

Pre-Service Teachers' Perceptions of Teaching Religious Education

Marino Institute of Education

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List of Abbreviations

RE	Religious Education
DES	The Department of Education and Skills
B.Ed.	Bachelor of Education
PME	Professional Masters of Education
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
ESPEN	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs
CSP	Catholic Schools Partnership
SPHE	Social, Personal and Health Education
PE	Physical Education
NQT	Newly Qualified Teacher
SERC	Student in Ethics Research Committee
ERB	Education about Religions, Beliefs and Ethics
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
CPD	Continuing Professional Development

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Abstract

"Pre-Service Teachers Perceptions of Teaching Religious Education"

The aim of this research is to explore pre-service teachers' perceptions of teaching Religious Education. In recent decades Ireland has become increasingly diverse and there has been consistent growth in people identifying as non-religious (Heinz et al, 2018), with one in ten people identifying as religiously unaffiliated (Central Statistics Office, 2017). Thus, underlining a need for change from the overwhelmingly Catholic education system. This study is considered timely, as the primary curriculum is currently out for review by all relevant stakeholders. Individual perceptions of RE inform the approach a teacher takes, thus having a clear understanding of pre-service teacher perceptions is both necessary and invaluable. The teaching of RE is currently managed by various patron bodies, however as with all curriculum subjects' teachers have their own distinct approaches based off their individual perceptions.

A limited amount of research exists surrounding the importance of pre-service teachers' perceptions of the teaching of RE and it is therefore my hope that this research project can help build upon the growing bank of research and will contribute to an important conversation regarding the future teaching of RE and the patronage system in Ireland.

The methodology adopted for this study was semi-structured interviews conducted with eight pre-service teachers from two different teacher education colleges. The findings highlighted a desire for change in approaches to RE and a need for more implementable ways to cater for multi-belief classrooms in denominational schools. The majority of participants in this study stated they had a positive experience of RE in primary school as children and this in turn has positively impacted on their attitude towards the teaching of the subject. However, some participants felt they did not feel adequately prepared to teach RE.

The thesis concludes by drawing on some conclusions and implications of the study, while offering recommendations to school communities, policy makers and third level institutes regarding the teaching of RE

Chapter 1: Introduction

This study explores pre-service teachers' perceptions of teaching Religious Education in primary schools in Ireland. This chapter will outline the rationale and scope of the research. It presents the research questions and the overall aim of the research. The chapter will conclude by presenting the structure of the thesis.

1.1 Rational and Scope of this Research

The Irish education system is very unique among other European countries, with a predominantly denominational schooling system (Rougier & Honohan, 2014). The Department of Education and Skills (2019) stated that for the first time in 2018 multi-denominational post primary schools (48.7%) exceeded the amount of Catholic post primary schools (46.7%). However, this is a very different picture among primary schools with 88.9% Catholic and 4.8% multi-denominational (DES, 2019). Catholic state schools in Ireland are privately owned by various patron bodies and are then funded by the State. They therefore have a mandatory obligation to have religious instruction across all class levels and the ethos of these schools is explicitly Catholic (Heinz et al, 2018; O'Toole, 2015). The DES recommends a daily time allocation of 30 minutes for the teaching of Religious Education (Department of Education, 1999, 70).

The demographics of Irish society are consistently transforming and evolving. There has been a unique relationship between religion and education in Ireland for centuries, which has in recent years, come under major scrutiny to meet demands of a diversifying Ireland. Therefore, teachers are placed with the complex task of creating inclusive environments. *The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector* (2012*)* has highlighted to school communities to be aware of their diverse populations and be inclusive in their practices.

It has been widely recognised that if individuals are to contribute to a democratic and pluralistic society, they must have an appreciation and understanding of individual religious beliefs and backgrounds (White, 2009). McCreery (2005) argues that teachers' individual religious beliefs and own personal religious background has a direct link to how they approach RE.

It is important at this point to define the term Religious Education and how it is being used and understood in this study. Historically in Ireland 'Religious Instruction' is the term that is used by the State for denominational schools, which refers to faith formation and instruction into a particular faith. The term Religious Education is a broader term and can include the nurturing of a child's beliefs, as well as seeking to learn about and from different beliefs. The language and terminology for the patron's half hour in primary schools varies according to school types such as, 'ethical education' or 'multi-belief and values education.' For the purpose of this study I have chosen the overarching term of 'Religious Education'.

There is currently limited research available surrounding pre-service teachers' perceptions of teaching RE. In order to build understanding and assist with the development of policy and practice, research is needed, particularly regarding the challenges surrounding religious diversity in an overwhelming Catholic education system. The study aims to provide an insight into the lived experiences of pre-service teachers and their perceptions of teaching RE.

1.2 Research Aim and Questions

This study therefore set out to gain an insight into the influence of backgrounds and beliefs on perceptions of teaching RE, while also gaining an insight into how teachers feel about teaching RE in a diversifying Ireland. The research questions this study aims to address are:

1. What impact do individual's religious backgrounds/beliefs have on perceptions of teaching RE?

2. What are preservice teachers' perceptions of teaching RE?
3. How do preservice teachers' feel towards teaching in religiously diverse classrooms?

This study aims to deepen understanding and inform my own future profession as a primary school teacher, but also to contribute to knowledge of the area, and in some small way, contribute to an important conversation. Allowing the participants voices to be heard was also an important aim of this study.

1.3 Structure of the Thesis and Conclusion

Within this chapter the rational, scope and aims of this study along with the research questions were presented. A glimpse into the context of RE in Ireland today was also provided, and how a need for change is evident. Chapter Two presents and explores the most recent and relevant literature pertaining to the context of RE in Ireland, initial teacher training in RE, the influence of personal background and beliefs on the teaching RE and perceptions of teaching RE. It explores some of the challenges faced by pre-service teachers, in particular regarding multi-belief classrooms in denominational schools and ensuring inclusion is maintained. Chapter Three describes the research design, the ethical considerations, the limitations of the study, the researchers own positionality, and the methods taken in order to collect and analyse the data. Chapter Four presents the findings of the research and how those findings relate to the available literature. Chapter Five draws some conclusions and recommendations for policy makers, school communities, third level institutions and offers suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The literature review chapter will present an overview of the existing research on perceptions of teaching RE. Following an in-depth review of the literature, the researcher has identified four key areas to be discussed within the review. It begins by reviewing curriculum, patronage, and the context of RE in Ireland, RE in initial teacher education followed by the influence of personal beliefs and backgrounds and finally perceptions of teaching RE.

2.2 Curriculum, Patronage & The Context of RE in Ireland

The Irish education system is unique among other European countries, with the vast majority of schools in Ireland being denominational (88.9%) (Rougier & Honohan, 2014). Both Educate Together and Community National Schools are the fastest growing schools in Ireland based off parental demand (DES, 2019). Thus, showing a desire for change within the current education system in Ireland. Many other schools are managed and owned by the Church of Ireland. Smaller numbers of Methodist, Presbyterian, Jewish and Muslim schools are also present in Ireland, each with their own unique curricula and approaches to RE (Faas et al, 2015).

The demographics in Ireland are changing and will continue to transform for many years to come, as there has been a consistent growth in people identifying as non-religious (Heinz et al, 2018). The 2017 statistics showed that one in ten people in Ireland identify as religiously unaffiliated (Central Statistics Office, 2017). Thus, underlining a need for change from a predominantly denominational schooling system. This move towards reform grew when The Minister for Education Ruairi Quinn established the *Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector* in 2012. The report produced by the forum identified an increase in demand for multidenominational and non-denominational schools and the importance of parent's preferences in schools (Coolahan et al.,2012). The forum recommended the diversifying of

current Catholic schools within areas of stable populations and within communities that have majority denominational schools (Heinz et al, 2018). Progress in this area has been slow due to the State not being in a position to incur the high costs needed to provide more schools simply to meet demands to have schools of different patronage. Therefore, the forum is aiming to ensure that diversity is welcomed and included in the existing primary school system (Department of Education, 2014). This involves developing policies within schools on what must be provided for children who attend a denominational school but have a different faith or belief system. This is to prevent children feeling isolated within their classroom, particularly when RE is being taught. Children can often feel isolated if they are not a part of the dominant belief system in their classroom (Deegan, Devine, and Lodge 2004)

Unlike all other curriculum subjects, the information presented when reading the RE curriculum is the following "The development and implementation of the curriculum in Religious Education in primary schools remains the responsibility of the relevant patron bodies.'' (NCCA, 1999). However, a new curriculum for Education about Ethics, Religion and Beliefs (ERB) is currently out for consultation by all relevant stakeholders, as recommended by the forum. The forum provides a window of opportunity for the future of Religious Education, patronage, and pluralism in Ireland. The future of RE in Ireland varies for each person. For some people this may involve radical change, whereby the State become the patron body, whereas for others it is simply just creating more diversity and options within communities of denominational and multi-denominational schools (Coolahan et al.,2012).

2.3 Religious Education in Initial Teacher Education

Within Ireland there are five publicly funded colleges of education and one privately funded. On all B.Ed. (Bachelor of Education) and PME (Professional Masters of Education) programs students must complete RE modules, with most colleges also providing students the option of completing a Catholic certificate (Hyland & Bocking, 2016). This certificate is

required to teach in all Catholic schools in Ireland. RE currently accounts for approximately forty-eight hours on the B.Ed. programme, excluding time spent completing the certificate (Hyland & Bocking, 2016). This is a large number of hours in comparison to some other curriculum areas. The question is then posed; why is it that many teachers have ambivalent feelings about teaching RE and struggle to manage their own views within the classroom (McCreery, 2005; White, 2009) despite spending a large amount of time studying it. In an Irish study conducted in Catholic schools it was found that 28% of teachers did not teach RE daily and 5.6% rarely or never taught it (Dineen, 2009). These findings show a need for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) after pre-service training in order for teachers to feel confident in delivering an effective Catholic RE programme.

Subedi (2006) and Faas et al (2016) suggest that teacher training programmes need to ensure they place a larger emphasis on religious diversity during RE lecture time, as the preservice teachers will undoubtedly be teaching children that come from a wide variety of backgrounds and beliefs. Often student teachers can create links between religion, fear, and discrimination (Kieran et al, 2020). Therefore, it is recommended that preservice teachers should engage in meaningful conversations about diverse religious beliefs in order to better equip them when they begin their teaching careers and to aid them overcome fears about offending or discriminating against others (Milner 2003; Subedi, 2006). These meaningful conversations can more formally be known as interfaith dialogue. This form of dialogue can aid people of different faiths to build understanding of one another (Garfinkel, 2008). Many large-scale and small-scale interfaith dialogue programmes are used worldwide to resolve conflict, for peacekeeping and enabling people to see how each religion contributes to society in a unique way. This form of dialogue can benefit future application (Garfinkel, 2008). For teachers who perhaps have never engaged in conversations with people of different faiths, interfaith dialogue programmes may be beneficial for them to engage with during their

professional career. Teachers will be able to apply this education and understanding to their own teaching while also developing upon existing perceptions and attitudes they may have. Taylor & Sobel (2001) suggest teacher education courses should encourage teachers to reflect upon and bring their own experiences into their teaching of RE. Much of the research surrounding teacher education and RE focuses not only on building curriculum knowledge but also developing as an individual, becoming self-aware and building personal spirituality (Martin & Van Guntan, 2002; Taylor & Sobel, 2001; Subedi, 2006). This will enable teachers to be aware of how their own viewpoints impact their teaching. Developing children's spirituality has become increasingly important to teachers as the benefits to children are evident. Binder (2011) argues that educators need to embrace and foster spiritual literacy in primary classrooms as it aids both child and teacher to connect to experiences about oneself and others. It also creates a non-judgmental mindful environment that allow teachers to explore children's feelings. Binder (2011) recommends that ITE programs should give students the opportunity to learn about the benefits of fostering spirituality in the primary classroom.

Humphreys (2015) outlines how children in Ireland experience RE will not only depend on individual schools and teachers, but in fact where that particular teacher acquired their knowledge of religions. It was recommended in *The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in Primary Sector* in 2012 that teacher education colleges provide students the opportunity to learn about religious diversity in Ireland. Many of the education colleges within Ireland are now providing modules in multi-belief & ethics, intercultural education, diversity, and inclusion (Hyland & Bocking, 2016) which will provide teachers an excellent foundation when entering not only schools such as Educate Together and Community National Schools but also Catholic schools whereby children of different beliefs are welcomed. Education has been found to be vital and one of the most effective contributions in fostering respectful attitudes towards religious diversity (Freathy & Parker, 2010).

2.4 The Influence of Teachers' Religious Backgrounds and Beliefs

It has been widely recognised that if individuals are to contribute to a democratic and pluralistic society, they must have an appreciation and understanding of individual religious beliefs and backgrounds (White, 2009). McCreery (2005) states that teachers' individual religious beliefs and own personal religious background has a direct link to how they teach RE. Therefore, it important to gain a deeper insight into the literature surrounding teachers' religious backgrounds and beliefs and what influence this has on their perceptions of teaching RE. The research surrounding religious beliefs of teachers in Ireland is limited. Heinz et al (2018) suggests this may be due to a presumption that all individuals who want to enter the profession are Irish Catholic. Parker Jenkins & Masterson (2013) describes the teaching profession in Ireland as homogenous, if barriers are to be removed further research is needed in order to understand what implications religious beliefs have on teaching. In a study conducted by Everington et al (2011) it was found that teachers in a wide variety of countries all recognised that there is a relationship between their own personal beliefs and their perceptions of RE and in particular their diversity related perceptions. This is in contrast to the findings by Heinz et al (2018) whereby teacher applicants were found to disagree with the suggestion that personal beliefs may influence their teaching. This may have been due to the participants being teacher applicants rather than pre-service teachers who will likely have experience teaching RE during school placements and or substituting. Heinz et al (2018) states that Roman Catholics are considerably overrepresented within the teaching profession, while non-religious individuals are underrepresented in comparison to the population and there is a lack of individuals from minority religious backgrounds entering the profession. White (2010) suggests that high representation of religious individuals entering the profession is due to individuals describing a 'calling' to the profession. It is also highly likely that this over and under representation is due to the largely denominational education system and thus acting as

a barrier for individuals from minority and non-religious backgrounds considering a teaching career in Ireland.

Religious and non-religious family background also plays a large role in the perceptions a teacher has towards teaching RE. McCreery (2005) found that it could have both a positive and negative effect on the approach teachers take to their teaching of RE. The study showed that positive attitudes towards teaching religion quite often stemmed from positive experiences of religion they experienced growing up, leading to them feeling confident and grounded in their ability to teach RE. Similarly, it also has a negative impact for some, leading to them having no connection with religion and therefore resulting in ambivalent feelings towards the subject. Reflecting and discussing these experiences is beneficial to teachers, increasing awareness of these experiences and how they may influence their teaching (Martin & Van Guntan, 2002). Teachers who experienced religious and cultural diversity growing up have noted that as they have always been around individuals of other faiths, they feel comfortable entering conversations and learning about differences (Everington, 2011).

Individuals from minority religious backgrounds have been found to identify as being in a good position to teach and guide children on topics such as social justice and equality within RE (White, 2010). Similarly, Everington (2011) found that teachers who came from a minority religious background felt a strong duty to include all children who may feel like ‘outsiders’ in all aspects of RE. Their perceptions of teaching RE were very much driven from their own background and beliefs. Heinz et al (2018) found that individuals from religious backgrounds had a shared belief with those of non-religious groups that teaching about all world views and faiths is of high importance. In a recent Irish study, Kieran et al (2020) found student teachers to have an overwhelming positive attitude to religious diversity in society, this mirrors the REDco Research Project (2006-2009) whereby learning about religious diversity was found to

be a priority for teachers and aided students in entering conversations with people of other backgrounds about world faiths.

Everington (2011) found that there was a mixed response among teachers whether students should be aware of their teacher's religious background and beliefs or not. Some teachers noted that sharing their beliefs showed the children that religion and religious differences can be discussed in an open and honest way. Others felt that in order to maintain an unbiased approach it was best not to share personal beliefs with their students. Faas et al (2015) states that as Ireland is now a multi-ethnic, multi-faith society, schools and teachers must meet the demands of that and ensure they take an unbiased approach to education. In order to help with this challenge, Taylor & Sobel (2001) suggests personal reflection is important for teachers to be aware of their own religious beliefs and how it contributes to their teaching of RE and will enable a more unbiased approach whereby all beliefs are welcomed and accepted.

2.5 Perceptions of Teaching Religious Education

Perception is defined as the way in which organisms interpret, engage, and manage information to make meaningful experiences of the world around them (Lindsay & Norman, 1977). Perception involves individuals using their memory, emotions and lived experiences to form judgments, views and attitudes about social roles, rules, and context. Perceptions and attitudes are closely linked (Lindsay & Norman, 1977). McCreery (2005) found that many teachers have ambivalent feelings and perceptions about teaching RE and that they struggle to manage their own views within the classroom. This echoes Kieran & Mullally (2021) whereby pre-service teachers were found to feel a disconnect between their own beliefs and the curriculum content, leading to feelings of ambivalence and uncertainty. Within the literature surrounding the teaching of RE it has been found that teachers can feel uncomfortable teaching RE in a one-sided manner and that many view RE as a personal matter but are willing to do it as its 'part of the job' (Heinz et al, 2018). McCreery (2005) also found that pre-service teachers

who expressed a lack of commitment to religion as a feature that would benefit them when teaching RE. The trainee teachers viewed this lack of commitment as enabling them to teach RE in a neutral and non-bias way. Subedi (2006) found that the vast majority of pre-service teachers did not have a high desire to teach in culturally diverse schools due to the daily challenge that catering for many beliefs brings. In many cases pre-service teachers wanted to teach in schools that reflected their own past school experience (Subedi, 2006; Zimpher & Ashburn, 1992).

It is also important to note the literature surrounding the positive feelings and the value that teachers place on teaching RE. Kieran & Mullally (2021) found that preservice teachers in Ireland view RE as an important part of their professional duty as a teacher. RE gives teachers the opportunity to create mindful environments and engage in meaningful conversations with the children and allow them to reflect and develop upon their own beliefs and opinions. This will in turn aid children's emotional development and critical thinking skills, vital for later life (Catholic Primary Curriculum, 2015). Religious Education gives school communities and teachers the opportunity to develop children's morality by promoting kindness, tolerance, compassion, empathy, and respect. It also gives children the opportunity to enter conversations about human rights, equality and how to challenge discrimination (Faas et al, 2015). All of which are essential life skills for children in their developing years.

As Ireland is now more religiously diverse and there is a consistent growth in people identifying as non-religious (Heinz et al, 2018) teachers in denominational schools are being faced with the daily challenge of catering for many different beliefs, particularly during RE lessons. The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (2011) describes inclusive education as responding to diverse needs of learners. It includes removing any barriers so that each child can receive the maximum benefits of school (NCSE, 2011). Implementing and creating inclusive environments can be a complex task (Shevlin et al, 2009). Progress has been

made, following the publication of the Catholic School Partnership (CSP) in 2015, however, ongoing guidance and support is needed as the diverse nature of Irish primary classrooms continue to evolve and without clear policy daily challenges still exist. These challenges include the potential for children of other faiths and non-religious backgrounds being exposed to conflicting values (Devine, 2009). However, removing a child from the classroom during RE might have a discriminatory effect (Faas, 2016; Devine; 2009). Inclusive education within Ireland is mandated by EPSEN Act, (2004). Inclusive learning should ensure that students of all genders, abilities, special educational needs, ethnicity, and faiths are respected (Shevlin et al., 2009). However, many teachers across Ireland still express the need for more 'realistic alternatives' to how they can best accommodate children of other faiths and non-religious beliefs during RE time (O'Brien, 2017). This current challenge that exists within Irish primary schools may potentially influence pre-service teachers' perceptions of teaching RE and result in them feeling unconfident in how to best cater for different personal beliefs. It has been found that individual teacher attitudes and perceptions are key to implementing affective inclusive practice within primary classrooms (Auramidis & Norwich, 2002).

Martin & Van Gunten (2002) & Milner (2003) advocate for reflection in order for us to observe our behaviour and enable us to discover more about how we interact with people, this can be applied to the teaching of RE. As reflection is advocated for teachers to be aware of their own perceptions it will also be beneficial for students to spend some time during and after RE lessons to reflect. As religious beliefs and personal standpoints have been found to impact how a teacher teaches RE (McCreery, 2005; Martin & Van Gunten, 2002) it is vital to gain a deeper understanding into pre-service teachers' perceptions of teaching RE in Ireland today. As pre-service teachers are the future educators, their opinions are key to gain deeper insights into the future teaching of RE.

2.6 Conclusion

Both internationally and within Ireland, policy makers have made recommendations about RE and the need to diversify the teaching and ethos of RE within primary schools (Heinz, 2008). Much of the current available literature includes teacher applicants or qualified teachers' perceptions, thus a need to investigate pre-service teachers' perceptions. The available literature presented mixed findings on what impact teachers religious backgrounds and beliefs have on perceptions of teaching RE. It has been found that teachers have ambivalent and uncertain feelings about teaching RE (Kieran & Mullally, 2021) and that they struggle to manage their own views within the classroom (McCreery, 2005). Other studies presented different findings whereby teachers viewed RE as a vital component within education that has necessary effects on children's morality, wellbeing, and spiritual development (Niculescu & Norrell, 2012), they are therefore willing to do it as 'part of the job' (Heinz et al, 2018) and view it as part of their professional duty (Kieran & Mullally, 2021). There was strong evidence within the literature that engaging in meaningful conversations and learning about religious diversity is beneficial to teachers in managing their own perceptions (Milner 2003; Subedi, 2006). Students who are currently studying to be primary teachers are the future educators, their views and perceptions will provide necessary understanding of the area. It is also these individuals who will be implementing the RE curriculum in primary school classrooms across Ireland in the near future.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the research methodology for this study. As this study aims to explore the perceptions of pre-service teachers', qualitative research was used, as it yields rich interpretations (Creswell, 2009). This chapter will discuss the philosophical underpinnings of the study. The researchers own positionality will be examined, before going on to outline and justify the recruitment and sampling method used and the methods of data collection and analysis. In conclusion, the ethical considerations will be highlighted, and the potential limitations will be discussed.

3.2 Philosophical Assumptions

It is important to consider the possible influences on a research design and the impact they can have on a study. Researchers can subscribe to many different worldviews, and how the researcher designs, undertakes, and analyses their data is impacted by their philosophical assumptions. This research, which is qualitative in approach and exploratory in nature, is informed by a social constructivist research paradigm. Although qualitative research does not adhere to a specific paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), this study is based on the understanding that knowledge is socially constructed. This requires researchers to explore and investigate opinions of the people involved in the study (Robson, 2011). Creswell & Creswell (2017, p.5) states that "in planning a study, researchers need to think through the philosophical worldview assumptions that they bring to the study." Social constructivists believe that "individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live." (Creswell, 2009, p.8). As the aim of this study was to explore pre-service teachers' perceptions of teaching Religious Education a qualitative approach informed by this social constructivist worldview was deemed most appropriate.

3.3 Research Design

"Research Design…involves the intersection of philosophy, strategies of enquiry, and specific methods" (Creswell, 2009, p.5). Worldviews generate 3 forms of research approaches: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. There are many ways researchers can collect qualitative data, including the use of interviews, focus groups or case studies. Using a qualitative design provides deep understanding of participants attitudes, viewpoints, experiences, and emotions. This gives researchers deeper and more valuable insights. Qualitative research is beneficial to small scale studies with a limited number of participants in providing a depth of understanding into lived experiences. Quantitative research, however, provides further data for analysis, which can be beneficial when identifying patterns and causes (Denscombe, 2003). Quantitative research involves empirical testing, which in turn provides more reliability and generality than qualitative (MacNaughton, Rolfe & Siraj-Blatchford, 2010). However, the same dept of lived experiences cannot be found through quantitative methods as with qualitative. The defining characteristic of a qualitative study is "The focus is on understanding the meaning of experience, the researcher is the primary instrument in data collection and analysis, the process is inductive, and rich description characterizes the end product" (Merriam, 2009, p. 19). As qualitative research encapsulates human experience, it was deemed the most suitable approach for this study.

3.4 Researcher Positionality

It is human nature to carry personal opinions and biases. Researchers carry with them their own experiences that inform their opinions and perceptions. I identify as a white, Catholic, Irish, woman, and as such I understand the privilege I hold. It is necessary to note this because, as much as it is my hope to be objective in my approach, all elements of research are influenced by personal positionality.

The study of data, "begins and ends with the biography and self of the researcher" Denzin (1989, p.12). As the primary school curriculum is currently under review, I felt it was important to gain insights into the lived experiences of pre-service teachers. The fact that I myself am a pre-service teacher is important to consider. I personally view religion to be quite a personal matter, and I believe change within the Irish educational context is necessary in order to meet the demands of a diversifying Ireland. However, I see great value in Religious Education within the classroom and it is a subject I have thoroughly enjoyed teaching thus far. I therefore view myself to be in a balanced position to undertake this research and have to the best of my ability approached this research as objectively as I could. Active choices are made when analysing and interpreting data, these choices are influenced by personal viewpoints. Thematic analysis was chosen for this study, with the understanding that themes don't inertly emerge, rather the researcher generates them (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.5 Research Participants and Recruitment

A vital part of research is establishing who to include in your study and where to conduct it (Maxwell, 2013). For this research convenience sampling was used. Convenience sampling is a form of nonprobability sampling where individuals in the target population are included in the study. The participants are included if they meet the criteria and are willing to participate (Etikan, 2016). Easy accessibility and availability are also factors to consider when recruiting. In the case of this study, as I am a member of the PME cohort in Marino Institute of Education, I recruited from within the college. Participants from other colleges were also recruited using convenience sampling because using more than one site to recruit from is suggested as good practice (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The participants for this study were all pre-service primary teachers, as they are future primary educators their perceptions are necessary for future implications of RE in Ireland. Participants were all currently in college studying and training to become primary school

teachers at the time of interview. All of the pre-service teachers had experience within classroom sittings in Ireland, such as during school placements. School placement is a key part of pre-service teaching (Teaching Council, 2020). Creswell & Poth (2018) recommend that participants who have experienced the phenomenon being explored will provide deep insights into lived experiences. The number of participants interviewed for this study was eight. Participants involved were currently studying at undergraduate and postgraduate level, from two different teacher education colleges. Newly qualified teachers (NQT) were not included in this study. All religious backgrounds and beliefs were welcomed to take part.

Table 1.1 Participants in the Study

Participant	Gender	Age	Background	Course
1	F	23	Rural	PME 2
2	F	24	Urban	PME 2
3	M	24	Rural	PME 2
4	F	25	Urban	PME 2
5	F	21	Urban	B.Ed. 3
6	M	25	Rural	PME 2
7	F	21	Urban	B.Ed. 3
8	F	25	Urban	PME 2

3.6 Research Schedule

This research began in March 2021 following ethical approval by Student in Ethics Research Committee (SERC). The journey of collecting relevant literature and deepening my own personal understanding began in April-May 2021. All participants were approached via an information letter (See Appendix A) in early January 2022. Once 8 participants had consented to take part (See Consent Form in Appendix B), a pilot interview was then conducted

followed by 8 interviews in late January 2022. The data was then analysed and presented within this thesis in April 2022.

3.7 Data Collection

One to one, semi-structured interviews were deemed appropriate for this study because they can investigate parts of a study that other research methods cannot (Wellington, 2000). This form of interviewing allowed the researcher to prompt participants and gain insights into things that could not be observed such as perceptions, feelings, prejudices, views, and beliefs (Cohen et al., 2007; Wellington, 2000). Semi-structured interviews have many advantages such as gaining insights into lived experiences, they also give the researcher considerable flexibility. The interviewer can approach the interview with a guide of questions and probe for more information. Semi-structured interviews also allow the space for the interviewer to follow the direction of the interviewee, should they deem the direction as important. This can provide a variety of insights. Drawbacks, however, do exist. Interviews can be time consuming, and they can raise anonymity concerns (Cohen et al. 2011). The checklist and guide of questions I used (See Appendix C) to conduct the interviews were based off themes that emerged from the key literature within the area. I was guided by both the questions and themes but also the direction and interaction with the participant. Due to Covid-19 government guidelines and ease for participants and researcher, the interviews took place via Zoom. The interviews were recorded via the record button on Zoom and stored on a password protected file on the researcher's computer.

3.8 Data Analysis

"Data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure, and meaning to the mass of collected data…Qualitative data analysis is a search for general statements about relationships among categories of data…" (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p.111). Braun and Clarke (2006) six step guide to thematic analysis was used to interpret the data. Thematic analysis is a flexible

and accessible method of analysing data, it is a systematic and organised way of identifying patterns and themes that emerge from a data set. Firstly, inductive coding took place. This process allowed the data to tell the story. Hand coding was conducted by reading and identifying repeated words by colour coding (See Appendix D), the context in which the words were repeated was also identified. "Coding is the process of organizing the material into segments of text before bringing any meaning to the information presented'' (Rossman & Rallis, 1998, p.171). When the researcher was familiar with the data by rereading many times and reflecting on its meaning, preliminary codes were generated, followed by final codes. Thematic analysis enables the researcher to understand meanings behind collective lived experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and what significance these meanings have on the research question.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

The main ethical responsibility when conducting research always lies with the individual who is conducting the study (Denscombe, 2012). For this study convenience sampling was used, the results of convenience sampling cannot be generalised to the broader population because of the potential bias (Etikan, 2016). It is also important to note, that sometimes participants can feel pressured into participating because they have a relationship with the researcher. Therefore, it was extremely important at the point of inviting participants, that full details of the nature of the study were provided that clearly outlined that participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw at any point.

Fidelity is a key ethical consideration in all research, it concerns the building of trusting and respectful relationships between the researcher and the participants (Mowbray et al., 2016). Within this study, fidelity was of high importance as participants were sharing personal information about their own religious beliefs and perceptions. All religious beliefs and

backgrounds were welcome to take part in this study and participants views were respected and recorded accurately.

One must be aware of their own beliefs and judgments and how these may have influence over the research. It requires acceptance and acknowledgment that the researcher is a part of the study. To keep track of personal beliefs and own positionality, the researcher kept a reflective journal. Russell and Kelly (2002) found that keeping a reflective journal during research aids researchers in consciously acknowledging their own beliefs rather than trying to control for them through their methods.

The British Association of Educational Research (2011) states that participants must understand the process they are going to be involved in, including why their involvement is needed and how and to whom the results will be presented to. All participants have the right to privacy and confidentiality. Participants were given a pseudonym for the purpose of the findings; their teacher training colleges were not identified, and the interviews were stored in a password protected file. The data from the interviews will be deleted after 6 months. The proposed study was ethically approved by SERC on 10/03/2021 (RERN) is: 14-PME-1-21 (See Appendix E).

3.10 Limitations

It is important to note, that during the research process the following limitations were identified: As this research project is small scale, the results do not suggest a generalisation of pre-service teachers' perceptions of teaching Religious Education but rather, to build upon existing research of the area. The sampling technique used for this study was convenience sampling, again it is important to note that convenience sampling cannot be generalised to the boarder population due to the potential bias (Etikan, 2016). As the researcher invited participants to whom they may have had a relationship with, this may cause bias results. The

researchers' own positionality as a pre-service teacher themselves should also be considered. Qualitative research focuses on opinions, thoughts, viewpoints and feelings and therefore qualitative research can be difficult to replicate due to its unique nature. As this research design is perspective based the results are not statistically representative. Finally, within research social desirability often exists, whereby the participant may tend to answer in a way they view as socially acceptable.

3.11 Conclusion

Within this chapter, the philosophical underpinnings of the study were discussed. A qualitative approach was then rationalised as the most suitable design for this study. The researcher outlined their own positionality. The method in which data collection took place, through semi-structured interviews and then analysed using thematic analysis was justified. Ethical considerations were considered. The chosen sample and recruitment process was outlined and discussed. Limitations of the study were acknowledged.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the main findings that arose from eight semi-structured interviews conducted for this research project. Interviews took place with pre-service teachers from two teacher education colleges across PME and B. Ed programmes. In keeping with qualitative methodology I was keen to gain insights into their perceptions, feelings, prejudices, views, and beliefs regarding the teaching of Religious Education (Cohen et al., 2007). Direct quotations are presented and discussed within this chapter. Through coding of the data, five themes emerged as being the most significant perceptions of the teaching of RE. The themes are as follows:

1. The Value of Teaching RE in Primary School
2. Influences on the Teaching of RE
3. A Desire for Change in Approaches to RE
4. Multi-belief Classrooms and Inclusion
5. Readiness to Teach RE

In the interview participants were initially asked what beliefs they identify with. The majority (62.5%) stated they are Roman Catholic and 12.5% identified with the broader category of Christian. Therefore, while 90% of primary schools in Ireland are run by Christian denominations, 75% of the participants in this study identified as Christian. 25% identified as either atheist or having no religious belief.

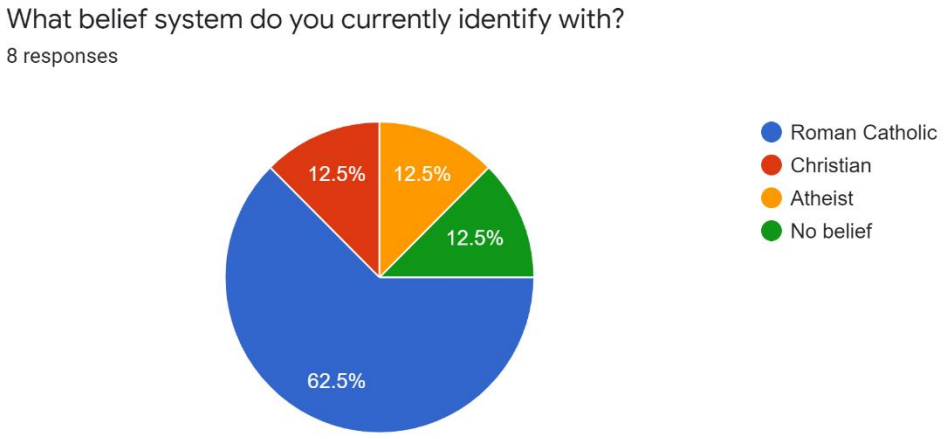


Figure 1.1 Participants Beliefs

4.2 The Value of Teaching RE in Primary School

The value of teaching Religious Education emerged as a prominent theme. Strikingly, all eight participants responded with an affirming 'yes' when asked if they saw value in the subject. The respondents all gave varying reasons for why they believe RE is an important part of the curriculum and what value it offers to children in Irish classrooms today.

> I do see value in the subject. I think it's really important and I think it's a really good thing for people to have a belief system like I don't think you need to be a devoted Christian or any particular Religion but it's nice to know there's something out there. Life can be hard for children especially in this world we live in, so I think it's good to help them establish a belief system to help them through that (Participant 8).

Participant 5 and 3 both outlined that although Religion is not a part of their own lives presently, they believe that people should have the opportunity to engage with it should they wish, and both noted the valuable role it plays in people's lives.

> I do see value in it in a way that it's part of so many people's lives. It's not particularly at the forefront of my life, but I can see where other families might want that and that is 100% fair and I respect that (Participant 5).

> So like I had a granny and stuff like when she was passing away, it was very clear to me like how much her Religion meant to her and who am I to say, you

> know that religion isn't real, or anything like that. It's a belief. It's something that's personal to everyone. And then also if religion can be used to give meaning to people's lives, and to help everyone live in society in a happy, harmonious way, I'm happy to do that (Participant 3).

Five participants stated that they saw Religious Education as a valuable way to discuss thoughts and opinions. Highlighting that it can be a break for children and allows them to re centre and live in the moment.

> Like everyone loved doing it and it was nice break away from academic subjects, like they kinda re centre during it. So it was kind of nice to listen to the music and the stories. Religion was at the core of all that, which everybody enjoyed (Participant 1).

Participant 7 shared this from an Educate Together point of view:

> The kids love it, it’s really good for meaningful conversation and even for opening up and slowing down. It’s not totally academic too.

Kieran & Mullally (2021) found that preservice teachers view RE as an important part of their professional duty as a teacher. This was reflected within this study where a strong sense of duty and value of RE was evident. RE gives teachers the opportunity to create mindful environments and engage in meaningful conversations with the children and allow them to reflect and develop upon their own beliefs and opinions. In a European study, it was found that teachers had positive attitudes towards RE and that the teaching of RE is a vital component within education that has necessary effects on children’s morality, wellbeing, and spiritual development (Niculescu & Norel, 2012). The importance of morality, story, and spirituality emerged on numerous occasions while analysing the data. These themes where generally mentioned when referring to the value of RE.

> I think Religion serves the important purpose to give children morals, discipline, and various things like that (Participant 5).

Participant 2 spoke of story as being a positive way to introduce morality.

> I do think the parables, I actually do think those stories are good, as in like, showing the children maybe the Good Samaritan of how to be good like even in XXX lecture, like I think those stories can help children become kinder caring people.

The above findings echo Fass et al (2015) who argues that RE gives children, school communities and teachers the opportunity to promote kindness, tolerance, compassion, empathy, and respect by giving children the opportunity to enter meaningful conversations. This can be seen when the participants speak of the importance of teaching morality and giving children the space to share thoughts and opinions.

4.3 Influences on the Teaching of RE

It has been widely recognised that if individuals are to contribute to a democratic and pluralistic society, they must have an appreciation and understanding of individual religious beliefs and backgrounds (White, 2009). McCreery (2005) states that teachers' individual religious beliefs and own personal religious background has a direct link to how they teach RE. Participants were asked about their own personal religious background and or current beliefs. The participants were asked if they believed their beliefs would influence their teaching, 7 out of the 8 participants agreed that it will have an influence.

> I believe in things like afterlife, spirituality and being grateful and like I can see how those kinda things would influence my teaching because I'm more open to fostering those kinds of conversations (Participant 7).

Participant 5 spoke of how their belief system does not play an important role in their life and acknowledged how this will have an influence:

> I don't see it as being the be all, or very important, so I can see how then I probably won't be that focused on it in my class.

Similarly, participant 6 acknowledged how their conflicts with their belief system over the years will influence their teaching:

> My journey like that is undoubtably going to influence but because, I've been through such a spectrum with it I'm very open to having any conversation.

Some participants referred to recent referenda and the evolving Irish attitude towards the Catholic Church. This change in attitude has undoubtably had a ripple effect on people's perceptions of teaching Religious Education. Participant 3 openly describes their experience at home:

> And then I suppose as my parents got older, you know, like, various referendums came up for debate and new stories or whatever. Yeah, people kind of, got educated on like, kind of how the world works today. I think then my parents realised, and then I suppose discussions were had at home that like, you know, religion isn't the be all and end all like maybe it did things for our country that were good, but it did a lot of bad things.

However, participant 4 stated that because religion doesn't play an important role in their life that this will result in an unbiased approach:

> I'm not religious at all so I won't be bringing any beliefs forward into my teaching as such, which I think is good.

This mirrors McCreery (2005) who found that pre-service teachers who expressed a lack of commitment to religion as a feature that would benefit them when teaching RE. It is important to note that although participant 4 and the findings from McCreery (2005) suggest not bringing any belief forward into their teaching, non-belief is widely considered to be a belief in and of itself. The question is then posed; is it possible to be value free in our approach? Martin & Van

Guntan, (2002) suggest reflecting and discussing these personal beliefs in order for teachers to be aware of how they may influence their teaching.

The findings of this study support that of Everington et al (2011) whereby teachers in a wide variety of countries all recognised that there is a relationship between their own personal beliefs and their perceptions of RE. This contrasts to the findings by Heinz et al (2018) whereby teacher applicants were found to disagree with the suggestion that personal beliefs may influence their teaching.

6 out of 8 participants spoke of how they had positive experiences of RE in primary school and thus, they tended to see the value in it. McCreery (2005) found that positive attitudes towards teaching religion quite often stemmed from positive experiences of religion growing up. The participants often mentioned how they had a meaningful experience teaching it during their school placements which in turn may have added to their belief that the subject holds a valuable place in the curriculum. The participants, when asked about their own primary school experience generally mentioned the use of story and music as a means of teaching RE and this may be an explanation as to why many of the participants spoke of using it in their teaching today. Subedi (2006) describes how often pre-service teachers want to teach in schools and in a way that reflects their own past school experience.

> My experience, I would say was very positive, like you could tell everyone enjoyed doing it and there was a sense of community to it too (Participant 1).

> The stories, the music, and the little dramas I always enjoyed it and have done similar on placement and enjoyed it (Participant 8).

> The positive experiences I had will filter in my teaching, like the music and stories definitely (Participant 2).

4.4 A Desire for Change in Approaches to RE

Many of the participants spoke of how they plan on teaching or have taught RE in a manner which reflects their own personal experiences which supports Zimpher & Ashburn (1992). However, a desire for change in approaches to RE was evident from the participants. The participants outlined the need for more training in relation to world religions and beliefs, ways to foster inclusion, the expectation of 30 minutes a day of direct RE teaching in Catholic schools, and to focus more on spirituality. The participants openly addressed how their perceptions of RE have changed in recent times and how RE as a curriculum subject should in turn be ever evolving and changing. Many of the participants indicated that they would rather focus on fostering children's personal spirituality rather than teaching RE in a specific faith forming manner. One participant suggested that today's primary school teachers are probably more suited to teaching about spirituality and meaning rather than about or through specific belief systems. Participant 5: 'Like First Holy Communion, I feel a lot of people aren't fully qualified to teach that as much as let's say meaning and spirituality.' Other terms such as 'higher power', 'something bigger', 'afterlife', 'sense of something' were also mentioned by various participants which indicates that perhaps personal spirituality is valued among the participants. Participant 1 offered an insight by stating:

> I think it should be more on spirituality more than teaching about God or their religion. So like, I'd focus on like the individual and them spiritually and recognising their gifts and talents rather than it being all about God if that make sense, or prayers or songs even I think more about themselves.

> I think things like open debates or critical thinking, room for that kinda thing, you know, spirituality, get more out of stories, let's say, instead of absolute isms is important to kids. I think that's the way to go (Participant 6).

This echoes Binder (2011) who argues that educators need to embrace and foster spirituality in primary classrooms as it aids both child and teacher to connect to experiences about oneself

and others and it creates a non-judgmental mindful environment that allow teachers to explore children's emotions and feelings.

Participant 2 speaks of a radical change of the subject:

> Maybe we could get away from the intense religious side and maybe was a combination with SPHE type thing.

Participant 5 also outlined a want for change, based off an experience they had during school placement.

> I think it's a lot to put on children particularly I remember when I was on school placement the children were able to rhyme off prayers better than they could rhyme off anything else.

Participant 4 describes change in a broader sense, and as being something that we need to reflect upon.

> Maybe it's something we need to revaluate, as families, as a society.

When the participants were asked if they would be happy to teach RE daily when qualified, the Patrons Half Hour naturally came up. There was a strong sense from all participants that this isn't happening in any classrooms they've been in and that it needs to be re-evaluated.

> I'd feel nervous about teaching it every day. Religion can just seem like an overload especially if there are children in your class that don't identify with that religion. Like just to teach Catholic religion, what do the others do? (Participant 4).

This is consistent with feelings expressed by many teachers across Ireland regarding the need for more 'realistic alternatives' to how they can best accommodate children of other faiths and non-religious beliefs during RE time (O'Brien, 2017).

Participant 8 describes an experience they had during school placement:

> Like the teachers I've worked with so far have had it down on their timetable for every day, but they've all said 'I never get around to it' because there's always so much else going on.

This reflects a study conducted in Catholic schools in Ireland whereby, 28% of teachers did not teach RE daily and 5.6% rarely or never taught it (Dineen, 2009). The participants voiced how they preferred teaching other subjects over 30 minutes of RE daily.

> I'd rather spend an hour on PE or wellbeing and like that has to come from somewhere. So it would be difficult to get that half an hour in (Participant 7).

The participants feelings and viewpoints on the need for change are consistent with the literature surrounding the teaching of RE today and reflect what Coolahan et al (2012) describe as a clear and evident need for restructuring of Religious Education in Irish primary schools.

4.5 Multi-belief Classrooms and Inclusion

As Ireland now represents a religiously diverse country and population, teachers in denominational schools are being faced with the daily challenge of catering for many different beliefs. Implementing and creating inclusive environments can be a complex task (Shevlin et al, 2009). Progress is being made particularly following the publication of the Catholic School Partnership (CSP) in 2015, however, ongoing guidance and support is needed as the diverse nature of Irish primary classrooms continue to evolve.

Inclusion came up for each participant with 6 out of the 8 participants using words such as ‘nervous’, ‘underprepared’, ‘challenging’, ‘unsure’, ‘fears’, when speaking about catering for religiously diverse classrooms. The two participants who used more positive language such as ‘happy to do it’, ‘suits me more’, ‘I feel at home’, ‘comfortable’ and ‘prepared’, unsurprisingly had completed school placements and or attended multi-denominational schools themselves. This echoes Everington (2011) who argues that those who experienced cultural and religious diversity growing up and have been surrounded by people of other faiths, feel comfortable entering conversations about differences in beliefs.

Two participants spoke strongly from their own experiences of how inclusion should be at the forefront of RE.

> I have seen how those who weren’t Catholic weren’t included, I wouldn’t want to bring that forward into my teaching. I want to make sure that all beliefs are taken into consideration and that my classroom is welcoming and caters for all (Participant 4).

> I love Educate Together because of the openness and the thing is you make sure the kids are comfortable, valued and included and that’s the main thing (Participant 7).

5 out of 8 participants mentioned how they believed classrooms are not inclusive when children must be removed for lessons.

> As teachers, we need to put something in place to make sure that children aren’t just sitting in a corner of the classroom for isolated periods of time (Participant 1).

Participant 6 described conflicting values as being an issue. McCreery (2005) speaks of how it can be difficult for pre-service teachers to take an unbiased approach to RE. Kieran & Mullally (2021) found pre-service teachers expressed a disconnect between their own beliefs and the curriculum content, leading to uncertainty, this is reflected in participant 6’s statement:

> I would definitely be apprehensive, having the opinions I have and having conflicting feelings. Yeah, it's so tricky to manage.

Participant 5 states 'I am not well versed on any world religion, so I do feel underprepared', however explains:

> I'm willing to put in the work, and I will read into everything to make sure I'm not offending anyone; I think it's so important to teach about all religions like no religion is better than the other and I respect them all.

For all participants, teaching about world religions was something they expressed a desire to do. The participants recognised and respected religious diversity, similarly, (Kieran et al, 2020) found student teachers to have an overwhelming positive attitude to religious diversity in society. Heinz et al (2018) found that individuals from religious backgrounds had a shared belief with those of non-religious groups that teaching about all world views and faiths is of high importance. This supports the findings of the REDco Research Project (2006-2009) (See Chapter 2). Participants 5, 6 and 1 referred to not wanting to offend or discriminate against anyone. Often student teachers can create links between religion, fear, and discrimination (Kieran et al, 2020). In this context, the relevance of continued education and dialogue with people of a variety of beliefs will aid students in overcoming such fears (Garfinkel, 2008; Milner, 2003).

4.6 Readiness to Teach RE

When concluding the interviews, the participants were asked when they think of themselves as an NQT do they feel adequately prepared to teach RE. Comments arose which I espouse as an important representation of the pre-service teachers' perceptions. There was a mixture of both feelings of uncertainty and nervousness, with some participants describing feeling as ready as they could be and describe how they will learn and self-educate as they progress.

Participant 1: “I honestly don’t, mostly because of the multicultural society we’re living in, I just simply feel I don’t know enough, and it does make me nervous.”

Participant 2: “I don’t think I’m fully prepared, I’ll have to do my own research especially in regard to non-beliefs and other belief systems”

Participant 4: “With my diverse experience in schools and from the lectures in college which gave us a great insight into religious diversity, I do feel prepared, but it will come down to more experience”

It was evident there was uncertainty and worry from the majority of participants which echoes McCreery (2005) and Kieran et al (2020) whereby pre-service teachers were found to feel disconnected towards curriculum content. 6 out of 8 participants expressed feeling unprepared to teach with 3 stating that they did not receive adequate support on how to manage Catholic RE programmes and religiously diverse classrooms. Kieran & Mullally (2021) found similar with 37% of participants in the study feeling underprepared and describing a lack of input from their teacher education course. This finding raises concern and highlights a need for ITE programmes to better prepare students to teach RE in an increasingly secular and diverse Ireland. McCreery (2005) states how feelings of ambivalence lead to preservice teachers struggling to manage their own views in the classroom. However, there was an acknowledgment from most that the teaching of RE will only improve with time and experience in the classroom. Participants 4, 7 and 2 spoke of feeling more prepared following their experience in a religiously diverse classroom during school placement, this mirrors Kieran & Mullally (2021) where preservice teachers expressed feeling comfortable teaching about different beliefs while on school placement. This also supports the participants acknowledgement that experience plays an important role in feeling prepared and confident. Subedi (2006) and Faas et al (2015) suggest that teacher training programmes need to ensure

they place a large emphasis on religious diversity during RE lecture time, as the preservice teachers will undoubtedly be teaching children that come from a wide variety of different backgrounds and beliefs. It is recommended that preservice teachers should engage in meaningful conversations about diverse religious beliefs in order to better equip them when they embark on their teaching careers (Milner 2003; Subedi, 2006).

4.7 Conclusion

Analysing the data, offered the researcher significant and invaluable insights into perceptions of preservice teachers towards the teaching of Religious Education. These findings allowed the researcher to explore how prepared the participants feel towards teaching RE, the value they place on the curriculum area, the influence of the personal beliefs on their perceptions, the challenges they face, and their desire for change in approaches. The findings in the chapter reflected much of the current and available literature, which can be seen in Chapter 2.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

The aim of this chapter is to respond to the research questions, to provide a summary of the main findings that emerged from this study and to highlight some recommendations.

5.1 Response to the Research Questions

The aim of this study is to ascertain pre-service teachers' perceptions of teaching RE in the Irish primary school classroom. The researcher gained important insights into how eight pre-service teachers perceive teaching the curriculum subject. The three key research questions identified in Chapter 1 were:

1. What impact do individual's religious backgrounds/beliefs have on perceptions of teaching RE?
2. What are preservice teachers' perceptions of teaching RE?
3. How do preservice teachers' feel towards teaching in religiously diverse classrooms?

In response to research question one, it was clear that participants placed a large emphasis on the importance of teaching about different beliefs and world religions echoing Heinz et al (2018). Participants spoke of an increase in secularism, ethnic and religious diversity in Ireland. Even though 62.5% of the participants identified as Catholic, they acknowledged on numerous occasions that Ireland has seen much change in recent years, which undoubtedly has led to mixed feelings of the involvement of the Catholic Church in the public education system. For some participants, the changing demographics of Irish primary classrooms has led to a desire for a more inclusive schooling system whereby RE programmes and sacramental preparation in Catholic schools are more inclusive to all. Although acknowledging the importance of catering for multi-belief classrooms, 6 participants expressed nervousness, uncertainty and a

lack of confidence when considering themselves as an NQT teaching in multi-belief classrooms.

In response to research question two, 7 out of the 8 participants acknowledged how their own personal beliefs and backgrounds will influence their teaching of RE in a mixture of positive and or negative ways. Participants gave varying reasons for this such as conflicting opinions they have towards religion, limited role religion plays in their life currently, their own upbringing and most notably their own primary school experience, with 7 out of the 8 participants describing their primary school experience as being positive. The findings of this research question both support and contradict the most recent findings. Everington et al (2011) reported similar findings of teachers recognising the relationship between their own personal beliefs and their perceptions of RE, however, contradicting Heinz et al (2018) whereby teacher applicants were found to disagree with the suggestion that personal beliefs may affect their teaching.

Responses to research question three yields important insights into the lived experiences of the participants. Comments emerged regarding participants readiness to teach RE, which the researcher espouses as an important representation of the pre-service teachers' perceptions. There was a mixture of feelings of uncertainty and nervousness from the majority with descriptions of fears they had in relation to knowledge on world religions and not wanting to discriminate against anyone. This mirrored much of the literature seen in Chapter 2. Conflicting opinions also emerged as being a challenge, with personal beliefs contradicting curriculum content. Three participants described feeling prepared to teach RE, explaining how they will learn over time and will self-educate as they progress through their careers. The participants all recognised the value of RE as a subject and citing reasons such as its use as a tool to facilitate meaningful conversations with children about morality, spiritual development, and an opportunity to create mindful environments.

5.2 Recommendations

Through qualitative research methods the preservice teachers interviewed were able to share their feelings, opinions, and viewpoints on the teaching of RE, which led to some interesting findings, observations, and highlighted recommendations. The requirements and demands placed upon teachers when teaching the subject can be challenging. In this context, I would recommend larger research to encompass how primary school teachers are navigating the teaching of RE. It would also be invaluable to conduct a longitudinal study. As this is an area of continual evolution and change, it would be both extremely interesting and beneficial to see how that change progresses. A mixed method approach involving a greater number of participants would provide more insight into the topic. From this, a deeper and more solid overview and necessary understanding would emerge, which in turn would greatly benefit policy, school communities, teachers and third level institutions. From my analysis of the available literature, I would argue there is a need for structured, simple, and implementable guidelines for schools and third level institutes as to how to navigate many of the common challenges faced by teachers. Along with, opportunities for teachers and students to engage in CPD such as opportunities to reflect on their own beliefs and experiences, and chances to engage in interfaith dialogue. Teachers can then continuously learn from others, as education has been found to be one of the most effective contributions in fostering respectful attitudes towards religious diversity (Freathy & Parker, 2010). I would argue there is also a clear gap in the literature in relation to the value teachers and preservice teachers place on RE. Although this emerged as a significant and interesting finding in this research, there are limited recent studies to support such findings.

5.3 Closing Comment

This study, although small scale in nature, contributes to the available literature on perceptions of teaching RE. It is my hope that this study can contribute in some way to an important conversation. No two teachers share the same teaching style, no two teachers have the same perceptions of a curriculum subject or place equal importance on all. We carry with us our own personal perceptions. Religious Education is a subject that at base level should enable children to develop and evolve as people, become kind, empathic and respectful of all. Teachers possess a tremendous power to instil these within children through Religious Education, as Dr. Haim Ginott states

> "I have come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in my classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. I possess tremendous power to make life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration"

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Appendices

Appendix A – Information Letter



Pre-Service Teachers' Perceptions of Teaching Religious Education

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

I am a final year student studying the Professional Master of Education in Marino Institute of Education. This research will explore Pre-Service Teachers' Perceptions of Teaching Religious Education with the aims of:

1. Investigating how teachers feel towards teaching in religiously diverse classrooms.
2. What impact individuals own religious backgrounds/beliefs has on their perceptions of teaching RE.
3. Examining pre-service teachers' perceptions about teaching RE.

As the primary curriculum is being reviewed, this research is interested in exploring the role of RE in primary schools and the perceptions pre-service teachers have about the subject. It is important to explore these perceptions as pre-service teachers are the future educators, their opinions are key to gain deeper insights into the future teaching of RE.

This dissertation research is being supervised by Dr. Aiveen Mullally. Only my supervisor, the research methods course leader, and I will have access to the personal data you provide. You are free to contact the course leader, Clíodhna Martin (cliodhna.martin@mie.ie) should you have any questions or concerns about the study.

PARTICIPATING IN THIS RESEARCH

Participation in this research involves a 20–25-minute interview. The interview will explore your memories of RE in primary school, your experiences of teaching RE on school placements, your feelings towards teaching in religiously diverse classrooms and confidence towards teaching the subject area. If you consent to the interview, it will take place on Zoom and will be recorded via the record function

on Zoom.

Your participation is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw from this research for any or no reason, and at any time. The information you provide will only be used for the purpose of exploring the research question set out above and will not be reused. In line with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) legislation, only essential personal data will be collected, and all identifiers will be disaggregated from the data as soon as possible after collection. MIE will be the Data Controller for GDPR purposes. With your consent, your personal data will be shared with my research supervisor but not with any other third party. Personal data will be destroyed upon completion of the research dissertation.

When reporting on the information you provide, your data will be presented using pseudonyms. Your anonymised data will be aggregated with information from other participants and documentary sources. Anonymised data will be shared in my dissertation and other research related activities e.g. presentations, journals, conferences.

Kind regards,

Niamh O'Reilly

Professional Masters of Education

Noreillypme20@momail.mie.ie

0863479954

Appendix B – Consent Form



Pre-Service Teachers' Perceptions of Teaching Religious Education

Consent Form

If you are happy to participate in this study, please complete the following consent form and return it to me by email at noreillypme20@momail.mie.ie

I understand and agree that:

- I am over 18 years of age
- The Project Information has been communicated to me
- I am aware that I can withdraw from this project at any time up to when my data has been anonymised and amalgamated
- I will participate voluntarily without incentive
- My data being treated with confidentiality and anonymity
- I will take part in 20-25 minute interview
- My interview will be recorded using zoom record function
- My personal data may be shared with the research supervisor
- My anonymised data may be shared in this dissertation and via other research activities as they arise.

Name (PRINTED): _____

Name (Signature): _____

Date: _____

Appendix C – Interview Guide of Questions

Possible Interview Questions: (not necessarily in this order, the researcher will follow the flow of the interview and ask Q's they feel are most appropriate in the moment)

1. **For the purpose of data collection can you tell me:**

- Your age and gender
- What year you are in
- Are you from a rural or urban background?
- What belief system do you currently identify with?

2. Is your belief important to you? How regularly do you practice your religion if at all? How committed would you say you are to your belief?

3. What type of school did you attend? (Catholic, Church of Ireland, Community National etc) can you tell me a bit about your memories of RE in that school?

- Do you think your experiences/memories of RE when you were in school influence your teaching of it today?

4. Can you tell me about your experience of teaching RE on school placement or when subbing?

- Did you find it to be a positive experience or challenging? Can you elaborate?
- Can you tell me if your perception of RE changed at all after teaching it?

5. When you are qualified will you teach RE every day?

- How do you feel about teaching it every day?

- If teaching in a Catholic school, will you engage in prayer with the children every day?

6. Can you tell me if you see value in the subject? (Probe: why/why not?)

7. Do you view teaching RE as a personal matter or something you view as a professional duty? (If it hasn't already been mentioned)

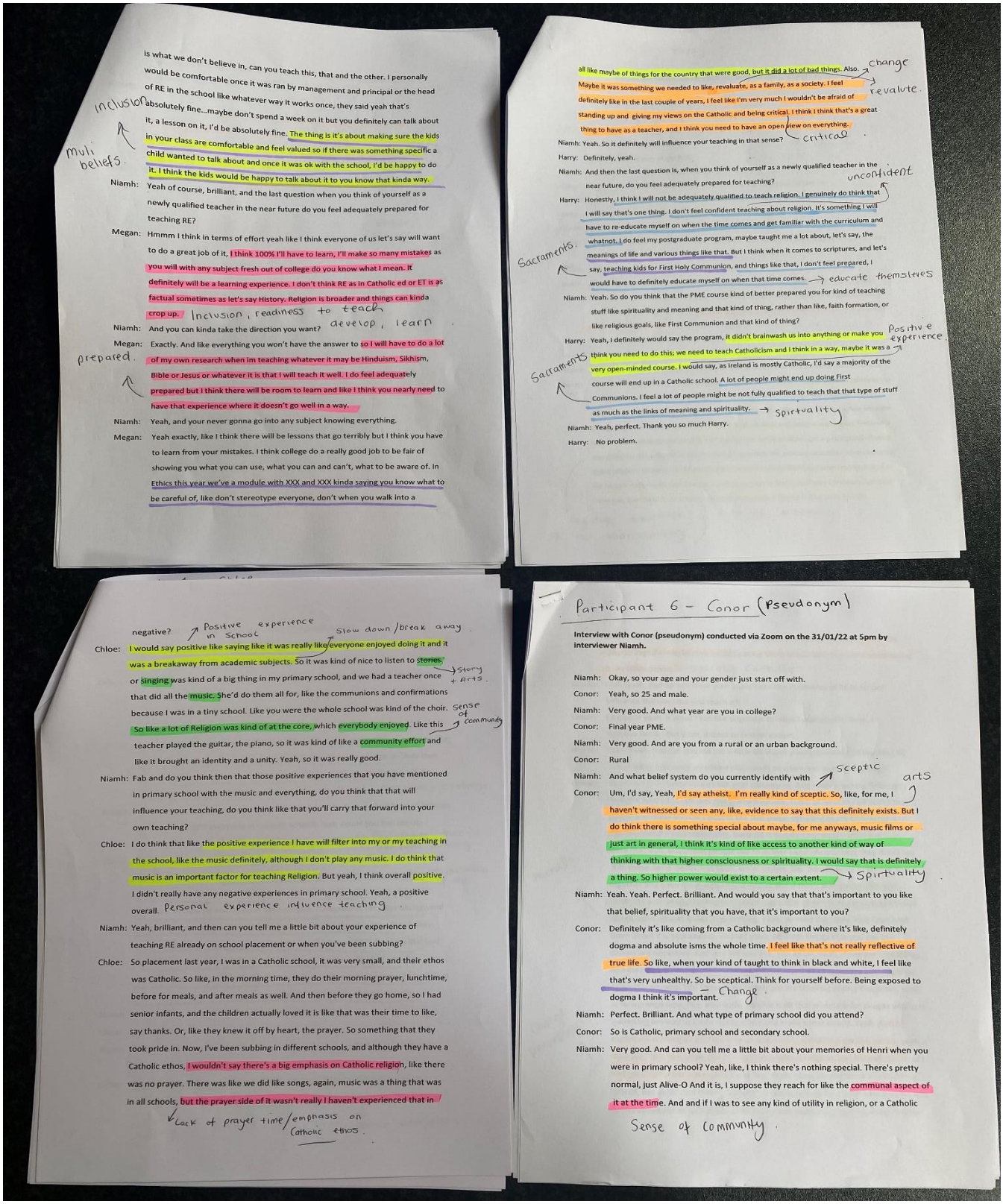
8. How do you feel about teaching in a religiously diverse classroom?

- Why? What's your fears about that? (If relevant/if it hasn't already been mentioned)
- Do you feel comfortable teaching about non-religious beliefs?

9. Do you believe your own background and beliefs influence your teaching? (Probe: why/why not?)

10. When you think of yourself as a newly qualified teacher in the near future, do you feel adequately prepared for teaching RE?

Appendix D – Image of Coding Process



Appendix E – Ethical Approval

Ms. O'Reilly

12.03.2021

Ref# SERC-10-03-21-14-PME-1-21

Research Focus/ Title: Academic Year 2020/2021 PME1

Dear Niamh,

Thank you for your submission to the Student Ethics in Research Committee. Your application was reviewed 10.03.2021 at the SERC Committee meeting and has been approved. Please note, your approval is conditional on your research instrument(s) being approved by your allocated supervisor prior to commencing data collection.

Please note for all future correspondence (including emails) that your Research Ethics Reference Number (RERN) is: 14-PME-1-21