE classroom. The voice of students, teachers and the researcher are summarised in Table 13. Following this summary, insights from the researcher's observations in RE classrooms are explored.

Table 13.

*The voice of students, teachers and the researcher derived from semi-structured and focus group interviews.*

<p><b>Voice of the students</b>            “The teacher goes around the class and gives help to those who need it” (F / A).            “We ask for help. She explains it in a way that we can understand and she gives us ideas to help complete our work” (F / D).</p> <p>“They walk around to see how much we’ve done and ask us questions about our work... (the teacher) “pressures us to do our work” (F / B).</p>	<p><b>Voice of the researcher</b>            Students were engaged when teachers were supportive of their academic learning needs. This supportiveness was demonstrated when teachers assisted students to understand content and task requirements.</p> <p>Students were also engaged when teachers were demanding (insisted that students put effort into tasks). However, demandingness (academic press) was not apparent to students; teachers’ focus seemed to be on supporting students with academic learning needs.</p>
<p><b>Voice of the teachers</b>            “Often they want to please you. If you’ve got a positive teacher-student rapport, they want to work and get things done to make you happy and get that positive feedback” (F / T).</p> <p>“We have to tailor tasks to their individual needs” (F / T).</p>	<p><b>Voice of the researcher</b>            Students were engaged when teachers developed positive relationships with them. This involved knowing students personally. Teachers used this relationship to get students working. They perceived that a positive relationship was demonstrated when students put more effort into tasks.</p> <p>Students were also engaged when teachers used their knowledge of students’ individual capabilities to provide academic press by adapting tasks to make them challenging for all students.</p>

**Researcher observation: responsiveness of the teacher.**

Students were asked to work in small groups of three to four to design a poster that highlighted how human life may be nurtured. During this activity, the researcher observed teachers using their knowledge of students to respond to their learning and behavioural needs through either a demanding or supportive approach.

***Demanding approach.***

Teachers were demanding of students who seemed easily distracted, who lacked work intensity, or who were not working together as a group. They closely monitored these groups by returning at regular intervals to check on their progress. Teachers' feedback to these groups was often related to task expectations. With a group that had not written many ideas the teacher stated: "I would get some words on here or else you are going to run out of time!" The teacher appeared to put pressure on this group to concentrate on developing and writing down some key ideas.

To complete the assigned group task, students were required to interact, discuss ideas and develop an agreed perspective with other group members. When a group seemed to lack focus on the exchange of ideas, the teacher approached them and asked: "Have you discussed your ideas as a group?" The teacher returned to this group a few minutes later and asked them "So did you share your ideas?" The teacher inquired and listened to the main ideas generated by this group's previous discussion and pointed out some areas that needed further consideration; the teacher indicated that she would be back to explore their progress.

The teacher had to be demanding with these groups by reinforcing key processes that supported completion of the task and by regularly monitoring that appropriate progress was being made. This demanding approach ensured that students with behavioural needs (i.e. students who were easily distracted or did not follow task requirements) continued working



on the task. With other groups, teachers used a more supportive approach. Typically, these groups required academic support with task demands or the content in the task.

***Supportive approach.***

A supportive approach was used with groups who needed academic support. Teachers were responsive to the learning needs of these students. The teacher offered these groups suggestions as to how to proceed with the task or scaffolded ideas that assisted them to understand the task.

A group was struggling with the RE task. The teacher approached them and helped this group to agree on an area of focus, and then scaffolded ideas for categories and sub-categories for this group to explore together. With this group the teacher suggested: “Perhaps you need to think about the main areas you will cover”. The teacher then offered the following ideas to assist the group with the task: “What if you focused on healthy food? What kinds of healthy food should we eat? What sorts of images would be appropriate?” Eventually this group started to discuss what they knew about healthy food and to write down some ideas under the sub-categories of fruit and vegetables.

Groups such as this required the support of the teacher to understand the task, key concepts, or how to conceptualise a response to a task. This support enabled these students to persist with the task. Teachers had claimed that they used academic press to support students’ engagement with tasks. This is discussed in the next section.

***Academic press.***

Whilst teachers were responsive to the learning and behavioural needs of students, they were not observed utilising academic press with them. Tasks were not adapted, as had been claimed by teachers, to ensure that these were challenging for all students. Throughout the observation period students were seen completing the same tasks as listed in *Coming to Know, Worship, and Love* (CEO, 2008). Teachers scaffolded learning to support students

with academic needs to complete tasks, but they did not change or adapt tasks to challenge further and academically press students who were working successfully on these.

Teachers used a positive relationship to engage students. A positive relationship was demonstrated in the high support and responsiveness of the teacher to students' learning needs. It was also evident in the positive response of students to their teacher. They enacted suggestions, and following each interaction with their teacher, continued the task with greater intensity. Teachers acted responsively to foster engagement. This responsiveness was expressed in two ways: teachers were demanding toward students with behavioural learning needs and supportive of students with academic learning needs.

The emerging insights from direct observations are summarised in Table 14. In the next section the emerging insights from interviews and observations are discussed and analysed in light of the related scholarly literature on teacher-student relationships.

Table 14.

*Emerging Insights from Direct Observations in RE Classrooms*

<b>Data gathering method</b>	<b>Emerging Insights</b>
Direct Observations	<p>Students were engaged in tasks when teachers utilised a positive teacher-student relationship. This relationship was demonstrated when teachers provided high support for students' learning needs and by students when they persisted with tasks following their teacher's support.</p> <p>Teachers adopted a demanding approach to ensure the persistence of students with behavioural needs by monitoring their progress and providing feedback regarding task expectations.</p> <p>Teachers adopted a supportive approach by scaffolding student understanding to assist those with learning needs.</p> <p>Teachers did not appear to engage students through academic press. They focused on responding to students with learning needs rather than setting high expectations for all students.</p>

**Discussion and analysis of category four: Positive teacher-student relationships.**

Analysis of the student and teacher interview scripts and the classroom observations of the researcher revealed that students were behaviourally engaged in RE tasks through positive teacher-student relationships. Teachers utilised these relationships to enhance the on-task behaviour of students. A positive relationship was evident in teacher-student learning interactions (demonstrated in the high support of teachers for students' learning needs). Teachers used their knowledge of students as learners to respond to their learning needs and engage them in tasks through either a demanding or supportive approach.

Across three decades it has been reported that the teacher-student relationship has a significant effect on student engagement (Juvonen, 2006; Hill et al., 1996; Wang & Eccles, 2012). This relationship has been understood in terms of two dimensions: responsiveness and demandingness. Students, teachers and classroom observations from this case study attested to teachers' responsiveness in the RE classroom and its positive impact on students' behavioural engagement. However, whilst teacher interview scripts suggested that they used demandingness, the researcher's classroom observations did not support this. In the following section, findings from this study in the area of responsiveness and demandingness are discussed and analysed in relation to the findings of the scholarly literature in this area. This discussion commences with teacher responsiveness.

***Teacher responsiveness.***

The behavioural engagement of students was facilitated by positive teacher-student relationships. Teachers suggested that student effort was directly related to their relationship with the classroom teacher. They understood this relationship to be about knowing each student as an individual and responding in a way that showed that students were valued and cared about. This perspective aligned with research on self-determination theory (Connell &

Wellborn, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 1985): there is an association between student engagement and their need for relatedness.

Through the lens of self-determination theory both Deci and Ryan, (1985) and Connell and Wellborn, (1991) proposed that students were more willing to involve themselves in learning because these activities were valued by someone who met their need for relatedness. Lee (2012) surmised that in the context of a positive relationship student effort was due to their taking on the academic values and expectations their teachers appreciated. Quantitative studies using teacher and student surveys have confirmed an association between positive relationships and student engagement in the primary years (Hughes et al., 2012; Hughes & Chen, 2011; Wu et al., 2010). However, these studies defined a positive relationship as being high in support and low in conflict (Hughes et al., 2012). The present qualitative study confirmed the association between the high support of teachers and the behavioural engagement of year five / six students in an RE curriculum. Furthermore, the attributes of a positive teacher-student relationship needed to engage students were revealed.

The emphasis in life-centred catechesis on religious education as a personal activity to be conducted in an atmosphere of care and concern for all students extended previous boundaries of the teacher-student relationship (Ryan, 1997). In a similar way, teacher participants emphasised relating to students personally and developing a friendly rapport with them. They perceived that students were more willing to work on tasks when this type of positive teacher-student relationship existed. It has been suggested that schools are primarily personal and communal (Stern, 2012). However, the teacher-student relationship must go beyond knowing students personally. Rather, teachers must enact care that shows that each student is an end in themselves (Stern, 2012). Treating people communally in the classroom, as an end in themselves, may be illustrated in honest and sincere teacher feedback which responds to the genuine needs of students, even when the student does not necessarily like or

agree with this (Stern & Backhouse, 2011). In line with this perspective, and in contrast with the perception of teacher participants, student engagement was actually enhanced when teachers enacted a particular type of care.

Two types of care may be enacted in relationships: aesthetic and authentic (Toshalis, 2012). Aesthetic care is expressed through sentimental language that fails to result in effective care-giving. There was a sense in which this level of care was reflected in the language of teachers; they perceived that a positive relationship was about having a “positive... rapport” (T / F) and getting to know students on a “personal level” (T / F). In contrast, authentic care results in actions that show genuine consideration of the needs of the one being cared for (Toshalis, 2012). Teacher participants used a demanding approach and reiterated expectations to students with behavioural needs. They used a supportive approach and offered assistance to students with learning needs. These authentic teacher efforts (responding to the particular needs of students) were indicative of a positive teacher-student relationship.

A positive teacher-student relationship was not about knowing each other on a personal level. It was about authentic teacher efforts to respond to the educational needs of students in the RE classroom. This approach reflects the contemporary emphasis on the educational and cognitive elements of RE learning (Buchanan, 2015; Healy, 2011; Rymarz, 2007). It also echoes the positive association between learner-centred teacher-student relationships and student engagement (Cornelius-White, 2007) and enacting care that treats all students as ends in themselves (Stern, 2012).

Qualitative studies have affirmed that authentic teacher efforts supported the engagement of secondary students (Faircloth, 2009; McHugh et al., 2013; Wang & Eccles, 2012). The current study extended these findings to the behavioural engagement of year five / six students in an RE curriculum. Student engagement was enhanced when authentic teacher

efforts were made to respond to the educational needs of students in RE classroom learning. Teachers also claimed to use their knowledge of students as learners to academically press them in the RE classroom.

***Teacher demandingness.***

Teachers in this study recognised that a diverse range of student abilities existed in the RE classroom. Therefore, to engage all students they perceived that it was essential that they adapt learning tasks to suit the individual learning needs of students. In this way they surmised that all students would be challenged through individualised tasks. However, classroom observations suggested that teachers did not adapt tasks. Whilst it was evident that teachers responded to students' academic and behavioural needs, they did not place high expectations and academically press students who did not need this support.

Academic press has been identified as a significant predictor of student engagement (Lee, 2012; Ma, 2003). The work of Goddard et al. (2000) extended the findings connecting academic emphasis and learning in middle and secondary school settings to include the engagement of students in the primary setting. These quantitative approaches have been criticised as “the prevailing empirical-analytical approach ... (which) ignores the values and life experiences of research participants and pays no attention to the meanings that they give to events” (Luyten et al., 2005, p. 262). Whilst teachers did not appear to use academic press in the RE classroom, an insight from the perceptions of teachers deepened understanding of how this may be used to enhance engagement. This involved utilising knowledge of their students as learners.

It has been stated that RE in schools should “appear as a scholastic discipline with the same systematic demands and the same rigour as other disciplines” (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, para. 73). This entails characteristics such as a “systematic and sequential” curriculum and teachers implementing practices commonly used in other subject areas such

as assessment to inform their teaching (CEO, 2008, p. 1). Teachers recognised that their knowledge of students as learners could be utilised to adapt RE tasks so that these tasks were challenging and engaging for all students. This insight connected academic press and behavioural engagement. It also highlighted how teacher awareness of students' knowledge and understanding through formative assessment could be an essential factor in creating challenge for all students.

Whilst teacher responsiveness and academic press have independent effects on student engagement, the suggestion has been made that it is the combination of these factors that has the most profound impact (Gill et al., 2004; Luyten et al., 2005). According to the work of Lee (2012), students who perceived higher levels of both demandingness and responsiveness of teachers presented the highest levels of effort and perseverance in learning (Lee, 2012). Although teachers in this study facilitated the behavioural engagement of students through their responsiveness, and suggested how they could use academic press, they did not set high expectations for all students, or demand that students achieve academic excellence with RE tasks. Behavioural engagement in RE classroom learning for year five / six students resulted from teacher responsiveness rather than academic press.

A positive teacher-student relationship exhibiting authentic care (responsiveness to students' learning needs) facilitated the behavioural engagement of year five / six students in an RE curriculum. Teachers used their knowledge of students as learners to respond to their behavioural and academic learning needs. Their responsiveness to these learning needs involved two approaches. They supported students who were having difficulty understanding RE tasks by scaffolding the learning involved in the task. They demanded effort from students with behavioural needs by monitoring and reinforcing task requirements.

The key findings from category four: Positive teacher-student relationships, which supported the behavioural engagement of students, are summarised in Table 15. This is followed by an exploration of the next category, challenging tasks.

Table 15.

*Key Findings from Category Four: Positive Teacher-Student Relationships*

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### **Key Findings**

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Positive teacher-student relationships in year five / six composite classrooms fostered student engagement in RE learning. This relationship went beyond the personal care reflected in life-centred catechesis (Ryan, 1997; see also Chapter 1, p. 31 of this thesis) and the need for relatedness reflected in self-determination theory (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 1985). It enacted care that responded to the genuine needs of students and treated them as an end in themselves (Stern, 2012; Stern & Backhouse, 2011). A positive teacher-student relationship in the RE classroom involved teachers showing authentic care through a learner-centred focus. This was visible when teachers were responsive to students' learning needs.

Teachers used their knowledge of students as RE learners to respond to: students' with behavioural needs by reinforcing task requirements and demanding these students complete tasks; and students with academic learning needs through scaffolding their understanding.

Teachers perceived that academic press could be used to engage students in RE tasks. They proposed that their knowledge of students as RE learners could be used to adapt learning tasks to suit the individual learning needs of all students. It was suggested that in this way all students would be challenged through individualised tasks. However, this was not observed in RE classrooms.

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### **Category Five: Challenging Tasks**

#### **Introduction.**

Findings from this investigation into factors that facilitated the engagement of year five / six students in an RE curriculum indicated that challenging tasks supported their cognitive engagement. According to the perception of students and teachers, these tasks required high-order thinking skills and cognitive effort. For teachers, relating RE learning to relevant, contemporary issues was another important element of tasks. Prior to exploring these elements, it is useful to outline some key terms.



Whilst not explicit, student and teacher data linked challenge with high-order thinking. The distinction between low-order thinking strategies (such as memorising information, reproducing information) and surface learning compared with high-order thinking strategies (such as synthesis and analysis, evaluating and hypothesising, observing patterns, and making generalisations) and deep learning is important for this exploration of the attributes of challenging tasks. This distinction was presented diagrammatically in Chapter Two (Cf. Figure 7).

Challenge involved cognitive effort. Rather than simply recalling or reproducing information, classroom observations suggested that cognitive effort required students to think about and work towards solutions to problems. Teachers perceived that students were more inclined to reflect when learning was relevant to them. Relevance occurs when students can see connections between the curriculum and their lives outside of school, or how school relates to real life (Dowson et al., 2005).

In this category the extent to which these elements of challenging tasks were key factors in the engagement of students is explored. Challenging tasks are distinct from academic press. Academic press or demandingness is about how teachers use a positive relationship with students to set high academic expectations (Zee et al., 2013). Challenging tasks are about activities that inherently require cognitive effort and high level thinking to complete (Delisle, 2012; Faircloth & Miller, 2011; Jones, 2012). In the next section insights from the individual and focus group interviews with students are presented.

**Student interviews: challenge involved cognitive effort and graphic organisers.**

The focus of this section is to report the insights associated with students' perceptions of what constitutes a challenging task. Students were cognitively engaged when these processes required them to use cognitive effort. Students suggested that graphic organisers

were an example of this. Figure 16 shows an example of a graphic organiser known, as a T-chart, which is used in the unit “Life is Good”.

**Figure 16. Graphic Organiser: T-chart**

Told Us	Made Us Wonder

Example of a Graphic Organiser called a T-chart from the unit “Life is Good”, by CEO, 2008, *Coming to know, worship and love. A religious education framework for Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne*. Melbourne: James Goold House, p. 35.

Graphic organisers had two attributes that fostered engagement in learning: they were an organisational tool and a thinking tool. Insights from student data related to cognitive effort and graphic organisers will now be considered.

### ***Cognitive effort.***

Students equated challenging tasks with cognitive effort. For them difficult tasks required thought to be completed successfully. This connection is captured in the following student’s comment: “hard tasks make me think deeply” (S / D). As expressed by another student, deep thinking consisted of working towards an answer or conceptual understanding: “That task really got me interested because I didn’t know what the answer was, and I really needed to think to figure it out” (S / Ma). Students were interested in tasks that demanded this type of effort. Student focus group interviews elaborated on these insights. They perceived that graphic organisers were an example of a challenging process; they required working through and thinking about information.

### ***Graphic organisers: organising and thinking tools.***

Graphic organisers challenged students to think through a two-stage process. The first stage involved organising information and the second required reflecting upon this. Each stage contributed to the deepening of student thinking.

Students perceived that graphic organisers had two distinct attributes: they were both organisational tools and thinking tools. As an organisational tool they assisted students to categorise their thoughts and ideas about a topic. As described by the following focus group, “It just helps organise everything such as the information collected by the group” (F / F). These students did not understand that organising information is often a necessary pre-requisite for high-order thinking: analysis, evaluation and synthesis may flow from a process of gathering and ordering information. As a thinking tool, graphic organisers assisted students to reflect upon the information they had gathered or generated on a particular issue. As expressed by a focus group, “Graphic organisers make you think at a deeper level such as comparing ideas” (F / C). Students suggested that graphic organisers enabled a deeper level of thought such as comparison and analysis of information as required in high-order thinking processes. Rather than being distinct from each other, these two attributes are interrelated: graphic organisers assisted students to organise information in a way that facilitated their thinking about these ideas.

Students were cognitively engaged when tasks required cognitive effort. Graphic organisers were an example of this. They involved a two-stage process of gathering information in a way that then supported students to think about RE issues. Teachers concurred with students: challenge occurred when students were involved in high-order thinking and cognitive effort was required. They also perceived that relevant and contemporary issues were important for student engagement. These perceptions are discussed in the following section.

**Teacher interviews: challenging students through high-order thinking skills, relevant, contemporary learning issues and cognitive effort.**

According to teachers, students were engaged when challenging tasks contained three elements. These were: the use of high-order thinking skills, relating RE learning to relevant,

contemporary issues and cognitive effort. They perceived that open-ended tasks were one way of making students of diverse abilities think in the RE classroom; they had multiple possible interpretations and could be expressed in various ways. In this section insights from teacher interview data related to these elements are explored.

***High-order thinking skills.***

Challenge involved use of high-order thinking skills such as the application of knowledge to a new situation or context. While teachers did not use this terminology, a teacher in the focus group explained this relationship through use of the following example.

An example of a challenging task is making the commandments apply to today; what do they mean today? They struggle with things like that. We want them to put it into a modern day context and how it relates to them. That's very challenging. (F / T)

These tasks included high-order thinking skills such as applying RE knowledge to a contemporary world and discerning the relevance of such learning.

***Relating learning to relevant, contemporary issues.***

Year five / six students were beginning to ask about and reflect upon issues that were important and relevant in their lives. A teacher expressed this in the following way:

I think morals and issues of where they are at in their lives. About the way the world is. They're starting to open their eyes and starting to question: 'why is the world like this?' They go through a stage of rejecting the status quo. (T / F)

Although applying learning to their lives was challenging, students wanted to think about and consider these relationships. These processes required cognitive effort from students.

***Cognitive effort.***

Cognitive effort was needed to achieve success with processes involving high-order thinking and relevant learning. Teachers related cognitive effort and challenge. As expressed by one teacher, challenge entailed "Something that is difficult for students but they can still

have success” (T / D). Teachers understood this to mean that a task was achievable, with effort, or as it was expressed in the teacher focus group “Challenge involves some degree of struggle” (F / T); students would have to use cognitive effort to achieve success. This aligns with Chen’s (2012, p. 471) understanding of cognitive effort in mathematics: students “need to actually exert themselves to solve problems”. Cognitive effort was necessary if students were to successfully participate in challenging processes such as open-ended tasks.

### *Open-ended tasks.*

Teachers considered that open-ended tasks were one way of making students of diverse capabilities think. With these tasks students were able to respond and express their understandings in varying ways. A typical teacher explanation of these tasks was “a task that’s fairly open, where you’re not just expecting one correct response, but many different interpretations” (T / C), and teachers are “giving students the opportunity to think of different ways of responding” (T / A). With several possible responses and multiple ways of expressing their understandings, teachers implied that students had to think to work through the possibilities inherent within these tasks.

Teachers perceived that students were cognitively engaged when challenging tasks had three elements: high-order thinking skills, relating RE learning to relevant, contemporary issues, and cognitive effort. A challenging learning process was open-ended tasks. These tasks gave students the opportunity to respond in varying ways.

Students and teachers constructed their understanding of factors that engaged students in an RE curriculum (their perspectives or voice) through semi-structured and focus group interviews. The researcher then sought to make sense of (interpret) student and teacher voice. These emerging insights from student and teacher interviews (the voice of the researcher), provided the context from which the researcher observed in the RE classroom. The voice of

students, teachers and the researcher are summarised in Table 16. Following this summary, insights from the researcher's observations in RE classrooms are explored.

Table 16.

*The voice of students, teachers and the researcher derived from semi-structured and focus group interviews.*

<p><b>Voice of the students</b>            “That task really got me interested because I didn’t know what the answer was, and I really needed to think to figure it out” (S / Ma).</p> <p>“It just helps organise everything such as the information collected by the group” (F / F).            “Graphic organisers make you think at a deeper level such as comparing ideas” (F / C).</p>	<p><b>Voice of the researcher</b>            Students were cognitively engaged through challenging tasks. These tasks required cognitive effort and use of high-order thinking skills.</p> <p>This was evident in the use of graphic organisers. These supported students to use cognitive effort to organise and think about learning.</p>
<p><b>Voice of the teachers</b>            “An example of a challenging task is making the commandments apply to today; what do they mean today? They struggle with things like that. We want them to put it into a modern day context and how it relates to them. That’s very challenging” (F / T).            “I think morals and issues of where they are at in their lives. About the way the world is. They’re starting to open their eyes and starting to question: ‘why is the world like this?’ They go through a stage of rejecting the status quo. (T / F)</p> <p>“A task that’s fairly open, where you’re not just expecting one correct response, but many different interpretations” (T / C).            “Giving students the opportunity to think of different ways of responding” (T / A).</p>	<p><b>Voice of the researcher</b>            Students were cognitively engaged when challenging tasks required: cognitive effort and high-order thinking skills to reflect on relevant, contemporary learning issues.</p> <p>This was evident in the use of open-ended tasks. These tasks provided opportunity for students of diverse capabilities to respond in multiple ways.</p>

**Researcher observation: cognitive engagement through open-ended tasks.**

Classroom observations indicated that students were cognitively engaged when they used challenging tasks. These tasks had three interrelated elements: cognitive effort, low and high-order thinking strategies, and multiple levels of difficulty. The engagement of students was further influenced by choice and relevance. These elements were demonstrated when

students were given the opportunity to respond to two different open-ended tasks. Insights from classroom observation data related to these elements are explored in this section.

***Cognitive effort, low and high-order thinking, and multiple levels of difficulty.***

Students were engaged when they were given tasks that had multiple levels of difficulty. The researcher observed this with a simple task from “Life is Good”, from *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008, p. 35). This open-ended task required students to complete the following sentence starters: “I treat people with dignity when ...; I treat people with respect when ...” Some student responses were as simple as: “I help people or give advice” (S / A); “I listen to others; I talk to them” (S / B). Other responses showed greater depth of thought such as: “I treat them how I would like to be treated” (S / C); “I make them feel equally important; I treat them the same as others” (S / D); “I try to include them even if they think differently to me or my friends; I accept their differences and similarities and try to get along with them” (S / E). These responses reflected different levels of thinking.

At the simplest level students were able to recall and describe some of the attributes of respectful interactions such as listening to others and responding to them through word or action. Students at a higher level of understanding were able to express that we should treat all people with respect regardless of the differences that may exist between people. All students were involved in thinking; however, the first group used low-order thinking skills such as recalling and describing whilst the second group used high-order skills such as analysis and application. The range of responses reflected the diverse abilities of students; this activity gave students the opportunity to think and use cognitive effort at different levels of understanding relative to their ability.

The engagement of students in open-ended tasks was also influenced by choice and relevance. In an RE classroom the teacher gave students an explanation of the fifth of the Ten Commandments: “Thou shall not kill”. Students were then given an activity from the unit

“Life is Good”, *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008, p. 37). They were asked to consider how this commandment would look in a contemporary context in relation to their life, and to consider it as a command to preserve life. This task gave students the opportunity to choose their own content area and to make it relevant to their lives.

***Choice and relevance.***

Students chose issues that were relevant to their lives such as safety in the local community and what constitutes a healthy diet. They analysed and evaluated these issues to connect them with the preservation and promotion of life. Students showed preparedness to think about these issues and apply the cognitive effort needed to come up with some solutions to this task. Students persevered with this RE task that provided them with the freedom to choose relevant content.

A diverse range of student abilities existed in RE classrooms. To cater for this range, tasks needed to contain varying degrees of difficulty: from low to high-order thinking. This enabled all students, regardless of their level of ability, to experience cognitive effort and be challenged to think about their learning. Open-ended tasks were one example of challenging processes that contained these characteristics through which students were cognitively engaged.

These emerging insights from direct observations in RE classrooms are summarised in Table 17. Following this, a discussion and analysis of the emerging insights from student and teacher interviews and the researcher’s direct observations in classrooms will be presented.



Table 17.

*Emerging Insights from Direct Observations in RE Classrooms*

<b>Data gathering method</b>	<b>Emerging Insights</b>
Direct Observations	<p>Students were cognitively engaged in RE classroom learning when they were involved in challenging processes such as open-ended learning tasks.</p> <p>Open-ended tasks challenged students of diverse abilities to use cognitive effort through low and high-order thinking strategies and multiple levels of difficulty.</p> <p>Cognitive effort was influenced by tasks that provided a degree of choice and relevance.</p>

**Discussion and analysis of category five: challenging tasks.**

In the following section the findings derived from interview scripts and classroom observations are discussed and analysed in light of the related scholarly literature. Findings from the current study which are consistent with, differ from and / or extend this literature are explored. Open-ended tasks provided challenge for students of diverse abilities when these involved cognitive effort, and low and high-order thinking strategies. Students were encouraged to think and persist when tasks provided scope for choice and were relevant to their lives. In this section these characteristics of challenging tasks are discussed and analysed.

***Cognitive effort, and low and high-order thinking skills.***

Teachers sensed that challenge required processes that involved students in high-order thinking such as analysis and application. Students understood this as having to think deeply. Challenge involved cognitive effort (Chen, 2012); rather than simply recalling or reproducing information, year five / six students had to think about and work towards solutions in the RE classroom. Students were engaged when open-ended RE tasks encouraged high-order thinking and cognitive effort. This conclusion aligns with the findings from thinking-centred

classrooms. Students were immersed in these settings when they used cognitive effort and high level thinking to complete challenging tasks (Delisle, 2012; Faircloth & Miller, 2011; Jones, 2012). However, students were also challenged and engaged through other qualities of open-ended RE tasks.

Open-ended RE tasks had multiple solutions and required students to think about and explore several possibilities. This quality aligned with one of the key characteristics of students' spirituality in year five / six: "developing the ability to think and engage in the abstract and explore concepts that allow for several points of view" (CEO, 2008, p. 21). Whilst the curriculum framework is knowledge-centred, its potential to facilitate the spiritual and personal faith development of students through critical inquiry and exploration is recognised (Buchanan, 2003, 2009; Engebretson et al., 2002). Open-ended RE tasks provided all students with the opportunity to use cognitive effort to explore faith concepts from different perspectives; this process opened up the possibility of the formation in faith of students and is consistent with the curriculum framework's catechetical goal (CEO, 2008). Open-ended tasks also included both high-order and low-order thinking skills, which challenged and engaged students of different ability levels; this supported the educational approach and cognitive emphasis of the curriculum framework (CEO, 2008). Open-ended learning tasks also provided some scope for choice and relevant learning. These elements impacted on student effort with challenging tasks.

### ***Choice.***

The interest of year five / six students in RE learning was enhanced when they were given open-ended tasks that gave them scope to choose content that was of interest to them. This is consistent with findings in other curriculum areas. Students engaged with tasks that offered a degree of choice over what and how to research, and how to present their findings (Turner, 1995; Watson, 2013). Such tasks have been called open (Parsons & Ward, 2011;

Turner & Paris, 1995). They are student directed: problems are framed and solutions determined by the students with the support of their teacher. Whilst year five / six students in this case study had some degree of choice, they did not have this level of control over what and how to investigate in RE classroom learning.

The pedagogy underpinning *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008) is inquiry-based, and whilst the focus of this educational approach is on exploring and understanding, it also supports an education in faith. The two viewpoints of RE as an education in faith and as a knowledge-centred, educational approach (Rossiter, 1981, 1999; Rymarz, 2007) is apparent in the description of the learning and teaching process as “faith seeking understanding” (CEO, 2008, p. 2). Whilst it is suggested that students have the possibility to explore their own questions (CEO, 2008), classroom observations revealed that teachers followed the guided inquiries as set out in the curriculum framework. Guided inquiries are teacher directed (Ireland et al., 2012). In this context student participants did not have control over what and how to research. Open-ended tasks that gave students choice over content provided them with some control over their learning. Although the level of control was limited, this supported cognitive effort and engagement with challenging tasks. This finding is similar to studies in other curriculum areas: primary students were engaged when they were given the opportunity to select their own books or to choose the topic from a shared novel to discuss with peers (Guthrie et al., 2007; Zhang et al., 2010; Zhang & Dougherty Stahl, 2012).

The current qualitative study indicated that students were cognitively engaged when they were able to choose the content of an open-ended task. These findings are consistent with literature on motivation which found that choice and autonomy support student engagement (Guthrie, 2008; Lam & Law, 2007; Patall et al., 2010). These findings also extend current literature as they indicated that having some choice over RE content

influenced the cognitive effort of students when working on challenging tasks. Engagement was further supported by relevance.

***Relevance.***

Cognitive engagement was influenced by task relevance. The open-ended task on preservation of life, described in the *Researcher's Observations*, required students to reflect on their life. As understood by teachers, students were challenged when they had to reflect on learning in RE and apply this learning to their lives. This process sounds similar to the previous life-centred approach; as presented in Chapter One, this approach required students to share their life experiences and relate these to the Christian faith (Engebretson, 1997). Critics claimed that often this process did not transcend the sharing of life experiences due to the “reluctance of teachers to move beyond the experiential world of students” (Rymarz, 2007, p. 63). The current curriculum framework, *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008), does not dismiss the place of students' life experiences in RE pedagogy. It suggests that sound education takes into account the interests of students and assists them to reflect upon and apply learning to their daily life (CEO, 2008). However, while students are invited to share their experiences, the constructivist underpinnings of this approach that distinguish it from its predecessor are apparent: the learning process is to “*build upon* [emphasis added] the personal experience and knowledge they bring to a topic question” (CEO, 2008, p. 12).

Teachers perceived that year five / six students were becoming more interested in, and therefore prepared to think about, relevant issues. Classroom observations indicated that students were engaged in tasks that gave autonomy to choose an area of interest and relevance such as diet or exercise. They were prepared to put in the required cognitive effort to come to a deeper level of understanding. Teachers had suggested that students were more inclined to reflect on relevant, contemporary topics. RE theorists have long held the view that students' interests and experiences need to be utilised to engage them in RE learning

(Crawford & Rossiter, 1985; Moran, 1989). According to Enright (2012), curriculum relevance is essential for student engagement in other curriculum areas. Students were more engaged in comprehending English texts they considered relevant (Hulleman et al., 2010). Not only were year five / six students in this case study engaged in relevant learning, relevance influenced them to put in the cognitive effort needed to complete challenging tasks.

Students were cognitively engaged in RE learning through challenging processes such as open-ended tasks. These tasks often involved both high and low-order thinking which provided opportunity for students of differing abilities to participate, use cognitive effort, and be challenged at their level of ability. Such tasks also provided students with some control over content. They were able to choose content that was relevant to them. Relevance and choice positively influenced students to persist with challenging tasks.

The key findings from this category, challenging tasks, are summarised in Table 18. In the next section, the engagement of students through ICT-enabled learning is explored.

Table 18.

*Key Findings from Category Five: Challenging Tasks.*

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### **Key Findings**

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Challenging learning processes such as open-ended tasks cognitively engaged year five / six students in an RE curriculum.

Students were challenged when they explored the RE curriculum from both an educational and faith orientation. From an educational orientation open-ended tasks provide multiple levels of difficulty, such as use of low or high-order thinking strategies, and require cognitive effort from students of differing abilities. From a faith orientation open-ended tasks provide students with the opportunity to use cognitive effort to explore faith concepts from different perspectives.

Students were prepared to put in the cognitive effort that challenging RE tasks demanded when they had some choice over the content of their learning and the learning was relevant.

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## Category Six: ICT-Enabled Learning

### Introduction.

In this category, the impact of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) on student engagement is explored. Students and teachers both claimed that the use of ICT supported student interest in RE learning. However, there were differences in their perceptions about the way in which ICT engaged students. Student data indicated that they were engaged through the use of laptop computers for practical purposes such as researching information for RE projects. Whilst teachers affirmed that students were engaged through these practical uses, they emphasised that ICT use was inherently engaging; that students were affectively engaged in RE learning whenever ICT was used.

ICT is part of the Interdisciplinary strand of the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) and is used in this curriculum as a tool for enhancing thinking and learning in all discipline areas (VCAA, 2005). ICT facilitates engagement in learning across a range of curriculum areas such as English, maths, science, languages and the humanities (Condie & Munro, 2007). *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008) is a knowledge-centred, educational approach to religious education. As such it is suggested in this framework that RE should use “processes and tools... (from) VELS” that enable students to “organise, internalise and reflect on... knowledge” (CEO, 2008, p. 13). It has been argued that the primary purpose of ICT use in Australian RE classrooms is to increase the availability of resources and extend the zone of discourse (McGrady, 2002; Ryan, 2001; Visser, 2003). Current theorists, however, emphasise the use of ICT tools to enable learning (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2013; Fisher et al., 2012). In schools considered as outstanding in England, ICT was used across subject areas, including RE, to enhance learning outcomes through increased student engagement (Ofsted, 2011). The present research sought to investigate factors that supported student engagement in RE. Whilst ICT has been found to

support engagement across various curriculum areas, there has been a paucity of research into its role in RE learning (Condie & Munro, 2007). Therefore, one of the aims of this investigation was to examine its role in engaging students in an RE curriculum.

In this section the perspectives of students and teachers and the engaging attributes of ICT-enabled learning observed in classrooms are presented. This is followed by a discussion and analysis of these insights in the context of current research.

**Student interviews: Use of computers stimulated interest in and enjoyment of RE learning.**

In this section the insights associated with students' perceptions of how their interest in learning was fostered through use of ICT are reported. Students perceived that ICT activity in RE learning primarily involved use of laptop computers to access online resources. Three key aspects of ICT usage stimulated their interest: it was easier to access resources for student project work; it provided them with multiple ways to present their learning; and online resources assisted them to broaden their perspectives. These three key aspects of engaging ICT usage are considered in this section.

***Easier to access to resources for student project work.***

Students participated enthusiastically in learning situations where ICT provided practical support. They enjoyed the novelty of learning through computer usage. This was expressed in a focus group discussion: "Using computers is a different way of learning: it's more fun and educational" (F / C). Computers assisted student learning in practical ways. Using computers to research information for projects was one of these practical uses.

When students were asked to complete research projects, computers enabled them to access information online. As reflected in the following student's comment, this made these projects easier to complete: "I like doing projects on the computer because it's easier to research and get information and pictures" (S / R). Students were enthused about online

research because they were aware that a range of resources was readily available which facilitated completion of projects. ICT also provided multiple ways for students to present their learning.

***Multiple ways to present learning.***

Computers and software programs such as PowerPoint provided options for students to present their learning. The visual aspect of ICT was utilised by some students to show rather than tell classmates about their learning. As highlighted by the following comment from a student focus group discussion, visual presentations were more appealing to introverted students: “If you are a shy person you can express your learning using PowerPoint. Others can view this rather than you having to stand up in front of the class and talk about it” (F / B). Many students felt confident using a computer to present ideas. They were familiar with basic processes from programs such as Word. This confidence is evident in the following student’s comment: “I like using computers because I’m pretty good at it and I know lots of special features such as copying and pasting pictures” (S / T). Students were engaged when they had a range of familiar processes for presenting their learning; computers and software provided access to these options. Computers also enabled students to access resources and this helped to broaden their perspectives in the RE classroom.

***Online resources assisted students to broaden their perspectives.***

Online resources gave students unprecedented access to information related to RE topics. This information increased understanding and stimulated interest. Key RE topics such as Easter are repeated in each year level of the Melbourne archdiocesan curriculum framework *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008). A focus group used the example of Easter to explain how research assisted them to think about this topic from a different perspective. “When we do Easter we think of Jesus dying and rising, but when we go deeper into it through research, we find out information we had never thought about



before” (F / F). ICT enabled students to understand concepts, and gather contextual and background information that encouraged them to reflect on a topic such as Easter from a different perspective. Thinking about familiar topics in a different way made learning more interesting for students.

The data from student interviews indicated that ICT was used in a number of ways to support learning in the RE classroom: computers were used for online research to support project work and broaden students’ perspectives, and to enable presentation of learning using basic tools such as Microsoft Word and PowerPoint. These factors increased students’ enthusiasm and made learning more interesting. In the next section the data from teacher interviews suggested that ICT was inherently engaging.

**Teacher interviews: ICT was inherently engaging.**

Teachers emphasised one fundamental quality of ICT that enthused students: ICT was inherently engaging. They perceived that students enjoyed the novelty of learning in a different way, which ICT provided, such as use of computers and the Internet. In this section insights from teacher interview data related to their perception that students were excited about ICT use is explored.

Teachers perceived that students were affectively engaged whenever they used ICT. According to the teacher focus group, affective engagement (Fredericks et al., 2004) was reflected in students’ “excitement” (F / T) when using ICT. Teachers suggested that students were inherently motivated by the use of ICT and its capabilities. This view was evidenced in the following teacher comments: “They love the technology and they’re right into it” (T / F); “ICT acts as a self-motivator” (T / E); “As far as getting them engaged, I think that ICT does it by itself” (T / B); and “They’re already motivated just by getting online” (T / C). Teachers implied that student interest was piqued through access to computers and research on the Internet. In a focus group discussion teachers were only able to suggest one specific attribute

of ICT use which enthused students - using computers for research: “They were so excited about researching using laptops and engaged that the activity actually turned out better than what I expected” (F / T). Use of computers mediated the enthusiastic response of students to learning in the RE classroom.

Students were engaged in learning, irrespective of the topic or activity, whenever ICT was used. This point of view is succinctly stated in the following reflection from the teacher focus group: “They love using computers, so almost any task you want them to do, or even if the RE topic is a little bit dry, they’ll get right into it because they enjoy that medium” (F / T). Computers enhanced students’ experience of learning.

Teachers affirmed that students were engaged through the practical uses of ICT such as using a computer for research. Furthermore, they suggested that they only needed to provide opportunity for students to use ICT to maintain their interest in learning. Teachers conveyed the notion that other factors related to learning, such as the qualities of the task or process, was not important. They held the view that students were engaged whenever they used ICT.

Students and teachers constructed their understanding of factors that engaged students in an RE curriculum (their perspectives or voice) through semi-structured and focus group interviews. The researcher then sought to make sense of (interpret) student and teacher voice. These emerging insights from student and teacher interviews (the voice of the researcher), provided the context from which the researcher observed in the RE classroom. The voice of students, teachers and the researcher are summarised in Table 19. Following this summary, insights from the researcher’s observations in RE classrooms are explored.

Table 19.

*The voice of students, teachers and the researcher derived from semi-structured and focus group interviews.*

<p><b>Voice of the students</b>          “I like doing projects on the computer because it’s easier to research and get information and pictures” (S / R).          “When we do Easter we think of Jesus dying and rising, but when we go deeper into it through research, we find out information we had never thought about before” (F / F).          “If you are a shy person you can express your learning using PowerPoint. Others can view this rather than you having to stand up in front of the class and talk about it” (F / B).</p>	<p><b>Voice of the researcher</b>          Students were affectively engaged in RE classroom learning when: online research supported project work and extended their perspective on RE topics; and when basic software tools assisted them in the presentation of their learning.</p>
<p><b>Voice of the teachers</b>          “They were so excited about researching using laptops and engaged that the activity actually turned out better than what I expected” (F / T).           “They love the technology and they’re right into it” (T / F); “ICT acts as a self-motivator” (T / E); “As far as getting them engaged, I think that ICT does it by itself” (T / B).          “They love using computers, so almost any task you want them to do, or even if the RE topic is a little bit dry, they’ll get right into it because they enjoy that medium” (F / T).</p>	<p><b>Voice of the researcher</b>          Students were affectively engaged in RE classroom learning through the practical uses of ICT such as online research.           Teachers emphasised that students were engaged whenever ICT was used. ICT was inherently engaging and did not require other factors such as the qualities of the task, learning process or curriculum to engage them.</p>

### **Researcher observation: ICT-enabled learning.**

In this section the key insights of the researcher derived from direct observation in classrooms are reported. These observations indicated that students were engaged through ICT tools that enabled their learning, or ICT-enabled learning. Students were observed using an ICT tool, in this case an online game, which supported student learning related to their topic “Life is Good”, from *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008). The focus of this topic was on preservation and respect for life. The game focused on ways to minimise loss of life due to natural disasters. The following features of this ICT tool appeared to

facilitate student interest and learning: the game-based context; the game's interactivity with its immediate feedback; and relevant content and a real life issue. These features are explored in this section beginning with the game-based context.

***A game-based context.***

The first engaging feature of ICT usage was that it involved a game-based context. It was solution-focused with an objective: to minimise loss of human life on an island due to natural disasters. Students had to consider various options, and associated costs, and determine the most effective course of action. This type of game-based context is known as a game framework (Chen et al., 2012). Such a framework situates student learning within a narrative or adventure framework with a goal to achieve. The narrative framework of this game centred on the story of the Samoan people whose island had recently been decimated by a tsunami. Students related to this narrative; several in the class were of Samoan heritage and the class had already been involved in a fundraiser for the people of Samoa. The goal of this game was to determine the most effective solutions to prevent loss of human life due to tsunamis. Students explored various solutions within the game and in conversation with peers.

Year five / six students were affectively engaged in RE learning through their participation in this game framework; they could relate to the narrative and actively sought ways to achieve the goal. The interactivity of the game with its immediate feedback also engaged students.

***The interactivity of the game with its immediate feedback.***

An important attribute of this game was its interactivity. When students applied their solution/s, they received immediate written feedback as to the effectiveness of their solution. Furthermore, realistic, colour graphics changed as they interacted with the game. Students were able to zoom in and out and move across the island to investigate natural features and

visually see the effect of their chosen solutions such as moving houses from the shoreline to hilltops. Students pointed out and discussed changes as they appeared on the screen. They visually evaluated these changes prior to considering their next option. The combination of written and visual feedback enabled students to make informed decisions and to modify solutions according to their effectiveness and / or cost. Students were seen discussing options and changing selections in collaboration with peers. They were learning through the interactivity and feedback the game provided. Students were also engaged through the game's relevant content and a real life issue.

***Relevant content and a real life issue.***

Students were interested in the relevant content and real life issue presented through this ICT tool. Throughout the topic "Life is Good" (CEO, 2008), students had been looking at issues related to preservation of life. The interactive game provided students with the opportunity to think through a real life issue; the need to prevent or minimise loss of human life due to natural disasters as had occurred on the island of Samoa. Students were able to make connections between what they were learning in school and this real life issue.

Year five / six students were affectively engaged through ICT-enabled learning. Three features of an online game fostered engagement: a game framework with a relevant narrative and a goal students wanted to achieve; the interactivity of the game and its realistic graphics that provided written and visual feedback and the opportunity to change decisions in light of this feedback; and its relevant content with a real life issue.

The emerging insights from direct observations in RE classrooms are summarised in Table 20. In the next section, the insights from student and teacher interviews and the researcher's direct observations in classrooms are discussed and analysed in relation to pertinent academic literature.

Table 20.

*Emerging Insights from Direct Observations in RE Classrooms*

<b>Data gathering method</b>	<b>Emerging Insights</b>
Direct Observations	<p>Students were affectively engaged through ICT-enabled learning in the form of an online game.</p> <p>Three features of this ICT tool enabled learning and engagement: the game framework; the interactivity of the game; and its relevant content with a real life issue.</p>

**Discussion and analysis of category six: ICT-enabled learning.**

Analysis of student and teacher interview scripts revealed some similarities and differences between the perceptions of these two groups. Students perceived that they were engaged in RE learning when computers were used for practical purposes such as online research to support project work. Whilst teachers validated such practical applications, they emphasised that ICT was inherently engaging for students. In the next section this latter perception is the first to be discussed.

***ICT and inherent engagement.***

Teachers had perceived that ICT use was inherently engaging. Student participants were observed to be enthusiastic users of ICT in the RE classroom. This aligns with a frequently cited finding that use of ICT has a significant impact on student engagement (Burden & Keuchel, 2004; Chen et al., 2012; Passey et al., 2004). Research in the UK has found that upper primary students had increased motivation and spent more time on-task when laptops were used in lessons (Becta, 2005; Burden & Keuchel, 2004). However, whilst students in an RE classroom appeared enthusiastic about using a laptop, they did not persist with the task given by their teacher (they were asked to explore an online article from the Caritas Australia website). The task and the process also mattered: the sustained interest of students occurred when they discovered and used an online game which was also on the

Caritas website. The connection between ICT use, learning and engagement requires further exploration. Arising from current literature on ICT use, this connection will be termed ICT-enabled learning (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2013). This type of learning is explored in the next section.

### ***ICT-enabled learning.***

Student participants indicated that researching information on the Internet enhanced their interest when it enabled them to think about a topic in a more comprehensive way. In a similar way, it has been argued that the primary purpose of ICT use in Australian RE classrooms is to increase the availability of resources and extend the zone of discourse (McGrady, 2002; Ryan, 2001; Visser, 2003). Current theorists, however, emphasise the use of ICT tools to enable learning (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2013; Fisher et al., 2012; Mikropoulos & Natsis, 2011). In a knowledge-centred, educational approach to RE learning “processes and tools” such as ICT that enable students to reflect on and develop RE knowledge are emphasised (CEO, 2008, p. 12). ICT-enabled learning occurred when students participated in the online game. Learning arose from the game framework, the interactivity of the game, and its relevant and meaningful content. These features of ICT-enabled learning are discussed in the next section.

### ***A game framework.***

Year five / six students were engaged when RE learning was put into a game framework. A game framework places learning in a narrative context with an objective to achieve (Chen et al., 2012). Student participants related to the narrative context of the game and sought to achieve the game’s objective. According to the research of Chen et al. (2012), grade four students were engaged when they were involved in a quest. Quests are role-playing adventures. Students take on the role of a particular character and must perform certain tasks to complete a given objective. Students involved in the quest were more active

participants and found learning to be more enjoyable than peers who completed the same learning but were not involved in the quest version. Their active participation and enjoyment of tasks was explained by the subordination of task completion in pursuit of completing the game quest (Chen et al., 2012). Year five / six students actively participated in this online game and its associated learning to achieve the game's objective. The game framework facilitated affective engagement and enabled learning. Other aspects of the game such as its interactivity were also important for learning and engagement.

***Interactivity of the game.***

Student interest was sustained through the interactivity of the game and the realistic graphics, which enabled them to visualise, interact with and change the natural and human made features of the island. They were given visual and written feedback when changes were made; they could then use this information to learn and to make further changes. In similar way the following features of virtual environments enhanced student engagement: the multi-sensory experience, the immersion in a three-dimensional environment, being able to visualise a real-world experience from multiple perspectives, and being able to interact with and influence a real-world environment (Ainley & Armatas, 2006; Salzman et al., 1999). Year five / six students were engaged through ICT-enabled learning. They were able to interact with the game and use feedback from it to learn about the effectiveness of their decisions. Students were actively involved in this learning process. Relevant and meaningful content also fostered student engagement.

***Relevant and meaningful content.***

The online game sustained high levels of student interest in content related to their current RE unit, "Life is Good" from *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008). A finding from this case study was that students were affectively engaged when knowledge was relevant and meaningful. As noted in the section *Researcher Observation*, students could see



the relevance of the narrative's content; how school related to real life (Dowson et al., 2005). They reflected on a global issue that involved meaningful content (embedded in a real-world context); students are engaged in these contexts (Enright, 2012). Meaningful and relevant learning promotes student engagement (Faircloth & Miller, 2011; Parsons & Ward, 2012). A key goal for RE in the Archdiocese of Melbourne is to support the education in faith of students (CEO, 2008). As explored in the next section, meaningful and relevant RE content are essential when addressing this goal and seeking to engage students in an RE curriculum.

From the 1960s the integration of the Christian faith tradition and life has been advocated in RE classrooms (Australian Episcopal Conference, 1970; Moran, 1989). It was suggested that this connection between faith and life fostered meaningful RE learning through life-centred catechesis in the 1990s: "Religious education that is meaningful for students in the 1990s must seek to bring the Gospel into dialogue with the concerns of our times and with the distinctive realities, issues and concerns which students experience in their daily lives" (Little, 1995, p. iv). Whilst many Australian diocesan RE programs in recent years have emphasized the cognitive domain and taken an educational orientation (de Souza, 2005; NCEC, 2008), these programs may still promote the interplay between life and faith (CEO, 2008). They acknowledge that an important aim of RE learning is to develop students who can interpret life from a Christian perspective. Therefore, the experiences of students and their interests still need to be recognized and included in the content of contemporary religious education (CEO, 2008; Crawford & Rossiter, 1985; Moran, 1989). Year five / six students were interested in real-world learning. They were engaged in learning when ICT utilised relevant and meaningful content and involved them in "developing a Christian interpretation of life" (CEO, 2008, p. 3). Engaging RE learning supported the education in faith of students.

Year five / six students were affectively engaged through the features of ICT-enabled learning. Three features of this learning facilitated engagement: the game framework; the interactivity of the game; and its relevant and meaningful content. Students related to the narrative context and the objective of the game framework. Realistic graphics enabled students to visualise and interact with natural and human made features; learning was enhanced through this process. Students reflected on a real-world problem; they were engaged through the relevant and meaningful content. Student interest was enhanced when ICT-enabled learning occurred in response to real-life situations and real-world problems.

The key findings from this category, ICT-enabled learning, which supported the affective engagement of students, are summarised in Table 21. This is followed by the conclusion to this chapter.

Table 21. *Key Findings from Category Six: ICT-Enabled Learning.*

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### **Key Findings**

Students and teachers indicated that ICT is used in RE learning for practical purposes such as researching; these uses facilitated student engagement. In a similar way, others have promoted use of ICT to gather resources and to enhance discourse in the RE classroom (McGrady, 2002; Ryan, 2001; Visser, 2003). However, a key finding from this study was that engagement was fostered when ICT tools enabled RE learning.

ICT-enabled RE learning occurred through an online game. Three features of this ICT tool enabled learning and supported the affective engagement of year five / six students: the game framework; the interactivity of the game; and its relevant and meaningful content.

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### **Conclusion**

In this chapter the findings and an analysis of categories were presented. These have emerged from the data generated from students' and teachers' perspectives as well as the researcher's classroom observations. These findings indicated that six key factors engaged year five / six students in an RE curriculum. Chapter Five concludes this study and proposes some recommendations derived from the key findings.

## Chapter Five

### Recommendations and Conclusions

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to identify factors that influenced the engagement of year five / six students (aged 10-12) in a religious education curriculum in a particular Catholic primary school in Melbourne, Australia. The curriculum framework being used in classrooms in the Archdiocese of Melbourne at the time this research was conducted (2009-2016) was *Coming to Know, Worship, and Love* (CEO, 2008).

This qualitative research was underpinned by a constructivist / constructionist epistemology and grounded by the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism. This study was undertaken to better understand the lack of engagement of year five / six students in RE learning. Semi-structured and focus group interviews with student and teacher participants facilitated their construction of meaning derived from the social context of the RE classroom. Direct observations assisted the researcher in understanding the meaning that participants ascribed to this context. Findings that emerged through constant comparison of the data were further analysed in light of relevant literature and the expertise of the researcher.

In the following sections the key findings from this research are presented, and the links between these findings and the literature are explored. In particular, areas where this research has extended the literature are identified. Recommendations arising from the key findings are highlighted, the limitations and delimitations of this study are acknowledged, and suggestions for further related research are also provided. Following this, the conclusion draws this study to a close.

### **Key Factors that Facilitated Student Engagement in an RE Curriculum**

The general research question investigated in this study was: What factors facilitated the engagement of year five and six students in a religious education curriculum? As discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, three interrelated dimensions are central to student engagement: affect, behaviour and cognition (Fredricks et al., 2004; Helme & Clarke, 2001; Russell et al., 2005). In this study the factors that supported each of these dimensions were explored.

As outlined in Chapter Two, three interconnected key themes for engaging year 5/6 students in learning were identified from the literature: the teacher, the classroom community, and learning. Therefore, in this study the following related areas were also investigated:

- The teacher selects and implements engaging pedagogical strategies such as classroom discourse (Smart & Marshall, 2013). In this study the role of the teacher and their use of engaging pedagogy was investigated.
- Two key elements of the classroom community support engagement: classroom emotional climate and the teacher-student relationship (Delisle, 2012; O'Neill et al., 2013; Reyes et al., 2012). In this study the impact of these elements of the classroom community on the engagement of year five / six students was explored.
- Three significant aspects of learning facilitated student engagement: achievement goal theory; ICT; and the curriculum (Chen et al., 2012; Fadlilmula, 2010; Watson, 2013). In this research the affect of these aspects of learning and the curriculum on student engagement was considered.

In the next section the key findings from this research are presented according to the six interrelated categories discerned from the data: the teacher's promotion of a mastery orientation; the teacher's knowledge; a trusting classroom climate; positive teacher-student relationships; challenging tasks; and ICT-enabled learning.

### **The teacher's promotion of a mastery orientation.**

Rather than narrowing learning to reproducing right answers, the current approach to religious education in the Melbourne Archdiocese, *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008), emphasises the formation of new concepts and understandings through thinking skills and processes (CEO, 2008, pp. 12-13).

Research has consistently found a positive association between a mastery orientation (students focus on learning and developing understanding) and student engagement (Elliot & Dweck, 1988; Middleton & Midgely, 1997; Senko et al., 2011). It has also indicated that teachers may influence this orientation for both primary and middle years' students (Bong, 2009; Fadlemula, 2010). Findings from this investigation indicated that the teacher's promotion of a mastery orientation influenced students' cognitive engagement in the RE classroom by: utilising thinking processes, and encouraging and leading classroom discourse.

Teachers emphasised thinking processes such as Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956). They promoted and validated the diverse perspectives gained through use of de Bono's (1985) *Six Thinking Hats* and used these to guide students' thinking and the co-creation of meaning through student-centred classroom discourse.

Whilst *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008) encourages the use of contemporary educational practices and thinking processes to engage students (Crawford & Rossiter, 1985; Ryan, 2005), an educational approach to RE must seek knowledge of and to understand the Christian faith tradition. Furthermore, it is hoped that this knowledge and understanding may foster the faith formation of students (Buchanan, 2009; Durka, 2004; Fowler, 1981, 2004). Thinking processes and student-centred classroom discourse supported engagement in an RE curriculum. However, use of these processes to involve students in RE learning through "exploration of religious truths" (CEO, 2008, p. 12) was not always evident in RE classrooms.

### **The teacher's knowledge.**

Teachers used their knowledge of content to facilitate students' behavioural engagement. They enhanced their understanding of a Biblical text and subsequent involvement in an activity by interacting with small groups of students through open-ended questions and scaffolding conversations. Open-ended questions have more than one possible answer and often require high-order thinking (Sadker et al., 2011). Scaffolding conversations are those between the teacher and small groups that respond to students' conceptual understanding and thinking (Ferguson, 2012).

Subject specific teacher knowledge is necessary if teachers are to be able to teach for understanding in specific curriculum areas (Stodolsky, 1988; Grossman et al., 2004). Religious knowledge underpinned and informed teachers' use of open-ended questions and scaffolded conversations. However, teacher knowledge was not imparted in a systematic and explicit manner such as through direct instruction. Teachers seemed to have limited understanding of effective ways to use their content knowledge to enhance RE learning.

Teachers used open-ended questioning to encourage student-centred discourse and enhance engagement. Open-ended questioning has been found to facilitate engagement (Jurik et al., 2014; Walshaw & Anthony, 2008). Teachers often used open-ended probing questions, but rather than using the information gained from these to extend students' knowledge, teachers simply posed questions and then left groups to discuss these. This type of question did not enhance student discourse and engagement when groups lacked understanding. A more effective approach involved use of a scaffolded conversation.

A teacher used a scaffolded conversation to increase student knowledge and facilitate their involvement in an RE task. They used open-ended probing questions to ascertain student knowledge, and then they used their historical and textual knowledge to pose closed cuing questions that scaffolded understanding. Students were engaged through this process.

**Trusting classroom climate.**

Some teachers perceived that RE was unique as a subject because it involved personal sharing. They indicated that trust promoted these exchanges. The current approach to RE does provide students with opportunities to share the experiences they bring to a topic, however, it is with a view to connecting their life story with the story of Christian faith, and building upon these experiences to develop new knowledge and understandings (CEO, 2008).

Students felt able to express, discuss and construct knowledge with each other when they sensed that they were in a trusting classroom climate. Drawing upon these insights from students and teachers, a trusting climate is necessary for the sharing of both knowledge and experience, and making possible the sharing of insights into the Christian faith tradition. A key finding from this research was that three key characteristics of the climate developed and sustained trust: reciprocal, constructivist and supportive peer interactions.

The current study found that when year five / six students were in a trusting classroom climate, they not only shared knowledge through reciprocal interactions, they also collaborated to construct knowledge and understanding through constructivist interactions.

A central finding from this investigation was that student actions were the focal point. Trust was developed among peers when they sought to understand each other and explore perspectives through supportive interactions. This finding contrasted with the emphasis on teacher actions in the research on classroom emotional climate and in the development of trust (Cornelius-White, 2007; Reyes et al., 2012).

In a trusting climate students shared experiences and made connections with the Christian faith tradition. In this climate the possibility of sharing insights into the Christian faith tradition was also fostered. In the present study students were enthusiastic participants and had the confidence to interact through reciprocal, constructivist and supportive peer interactions in a trusting classroom climate.

**Positive teacher-student relationships.**

Year five / six students were behaviourally engaged in situations where there was a positive teacher-student relationship. These relationships existed when teachers showed authentic care in the RE classroom: teachers provided high support and were responsive to students' learning needs.

Teachers used their knowledge of students as RE learners to respond to their learning needs through two approaches: they supported students who were having difficulty understanding tasks by scaffolding the learning involved in the task; and they demanded effort from students with behavioural needs by monitoring and reinforcing task requirements. These efforts indicated their authentic care and facilitated student engagement in RE tasks.

Authentic care results in actions that show genuine consideration of the needs of the learner such as assisting a student with a challenging task or providing honest and sincere teacher feedback (Stern & Backhouse, 2011; Toshalis, 2012). Through these interactions students could see that their teacher cared about them and their success in the classroom (Faircloth, 2009; McHugh et al., 2013). Authentic care in this case study occurred when teachers supported students with learning needs and demanded effort from students with behavioural needs.

Teachers proposed that knowledge of students as learners could be used to adapt tasks to suit their individual learning abilities. In this way they sought to academically press (setting of high expectations) all students through individualised tasks. However, teachers in this study did not adapt tasks, or use any other form of academic press to engage students.

Whilst students who perceived higher levels of both responsiveness and academic press presented the highest levels of effort and perseverance in learning (Lee, 2012), a distinguishing aspect of this research indicated that student engagement resulted from teacher responsiveness through authentic care.



**Challenging tasks.**

Students and teachers indicated that challenging RE tasks required cognitive effort (having to work industriously to solve a problem or understand a complex idea - Chen, 2012) and use of high-order thinking skills (such as analysing, evaluating and synthesising - Neal, 2005). For students this was evident in the use of graphic organisers. These supported students to use cognitive effort to organise and think about learning. For teachers this was evident in the use of open-ended tasks. These challenged students of diverse capabilities to respond in various ways. Teachers also perceived that challenge occurred through reflection on relevant, contemporary learning issues.

Students were challenged when they explored the RE curriculum from both an educational and faith orientation. From an educational orientation open-ended tasks provide multiple levels of difficulty, such as use of low or high-order thinking strategies, and require cognitive effort from students of differing abilities. From a faith orientation open-ended tasks provide students with the opportunity to use cognitive effort to explore faith concepts from different perspectives.

Teachers perceived that year five / six students were becoming more interested in, and therefore prepared to think about, relevant issues. Findings from this study indicated that students were encouraged to think and use cognitive effort when RE tasks provided scope for choice and were relevant to their lives. In the literature, students engaged with tasks that offered a degree of choice over what and how to research (Delisle, 2012; Watson, 2013). Students in this study were not given this level of control over learning. However, there was evidence of student engagement when they had some control over content and could choose subject matter of relevance to them. Students were prepared to put in the cognitive effort that challenging tasks demanded when the learning was relevant.

### **ICT-enabled learning.**

Students and teachers claimed that the use of ICT supported student interest in learning. Students perceived that they were engaged in RE learning when computers were used for practical purposes such as online research to support project work. They suggested that these uses of ICT increased their enthusiasm and made learning more interesting. Whilst teachers affirmed such practical applications, they emphasised that students were engaged whenever ICT was used. Therefore, other factors such as the topic or the qualities of the task were not important for engagement.

A frequently cited finding over the last ten years is that use of ICT has a significant impact on student engagement (Burden & Keuchel, 2004; Chen et al., 2012; Passey et al., 2004). Teachers in this study regarded ICT use as inherently engaging. However, a classroom observation revealed that students quickly lost interest in the online task (research using the Caritas Australia website) given to them by the teacher. It has been argued that a primary purpose of ICT use in Australian RE classrooms is to increase the availability of resources and extend the zone of discourse (McGrady, 2002; Ryan, 2001; Visser, 2003). Whilst this may be one valid purpose for ICT use in RE classrooms, the sustained interest of students in this case study occurred when they discovered and used an ICT tool that enabled their learning; in contrast to the perceptions of teachers, the task and the process mattered.

The following features of this ICT-enabled learning facilitated student engagement: the game framework; the interactivity of the game; and relevant and meaningful content. Students related to the narrative context and the objective of the game framework. They interacted with realistic graphics that enabled them to visualise and interact with natural and human made features, and learnt from visual and written feedback. Their interest was enhanced when ICT-enabled learning occurred in response to relevant, real-world problems.

## **Links Between the Research and the Literature**

The key findings from this research were further analysed using related literature in the fields of education and religious education. These findings extended the existing research and affirmed the applicability of current literature in other curriculum areas to year five / six students in religious education. This study, which investigated factors that influenced the engagement of year five / six students in an RE curriculum, is the first major case study of engagement in RE in a Catholic primary context.

An association between goal structures and mastery orientation has been affirmed for both primary and middle years' students (Bong, 2009). Teachers in classrooms with mastery goal structures were observed emphasising learning, understanding, and student responsibility for learning (Turner et al., 2002). Whilst some studies in this area have focused on middle years' students using qualitative methods (Turner et al., 2002; Urdan, 2004), the majority correlated students' self-reported goals with outcomes such as achievement and engagement (Shih, 2005; Senko et al., 2011). Rather than student self-reports, this study used interviews and direct classroom observation to identify two key teacher actions that promoted a mastery orientation and the cognitive engagement of students: use of a thinking process, and guidance of classroom discourse in a whole class context.

Teachers used open-ended questions to give students scope to explore their thinking and understandings (Jurik et al., 2014). Whilst such an approach encouraged group discussion in this case study, teachers' use of probing questions did not always facilitate student-centred discourse. Rather, it was the combination of teacher's knowledge, and use of open-ended probing questions and closed cuing questions that engaged students.

Students were interested and enthusiastic learners when classrooms were high in classroom emotional climate (CEC) (Hindman et al., 2010; Mashburn et al., 2008). Whilst a few studies involving pre-school and early primary students have measured CEC using

classroom observation (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Hindman et al., 2010; Mashburn et al., 2008), other research in this area has primarily relied on student surveys (Reyes et al., 2012). Rather than using pre-determined observation checklists or student surveys, findings from this qualitative study extended the research in CEC in two fundamental ways: trust was found to be the key characteristic of classroom climate; and, rather than the focus being on teacher actions, as it is in CEC, student actions were the focal point.

Other studies have highlighted the role of peer social support in assisting students to develop the confidence to share and critique each other's perspectives (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Wang & Eccles, 2012). In the present study students gained the confidence to share their perspectives in the RE classroom, and to extend and critique these, through the supportive interactions which occurred in a trusting classroom climate.

Quantitative studies using teacher and student surveys have confirmed an association between positive affective relationships (defined as high in support and low in conflict) and student engagement in the primary years (Hughes et al., 2012; Hughes & Chen, 2011; Wu et al., 2010). Classroom observations using predetermined observational tools support this link (Hamre & Pianta, 2005, 2010; Mashburn et al., 2008; Pianta et al., 2008; Reyes et al., 2012). The present qualitative study confirmed this association for year five / six students in RE classroom learning. Furthermore, positive relationships and engagement were influenced by actions that showed teachers' authentic care. Teachers showed this by: using a demanding approach and reiterating expectations to students with behavioural needs; and, using a supportive approach and offering assistance to students with learning needs. Several qualitative studies affirmed that such efforts supported the engagement of secondary students (Faircloth, 2009; McHugh et al., 2013; Wang & Eccles, 2012). The current study extended these findings to year five / six students in the RE classroom.

In the literature academic press has been identified as a significant predictor of student engagement (Lee, 2012; Ma, 2003). Findings connecting academic emphasis and learning in middle and secondary school settings (Hoy & Sabo, 1998; Hoy et al., 1991) were extended to include the engagement of students in the primary setting (Goddard et al., 2000). However, these quantitative approaches have been criticised for not paying attention to the meanings that research participants give to events (Luyten et al., 2005). Whilst findings from this qualitative study indicated that teachers did not use academic press in the RE classroom, an insight from teacher participants extended current findings in this area. Teachers perceived that engagement could be enhanced if they developed knowledge of their students as learners and adapted tasks to ensure challenge for all.

Students engaged with open tasks (Parsons & Ward, 2011; Turner & Paris, 1995). Use of these student directed tasks in third grade science classrooms and junior secondary English classes were associated with increased student engagement (Parsons & Ward, 2011; Watson, 2013). In this case study, open-ended tasks that gave students some choice over content supported their engagement. This is consistent with literature on motivation (Guthrie, 2008; Lam & Law, 2007; Patall et al., 2010). Similarly, primary students were engaged when they had some autonomy over the learning task (Guthrie et al., 2007; Zhang et al., 2010; Zhang & Dougherty Stahl, 2012). Findings from this research also extended current literature; having some choice over RE content facilitated the cognitive engagement of year five / six students in RE learning. This occurred when students were given an open-ended task from which to choose content that was of interest to them.

According to Enright (2012), curriculum relevance is essential for student engagement. Students were more engaged in comprehending English texts they considered relevant (Hulleman et al., 2010). Findings from this study indicated that students were engaged in RE tasks that gave autonomy to choose an area of interest and relevance to them.

They were more inclined to put in the required cognitive effort to come to a deeper level of understanding in these areas.

Students were immersed in tasks that demanded cognitive effort and high level thinking to complete challenging tasks. (Delisle, 2012; Faircloth & Miller, 2011; Jones, 2012). While many students in this investigation used high-order thinking strategies such as evaluating, comparing, analysing and applying, others used low-order skills such as recalling and describing. Rather than deep learning through high-order thinking strategies as suggested by Neal (2005), RE tasks needed to include both high and low-order thinking strategies to challenge and engage students of different ability levels.

In Australia, it has been argued that a primary purpose of ICT use is to increase the availability of resources and extend the zone of discourse in RE classrooms (McGrady, 2002; Ryan, 2001; Visser, 2003). However, current theorists emphasise the use of ICT tools to enable learning (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2013; Fisher et al., 2012; Mikropoulos & Natsis, 2011). Year five / six students in this case study were interested in authentic learning: real-life situations and real-world problems (Enright, 2012). They were engaged in ICT-enabled learning through a game framework with its real-world narrative. This study connected the contemporary focus on using ICT to enable learning and students' engagement with authentic tasks; students were affectively engaged through ICT-enabled learning.

## **Recommendations**

### **Direct instruction and the use of RE texts.**

Whilst having the opportunity to discuss key ideas with peers made it possible for students to engage in RE learning through exploration of content, at times, student interactions were impeded by their lack of knowledge of key terms and content. It is recommended that Catholic Education systems authorities facilitate professional learning for primary teachers to include the role of direct instruction and the use of texts to explicitly and

systematically teach key RE content. This will provide students with the opportunity to be “exposed to some key understandings that could deepen and extend their thinking” (Rymarz, 2007, p. 68).

### **Curriculum implementation.**

Teachers in this case study were challenged by the “paradigm shift” (Buchanan, 2007, p. 223) from the life-centred approach of the past to the current educational, knowledge-centred outcomes-based approach reflected in *Coming to Know, Worship, and Love* (CEO, 2008). Two major studies on curriculum change in religious education have occurred in the past decade: Buchanan’s (2007) study of management of curriculum change in Catholic secondary schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne, and Healy’s (2011) study of the implementation of curriculum change in Catholic primary schools in the Archdiocese of Hobart. In a context of change, it was recommended that teachers be given opportunities to learn about curriculum theory in religious education (Buchanan, 2007). The importance of a collaborative culture inclusive of central authorities and schools for the ongoing professional learning of religious educators was also noted (Healy, 2011). In light of these suggestions and the findings of this case study, it is recommended that continuous learning in collaboration with the Catholic Education systems authorities be conducted with primary RE teachers to support their implementation of curriculum change.

### **Academic press and individualisation.**

Teachers in this study made a connection between assessment for learning and the provision of challenging tasks for all students. By adapting tasks according to their knowledge of students as learners, teachers perceived that they could provide academic press through individualising learning. It is recommended that professional learning involving Religious Education Advisers from the Catholic Education systems authorities, RE teachers

and Religious Education Leaders in primary schools be provided which explores the most effective ways of implementing academic press in RE classrooms.

**Autonomy and inquiry-based learning.**

The learning and teaching approach for year three to six students in *Coming to Know, Worship, and Love* (CEO, 2008) is underpinned by a structured inquiry: the learning process is guided and directed by the teacher until students reach the endpoint the teacher set out to achieve. This type of approach limits student thinking and choice; as indicated in the category, *challenging tasks*, having some choice over RE learning facilitated the engagement of students. To ensure cognitive engagement, it is recommended that RE teachers set up learning structures that give students some control over content and the freedom to periodically investigate areas of interest through personal, open inquiry; in this student-centred pedagogy, students generate and investigate their own questions (Martin-Hansen, 2002).

**Broadening the purpose of ICT use in the RE classroom.**

In Australia, it has been argued that a primary purpose of ICT use is to increase the availability of resources and extend the zone of discourse in RE classrooms (McGrady, 2002; Ryan, 2001; Visser, 2003). A more recent view recognized the importance of ICT use for the engagement of adolescent students in RE (Ang, 2012). However, ICT was not listed as one of the four essential engaging elements (knowledge, authenticity, relevance, and relationships). Research into the effectiveness of ICT in the RE classroom is “less common” than other curriculum areas such as literacy and mathematics (Condie & Munro, 2007, p. 38). In this case study, ICT was only used for a limited range of purposes. It is recommended that further research be conducted by Australian Catholic University into the use of ICT in RE classrooms to discover how ICT may be used more broadly to facilitate student engagement and increased learning outcomes through a focus on ICT-enabled learning.



### **Teacher content knowledge and scaffolded conversations.**

Teacher content knowledge has been used successfully to engage students through scaffolded conversations in the maths classroom (Ferguson, 2012b). Scaffolded strategies such as Questioning as Thinking and Collaborative Reasoning have been used to engage middle years' students in reading comprehension and discussions of a text (Jadallah et al., 2011; Wilson & Smetana, 2011; Zhang & Dougherty Stahl, 2012). It is recommended that Catholic education systems authorities set up Religious Education Networks to explore the effectiveness of scaffolding conversations and other strategies used successfully in other curriculum areas.

### **Limitations and Delimitations of the Study**

All research studies have boundaries and qualifications (Creswell, 2003). In the next section the limitations and the delimitations of this research are clarified.

#### **Limitations.**

Whilst a case study methodology was consistent with the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism and the research purpose of this study, as an intrinsic case study which sought an in depth understanding of the case in all its complexity and in its context, this research is limited in its transferability to other context (Punch, 2009). It is up to readers of this research to use the rich detail of this case and to imagine whether judgements may be transferable to their own and / or other situations (Ary et al., 2010). Therefore, whilst the findings of this research may have more applicability to other Catholic primary schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne using the same curriculum framework, it is up to those reading the findings to judge the extent of this transfer.

#### **Delimitations.**

This research was delimited to year 5/6 students and their RE teachers in a particular Catholic primary school in Melbourne, Australia. The researcher was interested in this case

and what might be learnt from it as to the factors that enhanced the engagement of these students in an RE curriculum (Flyvberg, 2004). As an intrinsic case study, an in-depth understanding of the case in all its complexity was sought (Punch, 2009; Stake, 2005).

Through the interpretivist paradigm of symbolic interactionism this research sought to understand the most salient “Me” of the person as student in the RE classroom or teacher of RE (Blumer, 1969; Bowers, 1988, p. 37; Gouldner, 1970; Mead, 1934). Participant perspectives, gathered through interviews, gave students and teachers the opportunity to “illustrate what it is like to be” in their particular situation (Gillham, 2005, p. 8).

An in depth understanding of this case also required direct observation of student and teacher participants in the classroom as their perceptions arose from and were embedded in the RE classroom. These observations assisted the researcher to gain an understanding of the case from the perspective of those being observed (Hatch, 2002).

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

Further research in the following areas is suggested. Research should be conducted into the role of RE textbooks and direct instruction in enhancing student knowledge and engagement in primary schools. Exploration of how assessment for learning may be linked with academic press to enhance student engagement in RE learning is another possible area for further research. Another area of investigation that may enhance RE outcomes is an exploration of the impact of open and integrated inquiry units on the engagement of students in RE learning. Finally, given the findings from this study, further research into how ICT may be used more effectively to enhance engagement and learning outcomes in the RE classroom is desirable.

## Conclusion

In this case study the perceptions of year five / six students and their religious education teachers as to the factors that engaged students in an RE curriculum were investigated. The findings from this study have generated insight into how to engage students in religious education classroom learning, which may be applicable in similar settings.

Six interrelated categories emerged from student and teacher interviews and the researcher's classroom observations: the teacher's promotion of a mastery orientation; the teacher's knowledge; a trusting classroom climate; positive teacher-student relationships; challenging tasks; and ICT-based learning. Within each of these categories, factors that engaged students cognitively, affectively, and behaviourally were identified.

The teacher promoted student engagement when they utilised thinking processes and guided subsequent student-centred discourse, and used their knowledge of RE content to scaffold conversations with peers using probing and cuing questions.

Students were engaged in an RE classroom where a trusting classroom climate promoted reciprocal, supportive and constructionist peer interactions and a positive teacher-student relationship was evident in the teacher's response to students' learning.

Learning facilitated the engagement of students when tasks challenged them to use cognitive effort, and use of ICT enabled their learning.

The insights from this study have contributed to an understanding of factors that engaged year five / six students in the RE curriculum framework of the Archdiocese of Melbourne, *Coming to Know, Worship and Love* (CEO, 2008). It is hoped that these insights will support teachers in the archdiocese to reflect upon and improve student engagement, and provide teachers of religious education in other dioceses with a framework to think about how they may enhance the engagement of students in their classes.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: Student Survey – Education in Faith Learning & Teaching Religious Education

(Question and Variable Scores)

#	Education in Faith	1	2	3	4	5	QS	VM
1	Students at this school show forgiveness, fairness.		3	10	30	1	3.66	<b>4.23</b>
2	Students at this school show respect and care.		3	12	27	2	3.64	
3	The spiritual symbols we have around the school have meaning to me.	1	4	9	3	27	4.16	
4	At this school it is important to pray.		2		8	34	4.68	
5	At this school it is important to celebrate liturgies.			3	11	30	4.61	
6	At this school it is important to help others in the community.			3	9	32	4.66	
#	Religious Education	1	2	3	4	5	QS	VM
7	The lessons we have in RE are interesting.	1	1	11	29	2	3.68	<b>3.89</b>
8	The lessons we have in RE challenge me in my thinking.	4	7	7	18	8	3.43	
9	I enjoy the lessons we have in RE.	3	5	7	20	9	3.61	
10	My teacher in RE tells me how I'm going in my work.	4	2	18	12	8	3.41	
11	Doing well in RE work is important to me.	1	2	4	9	28	4.39	
12	My RE lessons are helping me to learn about being just and fair.			2	20	22	4.45	
13	My RE lessons are helping me to talk about what I believe in.		2	7	14	21	4.23	

## Appendix B: Ethics Approval

Dear Michael and Adrian,

Thank you for returning the amendments to your ethics application **V2009 6**.

In light of the received amendments, the Chair of the Human Research Ethics Committee has granted ethics approval.

The approved period of data collection is the **01.04.2009 to 30.10.2010**. A progress report is due at the end of this period. The relevant form may be obtained via the ACU National website [www.acu.edu.au](http://www.acu.edu.au), or by contacting Research Services directly.

Should any harm or risk to participants or breaches of any approved protocols be discovered during the course of the research project, the Chief Investigator must report this immediately to the Chair of ACU's HREC.

I have attached an electronic copy of the Approval Form and will put the hard copy in internal mail to Michael.

We wish you well in this research project.

Kind regards

Ivy

Appendix C: Letter to the Director of Catholic Education Seeking Permission to Approach Teachers and Students for Interviews and / or Observations

Australian Catholic University Limited  
 ABN 15 050 192 660  
 Melbourne Campus (St Patrick's)  
 115 Victoria Parade Fitzroy VIC 3065  
 Locked Bag 4115 Fitzroy MDC VIC 3065  
 Telephone 613 9953 3000  
 Facsimile 613 9953 3005  
[www.acu.edu.au](http://www.acu.edu.au)

5<sup>th</sup> February 2009

Director of Catholic Education  
 Mr Stephen Elder  
 Catholic Education Office  
 PO Box 3  
 East Melbourne Vic 8002

Dear Mr Elder,

I am writing to you to gain your approval to interview and observe staff and students in a Primary school in the Archdiocese of Melbourne. Currently I am undertaking doctoral studies at Australian Catholic University, St Patrick's Campus. The thesis is exploring factors which facilitate student engagement in Religious Education. The research is entitled *What issues facilitate the engagement of upper Primary school students (Years 5 and 6) in a Religious Education curriculum?*

I am seeking approval to interview Year 5/6 teachers and their students, and to observe a number of Religious Education lessons in each 5/6 class. It is anticipated that I will interview approximately 70 people. Interviews will take the form of unstructured, semi structured and focus groups. These will last between 20 – 45 minutes each and occur at the school setting. All interviews will be audio taped. The names of those interviewed and / or observed, as well as the name of the school or any information which enables the school to be recognised will remain confidential. The substance of the interviews will be used in the thesis and any published materials. The storage and disposal of audio tapes and records of interviews will follow the code of ethics of Australian Catholic University.

The stages in the process of approval for interviews and observation are:

- 1) Gaining ethical approval from Australian Catholic University (currently in progress);
- 2) Gaining approval from the Catholic Education Office, Melbourne;
- 3) Gaining permission from the school Principal; and
- 4) Gaining permission from the individual or, in the case of a minor, the child's parent.

So that you are fully informed of what I would be sending to schools, I have attached draft information letters to the Principal, teachers and the parents of student participants. I would appreciate any additions to the text that you would deem appropriate. If desired I will make an appointment to discuss these matters with you. My work phone number is 9702 8177.

I hope that you are able to support my studies and anticipate that the findings will be of benefit to the Catholic Education Office, Melbourne and the wider educational community. Upon completion of the research I will forward a summary of findings to you.

Yours sincerely,  
 Adrian Lacey  
 Deputy Principal  
 St Kevin's Primary  
 Telephone: 9702 8177

Dr Michael T Buchanan  
 Supervisor  
 Australian Catholic University  
 Telephone: 9953 3294

## Appendix D: Director's Approval



**Catholic Education Office**  
Archdiocese of Melbourne

In reply please quote:

GE09/0009  
1486

22 April 2009

Mr A Lacey  
Deputy Principal  
St Kevin's Primary School  
120 Hallam Road  
HAMPTON PARK VIC 3976

Dear Mr Lacey

I am writing with regard to your research application received on 25 March 2009 concerning your forthcoming project titled *What issues facilitate the engagement of upper primary students (Years 5 and 6) in a Religious Education curriculum?* You have asked approval to approach a Catholic school in the Archdiocese of Melbourne, as you wish to involve students in Years 5 and 6 and their teachers.

I am pleased to advise that your research proposal is approved in principle subject to the eight standard conditions outlined below.

1. The decision as to whether or not research can proceed in a school rests with the school's principal, so you will need to obtain approval directly from the principal of the school that you wish to involve.
2. You should provide the principal with an outline of your research proposal and indicate what will be asked of the school. A copy of this letter of approval, and a copy of notification of approval from the university's Ethics Committee, should also be provided.
3. No student is to participate in the research study unless s/he is willing to do so and informed consent is given in writing by a parent/guardian.
4. You should provide the names of the school which agrees to participate in the research project to the Knowledge Management Unit of this Office.
5. Any substantial modifications to the research proposal, or additional research involving use of the data collected, will require a further research approval submission to this Office.

1 of 2

Mr A Lacey

- 2 -

22 April 2009

6. Data relating to individuals or the school are to remain confidential.
7. Since participating schools have an interest in research findings, you should consider ways in which the results of the study could be made available for the benefit of the school community.
8. At the conclusion of the study, a copy or summary of the research findings should be forwarded to this Office. It would be appreciated if you could submit your report in an **electronic format** using the email address provided below.

I wish you well with your research study. If you have any queries concerning this matter, please contact Mr Mark McCarthy of this Office.

The email address is <[km@ceo.melb.catholic.edu.au](mailto:km@ceo.melb.catholic.edu.au)>.

Yours sincerely



Nancy Bicchieri  
DEPUTY DIRECTOR



Appendix E: Letter to the Principal Seeking Permission to Approach Teachers and Students  
for Interviews and / or Observations

Australian Catholic University Limited  
ABN 15 050 192 660  
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115 Victoria Parade Fitzroy VIC 3065  
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Telephone 613 9953 3000  
Facsimile 613 9953 3005  
[www.acu.edu.au](http://www.acu.edu.au)

Date: 17<sup>th</sup> June, 2010

The Principal, Mr Tom Coghlan  
St Kevin's Primary School  
120 Hallam Rd  
Hampton Park  
3976

Currently I am undertaking doctoral studies at Australian Catholic University. As part of this study I am investigating issues that facilitate student engagement in Religious Education and would like to interview teachers of Year 5/6 students as well as Year 5/6 students.

I have attached a letter from the Director of Catholic Education, Mr Stephen Elder and from the Australian Catholic University indicating their approval to approach you. Upon your approval I would like to invite 5/6 teachers and their students to participate in this study. An information letter outlining involvement and inviting participation will be sent to the teachers and to the parents of the students.

There will be a total of 6 interviews with staff with each lasting approximately 45 minutes. Staff will also be involved in one focus group of about one hour duration. Also, 24 students will be involved in interviews of about 20 minutes duration and six groups of 4-6 students will be involved in focus groups which will take about 30 minutes each. All interviews will be audio-taped and held at mutually convenient times to minimise disruption to the school, staff and students. Finally, I would like to observe each 5/6 class during Religious Education lessons on 5 separate occasions. The names of those interviewed and / or observed, as well as the name of the school or any information which enables the school to be recognised will remain confidential. The substance of the interviews will be used in the thesis and any published materials.

This research will be of benefit to individuals, schools and to the Catholic system as a whole and wider educational organisations interested in the subject of what engages upper Primary school students.

I have also attached an outline of the project and consent forms for you to please sign and return to me.

Yours sincerely,

Adrian Lacey  
Deputy Principal  
St Kevin's Primary  
Telephone: 9702 8177

Dr Michael T Buchanan  
Supervisor  
Australian Catholic University  
Telephone: 9953 3294

## Appendix F: Principal's Consent



Australian Catholic University Limited  
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[www.acu.edu.au](http://www.acu.edu.au)

Researcher's Copy

**Principal's Consent Form**

Title of Research Project: **An investigation of issues that influence the level of student engagement in a religious education curriculum: a case study in an upper primary school (Years 5 and 6).**

**Name of Supervisor:** Dr Michael T Buchanan

**Name of Student Researcher:** Adrian Lacey

*I have read and understood the information provided in the letter and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I give permission for an information letter to be given to 5/6 teachers and students requesting participation in this study.*

*I agree that research data collected for the study may be published or provided to other researchers in a form that does not identify the school or the individual.*

**Name of Principal:** Mr Thomas Coghlan

**Name of School:** St Kevin's Primary

**Signature of Principal:** Thomas Coghlan

**Signature of Supervisor:** Michael T Buchanan.

**Signature of Student Researcher:** A. Lacey.

**Date:** 24.6.09.

## Appendix G: Information Letter to Parents and Student Participants

Australian Catholic University Limited  
 ABN 15 050 192 660  
 Melbourne Campus (St Patrick's)  
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 Locked Bag 4115 Fitzroy MDC VIC 3065  
 Telephone 613 9953 3000  
 Facsimile 613 9953 3005  
 www.acu.edu.au

1<sup>st</sup> July, 2009

### **INFORMATION LETTER TO PARENTS and STUDENT PARTICIPANTS**

**TITLE OF PROJECT:** Increasing student interest in Religious Education classes.

**NAME OF SUPERVISOR:** Dr Michael T Buchanan

**NAME OF STUDENT RESEARCHER:** Mr Adrian Lacey

**PROGRAM IN WHICH ENROLLED:** Doctor of Education

Dear Parents and Student Participant,

Your child is invited to participate in a study investigating how to increase student interest in Religious Education classes. Four students from each 5/6 class will be involved in a one on one interview with Mr Lacey in which they will be asked to answer some open ended questions regarding what they believe increases student interest in Religious Education classes. 4-6 different students will be asked to be involved in a focus group in which they will be asked to join Mr Lacey in a group discussion of what they believe increases student interest in Religious Education classes. Finally, Mr Lacey will observe all students in a series of Religious Education classes noting what aspects of the Religious Education class appear to increase their interest in these classes.

If your child is involved in an interview, they will be withdrawn from class for approximately 30 minutes. During this time they will be asked for their opinion to several questions. If they are involved in a focus group, they will be withdrawn from class for approximately 45 minutes. In a small group of 4-6 students they will be asked to discuss questions with the other group members. They will need to feel comfortable to discuss their ideas in a small group setting. Finally Mr Lacey will observe each class group as a whole to see what activities stimulate interest in the Religious Education class. Observation will be of the class as a whole rather than of individuals.

Involvement in this project will give your child the opportunity to tell us what they find interesting in the current Religious Education program and what they would like to see more of. Their involvement will therefore help our school to develop a Religious Education program which they may find even more interesting. Their ideas will also help other teachers to create more interesting programs in Religious Education, and perhaps in other areas of the curriculum. Their ideas may also contribute to articles in magazines for teachers or to presentations at teacher conferences.

Your child is free to refuse to participate in this project, and if they do so they will not be asked why. If they do decide to participate, they are free to withdraw their consent at any

time and discontinue participating in this project. Neither refusing to participate nor withdrawing consent will have any impact on their school life or academic progress.

Information collected through interviews, focus groups or class observations will be kept separate from student names. The project report will not link student names with information collected, nor will any subsequent writings or discussions by the researcher.

Any questions regarding this project should be directed to the Student Researcher in the first instance, and the Supervisor if further clarification is required.

Student Researcher: Mr Adrian Lacey  
Telephone number: 9702 8177

Supervisor: Dr Michael T Buchanan  
Telephone number: 99533294  
Australian Catholic University  
St Patrick's Campus  
Locked Bag 4115  
Fitzroy, Victoria 3065

Once the information from interviews, focus groups and class observations has been analysed, participants will be given a brief oral presentation of the results.

This study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Australian Catholic University.

If at any stage throughout this project you have any complaint or concern about the way your child may have been treated, or if you have any query that the supervisor or student researcher has not been able to answer satisfactorily, you may write to the Chair of the Human Research Ethics Committee care of the nearest branch of the Research Services Office.

Chair, HREC  
C/- Research Services  
Australian Catholic University  
St Patrick's Campus  
Locked Bag 4115  
Fitzroy, Victoria 3065  
Tel: 03 9953 3158  
Fax: 03 9953 3315

Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. You will be informed of the outcome.

If you agree to allow your child to participate in this project, you should sign both copies of the Consent Form, keep one copy for your records and return the other copy to the Student Researcher.

.....  
Dr Michael T Buchanan  
(Supervisor)

.....  
Mr Adrian Lacey  
(Student Researcher)

## Appendix H: Information Letter to Teacher Participants

Australian Catholic University Limited  
 ABN 15 050 192 660  
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 115 Victoria Parade Fitzroy VIC 3065  
 Locked Bag 4115 Fitzroy MDC VIC 3065  
 Telephone 613 9953 3000  
 Facsimile 613 9953 3005  
 www.acu.edu.au

---

1<sup>st</sup> July, 2009

**INFORMATION LETTER TO TEACHER PARTICIPANTS**

**TITLE OF PROJECT:**     **An investigation of issues that influence the level of student engagement in a religious education curriculum: a case study in an upper primary school (Years 5 and 6).**

**NAME OF SUPERVISOR:** Dr Michael T Buchanan

**NAME OF STUDENT RESEARCHER:** Mr Adrian Lacey

**PROGRAM IN WHICH ENROLLED:** Doctor of Education

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in a study investigating issues that influence the level of engagement of upper Primary students in a religious education curriculum. This would entail your involvement in one semi structured interview, one focus group comprised of 5/6 teachers and my observation of a series of your Religious Education lessons.

For all interviews another teacher will replace you to enable you to attend the interview during class time. The focus group will occur during a scheduled Professional Learning Team (PLT) meeting to be decided by the PLT group itself. Finally I will observe each class group in a series of Religious Education lessons at a mutually convenient time. The focus of these observations will be on factors that appear to stimulate student engagement in lessons and related activities.

It is anticipated that interviews and the focus group will be of approximately 30-45 minutes duration and that I would attend about 5 RE lessons over the course of a one month period.

Involvement in this project will give you the opportunity to reflect upon and provide insights into factors which facilitate student engagement in the RE curriculum. This information will support other teachers in providing an engaging RE curriculum for their students. Further, information collected from you may provide insights into the application and implementation of the Inquiry based RE curriculum "*Coming to Know, Worship and Love*" (Catholic Education Office, 2008) and how to teach this curriculum in a manner which engages upper Primary school students. Your insights may also contribute to articles in magazines for teachers or to presentations at teacher conferences.

You are free to refuse to participate in this project, and if you do so you will not be asked why. If you do decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participating in this project. Neither refusing to participate nor withdrawing

consent will have any impact on you as a member of this staff or your relationship with other members of staff.

Information collected through interviews, focus groups or class observations will be kept separate from teacher names. The project report will not link teacher names with information collected, nor will any subsequent writings or discussions by the researcher.

Any questions regarding this project should be directed to the Student Researcher in the first instance, and the Supervisor if further clarification is required.

Student Researcher: Mr Adrian Lacey  
Telephone number: 9702 8177

Supervisor: Dr Michael T Buchanan  
Telephone number: 99533294  
Australian Catholic University  
St Patrick's Campus  
Locked Bag 4115  
Fitzroy, Victoria 3065

Once the information from interviews, focus groups and class observations has been analysed, participants will be given a preliminary oral presentation of the results.

This study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Australian Catholic University.

If at any stage throughout this project you have any complaint or concern about the way you have been treated, or if you have any query that the supervisor or student researcher has not been able to answer satisfactorily, you may write to the Chair of the Human Research Ethics Committee care of the nearest branch of the Research Services Office.

Chair, HREC  
C/- Research Services  
Australian Catholic University  
St Patrick's Campus  
Locked Bag 4115  
Fitzroy, Victoria 3065  
Tel: 03 9953 3158  
Fax: 03 9953 3315

Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. You will be informed of the outcome.

If you agree to participate in this project, you should sign both copies of the Consent Form, keep one copy for your records and return the other copy to the Student Researcher.

.....  
Dr Michael T Buchanan  
(Supervisor)

.....  
Mr Adrian Lacey  
(Student Researcher)

Appendix I: Questions Guiding Semi – Structured Interviews for Students

**Questions Guiding Semi structured Interviews – Students**

How does RE connect with your life out of the classroom?

Outside of the classroom, who or what helps you to be more involved in RE?

Inside the classroom, who or what helps you to be more involved in RE?

Can you tell me about a time when you were totally focused during RE?

What assists your learning in RE?

What makes learning in RE interesting for you?

What makes learning in RE challenging for you?

When does the content of RE lessons become interesting for you?

What activities help you to be more involved in RE lessons?

Appendix J: Questions Guiding Semi – Structured Interviews for Teachers

**Semi structured Interview Questions – Teachers**

**General Research Question: What issues facilitate the engagement of upper primary school students (Years 5 and 6) in a religious education curriculum?**

***How may we utilise students' emerging identities as adolescents to engage them in learning?***

In what ways may students' social awareness be utilised to engage them in RE?

How may we utilise digital / popular culture to facilitate student engagement in RE?

How may we support a student's identity as a learner to contribute to engagement?

***What aspects of students' community / relationships engage them in learning?***

How may supportive inter-personal relationships facilitate student engagement?

How may classroom environment support student engagement?

How is the personal story of others (in Scripture too), important for student engagement?

How may students' experiences / notions of community be used to increase engagement?

How does the whole school community support student engagement?

How may parental involvement support student engagement?

What is the role of culture in engaging students?

***What factors promote student engagement in the learning task?***

What aspects of curriculum facilitate student engagement?

What aspects of the learning/teaching approach in RE support student engagement? How are students' issues / ideas in RE used to further engagement? How does the inquiry approach impact on student engagement?

What classroom activities seem to really engage students generally / students of differing abilities? How would you describe the learning derived from these types of activities? How are opportunities for deep learning in your RE classroom fostered? Can you give an example of such? What impact did this have on the students?



What qualities of a task seem to facilitate student engagement? What role does working independently, time to reflect, and depth of thinking required have on engagement? How is the opportunity for student expression and understanding important for student engagement in a task?

How may we use learning technologies to engage students in learning?

What is the influence of other domains on student engagement in RE?

Appendix K: Classroom Observation Checklist – Issues Influencing Student Engagement in Religious Education as Gathered from Individual and Focus Group Interviews.

<p>Engagement &amp; Learning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Approach to Teaching and Learning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Introductory focus / stimulus activity</li> <li>- Individual, pair and group work</li> <li>- Whole class discussion (hearing different perspectives)</li> <li>- Teacher stimulus and interaction</li> <li>- Opportunity for personal inquiry and research</li> <li>- Research (homework) to support learning of a new topic</li> <li>- Flexible approach to Inquiry</li> <li>- Relating life and faith</li> <li>- Using life as a starting point</li> <li>- Catering for personal interest</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Curriculum <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Topics which improve our knowledge of our religion (e.g. commandments)</li> <li>- Jesus (parables and stories) and the early disciples</li> <li>- The Bible (various books such as Psalms) and the world and society of biblical times; comparing such with our contemporary world</li> <li>- Mass and the Sacraments</li> <li>- Religion and science</li> <li>- Our contemporary world and RE</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Personal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Allows for our personal story</li> <li>- Allows for a personal response</li> <li>- Allows for both intrapersonal and interpersonal reflection on thoughts and feelings</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Learning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- New ideas and topics</li> <li>- Relevant to student lives</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Learning Tasks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Unique (different) and interesting</li> <li>- Open ended</li> <li>- For differing abilities yet challenging</li> <li>- Creative focus; allow for a creative response (e.g. posters)</li> <li>- Learning styles</li> <li>- Enjoyable</li> <li>- Allow ideas / feelings to be expressed through artwork</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
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	<p>(colour)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Domains of learning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reading (works of fiction; biographies) to stimulate interest, illustrate a theme / idea / value; to develop empathy</li> <li>- Reading for information</li> <li>- Speaking and Listening (oral presentation)</li> <li>- The Arts: dramatizing / drawing to facilitate understanding, thinking and expression; composing songs</li> <li>- Writing: writing notes / key ideas to facilitate understanding and thinking; writing in the different literary styles of the Bible; creative ways of responding in written form</li> </ul> </li> <li>• ICT <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Facilitates research</li> <li>- Supports student creativity</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Alternative modes of expressing ideas / understandings</li> <li>• Presenting information in a variety of ways; students too to present information with which they are familiar</li> <li>• Student issues / questions / experiences considered</li> <li>• Application to our lives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reflecting on our lives</li> <li>- Giving meaning to and transcending our lives</li> <li>- How we should act</li> <li>- How we should live our lives</li> <li>- Gospel verses to live by</li> <li>- Our obligations in our modern world</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Teacher attributes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Enthusiasm for RE / topic</li> <li>- Knowledge and ability to explain RE concepts</li> <li>- Visual ‘demonstrations’</li> <li>- Positive feedback and encouragement of students</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Cognitive Domain <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Thinking / ideas are developed as a group</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Questions to help focus our thinking</li> <li>- Arts support thinking</li> <li>- Graphic organizers and other means of stimulating thinking skills</li> <li>• Student personal attributes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Effort and persistence</li> <li>- Attentiveness and concentration</li> <li>- Ability to see connections between RE and life</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Having these available to consult (Bible; To Know, Worship and Love)</li> <li>- Accessible language of To Know, Worship and Love</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Assessment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Leading to improved learning</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
Engagement & Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher – Student Relationship <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Personal knowledge / interest in child</li> <li>- Developing trust</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Teacher as person <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- personal faith</li> <li>- personal qualities</li> <li>- personal story</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Peer group interaction</li> <li>• Family <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Support and encouragement</li> <li>- Discussion of RE topics</li> <li>- Modeling how to live a life of faith</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Faith community <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Having the support of</li> <li>- Opportunities for involvement</li> <li>- Receiving and learning about the sacraments</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Cultural practices</li> <li>• Connections between life and various communities (church, school and family) made explicit</li> <li>• Learning community <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Encouragement of peers</li> <li>- Friends: influence each other to do set tasks, help each other to learn by working together (sharing ideas, asking and answering questions)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Whole class discussion to stimulate ideas, facilitate discussion and thinking</li> <li>• Affective domain <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Exploring feelings: self reflection and empathy</li> <li>- Arts (creating and responding) can facilitate feeling</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Prayer <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Expressing thoughts and feelings</li> <li>- Relating to our lives</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Jesus <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To learn from Jesus how we ought to live our lives</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
<p>Teacher Change:</p> <p>Whole School Design and Systemic Support</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Classroom reflects Gospel values</li> <li>• School reflects Gospel values</li> <li>• Classroom environment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learning from peers</li> <li>- Sharing ideas is valued</li> <li>- Thinking explored and challenged through questions</li> <li>- Able to ask questions</li> <li>- Listening to others</li> <li>- Quiet surroundings, but still able to talk to others</li> <li>- Working cooperatively</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
Engagement & Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adolescent needs</li> <li>• Motivation to learn</li> <li>• Peer group <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Having the respect of</li> <li>- Encouragement to learn</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	

## References

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