Family and school influences on the religious practice and spiritual lives of Catholic adolescents

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and spiritual lives of Catholic adolescents

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Educational Doctorate
Submitted as a requirement for a
Doctorate of Education degree

Submission date: 19 September 2013
Thesis Declaration

I certify that the work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original, except as acknowledged in the text, and that the material has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.

I acknowledge that I have read and understood the University's rules, requirements, procedures and policy relating to my higher degree research award and to my thesis. I certify that I have complied with the rules, requirements, procedures and policy of the University (as they may be from time to time).

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Abstract

In Australia, levels of engagement with religious practice and understanding of Catholic spirituality have been in decline. These declines have become increasingly evident within families and students in Catholic schools, even for those who have an active faith life. While acknowledging the traditional role of the family and the Catholic school in fostering the religious and spiritual lives of young people, the very nature of these institutions is increasingly complex. As part of a larger longitudinal study (Rymarz, Graham, & Shipway, 2008), the views of Catholic students about the influence of these two institutions were sought on two occasions from a cohort in Year 5 and again in Year 7.

In seeking clarification into a number of issues raised through these studies, this study reports on the findings of a third set of interviews with seven of the same students when enrolled in Year 9. Using narrative inquiry, the students were invited to reflect upon current and past experiences in providing perspectives on how family and Catholic school influence their religious practice and spiritual lives. Based on these findings the research identifies how students’ views and practices have changed over time and posits four areas for renewing families and Catholic schools as structures of plausibility.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my appreciation for the support and encouragement of the following people.

I am extremely grateful to Dr Brad Shipway, as my principal supervisor, for his continued commitment to my study. Brad’s expert guidance and insightful analysis enabled me to maintain my progress during the development and reporting of this research study.

I am also deeply indebted to Professor Anne Graham, as co-supervisor, for her professional support and advice. Anne’s wisdom and analytical abilities were invaluable in keeping me continually focused upon my goal. Brad and Anne’s welcoming and approachable nature provided a great sense of companionship during my study.

I would like to acknowledge the continued support of Mr David Condon, Director of Lismore Catholic Schools Office and the support of the Catholic Schools Office. In particular, I am grateful for the support of Dr John Graham, Assistant Director, School Evangelisation and Catechesis, Lismore Catholic Schools Office for his interest, support and encouragement over many years. I am indebted to his personal and professional support that helped me to balance work, family and study.

Finally, I am eternally grateful to my family and close friends who have encouraged me over the years. The completion of this study is a tribute to my wife, Alison, sons Thomas and David, daughters Claire and Elise and my parents Del and Reg. I am indebted to their unending support and the patience and love provided within my family.
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<td>AIHW</td>
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<td>CCYP</td>
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<td>Lismore Catholic Schools Office</td>
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<td>MCEETYA</td>
<td>Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs</td>
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<td>NCEC</td>
<td>National Catholic Education Commission</td>
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<td>NFCYM</td>
<td>National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry</td>
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<td>NSWDET</td>
<td>New South Wales Department of Education and Training</td>
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<td>NSYR</td>
<td>National Study of Youth and Religion</td>
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<td>RE</td>
<td>Religious Education</td>
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<td>SEACS</td>
<td>School Evangelisation and Catechetical Services Team</td>
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<td>UN</td>
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1 Introduction

This study explores the perspectives of young Catholic adolescents regarding the influence of families and Catholic schools on their religious practices and spiritual lives over time. The research is placed within a Christian educational context where spiritually is positioned as relational (de Souza, 2004; Hay & Nye, 2006; Ranson, 2002) and given form through a framework of religious beliefs and practice (Hanvey & Carroll, 2005). However, while young people continue to report their spiritual hunger and deeply felt relational needs (LCSO, 2009b), there are sharply declining levels of engagement by students in Catholic schools with religious practice and understanding of Catholic spirituality (Engebretson, 2004; Maroney, 2007; Ratican, 2004). Many young people are unable to articulate confidently how their faith informs the way they live (Dean, 2010; Mason, Singleton, & Webber, 2010; Smith & Snell, 2009). While some might argue there has been an inadequate response to such a significant shift away from religious practice and understandings of Christian spirituality (McCarty, in Morrow & Wong, 2013), others have suggested the Catholic Church has acted both globally, (The New Evangelisation for the Transmission of the Christian faith, 2012) and locally (Catholic Schools at a Crossroads, 2007), by re-examining the methods used in Catholic schools to influence the religious practices and spiritual lives of young Catholics.

This small-scale study takes place at a time when further questions need to be asked about what we know of the perspectives of young people in relation to such matters, and how Catholic education has responded, particularly given their views have largely been silenced or marginalized (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000). The limited evidence that does exist suggests their perspective is quite different from those of adults (Acock & Bengston, 1980). Moreover, where similar research in the past has sought the voice of students, a focus seems to be upon students during mid-adolescence, late secondary school or during transition into adulthood (Flynn & Mok, 2002; Mason, Singleton, & Webber, 2007). Yet the transition from primary to secondary school seems to be a “hinge-point” in the formation of the future religious patterns of young Catholic adolescents, pointing to the need to inquire into the views of young people at this earlier time (Barna, 2006; Smith & Snell, 2009).
This study therefore invites young adolescents to reflect retrospectively on the influence of family and of Catholic schooling on their religious and spiritual lives during the time of transition from primary to secondary school. Hearing the views of young people in other contexts has been shown to be instrumental in helping to ensure policy and practice is relevant to their lives, needs and circumstances (Kirby, Lanyon, Cronin, & Sinclair, 2003; Sayer, 2008). This could be no more important than it is at the current time when so many young people no longer affiliate with formal religion (Kay & Francis, 1996; Mason et al., 2007; NFCYM, 2004) and when life for the average young Catholic is markedly different than for previous generations.

1.1 A changing context for faith formation

While young Catholic adolescents come to understand their world within the relationships and community of families and Catholic schools (Kessler, 2000; Ranson, 2002), they also experience a world significantly different from that of their parents and grandparents (D'Orsa & D'Orsa, 2010). Popular culture and a burgeoning use of communication technologies and availability of information has changed the social spaces young people occupy, including how they approach relationships and “do” community. D’Orsa and D’Orsa (2010, p. 95) suggest “multiple levels of global inter-connectedness” compresses our sense of time and space while other writers claim time spent with families has been colonized by the merging of the boundaries between work and home (Bunting, 2004). The way families form, have children and live their lives is also increasingly diverse (AIFS, 2012, 2011) while relationship breakdown is more common resulting in substantial numbers of children and young people spending their time across two households (Qu & Weston, 2008). Complexity of connectedness brings new but indiscriminate information, a fragmented experience of life where diverse narratives and myths, many other than Christian, compete for their attention of young people (Carr, 2006; D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2010). Thus, families are challenged to build or sustain religious narratives, and while many traditional support structures offered to parents in their role as faith educators have disappeared, new possibilities are appearing (High-Wire Act Cyber-Safety and the Young Interim Report, 2011; Roberto, 2007).
Declining affiliation with formalized religion has coincided with these developments and nearly one in three young Australians aged 15 to 34 no longer report religious affiliation (ABS, 2012). Even within those families where religion is valued, the ability or willingness of parents to engage in dialogue with their children about religious matters has been questioned (Proctor, 1996; Smith, 1998). This is significant since engaging in such conversations has been shown to facilitate individual, familial and communal faith narratives and is an important predictor of whether children will choose to endorse familial faith patterns (Boyatzis & Newman, 2004; Dollahite & Marks, 2005; Ozorak, 1989). Even parents of “core” Catholic youth\(^1\) appear to be less inclined or less able to share their faith on a personal level (Rymarz, 2004; Rymarz & Graham, 2005), which some suggest is concerning given that religious affiliation can be among the most deeply held beliefs parents and families wish to impart to their children (Nooney, 2006). This shift in the ability or willingness of even the most committed parents to share their faith signals deep challenges for the Catholic Church in evangelizing its youth. Historically, one of the central sites for such evangelization and for the transmission of faith has been the Catholic school.

1.2 The changing nature of Australian Catholic schools

The broader social and familial changes signalled above are in many cases reflected in the changed environment of Catholic schools where at one time, “nearly all students in Catholic schools were Catholic” (NCEC, 2007, p. 29). Catholic education is now a desirable educational option for a much wider demographic and the profile of young people and their families in Catholic schools is becoming increasingly diverse and in many ways much more “demanding and discerning” (Rymarz, 2011, p. 23). For some time now, many schools have planned with a presumption that the majority of children have little familiarity with their Catholic faith tradition (Liddy, 2007) and are disengaged from the liturgical life of the school or local Parish.

It is also important that students who share similar core beliefs and practices have the opportunity to network with similar others (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001).

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\(^1\) Fulton et al (2000) described “core Catholic youth” as aged 18 to 30 and as having a pre-existing connection with parish communities through membership of families that display a close connection with the worshipping community.
However, many children with prior connections with their faith tradition now interact with an increasingly diverse set of friends, many of who hold alternative views of a religious and spiritual nature (NCEC, 2011, 2007; Sebald, 1986). Similarly, while the profile of peers is changing, the profile of teachers in Catholic schools has also changed. The primary role of the teacher in a Catholic school is as a witness to faith; teachers in the Religious Education classroom not only propose the content, but at the same time also pose as an example of an expression of that content lived out daily (Rossiter & Crawford, 2006). However, their ability to enact this role faithfully is in many cases now limited through increasing demands upon their time and energy (Galton, MacBeath, Page, & Steward, 2002; Hackett, 2006), or through an increasing independence of the institutional Catholic Church (Dixon, 2003; McLaughlin, 2005; Tinsey, 1998).

Of particular interest to this study is the transition period from primary to secondary school, which seems to be traditionally accompanied by a decline in interest in Religious Education (Flynn & Mok, 2002). While Hughes (2007) found younger students inquisitive about their religion and naturally inclined to ask questions, some teachers simultaneously view the teaching of Religious Education in secondary school a “health hazard” (Kenyon, 2010). D’Orsa (2013, p. 71) suggests this reflects a shift from the “hermeneutics of trust” - where children learn based on their own experience and what their parents and teachers tell them - to the “hermeneutics of suspicion” - where they are taught to question what they have learned as well as what people present to them in class, at home and through the media. This task is increasingly complex as religious educators now face a dilemma in setting out to:

educate young people in the Catholic tradition, through a religion curriculum framed within traditional Catholic cultural religious meanings. But most of their students have little identification with this authoritative view. Rather, in tune with the very different cultural meanings that frame their thinking, they tend to regard religion as an optional resource for living. (Rossiter, 2011, p. 57)

Thus, the need for trustworthy significant others to be involved in the teaching-learning process at this time is an imperative since it is at this time the gap noted above begins to widen between “what young people know and what they really believe.” (D’Orsa, 2013, p. 71)
Some writers suggest that Religious Education in Catholic schools needs to remain relevant, cognitively challenging and interesting (Rymarz, 1999). At the same time, others (Buchanan, 2005, 2012; Coles, 1990; de Souza, 2003; McClure, 1996) claim accentuating the cognitive has led to Religious Education being seen purely as acquisition of knowledge thus hindering the spiritual development of children. Hence, it is understandable that teachers are confused as to how to best approach the teaching of content in the Religious Education classroom (Kenyon, 2010), while young people also perceive religious knowledge as a “grey area” (Hughes, 2007), with attempts to teach religious knowledge as if it were similar to science, history or other forms of knowledge generating considerable resistance. Given this, there is a need to identify how students perceive their experience of teachers and Religious Education at this time. These are all important considerations yet while the perspectives of parents, teachers and Religious Education Coordinators have been sought in studies related to Religious Education (Finn, 2011; Fleming, 2002; Wanden, 2011), no contemporary systematic effort has been made to seek the views of students.

The changing nature of the family and Catholic school, as outlined above, and the complex interaction of these social institutions, present quite significant challenges in understanding the influences on young people’s religious and spiritual lives. However, as Bezzina (2008, p.7) has commented, “our sense of the purpose of Catholic schools has never been limited to passing on knowledge. We have seen them as agents of catechesis in a great many ways, beyond the Religious Education classroom.” Much confusion and contestation arises from disparate views concerning the role of the Catholic school in meeting faith outcomes previously the domain of the family and parish (McLaughlin, 2005). This ambiguity and the problematic nature of influencing the religious practice and spiritual lives of Catholic young adolescents has also been identified within Tinsey’s (1998) research in secondary schools in one regional Diocese. This research showed that

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2 A significant number of distinct but related terms make up the knowledge base underpinning this inquiry. The most important of these include: Catholic schools and families evangelize, (transmit faith) through the process of Religious Education, a term inclusive of catechesis and religious instruction. Catechesis is primarily concerned with faith formation (Moran, 1991). Religious Education in a Catholic school is different from, and complementary to, parish and family catechesis. While Religious Education in the Catholic school should attempt to convey a sense of the nature of Christianity, the orientation of the classroom program is not catechetical. However, it would be an over simplification to polarize the role of Catholic schools as distinct from that of families. Religious instruction is able to strengthen a personal relationship with Christ just as catechesis is able to impart knowledge about the Christian life.
while there was agreement between teachers and priests as to the importance of meeting the religious and spiritual needs of adolescents, there is confusion as to how to meet these needs. There were difficulties in terms of priorities, largely arising from divergent understandings of both the role of Catholic schools and of what young people might need. Tinsey concluded:

This study has indicated that differing shades of meaning that are attached to many of the terms used to describe the religious dimension of the mission of Catholic schools, can be ambivalent and confusing for some people. Investigation into whether different understandings of religious concepts contribute to different perspectives and views on the mission of Catholic schools would be helpful. (Tinsey, 1998, p. 93)

In any further investigation into these matters, it was apparent the views of students needed to be admitted into these “different understandings of religious concepts” (Tinsey, 1998, p. 93).

1.3 Aim and research question

The aim of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of how a small group of Catholic adolescents in one regional Catholic school Diocese view the influence of family and school upon their religious practice and spiritual lives. A particular interest of the investigation is on the transition period from primary to secondary Catholic education. Hence, the inquiry is underpinned by the following research question:

What are the perspectives of young Catholic adolescents regarding the influence of families and Catholic schools on their religious practices and spiritual lives over time?
1.4 Background to this study

This research took place in a regional Catholic school Diocese with a long-standing interest in enriching students’ faith lives and spiritual wellbeing, as well as identifying the most effective ways of supporting these in both the school and family contexts. The Catholic Schools Office (LCSO) for this Diocese provides leadership and guidance in matters of student religious and faith development for its 33 primary and 11 secondary schools. This is facilitated through its School Evangelization and Catechetical Services (SEACS) team. As a long-standing consultant on this team (primarily working in the area of Catholic school and family partnership), I have observed closely the strengths and limitations of past and current approaches to the faith development of students across the Diocese. These have been implemented against a backdrop of unprecedented increases in non-Catholic enrolments in schools within the Diocese. An average of 40 percent “other than Catholic” Kindergarten enrolments has been the case for some years now (LCSO, 2009a, 2013) and more recently the incidence of students reporting no religious affiliation has increased (LCSO, 2013). Such a shift in student demographic adds a further layer of complexity in considering a relevant but responsive program of faith formation and religious education. Such data also points to the importance and timeliness of further research into what young people perceive to be the key influences on their religious practice and spiritual lives.

A longitudinal study of students in a number of rural parish schools in NSW began in 2006; partly in response to the Tinsey report (1998), but also to address the emerging need to consult more closely with students about their religious spiritual lives. This study sought the views of students about the influence of the family and Catholic school on their religious and spiritual lives. A pilot survey of Year 5 students in eight Catholic Primary schools gathered student views across a range of domains: Yourself, Family, Religious Practice, Religious Identity of the School, Role of the Teacher, God, Religious Education and Friends and Peers. In seeking to understand further the results

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3 School Evangelization and Catechetical Services Team.
4 The Spiritual and Religious Development of Young People in Catholic Schools in the Lismore Diocese: A Longitudinal View, commissioned in 2006 by the Catholic Schools Office, Lismore in partnership with the Centre for Children and Young People, Southern Cross University and the Australian Catholic University.
5 Drawing upon the Smith and Denton (2005) instrument used in the American National Study on Youth and Religion (NSYR).
of this survey, students identified as “core” Catholic (Fulton et al., 2000) were engaged in a series of interviews on two occasions: firstly when students were in Year 5 (in 2006), and again two years later (in 2008) with a number of the same students when in Year 7. The findings from these first two sets of interviews revealed a number of quite significant concerns including: a lack of frequent practice of prayer; an inability to articulate fundamental beliefs of the Catholic faith; an inadequate Religious Education pedagogy; and a lack of networking with similar peers (Rymarz, Graham & Shipway, 2008). These findings are further detailed below since they formed both the foundation and rationale for this current study. The data for the study being reported here was collected from some of the same students when they were in Year 9 (in 2010).

The findings of the earlier study (Rymarz et al., 2008) indicated that while student relationships with parents appeared to be healthy and resilient, there was little evidence of religious practice such as family prayer or Mass attendance, a distinctively Catholic religious practice. Most students expressed a communitarian pattern of attendance, typified by an approach to attending Mass as something reserved for special occasions yet lacking personal commitment. The only students who expressed a growing personal commitment to church attendance also reflected strong parental modelling with the majority reporting either a strong or a weak familial pattern. Private prayer was practiced sometimes but not an important feature of their spiritual lives and the school the main forum for overt religious practice such as attending Mass or communal prayer. The majority of students were unable to describe the benefits of sacramental worship. Notably, there appeared to be a lack of conversations about religious or spiritual matters: most of the students instead relied upon the media or general discussion with their friends as a source of their information. A further notable finding was an apparent inability to articulate fundamental beliefs of the Catholic faith with most students finding it difficult to respond to questions related to their knowledge and attitude to two specific beliefs.

6 A term first described by Fulton, Catholic youth aged 18 to 30 having a pre-existing connection with parish communities through membership of families displaying a close connection with the worshipping community.
7 See Appendix A - Year 5 focus group and individual interview questions.
8 See Appendix B - Year 7 individual interview questions.
9 Foundational to these findings were those of Rymarz and Graham (2006, 2005).
10 A communitarian pattern is more likely to identify with more general, global values rather than those specifically Catholic. In contrast, a commitment model reflects distinctive features of Catholicism (Rymarz, 2007; Rymarz & Graham, 2006, 2005).
11 Participants express links to church attendance in terms of family bonds. A strong family bond is characterized by strong affective statements about the importance of attending by the respondent. Weak bonds do not have this affective affiliation.
foundational to their faith identity: Eucharist and Jesus. Only a small number of students saw their religious identity intricately linked with belief in God, or associated with formal religious acts such as praying in school or being in church. Most made little reference to the transcendent and were unable to speak of a more Trinitarian understanding of Jesus, instead imaging Jesus as a role model.

Many of the students reported decreasing endorsement of Religious Education identifying inadequate pedagogical approaches to Religious Education in schools, failure to challenge students intellectually and the repetitiveness of topics over the years as the main concerns with Religious Education. Religious Education classes did, however, lead to discussion around some of the more serious issues that confront Catholic adolescents.

Finally, although the students named accepting or defending many of the supernatural claims of Catholic belief and teaching as the most significant challenge they face in a secular world, they perceived no planned or systematic approach to youth ministry focused upon their needs. Young people saw supportive networks of like-minded peers as an important dimension of support for fostering their faith maturity. However, while the students were interested in participating in such networks, where participation in Christian youth groups had occurred, it was only through parent initiative. Nevertheless, most of the students reported they were content with their Catholicity and happy to remain a part of the faith community into the future. However, they mostly lacked conviction, pointing to a fundamental lack of affinity to their faith that in time and with decreasing family involvement may weaken. Such findings also reinforced other views that the period of transition from primary to secondary school is a time of fragility in the formation of the future religious and spiritual patterns of a young Catholic adolescent (Hughes, 2007; Kinnaman, 2011; Smith & Snell, 2009).

Given such emerging concerns in the Wave 1 and 2 data, the Catholic Schools Office involved in this earlier study identified the need to inquire further into the presenting issues and requested the researcher (also an employed consultant at the LCSO) considering undertaking the research as part of his Doctor of Education studies. Subsequently, a sub-group of seven students from the original sample (by then aged 14 and in Year 9) were invited to participate in in-depth interviews to reflect retrospectively on
the influence of their families and Catholic schools during the time of transition from primary to secondary education. These students, Anita, Bella, Natasha, Vanessa, Bree, Gordon and Jack 12 will be introduced in Chapter Three.

1.5 The significance of the study

Relatively little is known, from the perspective of Catholic young people themselves, about how they perceive the influence of their families and Catholic schools upon their religious practices and spiritual lives (Ault, 2001; Rymarz, 2007). Furthermore, there is very little evidence about whether and how this changes over time. This gap in understanding is somewhat disconcerting, given considerable changes in recent years within both the family and Catholic schools contexts, as outlined earlier. Hence, this follow-on study, while modest in scale, is potentially significant since it contributes in-depth insights into an area of increasing concern to Catholic education and to the Catholic Church more broadly. While such perceptual data is a vital component in the improvement of educational outcomes (Ontario Principals Council, 2009), little is available in relation to this particular issue of how family and school influence religious practice and the spiritual lives of young people over time. The evidence that does exist is largely cognitively based (Oser & Scarlett, 1991).

In addition, this study provides insight into the world of the adolescent that can be largely unknown to adults. There may be important dimensions of young people’s experience unnoticed by adults who fail to appreciate the capacities and stressors that lie deep in their world (Gilligan, 2010). These perspectives may challenge existing adult assumptions concerning children, young people and their worlds and hence potentially provide a unique perspective upon a pressing problem.

12 Pseudonyms are used in this study to protect privacy and provide anonymity for the students.
1.6 Research approach and design

The views of young people are often largely marginalized in research (Ault, 2001; O’Kane, 2000; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000). Further, past research has also been criticized for its over-reliance upon stage developmental approaches, critiqued for promoting the universal child construct and the accompanying emphasis on the portrayal of children as “incomplete” or “in process” (Qvortrup, 1994). Other associated dominant cultural assumptions have viewed children and young people as powerless, poor informants and as passive receptors of information imparted by adults (Christensen & James, 2008; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007; Handel, Cahill, & Elkin, 2007; Qvortrup, 1994; Turmel, 2008). Such views largely ignore the subjective experience of childhood and issues around the agency of young people (Levine, 1999). Bunge (in Yust, Aostre, & Johnson, 2006, p. 16) also claims Christianity has not developed “robust theologies of childhood” that might support a sophisticated base for understanding, educating, and advocating for children and adolescents. Other writers claim this lack of underlying theoretical basis for childhood has hindered the spiritual formation of children (Strommen & Hardel, 2000). Significantly, Grajczonek (2010) suggests key documents of the Catholic Church supportive of families and Catholic schools do not align with contemporary understandings of childhood:

Children are not viewed as active agents in their own experiences of childhood and participants in decisions that affect their own lives. In all but one statement… children are agentless passives; it was made clear what was to be done to them and for them, but those responsible were not always named. (Grajczonek, 2010, p. 16)

Bunge (in Yust et al., 2006, pp. 53-54), suggests such constructions of children and childhood have not encouraged consideration of the unique needs of children in the development of “religious rituals and practices, such as prayer [and] worship.” In contrast to this view, the approach taken in this study reflects a contemporary view of childhood, one that acknowledges “multiple childhoods” (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; Cooper, Jackson, Azmitia, & Lopez, 1998, p. 1; James & James, 2004; Soto & Swadener, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978). The rights of the adolescent to express their views to the decision-maker and have those views taken into account are recognized in the rights and responsibilities enshrined
in the 1989 *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UN, 1989). However, Percy-Smith and Thomas (2009) remind us that a rights-based concept of participation, in so far as it represents an entitlement to have a say, is insufficient. Children are capable of making sense of their world and therefore not only should they have voice in matters that affect them, but also agency (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Christensen & James, 2008, 2000; Mayall, 2002; Skelton, 2007).

Research where attention is paid to the experiences and lives of young people and where children’s voices and agency are prioritized is often drawn to narrative approaches (James & Prout, 1998). Such an approach allows insight into the personal accounts of experience, how young people explain their situations and construct life events (Holloway & Freshwater, 2007; Sandelowski, 1991) and has a focus upon their language, their stories and social interaction, often linked to their very beliefs and values (Johnson & Boyatzis, 2006). Moreover, a narrative style of inquiry also addresses an important gap in the literature related to this study—that is, the dearth of first-hand accounts of adolescents’ perspectives on the influence of their families and Catholic schools concerning their religious and spiritual lives.

While a narrative approach appeared to be appropriate for this study, the meanings and practices associated with inquiring into subjective interpretations remain ill defined and characterized by diverse approaches (Chase, 2005; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). Sarbin (1986, p. 9) suggests narrative is a way of “organizing episodes, actions, and accounts of actions” across both “time and place” while Smith (as cited in, Rogers, 1991, p. 199) simply suggests narratives are “verbal acts consisting of someone telling someone else that something happened.” Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 19) hold a view that as “humans are story-telling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives” so then should “educational experiences… be studied narratively” (2000, p. 19). Within educational research, the use of narrative has been seen as a natural method for inquiry used to listen to and give voice to the stories, experiences and feelings of teachers and students (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Errante, 2000; Larson, 1997).

However, inquiry into narrative is much more than just telling stories. Access into and learning from a person's lived experience brings the possibility to create new
knowledge (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Clandinin and Connelly’s particular perspective upon inquiry into narrative was shaped by earlier work including that of Coles (1989, 1990), Geertz (1988), and educationalist John Dewey (1938) who conceived learners as constructing and reconstructing knowledge through the individual yet socially interactive nature of experience. Within this view, each individual’s continuity of experience, filled with unique past memories, present actions, and future intentions, is always in interaction with the social and physical environment. As such, narrative inquiry holds the experiences of each student in a way that allows for a closer inspection using different perspectives and renewed ways of thinking.

The decision to use narrative inquiry implicated the need to thinking “narratively” about the phenomenon throughout the inquiry (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). Within this framework of thinking narratively, my attention needed to focus on the most appropriate ways to inquire into, to analyze and to (re)present the findings. One of the most obvious advantages of narrative inquiry is that it can provide a holistic picture and so the narrative approach to the study suggested the suitability of (re)presenting the data in the form of short stories, or vignettes. In qualitative research, vignettes have commonly been developed as short hypothetical stories and used to prompt responses in the collection of research data (Brondani, MacEntee, Bryant, & O’Neill, 2008; Hughes, 1998). However, in seeking to represent each narrative as a unique voice, this study adopted the use of vignettes in the same vein as Ely and colleagues (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997), that is, to use them to present research data. In keeping with the retrospective nature of the interviews, it was also felt the creation of vignettes would enable the students an opportunity to assume an active and enduring voice in the research, aided particularly through the inclusion of their own words.

The decision to (re)present the data as vignettes also supported the use of semi-structured interviews as a data-gathering instrument. In their work, Coles (1990) and Heller (1986) have showed how young children are able to freely express themselves as spiritual beings in response to questions framed within a Christian context. A conversational style of interviewing is also considered as the most effective method for an inquiry into participants’ assumptions, beliefs, feelings and interpretations of the world (Merriam, 1998).
The process of gathering data may also be enhanced through allowing the participant to take a self-critical perspective on stories earlier told (Marsh, Rosser, & Harre, 1978), and so a unique feature of this study was the use of transcripts or audio files from earlier interviews to help stimulate reflective discussion. As students accepted their invitation to participate in Wave 3, permission was sought from students at a preliminary meeting to access raw typed transcripts or digital recordings from their previous interviews for use in the interviews undertaken in this study.

An inquiry into potentially sensitive narratives about young people’s religious and spiritual lives also required that attention be given to the ethical considerations associated with a narrative style of inquiry. A number of key considerations are explained in the following section and further elaborated in Chapter Three.

1.7 Ethical considerations

Given the somewhat unusual nature of this study in building on earlier data and involving a cohort of young people reflecting on how their views, understandings and experiences have changed or developed, close consideration was given to the ethical issues underpinning the research process. The ethical agreement sought for the original research project (Approval No. ECN-09-103, Southern Cross University Human Research Ethics Sub-Committee) continued to be valid for this study and I adhered to all the conditions set out in this agreement throughout the duration of the current study. However, a further application was made to Southern Cross University’s Human Research Ethics Sub-Committee for approval to conduct a small number of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with students involved in the earlier research.

Josselson (2007, p. 538) suggests that ultimately, ethics in narrative research is not so much a matter of abstractly correct behaviour but of “responsibility in human relationship” and that perhaps the only solution is to demonstrate a clear account of the issues related to the ethical conduct of this study. Key amongst these was ensuring student consent (including the need to draw on earlier audio files and interview transcripts),
satisfying requirements for ethical conversations with children and the storage of the large amount of personal data developed through the interviewing process. To protect the identity of the students, all data was coded and kept in a secure and safe place. The approach taken in addressing these and other ethical issues is further detailed in Chapter Three. In addition to the close scrutiny given to ethical considerations in undertaking this study, a number of limitations were also evident and these are important to note at the outset.

1.8 Limitations of the study

This small-scale qualitative study is necessarily limited in size and scope to fit the requirements of a Doctor of Education program that also involves a considerable coursework component. That the research forms part of a program of study being undertaken by an employee of the Catholic Schools Office with an interest in the research needs to be made transparent. This is primarily because a potential limitation that required close monitoring concerned the issue of role conflict. In other words, it was important to ensure the interview process did not inadvertently elicit socially desirable responses from students who may have identified the researcher as part of the “system” on which they were reflecting, and to a considerable extent, critiquing. Significant attention was given to this as detailed in the discussion in Chapter three which outlines the particular approach taken with the interviews.

Further, no research method is without limitations, and narrative methodology is no exception. While narrative inquiry is open to the possibility that certain experiences may be unique and are associated with real people who have individual voices and agency, it is acknowledged that these experiences can be interpreted, reinterpreted and/or assume various different meanings for different individuals, depending on their life circumstances, relationships, values, beliefs, social and cultural contexts, and so on. Narratives are continually open to interpretation and can be revisited repeatedly.

Other limitations of the study include the limited number of participants in the study, the limited scope for selection of schools from which the students in the study were
based, and other limitations arising using narrative inquiry that challenge the suitability of conventional standards of reliability and validity (Mitchell, 1983). However, the small number of participants and the interpretive nature of this study may also be seen as supportive of the credibility of the study, as each of the experiences conveyed within the interviews may bring to light insights that, without the level of scrutiny required, may have remained hidden. Larger scale studies exist, which allow us to know something of the generalized patterns in the religious and spiritual lives of young people (Smith & Snell, 2009). However, this small, participative in-depth study provided a unique opportunity for exploring the individuality of children’s lives behind the statistics and generalizations, and the views of the students are seen as no less valid as are those gained by other means. As this study was restricted in terms of site, population selection and number of interviews, it is also not possible to generalize the findings to a larger population (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). In any qualitative research, three issues of trustworthiness demand attention: credibility, dependability and confirmability. As the development of the research proposal for this study clearly originated from my personal and professional interests, a further issue for attention is the importance of reflexivity (Elliott, 2005).

1.9 Overview of the thesis

This paper is structured around five main chapters. Chapter One signals the growing concerns associated with declines in engagement with religious practice and understanding of Catholic spirituality by young Catholic students in Catholic schools. It outlines how this small-scale study builds upon findings from previous research with students in Catholic schools in the same regional Diocese.

Chapter Two engages with literature related to the influence of families and Catholic schools, and Chapter Three presents a case for the methodological approach to the study. The experiences of each student are highlighted through a series of vignettes in Chapter Four, providing impetus for discussion of the findings in Chapter Five.
1.10 Summary of chapter

This chapter has introduced the research problem concerning declining levels of religious practice and gaps in understanding around the spirituality of students in Catholic schools. In exploring reasons for these declines, this study listened to the perspectives of young Catholic adolescents about whether and how their families and the experience of Catholic schooling influence their religious practice and spiritual lives.

In preparing to undertake such an inquiry, it was important to be cognizant of what is already known concerning these family and school influences. The following chapter explores this literature.
2 Review of the literature

2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter signalled increasing concerns about declining levels of religious practice and affinity with Catholic spirituality by young people in Catholic schools. In uncovering some of the reasons for these declines, this study endeavoured to inquire into the influence of families and Catholic schools upon the religious and spiritual formation of young Catholics.

This chapter reviews the literature related to the influence of the family and the Catholic school upon the religious and spiritual lives of young people. The chapter is divided into four sections. The first section outlines the view taken within this study of families and Catholic schools as plausibility structures (Rymarz, 2009). The following two sections review literature related to the influence of families and Catholic schools and the fourth section reviews the literature related to areas of shared responsibility: networking and worship. The final section reiterates the concerns raised through the previous two sets of interviews.

2.2 Structures of plausibility

Worldviews are more easily sustained within networks of similar others such as the family or Catholic school. In this way, families and schools constitute plausibility structures (Rymarz, 2009) that provide young people with plausible and persuasive reasons for choosing to actively participate in a particular religious worldview. Families and Catholic schools potentially legitimize the reasons and meaning behind their existence through building environments characterized by (i) the presence of mechanisms of socializing young people into their faith tradition and, (ii) opportunities for conversations relating to their faith arising as a result of the presence of such mechanisms (Rymarz,

13 Conversations might be within a group or through more directed, individualised conversations relating to their personal faith.
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2009). These mechanisms\textsuperscript{14} provide opportunities on a number of levels to “rehearse” and to converse repeatedly about what it means to be a member of that religious community (Rymarz, 2012, p. 195).

Writers have previously identified the presence in “core” Catholic youth of an initial inclining intensity in Catholic identity in the early years followed by a gradual levelling off as the student passes through early then later adolescence (Rymarz & Graham, 2006; Rymarz, Graham et al. 2008). This plateau may be gradual over a period or eventually decline over time evidenced through decreased commitment in religious practice or involvement in activities which encourage the ability to articulate Catholic beliefs and attitudes. At this time, many young adolescents commence making personal decisions about their religious practice and lives (Kooistra & Pargament, 1999; Myers, 1996; Wuthnow, 1999). This decision making occurs within a milieu of variables including increasing peer influence and a search for self-identity and belonging (Bridges & Moore, 2002; Lickona & Davidson, 2005). At the same time, the possibility of disengagement and loss of self-esteem intensifies (AIHW, 2009, 2007; NSWDET, 2008). Understanding how families and Catholic schools might provide for such mechanisms and conversations, particularly important during the period of transition from primary to secondary school, is therefore of significant interest.

The family is considered by the Catholic Church as the primary educator of the child (Declaration on Christian Education, 1966), hence this literature review commences with what is known about the influence of the family upon the religious and spiritual lives of young people.

\textbf{2.3 The influence of the family}

Sociological literature also underlines the prime importance of the family in fostering young people’s religious and spiritual lives. The influence of religiously involved parents is among the most powerful influences on the religious life of adolescents and specifically associated with the presence of religious practice and belief in the young

\textsuperscript{14} These mechanisms for conversations might include a wide variety of opportunities including but not limited to retreats, youth groups, praying with others, youth Masses and opportunities to serve others through Christian groups such as St. Vincent de Paul Society.
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(Boyatzis, Dollahite, & Mark, 2006; Francis & Brown, 1990). Furthermore, this effect appears to be enduring (Bendroth, 2002; Hoge, Petrillo, & Smith, 1982) such that Smith and Denton (2005) suggest the best predictor of what the religious and spiritual lives of youth will look like is what the religious and spiritual lives of their parents look like:

Contrary to popular misguided cultural stereotypes and frequent parental misperceptions, we believe that the evidence clearly shows that the single most important social influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents is their parents. Grandparents and other relatives, mentors, and youth workers can be very influential as well, but normally, parents are most important in forming their children’s religious and spiritual lives. (Smith & Denton, 2005, p. 261)

A number of authors have commented upon the reasons for this effect. Kuusisto (2003) has pointed to the intimate link between the religious beliefs of young people with the attitudes and behaviors present within family structures, claiming parental effect is based upon a number of key factors: a democratic relationship between parents and children, parental example, encouraging children to do their own thinking, and providing positive experiences of both religion and the social dimension of the religious community (Kuusisto, 2003). Similarly, in his research on Catholic schools, Flynn (1979) also pointed to the “example and religiousness” of the parents, but also pointed to the profound importance of their day to day relationships:

Not only do parents influence the development of their children's faith directly through their own example and religiousness, but they also influence their growth in the faith indirectly through the manner they relate to them in the most ordinary actions of everyday life in the home. (Flynn, 1979, p. 201)

Lack of conflict in the family, the consistency in the model of religiosity provided by parents and the willingness by parents to teach their faith are all associated with religious affiliation, frequency of church attendance and personal religiousness (Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2001). The presence of stable ties with extended family members is also important (Hadaway & Marler, 1993; Hadaway & Roof, 1988; Sandomirsky & Wilson, 1990). Across all of these factors, Myers (1996) highlights two
factors that seem to present as common: parental religiosity and the quality of family relationships.

2.3.1 Parental religiosity

Within the wider psychological theory of observational learning (Bandura, 1969), one model for understanding the influence of parents over the religious and spiritual lives of young people stems from the parents’ own attitude, example and the religious practices established in the home rather than more directive means of influence (Bandura & Walters, 1963; Hoge & Petrillo, 1978; Martin, White, & Perlman, 2003). Parental religiosity is directly linked with Mass attendance, historically considered the most important religious practice for Catholics (Bao, Whitebeck, Hoyt, & Conger, 1999; Cox, 1967; Greer, 1971; Smith & Denton, 2005; Suziedelis & Potvin, 1981). Contrasted with a range of other social influences, Hoge and Petrillo (1978) found parents to be the only strong influence on adolescents' church attendance. The mother’s example was seen as especially influential (De Roos, Iedema, & Miedema, 2004). However, Haug and Warner (2000) also found that the church attendance of the father has a pronounced effect on the attendance of young people.

Within this model of transmission of religiosity, behaviors exemplify a certain religious or spiritual approach to life where religious or spiritual behaviors can be perceived, imitated, and then eventually acquired as personal habits and beliefs. In other words, this view suggests the more observable are the behaviors of parents, the greater will be the religiousness of the young person. The limitation in the model is found within claims that parental religiosity may be more strongly related to young people’s religious participation than it is to their sense of the importance of religion (Bouma, 2006; Engebretson, 2006; Regnerus, Smith, & Smith, 2004). However, others counter that the influence of an emotionally supportive relationship between the parent and the adolescent may lead to an increase in the adolescent's private and outward displays of religiosity (Bandura, 1969; Litchfield, Thomas, & Li, 1997). Thus, enhancing the effect of parental religiosity within the family is the existence of close personal relationships.
2.3.2 Emotionally supportive relationships

The need for emotionally supportive relationships continues from childhood through to adolescence: “most adolescents in fact still very badly want the loving input and engagement of their parents—more, in fact, than most parents realize” (Smith & Snell, 2009, p. 284). While Francis and Brown (1991) found that income, parental education and class had no effect on religiosity of offspring, other writers underline the importance of affection and love, support, forgiveness, encouragement and acceptance (Bao et al., 1999; Bunge, 2001; Smith & Denton, 2005; Smith & Kim, 2003). Such relationships build toward a transactional model of development where the influence of parents is accounted for through the development of religious or spiritual capital, a concept itself built upon the assumptions of social capital (Coleman, 1988; Furstenberg, 1995). The concept of spiritual capital posits that the parent-adolescent relationship, shared parent-adolescent activities, interpersonal relationships, social networks, and other social structures provide a range of important resources to young people and that the stronger and more robust the relationship, the greater its capacity to channel such benefits to the individual. While the benefits of social networks are explored in later sections (Sections 2.4.2 and 2.5), it is worthwhile elaborating at this point upon the importance of conversations about faith between adults and the young.

2.3.3 Conversations about faith

The simple sharing of faith perspectives, values, commitments and goals between parents (and other significant others) and young people is important (Abbott-Chapman & Denholm, 2001; Litchfield et al., 1997). These conversations may strengthen family, communal and personal faith narratives through opportunities for either explicit or implicit teaching (Rymarz & Graham, 2007; Smith & Snell, 2009). In turn, these may also facilitate an emotional commitment by young people to their faith by allowing them to see their Catholic identity as an integrating force existing within and between these faith narratives (Ratican, 2004; Rymarz, 2007). Not only is the frequency of conversations important but so too is the clarity of such conversations. Dean (2010) suggests that young people are not articulate and passionate about the Christian faith because they have not heard a high level of articulation or experienced a high level of passion about their faith.
Thus, these conversations need to be both frequent (Keating, 2000) and marked by clarity of message (Cashmore & Goodnow, 1985).

Young people need the opportunity to re-evaluate and re-define their beliefs according to new learning and poor communication inhibits transmission of beliefs and values (Dudley & Wisbey, 2000; Flor & Knapp, 2001). Such a model promotes a view of faith communication because the young person is taken seriously as a subject and as an active participant in communication. Francis and Brown (1991, 1990) have shown how eleven-year-old children’s attitudinal predisposition to pray was a direct result of their denominational identity and their own and their parents’ church attendance. However, when contrasting the private prayer habits of the same students five years later, the Church was more influential in maintaining both positive attitudes to prayer and to the practice of prayer over the influence of both families and school. In other words, the practice of prayer might not develop naturally and may have to be explicitly taught. Thus, according to this perspective, religious interactions take the place of religious example in predicting the religious development of young people, reflecting Vygotsky’s (1978) social-cultural model of parents or schools scaffolding activities and interaction for higher and extended learning in channelling (Himmelfarb, 1980) their children towards religious others or opportunities congruent with their own (Lippman, Michelsen, Michelsen, & Roehlekepartain, 2010).

Beyond simply modelling church attendance and other religious practices, belief and commitment seem best nurtured in families where the young observe, discuss, and take active leadership in developing their own faith. In other words, we come to learn about our world, others and ourselves through interaction with others. As Totterdell (2000) points out, there is a clear connection between what we understand and how we behave.

The above discussion has pointed to evidence about parental religiosity, emotionally supportive relationships and, in particular, opportunities to converse about faith as important influences within the home. In turning now to what is known about the influence of the Catholic school, the importance of supportive relationships also appears to be highly significant.
2.4 The influence of the Catholic school

In contrast to the extensive literature supportive of the influence of the family, Uecker (2008) contends that the religious effects of Catholic schools appear to be rarely evaluated. Hyde (1990, p. 293) summarized the position at one time by commenting that perhaps “schools continue because all involved are convinced of their value, but they have had little empirical evidence to support their claims.” However, existing research seems to indicate Catholic background, Catholic home, church involvement and attending a Catholic secondary school are important in both the promotion of Catholic identity and positive student attitudes towards religious behaviour and belief (Spilka, Hood et al. 1985; Benson, Donahue et al. 1989; Hyde 1990).

Kay and Francis (in Engebretson 2003, pp.7-8) found student attitudes toward Christianity were more positive and decreased less with age at denominational schools than at state schools. Using Curran and Francis’ (1996) scale measuring Catholic identity with 11 to 12 year olds attending Catholic secondary schools, Francis (Francis & Robbins, 2005) writes that the responses to this survey ‘indicated a basically positive view of being Catholic’ (p. 116). Francis’ (2002) analysis of 13-15 year olds attending Catholic secondary schools drew on a database of approximately 13,000 teenagers whose values were profiled for the “Religion and Values Today Project” (Francis, 2001). Comparing the moral values of pupils attending Catholic schools with those attending non-denominational schools, the research found that practising Catholic pupils at Catholic schools recorded higher scores thus supporting Gill’s (1999) argument that committed churchgoing is a significant predictor of religious attitudes in its own right. Francis (2002) identifies four distinct groups, or ‘communities of values’ as he describes them, which can be identified amongst the pupils: i) active Catholics, ii) sliding Catholics, iii) lapsed Catholics, and iv) non-Catholics (p. 75). When comparing the scores for moral values, the scores for lapsed Catholics were nearly the same as those for pupils in non-denominational schools leading Francis to argue that lapsed Catholics presented a greater threat to the communities of higher moral and religious values in support the wider argument that there is a relationship between active church commitment and Catholic secondary education which reinforces positive attitudes towards moral and religious values held within those communities.
In Australia, concerns relating to the effectiveness of Catholic schools in Australia led to early studies by Hans Mol (1971) and others (Flynn & Mok, 2002) which revealed significantly higher levels of belief and practice among Catholic school Catholics compared with State school Catholics. Mol concluded that:

Those who have attended Catholic schools score more highly on the religious variables of the survey than others. More go to church regularly, more pray regularly, more believe strongly in God, more are of the opinion that the Church is appointed by God and more are likely to have had religious experiences (Mol, 1971, p. 195).

Longitudinal research in Australia, based upon the views of mostly senior students in Catholic secondary schools found the Catholic school, independent of home, parish or peer group, has an influence upon the religious and spiritual lives of children (Flynn, 1975, 1993; Flynn & Mok, 2002). Flynn’s (1975) study of Year 12 boys in Catholic Boys’ High Schools in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory found the home as the most important influence on students’ religious development. However, school climate was linked positively to student morale, or wellbeing and “Students with high morale were found to be significantly higher on all religious variables—religious beliefs, values, practice and attitudes towards religious education classes—than students of low morale” (p. 278). In other words, the school has a separate effect to that of the home upon both religious development and wellbeing. A follow up study in 1982 (Flynn, 1985) of 2041 Year 12 students again reiterated the influence of parents and home as the strongest influence on their religious development with the influence of school retreats as the next important. While students also nominated the school religious education curriculum as the third strongest effect (Flynn, 1985), recent studies suggest this influence may have diminished.

2.5 Religious instruction

Hughes (2007) found in young people the presence of a different approach to the nature of religious knowledge in comparison with other areas of knowledge. He asserted that young people perceived religious knowledge as a “grey area”, characterised by not only a diversity of opinion but also where one has the right to choose beliefs from a range
of sources. Hence, Hughes (2007) warned that attempts to teach religious knowledge as if it were similar to science, history or other forms of knowledge can generate resistance from young people. Other studies have noted how students fail to see how religious knowledge helps them answer the questions posed to them as young Catholics (Rymarz, 2008) and researchers have also found negative reactions by students to Religious Education and Religious Education classes (Flynn & Mok, 2002).

One important consideration within this discourse revolves around a comparison of approaches to the teaching of Religious Education informed by either uniformity vs pluriformity (Rymarz, 1999). Rymarz (1999) has suggested that Religious Education in Catholic schools needs to remain relevant, cognitively challenging and interesting. The argument here is that pluriformity, or being contemporary, for their own sake, should not be the goal. Rather, the goal should be for better quality. If, as a result of better quality, Religious Education becomes more pluriform and contemporary, then so be it, but the thing to “call” for in terms of reform is increased quality, as opposed to pluriformity or being contemporary. One outcome for this reform to be achieved is excellence in pedagogy. On the other hand, others claim there is a need for balance in approaches to pedagogy as accentuating the cognitive have led to Religious Education being seen purely as acquisition of knowledge thus hindering the spiritual development of children (Buchanan, 2005, 2012; Coles, 1990; de Souza, 2003; McClure, 1996). Contributing to the lack of clarity in this area is White’s (2004) assertion past educational research in Religious Education has largely focused upon the nature and expectations of the subject matter rather than on evaluation or the quality of learning. One dimension of Catholic schooling where claims that are more conclusive might be made is related to the social dimension.

2.5.1 The Catholic school community

Flynn’s (1993) third large-scale study in 1990 set out to explore the “culture” of the Catholic school as a source of Christian community as defined in terms of the document *Gravissimum Educationis* (DCE, 1965). It was found Catholic schools have an influence on students, independent of other influences such as that of the home, parish or peer group and, further, evidence was found of the “integration of faith and culture of
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which the Church documents speak” (Flynn, 1993, p. xiii). Flynn and Mok (2002) found students repeatedly affirmed the importance of the “ethos” or “culture” of a school (p.282) and were “generally happy with their experience of Catholic schools” (Flynn & Mok, 2002, pp. 135, 213). However, while the students appeared satisfied with their experience of Catholic schooling, what was being reported was a decline in moral standards, religious beliefs, church attendance and a general lack of understanding about the importance attributed to the teachings of Christ (Flynn & Mok, 2002, p. 26). Consequently, Catholic secondary schools may have more influence on Catholic identity than religious practice, since attendance at Catholic schools:

seems likely to enmesh one in an array of close, dense social ties—creating an experience of living in the midst of a Catholic community. Such an experience might make it important to young people to remain Catholic for the sake of maintaining that network of dense social ties in daily life, though not necessarily important to attend Mass because the parish is not the primary locus of those relationships. (Perl & Gray, 2007, p. 278)

Uecker’s (2008) study pointed to the importance of the effect of social ties as reasons for the modestly higher levels of church attendance and religious salience found among the adolescents in his study. Uecker (2008) and others (Coleman, 1988; Dorman, 2003; Smith, Faris, Lundquist-Denton, & Regnerus, 2003) suggest the ties developed through social and religiosity networks are intrinsic to the task of fostering the religious and spiritual lives of young Catholics in Catholic secondary schools. Thus, living within a community where religion is valued might provide opportunities for interaction with adult mentors, and network closure (where friends and activities of young people are more able to be closely monitored for reinforcement of parental values)—all important factors in fostering the religious and spiritual lives of young people. Hence it seems the social and theological dimensions of a Catholic community potentially overlap. While the social aspect of relationship is concerned with a young person’s social skills required to facilitate friendships and the theological aspect is at a deeper significant level and related to the theological concept of communio, the opportunity to develop relationships on a social level may act as critical entry points into a deeper level of religious and spiritual connectedness.

Rymarz (2012) has also pointed to the importance of the social dimension within the Catholic school as a structure of plausibility as there is substantial evidence suggesting
that as young people mature, they derive meaning, happiness and moral frameworks from social relationships, not religion (Clydesdale, 2007; Mason et al., 2007; Savage, Collins-Mayo, Mayo, & Cray, 2006; Smith & Denton, 2005). As Cheadle & Schwadel (2012, p. 1209) found, the search by youth, when seeking out similar youth and religion among other young people, “whether measured as participation, devotion, or identification, is pervasively social.” While there is general agreement that peer social networks are important to the religious attitudes and practices of young adolescents (Martin et al., 2003; Mercadante, 1998; Smith & Denton, 2005), at the same time, it appears there is potential for a reciprocal relationship to develop between friendship and the promotion of religiosity (Hoge & Petrillo, 1978; Smith & Denton, 2005).

The importance of maximizing such networks is especially important during transition from primary to secondary Catholic education as this is a time of increased interaction with others through the forming and reforming of friendship networks. However, the presence of a Catholic school does not automatically infer the presence of a faith community and further, that this community will engender a faith response in young people. In the development of such a community, the maintenance of an authentic Catholic identity is noted by the Secretary for the Congregation of Catholic Education, Archbishop Miller as the Church’s “greatest educational challenge” (The Holy See’s Teaching on Catholic Schools, 2007, p. 61). Pope John Paul II suggested growing the relational dimension within the content of authentic Catholic identity seems to be best established through inviting young people into situations of vibrant faith life (Redemptoris Missio, 1991). Consequently, a key shared function of the family and the Catholic school is to build upon the relational dimension to grow the theological (The Catholic school on the threshold of the third millenium, 1997; Engebretson, 2004; Kessler, 2000). A number of opportunities assist in the realisation of this response including the sharing of beliefs with similar others.

Challenges in learning associated with adolescents comes in the form of relational isolation (Dowson, 2002; Dowson, Ross, Donovan, Richards, & Johnson, 2005). Early adolescents need to form identity while remaining vitally connected to their peer groups. Hence, relevant curriculum experiences need to connect peers with each other and with teachers as for belonging and connection to take place on a more significant level in
schools, there needs to be a greater understanding and valuing of group affiliation, rather than an over-emphasis on self-reliance (Newman & Newman, 2001). One area of importance is thus peer and mentor networks.

2.6 Peer networks and mentors

An important consideration when building upon the relational dimension to support the theological is that young Catholic adolescents need to be able to share their beliefs with similar others and so peer networks become an important mechanism for young people to converse and share faith experiences in a safe and supportive environment (King, Furrow, & Roth, 2002; Mercadante, 1998; Regnerus et al., 2004; Smith & Denton, 2005). Such networks give young people a sense that they are part of a wider group who share the same beliefs, to whom they can feel accountable and where they can find affirming role models (Martinson, 2003).

Involvement in Christian youth groups or retreat experiences also provides young people opportunities for prayer and contemplation (Rymarz et al., 2008; Shelton, 1983; White, Newell, & Graham, 2005). Ratican (2004, p. 31) found the only students in his study who exhibited “explicitly religious spiritualties” came from families with very strong religious backgrounds and many had participated in Christian youth groups. The presence of groups specifically designed for young people such as Christian youth groups have been found to be the reason for increasing the frequency in the overall frequency of church attendance by young people (Bellamy, Mou, & Castle, 2005).

Strong networks of friendship may also counter negative effects of older siblings who, in many cases, have left school and ceased connection with Parish life. While Boyatzis et al. (2006) suggests that younger siblings may overhear older siblings’ discussions and respond positively, the opposite seems to be more apparent. Engebretson & de Souza (2002) found that most middle-school participants with older brother and sisters did not report a reinforcement of religious identity and Argyle & Beit Hallahmi (1975) contest that adolescent boys with older brothers exhibit low church attendance rates. In studies with core Catholic youth, Rymarz & Graham (2007) found a perception
that older brothers and sisters had drifted away from parishes and formal religious commitment had provided a negative influence evidenced in the students in their study envisioning repeating the patterns of their older brothers and sisters.

Religious formation is most effective when important others reinforce adolescent religious attitudes and behaviors (Hoge, Johnson, & Luidens, 1993). Myers (1997) noted the importance to young people of significant adults who not only take notice of them but who are also able to guide them. Thus the presence of faith mentors is important, exemplifying as they do what the tradition holds to be valuable and how religious commitment may be lived out through religious practice (Bukowski, Newcomb, & Hartup, 1996). However, while young people will look for someone to talk with in faith matters, it seems they look for theological and relational competency (de Souza & Rymarz, 2002). Evidence relating to how young adolescents perceive either the effectiveness of the Religious Education teacher during their transition from primary to secondary Catholic education is relatively sparse however both Hughes (2007) and Mason et al. (2006) found young people considered teachers to have relatively little influence upon their religious and spiritual lives and unable to relate to them on a personal level.

Smith & Snell (2009) have pointed to the importance for young people of interactions within larger faith networks for support, advice and help. Strength of identity and levels of commitment to a religious community correlate with the presence of such mechanisms (Strommen & Hardel, 2000). One way young people might be involved in faith networks is through opportunities for worship.

2.7 Worship

Larger faith networks such as found within congregational participation also have the potential for intergenerational transfer of religious beliefs and practices (Bendroth, 2002; Keysar, Kosmin, & Scheckner, 2000; Westerhoff, 1976). Young people themselves have acknowledged the positive benefits of interacting within faith networks in both intergenerational and similar peer settings (Allen, 2004; Mercer, Matthews, & Walz, 2004). However, Hughes (2006) found young people within larger faith networks felt more
comfortable listening to the stories and experiences of those whom they knew and respected. Students in Duffy’s study (2002) also indicated they would more likely be drawn into the activities of the wider congregation if they were familiar with the group.

Smith & Snell (2009) have pointed to frequent religious practice as being a positive influence upon the religious and spiritual lives of young adolescents. However, for young people, relationships and community are founded upon emotional attachment, itself linked with enduring religious activity (Goodwin, Jasper, & Poleeta, 2001; LCSO, 2009b; Turner & Stets, 2005). Hence, while young people themselves have said that they enjoy the conventional aspects of worship such as singing and music, the sermon and prayers and being taught about God, it seems this needs to be accompanied by a sense of belonging (Bellamy et al., 2005). Notably, while the presence of friends made no difference to whether young people liked church services (Bellamy et al., 2005), it seems the experience of satisfaction and joy associated with “expressive events” such as liturgical experience or other faith-based activities are important to young people (Deal & Kennedy, 1982, p. 23).

Prince (1972) found compulsory participation as the major reason for non-attendance and Gill (2004) has shown young adolescents from around ten years of age rejected any pressure upon them for belief and commitment. In Australia, Hughes (2006) found negative perspectives of Christian worship services developed where those beliefs and practices had been imposed. Kinnaman (2011) found students needed to understand what they were hearing at church.

Recent research (Pennings, 2011) reveals a divergence between Catholic and Protestant Christian schools in student commitment to religious life. Catholic and Protestant Christian school graduates asserted they felt well prepared for a vibrant religious and spiritual life. However, the Protestant Christian school graduates appeared more committed to their churches and the practice of spiritual disciplines. Catholic schools provide superior academic outcomes, an experience that translates into graduates’ enrolment in more prestigious colleges and universities, more advanced degrees, and

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15 The National Church Life Survey - Survey of Church Attenders Aged 10-14 Years: 2001. Pentecostal denominations and churches, evangelical denominations such as the Baptist Church and older mainstream denominations such as the Uniting, Lutheran and Anglican Churches were participants. While the Catholic Church did not participate in this survey, the results are still quite indicative of the views of young people who are a) within the age group for this study and b) who have prior connections to their faith traditions.
higher household income. However, the moral, social, and religious dispositions of Catholic school graduates seem to run counter to the values and teachings of the Catholic Church and such graduates are also less likely to serve as leaders in their churches. Attendance at Catholic school has no impact on the frequency with which graduates will attend church services. The authors conclude that in comparison to the vital role Protestant Christian schools play in the long-term faith of their students, Catholic schools seem to be largely irrelevant and sometimes even counterproductive to the development of their students’ faith. These findings seem to provide even greater urgency around the need to understand the influence of the Catholic school within a contemporary context.

2.8 Revisiting the previous study in this Diocese

The literature cited above seems to support Berger’s (1967, pp. 154-155) assertion that maintaining one’s faith is only possible if one “retains one’s significant relationships with the Catholic community.” Further, it seems a number of conditions appear quite consistently as important in influencing young people’s religious and spiritual growth. These include: (i) significant emotionally supportive and stable relationships, (ii) clearly demonstrated religiosity of parents focused upon a relationship with God whereby faith informs every dimension of life; (iii) conversing about faith with parents or significant others; (iv) engaging in frequent and varied religious practice and sharing of beliefs within a supportive environment; (v) networking with similar peers on a social level as an entry point into a deeper level of theological community; and (vi) mentoring by theologically and relationally competent others.

In contrasting these conditions with the findings of the previous two waves of data collection undertaken in the Diocese where the current research is taking place (see Chapter One, Section 1.4) (Rymarz et al., 2008), a number of discrepancies emerged including concerns around the absence of faith conversations, public or private religious practice or supportive peer faith networks, the failure of Religious Education to challenge students intellectually, and the lack of clarity as students articulate beliefs foundational to the Catholic faith.
Although parents are named as the most important influence in their lives and appear to have healthy and resilient relationships, there appears to be an absence of faith conversations with parents. Instead, students were turning to their friends or to the media as a source of their information. Perhaps as a result, students lacked clarity around beliefs foundational to their faith identity. In place of a metaphysical perception of Eucharist, most students saw Eucharist as a communal event, a way of strengthening ties with others and with God, reflecting the communitarian pattern of attendance. Only a small number of students saw their religious identity intricately linked with belief in God, or associated with formal religious acts such as praying in school or being in church. Most made little reference to the transcendent and were unable to speak of a more Trinitarian understanding of Jesus, instead imaging Jesus as a role model. Most said there should be a general desire to do the best that you can and to avoid harming or imposing your views on others. These findings seem to confirm those of other studies and underline once more the inability of these young people to articulate confidently how their lives are informed by key beliefs of their faith (Mason et al., 2010; Ratican, 2004; Smith & Denton, 2005; Smith & Snell, 2009).

Most students were also clearly not involved to any significant degree in distinctively Catholic religious practice and the majority of students were unaware of the benefits of sacramental worship. The only students who expressed a growing personal commitment to church attendance also reflected strong parental modelling with the majority reporting either a strong or a weak familial pattern\(^\text{16}\). Further, while private prayer was sometimes practiced, it was not an important feature of their spiritual lives.

Few reported strong endorsement of Religious Education, the main concern being that it failed to challenge students intellectually and repetitiveness of topics decreased its relevance to their lives. Faith discussions did not seem to occur within appropriate networks of like-minded peers and most were unaware of planned or systematic approaches to youth ministry that focused upon their needs.

\(^{16}\) Participants express links to church attendance in terms of family bonds. A strong family bond is characterized by strong affective statements about the importance of attending by the respondent. Weak bonds do not have this affective affiliation.
In other words, despite relationships within their families appearing to be strong, the students involved in the previous waves of data collection (at Year 5 and Year 7) appeared to be involved in minimal religious practice or opportunities for conversations about religious or spiritual matters. There seems to be little evidence of private prayer and where attendance at Mass does occur, it is as a result of the example and influence of the family. Most of the students appear content with their denomination, yet there seems to be little affinity. Furthermore, the repetitiveness of topics covered in Religious Education seems to be discouraging the growth of their faith or faith knowledge. There also appears to be little in the way of supportive networks where mentoring opportunities or the sharing of beliefs and practices with similar others might occur. Most of the students reported they were content with their Catholicity and happy to remain a part of the faith community into the future. However, in most cases, their responses lacked conviction, pointing to a fundamental lack of affinity to their faith reflecting findings by Smith and Denton (2005, p.129) that youth did not wish to be perceived as “too religious” and not to place a high priority upon religion in their conscious lives. Smith and Denton claim religion was largely disconnected from the everyday life of young people. Smith and Denton (2005, pp 162-165) proposed a teenage view of God as “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” incorporating three major concepts: a common view that life was about being a good and moral person, rather than sacrifice, service or sacred observance, their belief in God was related to the provision of therapeutic benefits related to wellbeing and happiness. Within this perspective, God was not particularly personally involved in an individual’s affairs unless called upon (2005, pp 162-165).

Kendra Dean (2010) suggests the reason young people lack “robust Christian identities” is because churches only offer a “stripped-down” version of Christianity which no longer poses a viable alternative to “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism”. Dean contends the reason teenagers lack an articulate faith is:

because the faith we show them is too spineless to merit much in the way of conversation. Maybe teenager’s inability to talk about religion is not because the church inspires a faith too deep for words, but because the God-story that we tell is too vapid to merit more than a superficial vocabulary. (Dean, 2010, p. 36)
Dean (2010, p.36) suggests that even if young people participate fully in youth ministry programs, are involved in church as well as evading overwhelming counter-influences, “youth are unlikely to take hold of a “god” who is too limp to take hold of them”.

These findings gesture to an imperative to re-interview some of the participants from Wave 1 and Wave 2 of the study previously undertaken in the participating Diocese. This is critically important in not only providing an in-depth, longer-term view of young people’s changing religious practices and spiritual lives, but also in identifying how they perceive (when reflecting back) the key family and school influences during the transition time from primary to secondary school.

2.9 Summary of chapter

This current chapter has reviewed literature related to the influence of families and Catholic schools on the religious practices and spiritual lives of young people. A number of issues have been identified as important considerations. These issues were contrasted with those identified in the first two waves of data collection for a study undertaken in the Diocese where the current research is under way. A number of areas of discrepancy emerge between what is elsewhere reported as influential and what these particular young Catholic adolescents are reporting to be their experience. This discrepancy has prompted the need for an additional investigation, which is the focus of the current research. In preparation for this further stage of inquiry, the following chapter discusses the research design adopted for this task.
3 Research design

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter highlighted a range of national and international research linking young people’s religious practice and spiritual lives with various family and school related influences. Within this literature there appears to be significant emerging evidence concerning the central role of relationships and the various tacit and explicit ways these act on young people’s religious and spiritual formation. In light of such findings, the data collected to date from Year 5 and Year 7 students in the Diocese where this study is taking place clearly warrants further investigation with a cohort of older (Year 9) students who were invited to reflect retrospectively on the influence of their families and Catholic schools during the time of transition from primary to secondary education. This current chapter outlines the methodology and research design for this study which set out to investigate this.

The theoretical interests guiding the research are examined, and narrative inquiry is identified and explained as the overarching methodology. Details of data collection, including student selection, interviewing, analysis of the narratives, and presentation of this analysis in vignette form are described and justified. To conclude the chapter, a number of ethical considerations and limitations relevant to the specific nature of this study are discussed.

3.2 Theoretical interests

This study is framed by the interdisciplinary field of Childhood Studies and draws on ecological theory as a way of better understanding the religious practice and spiritual lives of the young people involved in this study.

Childhood Studies was drawn upon because it provides a way of conceptualizing childhood, children and young people that transcends the (sometimes) limiting boundaries of knowledge claims within individual, isolated disciplines. Childhood Studies is a
relatively new academic field of inquiry, interdisciplinary in intent, that asserts children and young people are worthy of study in their own right. Hence, it is interested in generating what Kehily (2009, p. 19) refers to as “child-centered” scholarship.

Woodhead (2009) suggests there are three key features of contemporary Childhood Studies. The first relates to childhood and the many senses in which childhood is socially constructed and culturally situated (or mediated by beliefs) with implications for the ways it is studied and theorized; the second feature is about children and recognizing their status and rights (e.g., children’s “agency” displacing notions of “dependency”) as a starting point for research, policy and practice; and the third is about childhood and adulthood, that is, acknowledging that studying childhood is about intergenerational relationships. In this way, Childhood Studies challenges notions of children as natural, passive, dependent, vulnerable, incompetent and incomplete; asserts the lives, identities and experiences of children cannot be generalized or universalized; suggests childhood cannot be separated from other factors and experiences that shape identity, such as class, gender and ethnicity; recognizes that children and their relationships are important and worthy of our close attention; and positions children as social agents who are active in the construction and determination of their lives (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010).

Consistent with these core tenets of Childhood Studies, together with the lack of available data on how young people’s religious practices and spiritual lives change over time, it was important that the current study focused intently on young adolescents’ own perspectives (Erricker, Erricker, Sullivan, Ota, & Fletcher, 1997; MCEETYA, 2008). Not only is this approach supportive of advocating for the agency and voice of young adolescents (Rinaldi, 1993), the inclusion of their views is also justified on a pragmatic level as substantial research suggests differences have existed between the perspectives of young people and adults in respect to relationships (Hoffman & Lippitt, 1960; Rosenthal, 1963) and parental behaviour (De Vaus, 1983). The religious beliefs of children have been shown as less related to their parental (self-reported) beliefs than to the children’s perceptions of their parents’ religious views (Bader & Desmond, 2006; Bao et al., 1999; Evans, 2000; Okagaki & Bevis, 1999). Furthermore, the stated opinions of parents have been found to have little effect upon the orientation of their children except as they are
perceived and attributed by these children (Acock & Bengston, 1980; de Vaus, 1983). In other words, it appears that the perspectives of young adolescents are mostly overlooked even though these are key to understanding the issues affecting their religious and spiritual development.

Further, many studies involving young people in the past have been criticized for being largely dependent upon understandings of the universal child who is representative of all children, regardless of context (Ault, 2001; Coles, 1990; Hay & Nye, 2006). Consequently, the vast majority of studies involving children’s religious development were conducted with little consideration of context. In contrast, the very nature of this study sought to understand the way these students were living within the context of their families and Catholic schools, in turn pointing to an approach cognizant of social systems.

*Ecological theory* has also been drawn upon in this research given the emphasis on understanding more fully how the key social systems of family and Catholic school affect the religious practices and spiritual lives of young Catholics. In other words, this study also needed to be grounded in understandings of the individual in relation to their social environments. This is because it takes as a point of departure existing evidence that religious and spiritual growth is a dynamic process that simultaneously transcends multiple contexts, social relationships and cultural processes (Bruner, 1990; Dollahite, Marks, & Goodman, 2004; James & James, 2004).

The choice for such an approach led me to adopt Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model for explaining human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). In his analysis of the child development research literature based largely on the findings of highly controlled laboratory experiments, Bronfenbrenner noted the limitations of most empirically based developmental psychology. He characterized it as “the science of the strange behaviour of children in strange situations with strange adults for the briefest possible periods of time” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 19). As an alternative approach, Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model stresses the importance of interactions among multiple systems, situations or contexts while also being able to do so over time (Lerner, 2002).
Based on such understandings, the student participants in this study are conceptualized as operating within a series of nested and interconnected layers or structures, each inside the next (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). The outermost layer, the *Macrosystem*, contains the wider socio-cultural context within which all other layers reside. Closer to the student, the *Mesosystem*, includes the connections between more settings—in this case family and Catholic school. The next layer, the *Exosystem*, includes the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings such as family, school or peer networks or collaborations but which indirectly influence processes within more immediate settings. The next system, the *Microsystem* includes the patterns of activities, social roles and interpersonal relations experienced by students. The final sphere, the *Chronosystem*, allows for conceptualizing these influences across the life course and across historical time (Bronfenbrenner, 1993).

These connections between time and context in the construction of meaning are a distinctly narrative characteristic (Simms, 2003). Narration is a dimension of human nature whereby individuals have a natural inclination to share stories of experiences and communicate how those experiences have affected them. Many children and young people also have a natural disposition for telling stories. Indeed, Coles (1990) cautioned against the overlaying of our own cognitive practices and interpretations onto the experiences described by children offering instead a methodology that was exploratory, descriptive and used case studies to investigate children’s spirituality. Given this and the retrospective dimension of the current study, narrative inquiry appeared to be an appropriate approach for gathering young people’s perspectives on whether and how family and Catholic school impact on their religious practice and spiritual lives over time.

### 3.3 Narrative inquiry

The understanding of the lives of people within this study reflects what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) among others (Aoki, 1997; Bruner, 1991) call “storied” lives, wherein people narratively blend moments into a coherent and storied whole and, while preparing for the present moment, also imagine the next (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Conle, 2000). In other words, people think narratively (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000;
Polkinghorne, 1988), and it is through narrative that people construct and reconstruct their reality through interpretation of their emotions, feelings, and experiences (Bruner, 1991; van Manen, 1990). Within this view, an informant's sense of self and their worldview are all apparent in the stories they tell about themselves (Kerby, 1991; Singleton, 2001). Thus understandings of narrative shaped the approach taken in this study which sought to value the experiences of each student, encourage them to reflect on their experiences, to tell their stories, and to make meaning of their experiences, all of which are qualities evident within narrative inquiry as proposed by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). Thus, within this study, the idea of narrative remains implicit: the presentation of the data is where the life story unfolds and this is the kind of narrative analysis offered in the thesis.

Apart from their preference for the *individual* rather than *universal* case, which resonated with the underlying theoretical interests of both Childhood Studies and ecological theory is their belief that experience happens narratively and hence narrative inquiry is a form of narrative experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry is “first and foremost a way of thinking about experience” and story is the “portal through which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 375):

People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Viewed this way, narrative is the phenomenon studied in inquiry. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is primarily a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular narrative view of experience as a phenomenon under study. (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006, p. 477)

Moreover, narratives may be viewed as socially and culturally conventionalized forms for organizing and representing past experiences (Bruner, 1987; McAdams, 1985) and so storying and restorying our life is a fundamental method of personal and social growth, wherein education is a process of rethinking the past with new external knowledge, theory and experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 1991; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). Consequently, this study places an emphasis upon the unique experiences of
individual lives in which new experiences simultaneously shape and inform previously lived experiences. The creation of knowledge learned from access into lived experience through the narratives of their “storied lives” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p.37) has given voice in educational research to both teachers and learners who become “storytellers and characters in their own stories” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). Within this understanding, Bailey’s (1997, p. 139) position is that “narrative inquirers concerns itself with examining and facilitating change within the oppressive modes of the classroom.” Hence, narrative inquiry is not only a way of listening to the experiences of the students involved in this research but also opens up a way to analyze underlying narratives the storytellers may not be able to voice.

Dewey’s (1938) conceptualization of the nature of experience has also informed Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) perception of narrative inquiry. The educationalist Dewey theorized the terms personal, social, temporal, and situation (based on his principles of interaction and continuity) to describe characteristics of experience. The first criterion—interaction—refers to how “people are individuals and need to be understood as such, but they cannot be understood only as individuals, they are always in relation, always in a social context” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 2). The second criterion—continuity—establishes the important function played by experience:

Experiences grow out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences. Wherever one positions oneself in that continuum—the imagined now, some imagined past, or some imagined future—each point has a past experiential base and leads to an experiential future. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 2)

Thus, the quality of both interaction and continuity, critical in perceiving experience as educative or mis-educative, is the genesis for Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) approach to narrative inquiry. Drawing on Dewey’s principles of interaction and continuity, Connelly and Clandinin (2006) brought a focus on three dimensions of experience: personal and social (interaction); past, present and future (continuity) and place (situation). Within these terms, a metaphorical three-dimensional narrative inquiry space exists with temporality along one direction, the personal and the social along a second dimension, and place along a third.
As studies have “temporal dimensions and address temporal matters; they focus on the personal and the social in a balance appropriate to the inquiry; and they occur in specific places or sequences of places”, any inquiry may be imagined within this space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.50). However, all commonplaces need to be explored simultaneously as it is this, in part, which distinguishes narrative inquiry from other methodologies. Hence, within this perspective, one can assert more explicitly that because of a person’s “experience” they do what they do. For this study, within the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, the perspectives of young adolescents about the influence of the family and Catholic schools upon their religious and spiritual lives are the phenomenon under study (Figure 1).

![A framework for inquiry – A three-dimensional narrative inquiry space. Adapted from Connelly and Clandinin and (2006) and Bronfenbrenner (1993).](image)

The decision to use narrative inquiry implicated the need to “think” narratively and to “adopt a particular narrative view of experience as phenomena” under study throughout the inquiry (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006, p. 477). However, the very nature of narrative inquiry research is constitutive of processes difficult to describe and so “each narrative researcher needs to work them out for her or his own inquiry” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 97). In thinking narratively, my attention focused on the most appropriate ways to (i) identify who would be involved in the study and why; (ii) the methods used to gather the perspectives from these participants; (iii) the approach taken to the analysis and presentation of the interview data; (iv) ethical questions associated with the research and; (v) consequential limitations of the study. While these are now each addressed in turn, in reality these five issues informed each other.
3.4 The research participants

In seeking further insight into the concerns identified in the Wave 1 and Wave 2 data collection (See Section 1.4), this research sought the retrospective views of a small number of the original students interviewed in Year 7 (Wave 2). Inquiries made to the Principals of the participating Catholic secondary schools resulted in the identification of seven students as possible interviewees. Gordon, Natasha, Jack, Anita, Bella, Bree and Vanessa had all participated in the Wave 1 survey while Gordon, Natasha, Jack and Anita had participated in focus group interviews held as part of Wave 1 (See Table 1).

Table 1
Timeline of Research Project, Wave 1, 2 and 3 Data, Students and Methodology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Wave</th>
<th>Students and Interviews</th>
</tr>
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| 2006  | Wave 1| Preliminary survey Year 5 students in eight Catholic Primary schools (n= 146) Focus group interviews  
|       |       | Year 5 students (n=12 students from eight primary schools in the Diocese) |
| 2008  | Wave 2| Year 7 students (n=16) - Gordon, Natasha, Jack, Anita, Bella, Bree and Vanessa Individual Interviews |
| 2010  | Wave 3| Year 9 Students (n=7) - Gordon, Natasha, Jack, Anita, Bella, Bree and Vanessa Individual Interviews |

All students were aged 14 years and self-identified as Catholic. Students within the age range of the sample are described as “adolescents” (Barratt, 1998; Cumming, 1993; Eyers, Cormack, & Barratt, 1993; Fleming, 1993) and belonging to the “middle years” of Australian education (NSWDET, 2008).

3.5 Data collection – the interview approach

Considering the age of the participants, it was felt that a conversational style of interview, rather than a tightly focused question-response structure, would more easily elicit the narratives through the recounting of personal experiences and stories (Singleton, Mason, & Webber, 2004). Such an approach also allowed greater flexibility in inviting
students to provide more detail or through rewording of questions when students were unclear about meaning or intent (Chase, 1995; Kvale, 1996). A conversational style of inquiry was seen as conducive to the building of trust and rapport and Ellis (2004) suggests narrative researchers may share their own experiences of the research topic in order to build rapport and open communication. I was therefore quite honest in sharing with the students my professional and family background. My experience of being a parent of similarly-aged students of the same gender seemed to build rapport quite easily and in turn assisted in evoking responses from students.

To stimulate discussion, excerpts from transcripts or audio files from earlier interviews conducted with the students in Year 5 (where available) or Year 7 had been prepared for use during the interview. With the consent of the students, these extracts were played or read during the interviews as a stimulus to personal reflection. The intention was that, with the passing of time, students would provide a more nuanced perspective on their past, present and future experiences. In all cases, students were quite curious to hear the sound of their own voices or read their previous comments and perspectives. One student took some time to realize the extent to which their voice had changed while another student appeared slightly hesitant through a concern that others in adjoining rooms might hear her “kid” voice.

Reflective of the desire to inquire further into a number of issues of interest that had arisen in the earlier research when the students were interviewed in Year 5 and Year 7 (identified in Chapter Two, Section 2.7), a schedule of semi-structured questions was developed (See Appendix C). These questions addressed issues relating to (i) the absence of faith conversations; (ii) the absence of public or private religious practice; (iii) the absence of supportive peer faith networks; (iv) the failure of Religious Education to challenge students intellectually; and (v) a lack of clarity as students articulated beliefs foundational to the Catholic faith. A further area for inquiry focused upon relationships with self, others and the Trinity and, reflecting both the narrative and retrospective style of the study, attention was given to addressing the period of transition from primary to secondary schooling.

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17 Transcripts of focus group interviews held in Year 5 were also available for scrutiny. Four of the students in this current study had also participated in these earlier focus group interviews: Natasha, Gordon, Jack, and Anita.
The interviews were approximately 60 minutes in length, although the time varied according to participant responses. At the conclusion of the interview, each student was offered the opportunity to ask questions. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and to ensure accuracy, the language and punctuation of each transcript was ensured by reading each one while listening to the relevant recording, a procedure recommended by Morse (1994) to provide a true record of the interview. The interviews provided significant amounts of data that needed to be analyzed in an appropriate manner.

3.6 Data analysis and presenting the vignettes

As suggested previously, (Section 3.3), thinking narratively resulted in issues such as the methods used to gather the perspectives from these participants, the approach taken to the analysis of the interview data, and the presentation of data informing each other. Narrative inquiry lends itself to alternative forms of representation and, as outlined in Chapter One, the retrospective nature of the inquiry seemed to suggest the suitability of presenting participant narratives in the form of short stories, or vignettes. The choice of vignettes supported the understanding that in this study, the central aim is not to ascertain the total number of participants that have had similar or different experiences, but rather to (re)present and make meaning from the texture, depth and complexity of each participant’s stories of their lived experience.

The choice of portrait vignettes offered a rich, interesting and engaging account of my understanding of the stories of these participants consistent with Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) metaphorical three-dimensional narrative inquiry space. Within this inquiry space, I moved inductively between transcriptions of their interviews, transcriptions of previous interview data (from Year 5 and Year 7)\(^{18}\) and the recordings of their voices (Polkinghorne, 1995). Listening to a student voice on speakerphones while driving to work each morning provided deeper immersion into each student’s story. I took time to listen to their tones, their words and—in many cases—the silences, for each of these also told a story. It was noted that the schedule of questions, as was its purpose, provided general consistency around the movement and general direction of the interview.

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\(^{18}\) A deductive analysis of the Wave 1 and 2 interview scripts.
However, given the retrospective nature of the study, at times responses shifted from the present to the past and then once more to the present. Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) three-dimensional *narrative inquiry space* was therefore useful as a guide to the structuring of each student’s own individual vignette each including the personal as well as the social (interaction); *past, present* and *future* (continuity); and the notion of *place* (situation). Over time, the unique voices of the participants were faithfully (re)presented as an intact narrative in the form of a series of vignettes. The presence in the vignettes of the actual words spoken by each student evoked the “very essence” (van Manen, 1990, p. 88) of the depth and reality of their experience.

However, as Clandinin and Connelly (1994, p. 418) suggest, it is not enough to tell the story; a “more difficult but important task in narrative is the retelling of stories that allow for growth and change” and further analysis was necessary. Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 20) understand that terms such as “thinking about experience”, “story” and “narrative” are analytically different, perceiving the phenomenon as the “story” and the inquiry process as the “narrative.” In this understanding, while people tell stories, narratives come from the *analysis* of their stories (Frank, 2000). The examination and exploration of stories, a “new spiral of retellings” (Olson, 2000, p. 350) where experience is viewed through different perspectives enables access to underlying narratives. As Carse (in Feuerverger, 2013) tells us: “Narratives raise issues, showing us that matters do not end as they must but as they do… narrative invites us to rethink what we thought we knew.” Although enfolded as networks within networks, schools and families at times disconnect or contradict and so “moments of tension” emerge (Huber, Huber, & Clandinin, 2004, p. 182). Recognition of such tensions offers the opportunity to glimpse transformative possibilities for families, schools and for students.

To this point, the theoretical interests guiding this study and the reasons behind the choice of narrative inquiry have been outlined, along with an introduction to the research participants, and an overview of the interview method and the approach taken with data analysis and (re)presentation of participant stories. Every stage of this process involved decisions and actions grounded in important ethical considerations: these are considered below.
3.7 Ethical considerations

Critical to the ethical dimensions of this study were recognition of issues related to the wellbeing of the participants and ensuring the integrity of the study. The issues related to ensuring student consent (including the need to draw on the earlier audio files and interview transcripts of the students), satisfying requirements for ethical conversations with children and the storage of large amounts of confidential data are briefly addressed below.

Consistent with this study’s interest in the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) and the field of Childhood Studies, both of which recognize the agency of young people, students were integrally involved in the consent processes for the research (Alderson, 2004; Hill, 2005; Williamson & Goodenough, 2005). Consequently, the procedures for accessing and inviting student participation that were laid down within the original institutional ethics application were replicated when seeking approval from the Director of Catholic Education, School Principals, parents and students.

Further, there was an onus to ensure the students were provided with clear and sufficient information explaining both the purpose and nature of the research (Alderson, 2004; Morrow & Richards, 1996). Alderson (2004) argues that asking children and young people how much they understand the research and their rights in relation to the research can assess competence. Consequently, I arranged through the relevant Principals to meet briefly with the students who were nominated for the interviews to familiarize them with the aims and progress of the research as well as indicating how their participation might contribute to future action. I also sought their permission to listen to or read their earlier interviews during the interviews to which all students agreed. At the onset of each interview, the history and purposes of the research were again reviewed using both a flow chart and a verbal explanation of the purposes of the research. An opportunity to answer participants’ questions was provided at this time as well as at the commencement and conclusion of interviews. This approach set the tone for the conversational nature of the interviews and provided a platform for ethical considerations related to interviewing.

Even where a small concern regarding the privacy of the participants exists, there is an obligation to protect interviewees (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). In-depth interviewing can
often raise difficult issues for participants in the telling of stories of a highly personal and sensitive nature (Darlington & Scott, 2002). Thus, the safety and success of this method of inquiry necessitated the establishment of rapport and, in a very short time, a non-threatening relationship with the students. Each participant was greeted warmly and I took time to review their previous involvement and once more explained how their contributions may improve the experiences of students similar to themselves in the future. It was also important to ensure the setting for these discussions would be comfortable for all involved while also ensuring the confidentiality of each student and satisfying the appropriate child protection procedures authorized by my own employers (LCSO, 2004).

Thus, interviews were held within the parameters of the school day and school environment in a screened public place in view of school staff.

The literature on the emotional aspects of researching lived experience (Mitchell & Irvine, 2008; Pithouse-Morgan, Khau, Masinga, & van de Ruit, 2012; Rager, 2005) suggests the importance of being mindful of the emotional impact of the research process. To address this consideration, I met with either the Principal or an appropriate teacher (e.g. Home Room teacher) prior to the interviews to ascertain their readiness to participate. Josselson (2007) suggests ethical considerations are just as important at the end of the interview as at the beginning. The conclusion of the interview may have been a time of vulnerability for interviewees who have just exposed important aspects of their lives. It was therefore important to ensure that each interview included a “phase out” stage, ending with informal conversation and an invitation to the student to ask any further questions or seek clarification on any matter arising during the interview.

Finally, the nature of the research also required adherence to strict controls over data for the sake of confidentiality and the dignity of the student. Despite the limited size of the sample, the narrative approach to the study generated a considerable amount of raw interview data including the raw interview scripts generated from the earlier interviews in Years 5 and 7. The guidelines set by the research Centre where the study was being supervised were followed (CCYP, 2005). As mentioned in Chapter One, Section 1.7, all data were contained in a secure area in my place of work and pseudonyms were used throughout the research process. Aside from these ethical obligations, a number of limitations arise out of the nature of this inquiry and these are now briefly discussed.
3.8 Limitations of the study

The use of a narrative approach to explore and understand children’s accounts has the advantage of drawing the focus away from verifying the “facts” or “truth” of a story, and instead focuses on the meaning that the story has for the child and their understanding of themselves and their relationships. In other words, narrative inquiry may reveal information that is not easily discerned on the surface and so “it is important not to squeeze the language of narrative criteria into a language created for other forms of research (e.g. objectivity, validity, generalizability)” (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p.7).

At the same time, I was aware of the need to minimize as much as possible the effects of reactivity and bias to ensure the meanings of the participants was prioritized over those of the researcher. The rigor of this qualitative research does not set out to satisfy an inflexible set of standards and procedures, as is imposed in quantitative inquiry (Gambrill, 1995). Instead, reflective of measures suggested by Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 185) such as “authenticity, adequacy and plausibility,” the rigor of this research seeks to increase confidence that the findings represent the meanings presented by the participants. In any qualitative research, three issues of trustworthiness demand attention: credibility, dependability, and confirmability. That the research proposal originated from personal and professional interests also suggests the importance of paying attention to the issue of reflexivity (Elliott, 2005).

The use of narrative inquiry leads to questions about the credibility of the narratives told by participants, including the question of whether or not they represent memory reconstruction versus ‘facts’ (Clandinin & Connelly, 2001). However, the social constructionist perspective is that all “narratives sit at the intersection of history, biography, and society” (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005, p. 132) and as such, dependent on the context of the teller and the listener and not intended to represent ‘truth’. Denzin (1989, p. 25) argues that:

the meanings of these experiences are best given by the persons who experienced them.

A pre-occupation with method, with the validity, reliability, generalizability and
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Theoretical relevance of the biographical method must be set aside in favour of a concern for meaning and interpretation. (Denzin, 1989, p. 25)

Supportive of an intent to listen to the “voice” of the students, Denzin's (1989, 22) position is that, "there is a 'real' person 'out there' who has lived a life, and this life can be written about.” Thus, each of the experiences conveyed within the interviews is no less valid than are those gained by other means. Indeed, the small number of students and the interpretive nature of this study may have brought to light insights that would otherwise have remained hidden.

There is also then the need to acknowledge the interpretive and constructive processes that are unavoidably involved when attempting to present the voice or perspective of another (Ely et al., 1997). The stories told by participants represent empirical data, invaluable to “understand-[ing] how people create meanings out of events in their lives” (Chase, 2005, p. 651). However, it is impossible for a researcher to be neutral and objective and simply report on what people relate. Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 93) note the “data” acquired through narrative field texts are inevitably “imbued” with interpretation on a number of levels. The first of these could relate to the difference between experience as it was lived, and how students have relayed that experience during the interview. A further stage occurs in the analysis of the spoken language and once again, its consequent (re)presentation into vignette form. All of these have implications for how the text was understood. The inclusion of the actual words of the students within each vignette also sought to ensure the credibility of my claim that I was communicating what these students were telling me (Gilgun, 1992).

Largely, the dependability of a study hinges on the validity of processes used to arrive at the conclusions made (Lincoln & Guba 1985). Ensuring the dependability of this study was addressed by clearly specifying the research process taken thus enabling the reader to follow how the views of the students have been collected, analyzed and (re)presented. In compliance with this expectation, all data reported in this study are available in their original form on digital audio or in transcribed hard copy and interview data and composed vignettes have been available for supervisory check. Additionally, a data trail composed of hard copies containing initial coding and analysis of the interviews has been maintained.
Appropriate levels of attention focused upon the integrity between the data collected and the results, the chain of evidence, contributes to the overall confirmability (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). In meeting this criterion, a precise description of the research paradigm and research method, illustrative of the understanding that findings are representative of the participants and not of the biases of the researcher, is presented (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, Ely and his colleagues (1997) do acknowledge the interpretive and constructive processes that are inexorably engaged when any individual attempts to present the voice or viewpoint of another. Thus, it must be noted that the current vignettes reflect in part an interpretation of the author and the researcher’s part in the conversation in order to be transparent about the relational nature of the research, and the ways in which these stories are shaped through dialogue and co-construction. While not necessarily a “limitation” of the study, it is important to be transparent about such issues.

Narrative researchers also help safeguard the integrity of their studies by clearly identifying and telling stories of their own backgrounds, intentions and purposes throughout the process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The development of the research proposal for this study quite clearly originated from the personal and professional interests of the researcher. All researchers come with their own assumptions and biases, thus a critical aspect of this narrative inquiry was my need to be attentive to the requirements of reflexivity (Elliott, 2005). While the meaning of reflexivity is itself a matter of debate, one view suggests reflexivity is “the capacity of the researcher to acknowledge how their own experiences and contexts (which might be fluid and changing) inform the process and outcome of inquiry” (Etherington 2004 p. 31). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described this dynamic as the struggle experienced by researchers who, while searching for meaning within the stories of the participants, also feel the need to express their own voices. I therefore needed to acknowledge how my own biographical perspective might influence my relationships with the participants and the interpretations of their experience (Elliott, 2005). Central to the reflexive process is the relationship between the researcher and “the researched” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 30): thus, the integrity of this study would be assisted by acknowledging how I was situated “socially and emotionally” in relation to the participants (Mauther & Doucet, 2003, p. 419). The nature of the topics discussed also
suggested the integrity of this study would be further enhanced by acknowledging how I was situated religiously and spiritually.

As an experienced educator, I was cognizant of the possibility of tension between my own narrative history as a Catholic educator and the narrative histories of the participants. Each student had offered a valuable opportunity to engage with his or her, at times, sensitive experience. Within each conversation, I was aware of my experience as both educator and parent having children of similar age to the participants. The focus of the research — to elicit from each student their unique knowledge and experience, to present it faithfully while listening for underlying narratives — continually returned me to the position of naïve listener.

3.9 Summary of chapter

This study is an exploration of the influence of families and Catholic schools upon the religious practice and spiritual lives of young Catholic adolescents. In the previous chapters, the context and reasons for this investigation were outlined and relevant literature was examined. This chapter has outlined the methodological approach taken to the study resulting in the development of a series of individual vignettes each identifying their own moments of tension (Huber et al., 2004) and providing impetus for discussion during the final chapter of this study, Chapter Five.
4 Participant vignettes

4.1 Introduction

As outlined in Chapter 1, this study extends earlier longitudinal research\textsuperscript{19} that included interviews with students in Year 5 and Year 7 about the influence of the family and Catholic school on their religious and spiritual lives. The findings pointed to a number of quite significant issues concerning the practice of prayer; the ability to articulate fundamental beliefs of the Catholic faith; the adequacy of Religious Education (RE) pedagogy; and networking with similar peers. In order to gain a deeper understanding of these issues, the current study engaged in a further series of interviews with a sub-group of the original cohort. These interviews took place in 2010 when the students were in Year 9 (See Table 2). The goal was to focus more closely on the students’ perspectives of the influence of families and Catholic schools upon their religious practice and spiritual lives during the time of transition from primary to secondary education.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student interviewed</th>
<th>Wave 2 (2008 – Year 7)</th>
<th>Student interviewed</th>
<th>Wave 3 (2010 – Year 9)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gordon</td>
<td>Individual interview</td>
<td>Gordon</td>
<td>Individual interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natasha</td>
<td>Individual interview</td>
<td>Natasha</td>
<td>Individual interview</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>Individual interview</td>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>Individual interview</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anita</td>
<td>Individual interview</td>
<td>Anita</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bella</td>
<td>Individual interview</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bree</td>
<td>Individual interview</td>
<td>Bree</td>
<td>Individual interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanessa</td>
<td>Individual interview</td>
<td>Vanessa</td>
<td>Individual interview</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The perspectives of these seven students are now presented in this chapter as a series of seven vignettes. However, little is to be gained from simply recounting stories over and over again as each retelling closes off possibilities of new knowledge to be

\textsuperscript{19} The Spiritual and Religious Development of Young People in Catholic Schools in the Lismore Diocese: A Longitudinal View (Ryman et al., 2008).
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gained from that story (Whelan, Huber, Rose, Davies, & Clandinin, 2001). Narrative inquiry allows a more difficult yet important task of engage in a further level of analysis wherein the retelling of stories allows for growth and change (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). As signalled in Chapter 3, narrative inquiry allows for this further level of analysis to be situated within the “three-dimensional narrative inquiry space” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.50), where, travelling “inward, outward, backward, forward”, student experiences, research and theoretical knowledge inform each other within a “spiral of retellings” (Olson, 2000, p. 350).

This process of reflecting upon each story allowed for new perspectives, knowledge and questions to be asked of the influence of families and Catholic schools. Pushor (2007, p. 9) has shown how the distancing of families from educational landscapes, where teachers are “knowing professionals” and “parents are positioned as unknowing, or less knowing, about children, teaching, and learning” is problematic. Although families and schools may be enfolded as networks within networks, at times their respective landscapes and narratives disconnect or contradict each other, giving rise to moments of tension (Clandinin, Murphy, Huber, & Orr, 2010, p. 182). Within the process of identifying such moments of tension, students identified a number of key family and school influences upon their religious and spiritual lives that are in play during the time of transition from primary to secondary school.

Furthermore, in this process of retelling and identifying moments of tension, opportunities for growth and change in realigning family and school influences on young people’s religious practice and spiritual beliefs also emerge. The first of the students interviewed was Gordon and so his vignette is the first to be presented.
4.2 Gordon

Gordon is the oldest of three sons in a family committed to religious practice. His parents have supported his faith life through a strong, consistent and public commitment to their own practice within both the parish and the school. Gordon and his three brothers have continued in their role as altar servers in their local parish for many years. Gordon brought a serious and reflective demeanour to the interview. He was guarded in his answers although towards the conclusion of the interview, Gordon seemed to relax and spoke more freely of his personal feelings.

Gordon’s family has always been involved in regular religious practice and remains religiously committed and active. Gordon has also spoken of a family life marked by warm, close relationships, naming his family as “the biggest influence” upon his religious life. Gordon has continued to exhibit familiarity and affinity for religious practices such as prayer and Mass attendance, regularly attending Mass each weekend with his family. He connects the way he feels when he prays, and the way he feels when experiencing success in life to feeling close to God. In Year 5, he told of feeling close to God when “praying and when I do well in something.” The reception of Eucharist makes him feel “special” and he views religion as important in that “we go to Mass, we say our prayers and we talk about it at school and at home”:

I What else do you enjoy about it (religion)?
P I really enjoy Masses.
I What do you enjoy most about Mass?
P Getting the Eucharist.
I Why is that important?
P It makes you feel special.
I How does it make you feel special?
P It just does.
I What else makes you feel really special?
P When my parents say I am doing really well, they say that often.

(Wave 1)
Through the period from Year 7 to Year 9, the family continued to maintain an active and positive relationship with parish life through regular attendance at Mass as well as a social connection with the Parish Priest who visits their home on a regular basis. In Year 7, Gordon considers himself “religious” because he feels close to God and is aware his family has nurtured these feelings. He feels religious practices such as prayer and attendance at Mass have enabled him to be close to God:

I Is there a difference between… religious practice, the things that you do, like going to Mass and praying, and being close to God?

P Not really. I guess it would be hard to be close to God if you like didn’t go to Mass or anything.

(Wave 2)

During the interview, Gordon was given the chance to read sections of the transcript from his previous interviews when he was in Year 5 and Year 7. After reading the stimulus material chosen for Gordon (relating to his prayer life at home and school), Gordon suggested that between his Year 7 interview and the present time, there have been some doubts and disappointments relating to his religious and spiritual life. This Year 9 Gordon is quite different to the Year 5 Gordon who prayed before meals, at home and before dinner. In Year 9, Gordon no longer prays by himself and has not spoken to God since primary school. Although he remembers a time when he “absolutely” believed it (existence of God), it was around the time of Year 7 and Year 8 when he commenced questioning the existence of God: Gordon has not mentioned these doubts to his parents as he felt questioning of his beliefs would disappoint them:

P Yah, probably. I used to absolutely believe it, like I could see nothing that could be wrong with it but, I don’t know, I’ve started to wonder about it.

I Ok, is that this year?

P No, like from in Year 7 and 8.

I If I can ask, what sort of things have you wondered about?

P Like whether there is a God.

I Is there a reason why you didn’t ask your Mum and Dad …?

P I don’t know, they’re pretty Catholic.

I Ah, so you didn’t want to make them… disappointed?

P Yeah.
(Wave 3)

He suggests other students like him were also asking such questions but no person was available with whom to speak about his doubts or to explore these questions. He was unable to attend the Parish Youth Group due to distance and spoke vaguely of the School Chaplain whom he had seen at church, yet with whom he had not spoken. Neither were Gordon’s teachers seen as a source of clarification, as they ignored such questions during RE class. Gordon had deep misgivings about the reliability of the RE classroom teacher in Year 7, saying “we’re all human so people are going to make mistakes.” By Year 9 this level of doubt has increased and Gordon claims teachers lack credibility because it is just as easy to replace authentic Church teaching with personal opinion. Gordon now seeks answers through the internet:

P  You don’t know where they (the teachers) learn these things, it might just be their opinion.

P  …we (students) doubt, but, oh I guess we would wonder about how credible what they’re saying is.

(Wave 3)

Gordon was also quite negative about the quality of RE at school in Year 7, claiming the topics in RE were repetitive, unchallenging and “boring”, and in Year 9, this view has not changed. He is quite frustrated with the overuse of the textbook and sees the repetitive nature of the topics in RE as limiting:

P  Yeah we just do the same thing over again. Like from the same textbook, just the same chapters. I think they’ll test us on the same thing this year…

P  … (test) on the history of the Church and that’s what it was on last year as well…

P  It’s from the same textbook. Yeah, we do the same units every year…

P  Well it seems a bit strange to just do the same things every year. I guess if they added things and maybe developed the units, but they don’t, it’s just same thing.

(Wave 3)

In Year 7, Gordon viewed his school as “religious” because “most people have good values”, there were many liturgies and the Principal spoke of “values and things… what it sort of means to be Christian.” However, during his Year 9 interview Gordon
describes his frustration at the presence of vocal students in the classroom who do not believe in God and acting as if “it’s a bit of a joke.” He is disappointed they take the attention of the class away from his learning and later names them (cynically), as negative influences upon his religious and spiritual life in that “it’s hard to sort of really be vocal in your beliefs when everyone else is saying there isn’t a God.” His experience of prayer at secondary school in homeroom has been disappointing as it is “old” and, his earlier perception of going to Mass to receive Eucharist, once “special” is now seen as “repetitious.” He also finds parish life disappointing, revealing a sense of isolation as he sees diminishing numbers of students his own age attending Mass. In Year 9, Gordon finds he and his brothers are the only teenage boys in the congregation. Further, he reveals his disappointment at the creation of the role of Acolyte within his Parish, as these have taken the responsibilities previously held by altar servers. Gordon is quite indignant that they have taken responsibility for his role:

P They don’t really seem to encourage it (altar servers) at the church anymore. They have Acolytes and they seem to want to do it every week.
I Oh ok. So they have an Acolyte but they don’t have altar servers as well?
P They don’t really encourage us. They don’t seem to want them.
I (Do they do) some of the roles that the altar servers would have done?
P Like all of them, yeah.

(Wave 3)

Considering the close connection of the family with the Parish, it was surprising Gordon discounted the Parish as an influence upon his religious life, although he does suggest the Parish Priest should visit RE classrooms. In the future, he feels further units need to be developed in RE to introduce new and more challenging topics. Gordon also pointed to the unfulfilled potential of the Homeroom as an important location for effective experiences of prayer.

4.2.1 Gordon’s moment of tension - an emerging sense of isolation

Confirming the important influence of the family upon the religious and spiritual lives of young Catholics, Gordon’s religious and spiritual life has benefitted from early involvement of living within a religious family and faith community. However, as he has
matured and doubts about the existence of God have arisen, an emerging sense of isolation is evidenced in a number of ways. He is unable to seek clarification to these questions as he doubts the theological competency of his teachers and his faith background brings a sense of isolation from other students in the RE classroom. Although his family has been effective in the transmission of his religious beliefs, as Gordon matures their orthodoxy and the strength of their Catholic witness is now a barrier to Gordon seeking clarification. He is also aware he remains one of a dwindling number of adolescents within his congregation. It was not that Gordon did not want to discuss the various doubts he had, but rather as he looked around, he could not see anyone who could engage with him in such a way as to allow him to articulate his questions, without making him feel that he was betraying these foundational beliefs. Accompanying young adolescents on their religious and spiritual journey is an important task of the religious community yet Gordon appears to have been alone at this important time. There is a need for an alternative, competent and trustworthy source of clarification, yet none is apparent.

The underlying narrative within Gordon’s moment of tension is the lack of appropriate structures to accompany the young Catholic adolescent at this critical, but completely predictable time of “doubting.” At the same time, the anger felt at the loss of responsibilities as altar server is perhaps indicative of the Church having few viable ways to recognize the voice of young people who wish to be active members of the present and future Church.
4.3 Natasha

Natasha is the oldest child of three, loves music, sport and being with her friends. While Natasha nominates herself and her siblings as Catholic, she is quite adamant “no one in my family is... religious or anything like that.” Her mother is not Catholic and, although her father is Catholic, his work keeps him busy and prevents him from attending Mass. Natasha has no clear early memories of religious practice such as attendance at church, however her involvement in the school choir and band at both Church and school liturgies have now been highlights of Natasha’s school life.

Natasha spoke of the presence of an established core group of friends at school beginning in Year 5 when you start to “associate yourself with your friends”, through to the present in Year 9 where these friendships are “really set in.” Natasha speaks in a warm way of this community, depicting a real sense of students journeying together, and envisions her future with this same group of friends continuing their journey through to Year 12:

I  When does it start to be quite influential?
P  Year 5 probably. It’s like you really start to associate yourself with your friends and then once you’re in Year 8 and Year 9 it’s sort of, it’s really set in, those are the people, ‘cause you realize you’re going to be with them until Year 12.

(Wave 3)

In the opening minutes of the interview, Natasha revealed very little family connection with the parish or religious practice. Natasha goes to Mass, but with her friends rather than her family, and she was very happy to share her great enjoyment, excitement and sense of a shared purpose she felt when doing this. The sense of journey with other students through the period of transition has been an important part of her life, and a highlight of this journey has been involvement within the Parish/school Youth Group, which commenced in Year 5. Natasha speaks with enthusiasm of how this community of friends, having learnt about their religion, is now involved in Youth Group, “applying” their learning:

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20 Natasha belongs to a different Parish to Gordon and their experiences of attendance at Christian Youth Groups are also different.
One aspect of this learning according to Natasha is the importance to young people of learning from each other’s shared experiences and mistakes:

P Well we all go through the same stuff, like we’re all there for each other and stuff.
I That’s the best thing about it?
P Yeah, and there are people who say, oh you shouldn’t do that because we know from past experience that blah, blah, blah, but you’re always thinking that was you, not me, and like we have to make our own mistakes, learn our own lessons and the good thing is like we kind of learn off our friends so much more than older people because it’s like… friends seem to influence you more than parents and what not.

(Wave 3)

Like some of the other students, Natasha is very interested in music, and in Year 7 had nominated involvement in the school choir and band at church as highlights of school life. While Natasha was not as enthusiastic towards Mass attendance at primary school as it was compulsory, her experience of Mass attendance through Youth Group is “a lot more interesting.” Once more, there is a sense of genuine enjoyment as she speaks of the satisfaction and sense of celebration gained through this involvement.

P …like youth is really fun but it’s like one way of applying it and you know everyone looks forward to going to youth (Group) and what not, and it’s like back then you were like, oh we have to go to church because school’s making us sort of thing and like it’s still a bit the same now but the high school has made church a lot more interesting, like everyone’s sort of involved in it, there’s people doing readings from all different years, the choir in the Mass and everything like that.
P And it’s like everyone kind of puts in it, makes it one big celebration.

(Wave 3)
A key element in this enjoyment is the deliberately communal aspect of the occasion, creating a sense of belonging and participation. Natasha does not identify the Youth Group as a specifically “Catholic” group, instead explaining the membership reflects the nature of the current enrolment at the school and that denomination does not matter and should not be an issue, as “people don’t care anymore.” Youth Group is a place where all members “pretty much believe in the same thing” and work together to knock down the barriers “stopping us from celebrating it together.” Natasha and her friend who is Christian attend each other’s Youth Groups:

I So what’s really supported you (during transition) has been what’s happened at school.

P … it’s just like in our group of friends there’s, we’re all Catholic sort of thing and it’s like even if people aren’t they still come along to church and stuff like that with us so it’s …

I So you identify yourselves pretty strongly as a Catholic group?

P Sort of, it’s… it’s not just Catholics, there’s a lot of Christians and stuff like, in our school and what not, and people don’t like define you by it but they know about it and the difference is between now and like when we were younger and stuff, people don’t care anymore. It’s like ok, that’s fine, you go to church and stuff like that. And a lot of the Catholics, we go to like the Christians’ youth group and they come to ours sort of thing, so it’s kind of like mixing because it just seems silly that, you know, we kind of pretty much believe in the same thing but there’s like a barrier stopping us from celebrating it together but we’re starting to go, oh well, knock it down (laughs).

I … so who’s helping you knock it down?

P Kids in my year and they’re Christian and P (a friend) came to our youth Mass the other night (for the first time) and I’m going to hers in the holidays sort of thing so it’s like all joining together.

(Wave 3)

In Year 9, Natasha also named her Festa Christi experience as being a positive one, remembering the traditional Catholic practice undertaken at Festa Christi: focus

21 Natasha uses the term “Christian” to denote students attending Anglican youth groups.
22 Festa Christi is a Diocesan initiative providing an opportunity for students to meet like-minded peers to celebrate and meet with other young people who practice their faith.

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activities, reflections and preparation, and the planning of Mass. As with many of the students, Natasha points to meeting with a broader group of other young Catholics of her own age as being important and providing an opportunity to realise that there are others her own age who hold the same beliefs. Natasha was very eager to suggest *Festa Christi* be promoted to younger students to enable them time to consider attendance prior to Year 9:

I So things like *Festa Christi*… worthwhile?

P Oh they’re great. It’s just like the best experience. Like everyone’s like, “You going on Jesus Camp?” and we’re like, ooh Jesus Camp (laughing), and cause we’re kind of like, oh God what are they going to make us do, and we’re thinking, oh they’re going to make us sit down and pray, but once we got there it was actually like really fun, like to see that they weren’t like that…

P Yeah, it was kind of scary at first but once we got there it was just like the people that we met and the fact that there was so many Catholics and stuff like that, it kind of just put it into perspective that there is so many people in the world that believe it.

(Wave 3)

In a similar way to Gordon, for Natasha, enjoyment and success are closely aligned with feelings of closeness to God. If you “enjoy something”, you find God in it because it is making you happy, and so Natasha finds God in the things she enjoys purely because it makes her happy:

P I think people find God in their own ways… I just see it as if you enjoy something you find God in it because it is making you happy so if it’s sport you do it because it’s fun and because you’re good at it…

(Wave 3)

Natasha views Mass attendance as a way of sharing a common interest with someone else. Although she talks with God at church and “definitely” at Mass, Natasha sees many people who do not go to Mass, yet remain Catholic and still believe in God, so in her eyes it is not “necessary” to go to Mass to believe in God, instead it is possible for people to experience God in “their own ways.” A sign of being a good Catholic is not so
much going to church, but instead how you treat others and how you act and “feel about God”:

P Yeah, if you’re not breaking the Ten Commandments, sort of thing, you can be a good Catholic I guess, but it’s like the way you act, you can go to church but you can still be mean to people and that’s not really what God wants you to do, sort of thing. Like he says be nice to each other, you know, everyone’s equal, and then if you go to church, blah, blah, blah, come back and you’re mean to someone, you completely dog them, it’s just like how does that make you a good Catholic? Even if you go to church like twice a week.

P You know, it’s who you are and how you treat people that makes you a good Catholic. I don’t think just because someone goes to church they’re religious. They can go there and not believe in it sort of thing. So I don’t think you can really judge to see if someone is religious, it’s how they feel about God.

P No. I don’t really feel the need to (pray). I don’t feel I have to. Like I don’t feel that it’s necessary… because like he’s there, you don’t have to like talk to him and stuff.

(Wave 3)

Natasha also does not intentionally pray privately, reasoning that if God is “always there” then there is no reason to pray or talk to God:

I Do you feel you need to?

P No. I don’t really feel the need to. I don’t know if that’s an answer. I don’t feel I have to. Like I don’t feel that it’s necessary… because like he’s there, you don’t have to like talk to him and stuff.

(Wave 3)

Natasha has constructed a perception of being religious, and more specifically, being Catholic that does not include within itself the necessity of having a personal relationship with Jesus. This lack of a personal experience of Jesus was not surprising as this was common among all the students interviewed. However, what was surprising was Natasha’s reaction when asked if she might confide in Jesus for advice or in times of need. Natasha emphasized that she definitely would not “talk to Jesus” and that although she saw Jesus as a “cool guy”, she laughed incredulously at the thought of confiding in him, saying
“I don’t think so!” Natasha did not see a need to have a personal relationship with Jesus, but instead relying upon her “classroom” knowledge for answers to any questions that might arise:

I Ok, do you see Jesus as different to God?
P Oh no, they taught us at (secondary) school that it’s like one big thing, I don’t know how you would describe it. No, it’s one big thing, like Jesus is God or something, I can’t remember.

(Wave 3)

In the end, Natasha found the connection between God and Jesus too difficult to articulate, and gave up trying to explain the relationship:

P It’s more like showing that Jesus is part of God so it’s just one big thing so it’s not just focusing on, oh look this person did this, it’s like God did it. Like they taught us that Jesus was God, oh I don’t know.
I Is that confusing?
P No, not really I just can’t remember it. Dead from exams!

(Wave 3)

RE class is the place where, “We talk about whether we believe in it or not” and so it is not surprising to hear that RE class is also the place where Natasha first hears students claim they do not believe in “it” (God). In the classroom those who do not believe “still respect what everyone else believes”, a view seemingly placing belief and disbelief on an equal footing:\(^\text{23}\)

I How do you relate to God, how do you talk to God?
P Probably at Church.
I Ok, in Mass?
P Yeah, definitely.
I Ok, do you, apart from being in Mass, do people like you talk about God do you think? Talk to God?

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\(^\text{23}\) There is a similarity and a divergence here with the experience of Gordon. The similarity is that the RE class is the place where the issue of the existence of God is canvassed. The divergence is that in Natasha’s RE class, those who did not believe still respected those who did. This was not the case for Gordon, the students in his RE class worked actively to undermine the faith of believing students.
We definitely talk about him, I’ll give it that much.

In your Youth Group you mean?

No, not in Youth Group, just like even in (RE) class and stuff like that. We talk about whether we believe in it or not and there’s some people in our class who don’t believe in it but even so they’ll still respect what everyone else believes.

(Wave 3)

Natasha’s story suggests the importance of engaging with the context of the student. Natasha particularly enjoyed lessons when class discussion was encouraged, and she was able to listen to the interests of other students. While Natasha enjoyed learning “the whole story of it”, some approaches to learning in RE class suggests a methodologically poor approach where her learning was just “book work and (I) didn’t believe in it.” Natasha is very negative about the overuse of textbooks, copying from textbooks, and the repetition of topics “kind of kills the subject” and she would prefer an “everyday”, practical approach where having “…applied it” you can “kind of put yourself into it.” Natasha feels a highlight of her learning was the approach taken by a new teacher in Year 8 who had allowed them to “talk about it” and “expanded it (the topic)”:

A lot of teachers didn’t let us go into other religions and stuff like that and a lot of people wondered why, but he kind of let us learn about it. Like if there was something we wanted to look at, sort of thing, he’d let us.

So he went with where your interest was.

And the whole class, like learning out of the book and stuff like that, was just, didn’t really appeal to anyone. It needed to be more practical and like he started to make it more practical, like everyday situations that we’d put it into.

The majority of kids were like that?

Yeah, pretty much. It’s like the text book work. It kind of kills the subject because when we went into Year 8 we had a different teacher, I’m pretty sure it was in Year 7 and it was text book work and everyone hated going to religion class. But now with the new teacher sort of thing it’s like we don’t really mind going to class because we know we’ll talk about it and stuff like that.

(Wave 3)

In Year 7 RE class, her learning didn’t “really sink in, it was just all like out of the text book” and this approach “just didn’t really give the chance to let us like see how
we would fit into it sort of thing.” As her learning was placed in context by a new teacher, she felt she could “relate to it” and then makes a link between this change and her belief in God. The contrast between her former and current RE class indicates that misaligned pedagogy in RE classes may have led to the loss of opportunities to deepen Natasha’s personal relationship with God:

P Yeah it (belief in God) probably was more now than then.
I Ok, so what’s happened then?
P Well, when we were in Year 7 and stuff, it’s like when they teach us in religion class, it just didn’t really sink in, it was just all like out of the text book, we’re learning all this theory stuff and it just didn’t really give the chance to let us like see how we would fit into it sort of thing and like this year, we’ve learnt different stuff and it just feels like you can relate to it and like our new teacher has really put it into context…

(Wave 3)

4.3.1 Natasha’s moment of tension – the challenge of making Jesus present

Natasha’s vignette provides an insight into the important role played by significant relationships in fostering the religious and spiritual lives of young people. Natasha enjoys her experience of meeting similar peers within the context of faith activities such as *Festa Christi* and Youth Group. Given this affinity for relationships, a moment of tension appears with the rejection by Natasha of the presence of Jesus as confidant or advisor. Natasha’s relational understanding of Jesus does not seem to have progressed from her view of Jesus as a “good guy” in a general, rather than a personal sense. This is concerning given the mission of a Catholic school is to enliven the spirituality of young people through “frequent encounters with Christ” as the “cornerstone of the school community” (*The Catholic School*, 1977, n. 61).

Natasha struggles to articulate a relationship with Jesus outside classroom knowledge, suggesting that there exists a gap, or hiatus between her knowledge about Jesus and her relationship with Jesus, with the latter involving the challenge of making Jesus present. Natasha’s vignette suggests learning about Jesus in the classroom, while
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important, may not be enough as knowledge needs to be processed and contextualised for a
connection to be made between the cognitive and the “heart.”

In searching for someone to help place her learning about Jesus within the context
of her life, Natasha had already discounted her mother as a source, because she was not
Catholic, and although her father was Catholic, he was too busy. Natasha is unaware of the
presence of a school counsellor and chaplain at school, and although she identifies teachers
as important people, she knows no teacher well enough to trust them with her questions on
matters of faith.
4.4 Jack

Jack is the second son of parents who have maintained an infrequent connection with individual or family religious practice. The influence of his mother in Jack’s formative years has been quite important in encouraging his affinity with prayer. He loves keeping fit, playing football, has some great mates and enjoys school. Jack’s manner from the commencement of the interview was calm and relaxed, a demeanour maintained throughout the entire interview. He introduced himself confidently and was very interested in the history and goals of the research. His earlier Year 7 transcript had revealed family tension prior to his interview.

Jack’s early memories of family religious practice are ones of active engagement. Jack accompanied his parents to church regularly, and clearly remembers his mother being “really happy” when in church, and saw his father as “really religious” just for attending Mass. He also points to the importance of the classroom teacher in primary schools who brought to him a sense of God simply by telling him God is with him: “I know that he is with me because people say that to me.” He enjoys the simple actions of listening to Bible stories read by the teachers and talking about Mary as well as reading and active learning such as drawing and “just hearing about all the good things that happen and what the miracles Jesus did.” He explains these experiences of being close to God are similar to those feelings he experienced during times of success or praise, when he is “doing the right thing. I feel like I have done something good. Even on the board when I do a Maths question right. I feel good about myself.” The continuing presence of the same Parish Priest and the same members in his congregation contribute to his sense of being “connected” to the Parish. Jack valued this sense of being “connected” and spoke of the presence of close and warm relationships connecting him, his family and religious practice, suggesting participation in Baptism and Eucharist brings a sense of safety and connection with God and family:

Being baptized and having Eucharist and those sorts of things (make) you feel like you’re more connected to God because you’re sort of in his family already when you get baptized so you feel like you’re safe.

(Wave 1)
When asked how he views his faith, Jack answers that he would be “puzzled without it. I’d wonder… It’s good to know that – just to believe in something.” In Year 7, Jack had spoken of his memories of family tension and the creation of an imaginary friend as someone with whom he talked when upset or “confused with my life, when I don’t know what’s happening.” He also saw God as another friend with whom to talk, to “say how my day was. That I am sorry for my sins and things like that.” At that time he thought praying to God was very important and while he prayed nightly, he did not enjoy praying at school because of distractions. In Year 9, Jack now does not pray by himself as he already feels close to God, is certain about his faith and so does not need to express this through prayer:

But nowadays I don’t think there’s really a need to pray because I know that I’m close to God and I know that I’m certain about my faith and what’s what, so I don’t feel the need to really express that as much anymore.

(Wave 3)

When he read an extract from his Year 7 interview concerning his prayer life, Jack was a little surprised. In Year 5 he used to collect prayer cards and prayer books over a period of time for certain events like confirmation explaining he “thought it was the right thing to do to talk to God. I thought it was something important and not anyone put it in my head.” These words led to a discussion about prayer and he spoke of remembering the importance of prayer and his practice of talking to God “dimmed down a bit” around the time of transition into secondary school. He suggests that as a result of a more settled family environment, he now feels there is no need to pray, and that he is now a happier person. In response to a prompt about whether he thought God became present when he was in need, Jack took a few seconds before agreeing:

Yes, that would be pretty true. You feel like you need him more when you’re having some troubles and some problems, but you don’t think you need him when you don’t have any problems, and I think that’s what’s happening to me nowadays. I don’t really have as many problems so I feel like I don’t need to talk to anyone about anything.

(Wave 3)
Jack then spoke of his image of God in primary school, which was “almost intimidating”, and how prayer was a way to gain favour with God and that “if you didn’t pray to him he wouldn’t like you as much – like your parents sort of thing, if you did do something wrong you know you’ll (be in trouble).” I waited a short time until Jack himself ventured that perhaps his relationship with God in primary school was “negative”, and this was reflected in how he prayed at that time, seeing prayer as something you had to do to become closer to God, and to be welcomed into Heaven:

P (I)…felt like it was a negative; it was something that you had to do to be closer to God. I can’t really remember now but I wonder if maybe wanting to go to Heaven or not sort of thing – I had to pray to be welcomed into Heaven – it felt like that was a need to be a good person; you had to pray to be a good person

P …maybe when I was young I used to think that I had to (pray), maybe and that was the only way I could keep God close – if I did pray.

I And can you identify what made that change?

P As I got older I decided to be less… not less caring about my religion, but I saw that I didn’t need to pray as much to be… as the same connection with God as I did in primary school.

(Wave 3)

Despite earlier saying he no longer prays at all, Jack then mentions that although his formal prayer life has diminished, he still turns to a form of self-talk when faced with stressful situations. In the past, Jack said he had always found it easy to pray:

P …I think everyone really knows (how to pray)… it’s not that hard to pray sort of thing…on your way and you start talking away. I felt like I wasn’t even praying; I felt like I was just having a chat. I wasn’t saying prayers…

(Wave 2)

And in Year 9:

P Oh yeah, sometimes I just like to say stuff out loud to someone because I feel that it’s all muddled up in my head; I need to get it out, need to just have everything sorted and just feel that everything is sort of sorted and fine.

(Wave 3)
Jack realizes that perhaps this “someone” is God who, unlike the imaginary friend now long forgotten, remains with him. Jack firmly believes his faith gives him clarity around his choices, and a sense of comfort and peace such that he would be “puzzled” without his faith:

I …what are the advantages of having a strong belief?
P Maybe you feel a bit more “figured out” – like sort of comfortable; you know what’s right and what’s wrong.
I Yes, you were saying that before actually. You were saying that you feel a bit more… I can’t think of the word…
P Satisfied maybe?
I Yeah, satisfied and you know where you’re going.
P Yeah
I Yes, so you feel a bit safer? I think you said “safer” before?
P Yes safer; more comfortable with who you are – at peace…

(Wave 3)

By Year 9, Jack “doesn’t really go (to Mass) as much as I should” and his past sense of sacraments bringing a sense of being “connected to God” has been replaced with a view that, whether baptized or not, everyone is close to God. He believes he is no better than other students who do not have a strong faith, or who have not practiced their faith. He agrees religious beliefs and practices do afford a person an opportunity to become closer to God:

I’m not saying that if you’re not baptized you’re not as connected to God as people that are baptized. You just feel closer maybe if you do those sorts of things… such as “being kind to other people, caring, following the Ten Commandments and Beatitudes and that sort of stuff, and putting that into your life.”

(Wave 3)

Jack was immediately interested in hearing about the students who saw prayer as a way to relate with God. This led to a positive affirmation of his experience of Festa Christi as an opportunity for contact with other students who shared the same beliefs and the same life experience. Festa Christi has been of enormous value to his faith life acknowledging this experience has strengthened his faith:
It’s good to go and talk to other people from other schools that have the same faith and the same beliefs as you, the same passion about what they believe in and sort of got along… like the same stuff’s happening in their life as you.

(Wave 3)

Jack has a few of his mates go to youth Masses and recently some went to *Festa Christi*, however, Jack was disappointed none presently prayed or “talk about God.” As with many of the students, Jack displays confusion around understandings of Jesus and God:

P I used to think that God and Jesus were the same sort of people…
I You used to or you do now?
P I sort of do now sort of thing. I think I’m talking to the same person.
I Okay. So is that confusing for you?
P Yeah sort of. I never really used to focus on Jesus because I just thought that he was God…

(Wave 3)

Jack was unable to name people with whom he has spoken about his religious and spiritual life during transition into secondary school. He saw the role of Parish Priest limited to celebrating Mass, and doubted that the role of the counsellor included such matters. Jack seemed comfortable speaking about a number of religious practices and teachings of the Catholic Church, and inquiries after the interview with his Principal indicated Jack’s parents might have been the source of this knowledge. However, Jack may have benefitted from more frequent or systematic opportunities for “conversations” about his religious life.

Like many of the students, he is disappointed in his experience of RE class in secondary school. His perception of teachers is that they distribute worksheets and appear “just too busy in that time” to attend to him individually. When I asked Jack what an effective teacher would look like he replied they would have a “good working habit that really gets you to understand; not just copying off the board or on a sheet – sort of talks to
you face-to-face sort of thing (and who) has a conversation with you and treats you like an adult.”

4.4.1 Jack’s moment of tension - reflecting upon experience, growing towards God

Jack’s vignette points to how the religious narratives of childhood need to be re-created as young people mature. Tension within Jack’s family in the past may have led Jack to a negative image of God and prayer and so, aided by the stimulus material from his earlier interview, inquiring into his past faith narrative may have encouraged Jack to move towards a new perspective upon his prayer life and the place of God in his life. Jack’s new knowledge is that he is not just saying, “stuff out loud to someone” but that God remains within his internal conversations. The discussion may have allowed Jack to visualize a more mature, and renewed relationship with God as he makes a connection between his Year 9 self-talk and God.

Jack’s vignette also alerts us to the importance of emotionally supportive relationships and how it is important for teachers and significant others to converse in an appropriate manner.

Jack’s vignette also highlights how a prayerful relationship with God prayer is a “natural” reaction for young people. While the practice of prayer seems to have diminished for many of the students, two students remain connected to this practice. Anita sees it as a part of her life while Jack developed his private prayer to God as a natural response early in life.
4.5 Anita

Anita was energetic, positive and keen to engage in discussion. Nominating friends, her family, music, and sport as important, Anita also suggests her parents are “pretty religious.” When Anita was in primary school, her sister had provided Anita with a positive perspective concerning life in secondary school and Anita herself recognizes this made a “big difference” to her smooth transition. Once more, relationships are important to Anita who also sees religion as an important part of her life.

In her earlier interviews, Anita had spoken of the rich religious experiences and practices such as prayer, Mass attendance and parish experiences provided by her parents. This family involvement continued into Year 9 where Anita saw “religion” as being a link between her family, a shared belief in God, shared religious practices and the closeness of her family members:

P They’re sort of connected; religion’s a part of all of those sorts of things…Like my family – it sort of relates – religion; they believe in God and so do I so it’s sort of a close family.

(Wave 3)

The family practice of prayer has been supported by Anita’s school, where prayer was both taught and practiced regularly. In Year 9, prayer continues to remain important to Anita who still prays to God at night before going to sleep. Anita also agreed enthusiastically with the views of many students in past interviews that religious practices such as Mass attendance and prayer assisted young people develop good attitudes in life. However, Anita then suggests “proper” (formalized) praying was “not the way to get close to God; it’s through experiencing through other people” and that greater emphasis should be placed in schools upon the message that understanding religion is not only about praying, but about “your whole life.” When I asked her why she felt this way, Anita replied that she learned this from overseas pilgrims travelling to World Youth Day in Sydney in 2008 who had been billeted with her family.

Aside from the billeting of the pilgrims who have brought their own faith perspectives, Anita’s parents have made deliberate decisions to influence Anita’s religious
and spiritual life in a number of ways. Her parents have also ensured Anita’s involvement within the parish/school band that played at school Masses during the period between Year 6 to Year 9. The Parish and Priest have encouraged the participation of young people through this ministry, allowing Anita opportunities for involvement with peers as well as other significant role models. Anita suggests her involvement in the band makes Mass attendance “more fun.” Anita’s parents also encouraged her to attend *Festa Christi*, something that Anita saw as formative to her spiritual life. Similar to the experience of other students in this study, *Festa Christi* was an opportunity to meet “new people” of her age who were “like me.” While the social aspect was important, Anita valued an environment where “it’s alright to believe in God” and that “you’re not different”:

P I went to *Festa Christi*. I got to experience different sorts of faith things and I think that helped deepen my faith as well, and also World Youth Day – when all the pilgrims came over, it was good to see how strongly they believed; it sort of influences you.

I Who stands out as being important in those changes?

P I don’t know. Probably the people at *Festa Christi* – just the kids there – they just sort of made me feel it’s alright to believe in God; you’re not different. (Wave 3)

Anita is adamant her experience in the band and the experience afforded by an event such as *Festa Christi* must be continued for students into the future. Involvement within the band has afforded positive experiences of active liturgical participation, reflected in her enthusiastic plea that everyone should share her positive, experience of Mass. Common to these experiences was a sense of enjoyment, sharing and building of relationships with similar others and in experiencing “different sorts of faith things.” Anita feels her own faith has deepened:

P I didn’t believe as much like…

I When was that?

P Probably Year 7…Year 8 that sort of time.

I So it’s really made a big difference to you, the World Youth Day visitors and *Festa Christi*?
P: Yes. (Anita speaking of her faith) It’s sort of gotten deeper, more meaning. I just believe more strongly now. It feels like I’m more connected or closer…

I: To God?
A: To God yes.

(Wave 3)

Anita is able to state that her faith has grown since Year 7 and Year 8, and she feels a sense of being “more connected” to God. Moreover, her image of God has matured from a “formal” authority figure, such as a “teacher at school” in Year 7, to her present image of an “informal friend”, or someone who is always there. Anita mentions the Priest as connected with her image of God, perhaps reflecting the positive support of the Priest for the band. Perhaps as a result, Anita has the most consistent understanding of the relationship between Jesus and God of all students. Her belief in Year 5 that Jesus and God are the same has remained consistent, and her answer suggests an all-encompassing view of Jesus:

I: Where does Jesus fit into all this?
A: The same as God – he just fits in everyday life.
I: So Jesus is the same as God?
A: Yes.

(Wave 3)

The shared experience of young people seems to be important in fostering their religious and spiritual lives. Anita’s relationships have been developed through shared experiences where, “you’re all sort of going through the same sort of thing like feeling different emotions and going through that sort of thing.” This relational perspective does not seem to have been her experience of learning in RE, where lessons have been predominantly individualistic rather than co-operative. Anita suggests the cognitive aspects of RE need to be better balanced with more “pastoral care stuff” and RE should include a greater degree of collaborative learning as “working as a group… (makes) it more enjoyable for everyone.” Anita reveals an interesting moment of tension as she suggests that the very nature of RE class means that it is not the place to come to “experience” God:
I So if I say to you “So what’s your religion class like? Is that a good place to learn about your religion?”
P Not really. Not by yourself.
I Not by yourself?
P Yeah. You can’t really experience God through religion classes.
I Okay. So what do you do in religion classes? It’s more…?
P Just learning about history and stuff.

(Wave 3)

4.5.1 Anita’s moment of tension - an emerging need to “experience” God

Anita’s vignette illustrates the positive outcomes that are possible when the faith narratives of family, school and other agencies are consistent and complementary. Anita’s parents have deliberately catered for her emerging need to “experience” God in a number of ways: a close involvement of the family within the religious life of the parish; involvement in Festa Christi; participation in the parish/school band, and inviting visiting pilgrims into her family home. Interestingly, Anita did not mention her teachers when asked who was influential in her experiences of religious and spiritual growth during the transition from primary to secondary school.

Anita is the exception to all the other students who seem to be confused by the relationship between Jesus and God, and fail to see Jesus Christ as advisor or confidant. Anita is the only student who has clarity around an ever-present notion of God, a personal relationship with Jesus Christ sustained through a prayerful relationship with God.
4.6 Bella

_Bella told me she “lives” on Facebook, enjoys entertainment, enjoyment and an environment where you can “do whatever you want.”_ The youngest of three children, Bella has many friends, enjoys school and close, positive relationships with both parents. Bella spoke eagerly about the time spent with her mother mapping out her future career. In her opinion, she feels trusted and privileged in comparison with many other children who do not have the same privileges and appreciative of the freedom afforded her by her parents as she progressed from primary to secondary school.

While Bella was enthusiastic when the interview commenced, after the introductions and explanation of the research purpose, Bella’s energy and interest disappeared and remained absent for most of the interview. She nevertheless opted to stay involved even though it was made clear that she was not required to do so.

In Year 7 Bella perceived herself as a “religious person” who “follow(s) things that Jesus did, setting good examples and stuff” and so it was interesting to hear of her cynical attitude towards religion two years later. While both parents are Catholic, there is little sign of a connection to her faith, and Bella cannot name anyone who had encouraged her to remain interested in her faith. Towards the end of Year 7 Bella continued to attend evening meetings with the Parish based National Evangelization Team (NE Team) and seemed to be engaged there until her attendance was interrupted by a change in peer group:

I So is there anybody who’s been in there to sort of make you lose interest or to encourage you to stay interested in it? (her faith)
P Not really. Well when we had like the NE Team I used to like to go to all those things but then when I stopped going to that I kind of just like didn’t…
I What year…were you in?
P The end of Year 7.
I And did you enjoy it?
P Yeah it was fun.

24 National Evangelization Team (NE Team) is a Catholic peer to peer youth ministry initiative. http://www.cgyouthministry.org.au/youth/national-evangelisation-team/
I With your mates?
P Well I’m like with a different group of friends and then our group of friends we stopped going and then, yeah.

(Wave 3)

Two years later, Bella states she does not believe in God, no longer perceives her parents as “religious”, and her religious practice in things such as Mass attendance since Year 5 has been minimal. While her Grandmother tries to support her religious practice, Bella now makes deliberate choices against Mass attendance:

I Your Mum and Dad at home. Are they religious?
P Not really. Like my Mum and Dad’s parents are, like my grandparents are but we’re not as much.
I Does your Grandmother, does she take you to church.
P When she’s like up, she’ll say anyone want to come to church? But we won’t go but she’ll go but we like choose not to go with her.
I Ok, have you ever gone with her?
P No, cause she likes to go in the morning times and I like to sleep.

(Wave 3)

Bella remained positive towards “learning more about religion” in Year 7, yet once more found RE lessons moving “more and more off track” and addressing “random stuff.” Bella recalls RE as boring and “just stuff out of the Bible and work sheets.” Bella points to the repetition of the content in RE as the source of her lack of interest:

It will just like… stay the same, like we just do the same things over and over again but we’ll just be adding a bit more to it every year and looking deeper into it but still looking over the same topics.

(I like) Nothing really…Because I’ve already like heard about it all before and we always go over the same things every year …

(Wave 3)

By Year 9, questions relating to “religion” were not taken seriously and when asked for her current opinion towards religion, Bella laughed cynically, dismissing the
question explaining she now does not “participate” or “think about religion anymore.” Bella considers religion as “weird” and religious practices equally so and states her family no longer go to Mass:

I  How has your attitude to religion changed?
P  (laughs)
I  What are you laughing at? Since Year 5…how has your attitude to religion, and when I say religion it could be your religion lessons or it could be your religion.
P  Oh well, I don’t really like partic… I wouldn’t say participate, like I don’t think much about religion anymore. Like in Year 5, I’d pay attention to it, but now it’s like I think it’s weird. Like we don’t really go to Mass and stuff anymore.

(Wave 3)

When asked to clarify her meaning of the word “weird”, Bella explains that she does not believe that someone like Jesus, who is supposed to be human, can perform miracles:

P  Like, I think Jesus is like, I don’t even know, because I think it’s weird like how someone can perform all these miracles and stuff, like I don’t think that’s humanly possible to just do all that stuff.

(Wave 3)

When asked about her understanding of the relationship between Jesus and God, her response seems to replicate what might have been learnt in RE lessons as opposed to her current personal understanding:

I  Where does Jesus fit into all these things?
P  Isn’t God Jesus?
I  How do you see God and Jesus being related?
P  Well they say that Jesus is God’s son but isn’t Jesus Mary’s son? Like I just get confused.
I  Who do you have to talk (to) about that sort of stuff, if you had a question? Do you do that in religion class? Would you talk about that? (Bella shakes head) No.

(Wave 3)
Bella saw no opportunity to clarify issues raised by her doubts or incomplete understanding. She could not ask her friends as they were “not fully religion like Mass every weekend” and the same criteria perhaps excluded her parents. Bella’s attitude to prayer seems underdeveloped, seen largely in terms of petition, while her perspective of opportunity for prayer at secondary school is limited to the RE classroom, which is very irregular and only when “allowed” by the teacher. In Year 9, her prayer life is non-existent:

P I don’t talk to God. I don’t even like really think about it at all.
I So do you pray at all?
P I pray, like at the start of every religion class we say a prayer and stuff and like at assemblies. I don’t pray in my own time.
I In your own time, like in your own thoughts?
P No.

(Wave 3)

Towards the end of the interview, Bella returned to the topic of “religion” and it was then I started to place into context her earlier cynical attitude to religion understanding that perhaps the word itself is the cause of her derisive attitude. Towards the conclusion of the interview, Bella suggests there is a disconnect between morality and religion, such that morals and values are “like connected to…religion” but not “fully like religion.” When asked for suggestions on how to improve RE classes in the future, Bella showed little interest, and was the only student not to offer suggestions. At the conclusion of the interview, Bella’s enthusiasm returned and she spoke once again of her plans for her career, pursuing her passion for music. Once more, Bella spoke of her love for music and concerts with as much passion as did Natasha when speaking of her involvement in her parish/school band.

4.6.1 Bella’s moment of tension - the absence of a family faith narrative

Bella’s story seems to expose the fragile links between children and religious practice where family narratives are disengaged from the religious. Bella herself saw clearly the decline in her religious and spiritual life during Year 7, and by Year 9 it was almost non-existent. Bella’s family is now involved in minimal religious practice and her perception of
prayer within the classroom is of something only “allowed” by the teacher and not something “normally” occurring. Bella appears to lack an understanding of the key tenets of her faith tradition. She did not have a personal relationship with Jesus and possessed an understanding of the term religion that had mainly negative connotations. She saw RE as repetitious and disconnected from her life. Where families and schools co-construct common narratives, plausible and persuasive reasons for young people to choose a religious worldview are created. Bella’s vignette shows the powerful influence of the family when disengaged from the Church and its narrative.
4.7 Bree

While Bree’s Dad is Anglican and her Mum is Catholic, discussions related to the religious or the spiritual seem to be absent in Bree’s family. The middle daughter in her family, Bree is very involved in a variety of sports and very eager to converse during the interview. In Year 7, Bree felt Mass attendance was “compulsory” and wished to commit to God and Jesus of her own accord rather than out of any external expectation. However, by Year 9 Bree reveals she is engaged in little or no religious practice apart from that experienced at school and very cynical of the views of teachers who are involved in what she sees as a conspiracy of silence. She is also developing an interest, initiated by her older brother, in the Illuminati.

When asked about the influence of her family in her religious and spiritual life, Bree speaks of a slowly decreasing level of family attendance at Mass commencing around the time of Year 5, to the extent that only Bree, her brother and Mother attend Mass and only then at Christmas and Easter. Although her family usually does everything together, her Dad doesn’t go to Mass, even at Christmas, preferring instead to stay at home watching television - a situation she considers to be a “bit weird” as Bree would prefer him to be with her at Mass.

Together we read some of her transcript from Year 7 concerning her relationship with God, her faith, beliefs, and the place of prayer. When I asked if these are topics for discussion in the family, Bree rolls her eyes, indicating that the answer is an obvious “of course not.” Bree is surprised when I ask whether her attitude to God has changed since Year 5:

I We asked you last time, “Is God close to you, or are you close to God?”
P Wow, I’ve got no idea. I don’t know.

(Wave 3)

When pressed, Bree says: “I think it’s different for everyone. For me, I’m happy. I know He’s there in some way, shape or form so that’s all that really matters to me”, and “I know He’s there but I’m not sure how close.” Bree “definitely” believes in God, but “now not so much”, meaning that the belief that is there is diminishing. Similar to Bella,
Bree sees formal prayer as something only occurring at school, and disagrees that prayer is a way to get close to God. Bree will “talk” to God, but she does not see this as prayer, and she does not intend for it to bring her closer to God: “I talk to God but I don’t think it’s a way of me getting closer, I just comment every now and then.” However, Bree did feel a sense of being close to God at the time of her Nan’s death:

P  So like when my Nan passed away that’s when I was close to God, or He was close to me, I’m not sure… I just found myself talking to whoever.

(Wave 3)

Bree finds prayer and the parables repetitive, saying you can read all the readings you want in the morning at school, but unless it is personally meaningful, it “doesn’t mean anything.” If Bree was to pray, her way of praying would need to be “personal.” When asked how prayer should “look”, Bree suggests it is the opportunity to reflect and to thank God:

P  Prayers in the morning, they have a reading from the Gospels, I think it’s the Gospels, and they say “Hail Mary” and “Our Father” but it’s repetitive, it doesn’t mean anything after a while, so you can read all the readings that you want but it’s not really personal.

I  So what would be the thing that you could do then to make it work well?

P  I don’t know, like a minute just to think to yourself or just to thank Him personally… Yeah. To make it more personal, because like saying those prayers every morning, like we understand like the story of how He changed water to wine and stuff, we’ve studied that and we understand that, but it’s nothing that has any meaning. It doesn’t have any meaning to me because it’s not that personal.

(Wave 3)

When discussing her friends, Bree divides them into two groups; those who get drunk and “do the party” and those who “go and watch a movie on the weekend.” Her narrative about the influence of her peers was that she had chosen the wrong friends, who were negatively influencing her. Eventually, Bree repositioned herself with another group of friends:
Well I had a bit of trouble in Year 7, ‘cause like there were some girls there who I hanged around with and they were a pretty bad influence, like they were… Yeah, they were a pretty bad influence. They changed me for a bit, but then I woke up to myself and then I found my group of friends that I have now…

(Wave 3)

When I asked what might have been the catalyst for this change of peer group, Bree suggested their shared values had drawn them together, in particular, the values and empathy for the disabled, formed through her involvement in her local surf club’s “surfing days”:

In class they (Bree’s old friends) were so immature and like making fun of people, and I didn’t like that ‘cause they’d make fun of disabled people and I’m like charity-involved, so I serve with disabled people and I’m like, “dude you can’t do that.” So then, I found a group of friends that didn’t do that and they come to disabled surfing days as well so…

(Wave 3)

Bree was very enthusiastic when explaining the work she performed with a number of disabled children in the surf, and how wonderful it was to see the smiles on their faces as they rode the waves. Interestingly, when I suggested her service was a way to put her faith into action, Bree replied no such connection had been made previously. I deliberately asked the question once more to clarify and was surprised as Bree was quite adamant “we don’t talk about it”:

So where do you think those values came from that you’re talking about just there, your respect for disabled people?

I don’t know, everyone’s a person, they can’t really help, they can’t help it. One of them nearly drowned and like no oxygen got to his brain for a while so he has cerebral palsy and like severe problems like speech and stuff and he’s in a wheelchair and he’s the loveliest man. He has nothing wrong with him, like you sit and have a chat.

It started up a couple of years ago and like first day I like loved it. The fact that people can get together, they’d be like no discrimination, and you take them surfing and the smiles on their faces, you’re just like, ooh. And you’d get on the
back of the surfboard with them and put them on the wave and in the photos they’ve just got these smiles, like don’t stop.

I So you’re really living out your faith in that way?

P Yeah, I guess.

I …do you get opportunities to talk about how you serve, or how you live out your faith in your own life?

P No. We don’t talk about it.

(Wave 3)

While Bree enjoyed learning RE during the time between Year 5 and Year 7, by Year 9 her interest had diminished. Bree listens to her own words from the Year 5 interview and laughs at how she “…used to love religion in primary school, I was so naïve.” She laughs as she remembers her grandfather frequently ringing her and asking what her favourite subject was and she would answer, “Oh religion, religion’s really enjoyable - like in primary school we got to colour in, you know, colour photos of God and stuff.” Bree particularly enjoyed stories and parables where you have to figure out the meanings by yourself, however by Year 9 the stories seem “all the same”:

P Mmm, cause like you get the things like the birth story and then you get the creation story, then you get the water to wine story, and then you get all these stories that are all the same like all the time and it’s like, I know what that means, I’ve studied that.

(Wave 3)

Bree laments this repetitiveness, the focus upon copying and summarizing work and the lack of interactivity and intellectually challenging material in RE. RE had not satisfied her need to relate to religion in a more personal way, her “personal view on life”:

P Intellectual stuff, not… ‘cause our exam next week is on Early Church in Australia and stuff like that, but that has no meaning to us and, I know it’s a Catholic school and I probably shouldn’t say this but… I don’t need to know that. I don’t need to know that Father Terry, Father Dixon, Father whatever came to Australia and they were Irish convicts, no offence, I don’t really care.

I What would you rather do?
Rather than that, they need to do more inter-actives, ‘cause they’re just like, alright, copy this out or summarize this or do these question.

So it’s not really challenging, well it’s challenging your brain…

It’s hard but it’s not really challenging anything else.

Ok. Does it affect inside you, your thoughts and feelings and so on, very much?

It kind of makes religion more of a subject and…

What should it be?

It’s not a subject, it’s your personal view on life and stuff so it’s not about Jesus, like Mary and stuff going to Nazareth, it’s like how He came about was very important and it’s very important to a lot of people, but I just find it too studyish.

(Wave 3)

There seems to be a critical maturing of her interest in the religious, noted by Bree as a shift from unquestioned acceptance of what was taught in Year 5 to now questioning her own beliefs. In contrast to other students, Bree seems to have a genuine interest and curiosity in Jesus Christ, and was very disappointed her mother denied her an opportunity to see the film “Passion of the Christ” with the rest of the class. Bree felt seeing the film would open the door to a more personal understanding of the person of Jesus. At the same time, her beliefs have been questioned through her learning in Science, a place where “you learn and everything starts falling into place.” It is in Science she hears that the stories in the Bible are not meant to be true but rather tell a story:

In primary school they wouldn’t touch on that subject (the topic of evolution), they would talk about more like God and what He means to you and stuff. So they kind of push it differently… Faith wise, in primary school we weren’t really pushed, but it was the only thing we knew and now that we’ve got to like an older stage, we sort of realize more things. So in primary school I might have said that, yes, I definitely believe in God but now not so much.

Well it’s (scientific views) all over the news, it’s everywhere… I’m in a top Science class, so I sort of get a bit of input from her, my teacher. But I still believe, it’s just not as strong as what I was in Year 5.

(Wave 3)

As with other students, Bree is vague when asked where or to whom she might take questions or doubts concerning her faith. When Bree’s Grandmother passed away,
Bree asked, “Is He (God) really here? Can He actually hear me?” yet she explained “I had no one to ask.” Bree could not talk with her mother and father, but she saw speaking with a Priest in Confession as a positive experience because you “can just really talk to him… he’ll do like the blessings” and you can confide in him as “he’s not allowed to tell anyone.” Bree was aware of the presence of the National Evangelisation Team working within the school, however they appeared to be “really busy doing music and religion stuff.” Bree believes the placement of someone who is “there like all the time” would have assisted her transition into secondary school. Perhaps due to her positive experience with her Parish Priest, she suggests someone “like a priest”:

P I guess you can talk to your teacher but they’re gonna say what they have to say cause they’re teachers and we don’t really have a person around, oh we have the counsellor and stuff but we don’t have like a priest or someone who’s like around, or a school chaplain who’s around, like all the time you can just like talk to.  

(Wave 3)

Towards the end of the interview, Bree expressed her interest in the novel “Angels and Demons” and the Illuminati, along with her disappointment that these topics are not discussed in RE classes, as teachers try to “paint a perfect picture.” Bree also believes the “bad things” that Catholics have done are not spoken of in RE classes, as teachers “are paid to tell you what they have to.” Bree has constructed an understanding of Jesus as an outcast, who was actually doing the wrong thing by trying to convert those who already had a valid belief system:

P So I asked my brother and he said he hasn’t learned anything about it so they’re trying to like paint this perfect picture and I don’t see it. Like they’re trying to paint this perfect picture like you know everything’s good and Jesus did every right and I don’t see it that way, I see him as like he was an outcast and he tried to convert people who already had a belief. So if someone came and did that now… I’d find it pretty like rude, rude and like to come in and change everything.

P And then people started following him so, they don’t teach us the fact that he came in and tried to change everyone’s lives. They don’t teach us about the bad things that Catholics have alleged (sic) done. So we get this perfect picture.
Families and school influences on the religious practice and spiritual lives of Catholic adolescents

P Jesus, he changed water to wine and everyone was like, oh my God…He changed a blind man to see, he cured a leper. I have heard all those stories but that makes Him look like this, you know, great person.

(Wave 3)

When asked if Bree had spoken to someone about these questions and concerns, Bree suggests there is no one she could express these thoughts to, not even the Priest and Chaplain:

P I get this feeling that they’re not going to tell you anything, not nothing, but not the truth. I don’t know where that came from maybe that’s my Mum’s side of me.
I Does she say that?
P She doesn’t really say that but she speaks her mind pretty well.

(Wave 3)

4.7.1 Bree’s moment of tension - the need to connect student life with faith

Bree’s vignette illustrates a number of factors some students need to face while constructing their faith narrative. Within the home, the “religious” or the “spiritual” are not openly discussed, and there has been little family religious practice with her father disengaged even at Christmas and Easter. Her experience of prayer appears to be unrelated to her life and, although she is quite intelligent, Bree has been intellectually unchallenged by RE. While she is extremely cynical of the views presented in RE class, Bree appears to listen to the Science teacher closely where she hears for the first time that Bible stories are not true. Bree’s older brother and her own careful observation of media have also presented her with narratives in opposition to the Christian tradition. By Year 9, Bree reflects an antagonism towards the “religious”, including religious practice, RE teachers, and Jesus and His mission. Given these circumstances, it was not surprising that Bree was unable to see the connection between her service to the disabled, and the deeper theological connection to Christian notions of service, community and witness.

4.7.2 Bree’s second moment of tension - the absence of a family faith narrative
In the absence of family faith narratives, narratives other than Christian become more than a curiosity for young people. Bree was unable to name either an individual or a structure with whom she could discuss her emerging questions and concerns (apart from the possibility of the Sacrament of Confession). Bree is intelligent, articulate and curious, and still shows an interest in learning about Jesus Christ. However, the type of learning she is interested in is one that directly engages with critical secular perceptions of the work and life of Jesus. The Year 9 interview provided a limited opportunity for Bree to articulate her questions, showing that young people do have significant questions and are willing to voice these questions within a safe and supportive environment. Her positive view of the role of the Sacrament of Confession was interesting, despite her critical stance toward Jesus and His Mission. In Bree’s case, the availability of theologically competent companioning is of critical importance, given the antagonistic narratives already held relating to religion and Jesus Christ.
4.8 Vanessa

Vanessa appeared to be an intelligent, personable and shy student with an active and healthy lifestyle, yet it was very difficult to engage Vanessa in conversation. While attentive, many of her responses reflected either a lack of interest or a difficulty in articulating her views. Vanessa’s father is not Catholic, and although her mother took her to Mass when she was younger, by Year 7 Vanessa claimed her family was not religious, only attending Mass at special times during the year such as at Easter or Christmas. There now seems to be minimal religious involvement.

Vanessa found it difficult to articulate a personal Catholic identity and could not say whether her Catholicity and learning in RE has made a difference to her life values. Vanessa was also unsure of any difference between her values and those of other students in her school who may have enrolled from non-Catholic schools. When pressed, Vanessa suggested there was a difference in the actions of some of her friends from non-Catholic schools, however she was vague about describing this difference.

In Year 7, Vanessa felt God is “everywhere” and is close “especially… when we’re reading out of the Bible.” However, by Year 9, Vanessa does not talk to God or Jesus, although she might turn to God if she had a problem. There is an absence of prayer at home and Vanessa seems to have a perception of prayer as something quite formal and occurring at predefined times during the school day. Reflecting the lack of a meaningful context for prayer, Vanessa says when she did pray, she did not “really aim it (prayer) at anyone.”

While Vanessa had previously spoken of her confusion between religious teachings and those of Science, she now gives little thought to these matters. I sensed this was possibly the first time Vanessa had been asked to reflect upon her own faith and relationship with God in such a direct manner:

I Do you talk to God?
P No.
I So what about your relationship with Jesus? Do you have an understanding with Jesus, talk to Jesus?

92
No

What do you think about Jesus?

I don’t know. I don’t really know if I completely believe that.

What don’t you believe?

That the earth was, I don’t know. I don’t really know. Just some of the stories seem kind of unbelievable.

From the Gospel, from the Bible? Which ones, if you don’t mind?

Well, I reckon, like how the world was created, I don’t believe in that really. The ones like how He like does all these miracles and, like some of them I can understand but other ones are like... (sentence tails off).

(Wave 3)

Vanessa was the only student who revealed a negative attitude to Religion Education in both primary and secondary school. In primary, Religion Education was seen as “enforced” and, although interest in RE increased upon entry to secondary school, lack of active engagement in her learning resulted in a declining enthusiasm. When asked what she was doing in RE now, Vanessa rolled her eyes and replied “copying information off the board.”

Given Vanessa’s demeanour during the interview, it was encouraging to notice the interest shown when she was asked for suggestions on how to make RE better in the future. Vanessa suggested incoming students from non-Catholic schools needed an introductory course for RE. Vanessa’s experience of a father who was not Catholic may also have led her to suggest that in the future, greater support be available for parents who do not have background knowledge in “religion.”

4.8.1 Vanessa’s moment of tension – catering for diverse religious and spiritual needs

The moment of tension within Vanessa’s story only arrives towards the end of the interview where Vanessa repeats, in her own words, a call similar to that made in The General Directory for Catechesis (1997) for religious instruction to cater for different kinds of faith responses among students. Upon entry into secondary school, Vanessa was looking forward to RE, though her enthusiasm waned once more after placement in a RE class with many students who “didn’t really know anything.” Vanessa is a very quiet girl
and perhaps not as willing to display knowledge or aptitude in a classroom situation where many students have arrived from a variety of religious backgrounds or non-religious backgrounds.

Vanessa’s vignette illustrates the necessity of catering for an individual’s needs however challenging that may be. The lack of a differentiated approach towards students entering secondary school clearly underlines this time of transition as a time of challenge to those students who possess a faith connection, yet now find themselves in RE classes where teachers seem to presume a generally uniform faith response among students. It is little wonder Vanessa responds with declining enthusiasm and interest. The family and the school have responsibility to search for and respond to the faith responses of every student.

The vignettes of all seven students presented above include important moments of tension that warrant revisiting as this chapter draws to a close and before the students’ perspectives are further discussed in Chapter 5. To this end, a summary of the moments of tension for each student along with an indication of either the presence or absence of structures of plausibility emerging from each vignette is provided in Table 3 (see page 90). In the final column, family and school influences named by students as positive are also listed.
Table 3
Student, “moments of tension”, presence or absence of structures of plausibility and positive influences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student and moments of tension</th>
<th>Indicated presence or absence of structures of plausibility</th>
<th>Positive influences upon their religious and spiritual lives</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Gordon</td>
<td>• Early family connection with parish life</td>
<td>• Early family connection with parish life</td>
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<td>• Consistent family support</td>
<td>• Consistent family support</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Active participation in the religious community</td>
<td>• Consistent family support</td>
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<td>• Absence of faith conversations</td>
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<td>• Absence of recognition of student voice and agency</td>
<td>• Absence of recognition of student voice and agency</td>
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<td>Natasha</td>
<td>• Absence of faith conversations</td>
<td>• Active participation in the religious community</td>
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<td>• Active participation in the religious community</td>
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<td>Jack</td>
<td>• Early family connection in parish</td>
<td>• Early family connection in parish</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Consistent family support</td>
<td>• Consistent family support</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Active participation in the religious community</td>
<td>• Emotionally supportive relationships</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Absence of faith conversations</td>
<td>• Active participation in the religious community</td>
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<td>• Absence of faith conversations</td>
<td>• Faith conversations with similar others</td>
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<td>Anita</td>
<td>• Early family connection in parish</td>
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<td>• Consistent family support</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Active participation in the religious community</td>
<td>• Consistent and complementary faith narratives</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Consistent and complementary faith narratives</td>
<td>• Active participation in the religious community</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bella</td>
<td>• Absence of a family faith narrative</td>
<td>• Active participation in the religious community</td>
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<td>Bree</td>
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26 Bella was involved in the Parish NE Team program in Year 7.
4.9 Summary

This chapter has presented the vignettes of Gordon, Natasha, Jack, Anita, Bella, Vanessa and Bree. Viewed from their perspectives, moments of tension have emerged pointing to possibilities for renewing family and schools as structures of plausibility. Six key family and school influences upon the religious and spiritual lives of young Catholic adolescents have also been identified (See Table 3, page 90). In the final chapter, these influences are named and three directions to enhance families and Catholic schools as structures of plausibility are presented as recommendations for future action.

27 Consistent support of the family; active participation in the religious community; emotionally supportive relationships; contextualising Religious Education within student life experience; conversations about faith; and consistent and complementary faith narratives.
5 Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This study has sought the views of seven Year 9 Catholic students regarding family and school influences upon their religious practice and spiritual lives. Prior to this study interviews had already been held with young Catholic adolescents in Year 5, and then in Year 7, after the transition to secondary school. The findings of these previous interviews had identified a number of concerns relating to the religious and spiritual lives of students during their transition into secondary school (Rymarz et al., 2008).

To inquire further into the nature of some of these concerns, this current study has continued the conversation with a number of the same young people, and has provided them with the opportunity to re-encounter the thoughts on their religious practices and spirituality they held in Year 5 and 7, and reflect on what has changed now that they are in Year 9.

Providing this retrospective opportunity has allowed these Year 9 students to reflect on the influence of their families and Catholic schools during the transition from primary to secondary Catholic education. Narrative inquiry was chosen as a process where storying and re-storying the past with new knowledge and experience brings the opportunity to reflect upon that past, aided by the use of appropriate transcripts or recordings from their previous interviews. As part of this iterative process, a number of moments of tension emerged which not only point to the tacit and explicit ways family and school influence religious and spiritual lives during the time of transition from primary to secondary education, but also signal where change may be required. These issues are now discussed in more detail.
5.2 Key family and Catholic school influences

The students in this study have highlighted six key family and school influences upon their religious practice and spiritual lives.

- **Consistent support of the family:** Where the influence of the family has consistently supported the religious and spiritual lives of students, positive outcomes have been enduring (Smith & Denton, 2005; Smith & Snell, 2009). The early influence of the family is important in the creation of patterns of connections between relationships within the family, the religious practice of the family and the wider religious community (Bandura, 1969).

- **Active participation in the religious community:** Young people viewed active and expressive participation in the religious community as a positive influence (Bellamy et al., 2005). Frequent participation in varied forms of worship, marked by a sense of belonging, satisfaction and joy, seems to foster openness to more conventional forms of worship (Bellamy et al., 2005; Smith & Snell, 2009).

- **Emotionally supportive relationships:** Such relationships between members of a religious community have a significant influence (Smith & Denton, 2005). The tone and message conveyed during these interactions is important. Speaking respectfully and compassionately to young people brings a sense of God’s presence.

- **Contextualising Religious Education within student life experience:** Student views reflect educational research claiming pedagogy for adolescents transitioning through primary to secondary education needs to be relevant and relational (Dowson, 2002; Dowson et al., 2005). Natasha claims such pedagogy enhanced her relationship with God.

- **Conversations about faith with similar others:** Faith perspectives need to be shared and discussed before an emotional commitment can be expected (Ratican, 2004; Rymarz, 2007). Thus, student participation in events such as *Festa Christi* and
Parish Youth Groups are important opportunities for promoting positive religious practices and for discussion of faith matters. Students feel safe and more able to share their experiences and to have their faith validated within such environments.

- **Consistent and complementary faith narratives.** The religious and spiritual life of a young Catholic adolescent is most supported when the influence of the family and Catholic school (and other agencies) is consistent and complementary (Hoge et al., 1993; Hyde, 1990).

5.2.1 Consistent support of the family

The influence of the family was critical to the socialization of children into a religious community and their continued affiliation with that religious tradition. Positive familial influence, especially through primary school, had a positive influence upon student religious practice and where this influence has been consistent, (Gordon and Anita), student religious practice also continued (Bendroth, 2002; Hoge et al., 1982).

Early positive experiences were important to the connection made between religious practice, family life and wellbeing. The reception of Eucharist made Gordon feel “special”, a feeling similar to that felt when given approval from his parents. Gordon saw close connections between the warm and close relationships within his family and an acceptance of religious practice as a way of becoming closer to God. Jack saw that his Mother looked “happy when she was at Mass” and for Jack, his Father’s attendance at Mass suggested he was “really religious.” Jack suggested participation in Baptism and Eucharist brings a sense of safety and connection with God and family. These findings fly in the face of the argument proposed in previous decades premised upon the presence of a generation gap. In this argument parents, amongst other things, try to get their children to go to church and are frustrated by the lack of response. Forty years later, as they say, the game has changed. Teenage rebellion is very overrated.

Young people it seems are, in the main, very willing to incorporate themselves into their own family’s religious disposition- indeed to accept it quite passively (Dudley & Dudley, 1986). Positive outcomes resulted from the family making deliberate choices to
direct their young to social and faith activities congruent with that of the family. Choices made by Anita’s parents to channel Anita into a variety of faith-building opportunities supported by the parish and school saw Anita making contact with other young people of the same age, who held a similar faith. Such an experience was an important affirmation of Anita’s faith life. Anita’s vignette demonstrated the benefits of alignment of family, school and parish faith narratives as well as Anita’s quite evident willingness to accept those narratives.

On the other hand, decreasing parental modelling, expectation or familial religious practice over the transition period seems to diminish religious practice specifically, and to reduce interest in spiritual things in general (Bree, Bella, Vanessa). Despite a strong relationship with parents, the orthodox religious practice of most students has declined, evidenced in part by a marked decline in private prayer. At the same time, those students who retained various religious practices (Gordon, Anita) did so with the continued support of their families’ own commitment to religious practice. However, when a strong relationship with parents was absent, there was an even more marked decline in religious practice.

Following the work of Smith and Snell (2009), children are very much influenced by their parents but their parents now reflect the wider cultural norms with regard to religions and as such participation in religious ritual becomes increasingly marginal. As students transition into secondary school and as questions about faith emerge, even families who value the religious seem to lose some influence as a source of clarification. At this time the support of other bodies needs to support the influence of the family as questions emerge and changes occur within the students. One such source of support is through active participation within the religious community.

5.2.2 Active participation in the religious community

Active and expressive participation in the religious community, identified by such factors as a sense of belonging, companionship, participation and joy, seem to be highly influential in fostering the religious and spiritual lives of these young Catholics (King et al., 2002; Regnerus et al., 2004; Smith & Denton, 2005). A passion for music provided an
important connection between Anita and her involvement in the religious community. Participation in the parish/school band made Mass attendance “more fun” through her experiences of positive and active participation within the liturgy. Natasha’s willingness to contribute to her parish community seems to fulfil the desire expressed in Church documents urging liturgical prayer be seen by young people not as something externally imposed but “as a free and loving response” (The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School, 1988, n.87). Where such activities have been encouraged, the Parish Priest has played an important role in facilitating the participation of young people into this ministry of the Church. Anita felt everyone should have the opportunity to share in her positive experience of Mass while both Natasha and Anita suggested experiences such as the parish/school band and Festa Christi need to be continued, but also be made available prior to Year 9.

Peer social networks are important to the fostering of positive religious attitudes and practices of young adolescents (Martin et al., 2003; Mercadante, 1998; Smith & Denton, 2005). Opportunities to participate meaningfully within the faith narrative of the wider parish are associated with a sense of enjoyment, sharing, and the building of relationships with others of a similar faith. Youth Groups, Festa Christi and parish/school band help provide a sense of belonging while at the same time promote an affinity with a variety of religious practice. Friendship and the promotion of religiosity seem to accompany each other (Cheadle & Schwadel, 2012; Mason et al., 2007).

5.2.3 Emotionally supportive relationships

Close and loving relationships enable members of a religious community to be open to the influence of significant others upon their religious life (Smith & Snell, 2009). Many of the students equated feeling close to God with success or parental praise, noting similarity between feelings experienced during times of success or praise and feelings of closeness to God. Natasha found God in the things she enjoys purely because it is making her happy. Simple events in the course of the school day also brought Jack a sense of God’s presence, as he felt closest to God when he was “doing the right thing.”

Speaking respectfully and compassionately to young people can bring them a sense of God’s presence (De Roos et al., 2004). In younger years, Jack had shown the
positive and powerful influence of the classroom teacher who had brought a real sense of the presence of God to Jack merely by telling him that God was with him. Four years later, Jack still looks for an effective teacher who “talks to you face-to-face” (and who) “has a conversation with you and treats you like an adult.”

5.2.4 Contextualising Religious Education within student life experience

Most students indicated the need for a new pedagogy to re-energise learning in Religious Education. *The General Directory for Catechesis* (1977) also requires approaches in Religious Education to address the different faith responses among students. However, by Year 9 all students in this study have negative impressions of Religious Education reporting inappropriate pedagogy, an overuse of textbooks, the repetitiveness of topics and a bland curriculum. Religious Education has failed to challenge Bree intellectually and Natasha found class work was just “book work and (I) didn’t believe in it.” Her belief was that overuse of textbooks, copying from textbooks and repetition of topics “kills the subject” and “just didn’t really give the chance to let us like see how we would fit into it sort of thing.” Natasha suggested a change of teacher and pedagogy whereby her learning was given context as having led to an increase in her belief in God. Anita preferred to learn with others although reported on a predominantly individualistic mode of learning and was quite clear that Religious Education class was not the place to go to “experience” God. Vanessa’s vignette clearly highlighted the lack of differentiation of content for students entering secondary school.

5.2.5 Faith conversations with similar others

All students who had attended *Festa Christi* enjoyed the opportunity to participate in religious practice, learn about their beliefs and meet with a broader group of other young Catholics their own age. When stories are shared, there is the potential for the teller to “feel that their stories are important and that they are heard” (Creswell, 2008, p. 511) and so Jack appreciated meeting other people from other schools with the same faith, passion and common experiences: “their relationships are really strong with God as well.” As was also the case for Anita, *Festa Christi* was an important affirmation experience for Jack’s developing faith and for perceiving that a faith life is socially acceptable. Events and structures such as *Festa Christi* and the local Parish Youth Group, while seen as
experiences with positive religious and spiritual outcomes, were rare during the period of transition.  

5.2.6 Consistent and complementary faith narratives

When parents and other potential influential agencies reinforce the same religious perspective, the resulting combined religious socialization effects may be especially strong behaviors (Hoge et al., 1993; Hyde, 1990). This is especially important during transition from primary to secondary Catholic education as young people commence making decisions about their future religious practices and spiritual patterns (Barna, 2006; Kooistra & Pargament, 1999; Myers, 1996; Wuthnow, 1999).

Anita’s parents have made deliberate choices to channel Anita into a variety of faith-building opportunities supported by the Parish and school. Anita herself nominates the invitation to World Youth Day pilgrims to stay with their family during a Parish visit, her involvement within the school/parish band during the period from Year 6 to Year 9, and attendance at Festa Christi as three such opportunities. The school has continued to support family prayer practice through the teaching of prayer with provision for frequent opportunities for prayer. The support and presence of the Parish Priest leads Anita to connect him with her image of God.

There appear to be a number of benefits for Anita arising from the consistency of these faith narratives. In contrast to many other students, in Year 9, prayer remains an important matter for Anita who continues to pray to God at night before going to sleep. Anita also sees “religion” as the common link between her family, belief, God and feelings of connection.

It is not surprising then that Anita has perhaps the most ordered understanding of the relationship between Jesus and God of all students. Her belief in Year 5 that Jesus and God are the same (Triune) has not changed and contrasted sharply with the majority of the other students. Anita also seems to have a closer relationship with Jesus who “fits in

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28 Festa Christi occurs in Year 9.
everyday life.” Anita believes these experiences have directly influenced her belief in God to the extent that she is in another “place” (level of belief) than most of her peers.

Where the influence of the family and Catholic school has been consistent and complementary, religious practice and spiritual awareness has also remained positive and consistent. Anita’s strongly articulated need to “experience” God seems to have been satisfied through the consistency of the faith narratives of her family, the Catholic school and other supportive bodies such as the Parish and Catholic Education authorities.

The family and Catholic school, as structures of plausibility, need to actively plan for systematic relational and theological competency in a manner responsive not only to an ever-increasing diversity of student religious and spiritual needs but also to the emergence of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (Smith and Denton, 2005). Dean (2010, p.37) reminds us of the common and central need to clearly propose to young people an ecclesiology which is founded upon “Christianity’s missional imagination.” Dean suggests we have:

… forgotten that we are not here for ourselves, which has allowed self-focussed spiritualties to put down roots in our soil. When practices intended to reflect God’s self-giving love are cut off from their theological taproot in the missio de—God’s sending of God’s own self into the world in human form—these activities lose their ability to reflect outward, which weakens our resistance to spiritualties like Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. In the process, we confuse Christianity with self-preservation, which is the very opposite of Jesus’ own witness, and the antithesis of his call to the disciples to take up their crosses and follow him. (Dean, 2010, p.37)
As Dean (2010, p. 37) suggests, Therapeutic Moralistic Deism offers only a superficial Christianity with a religious outlook that proposes a “god” who supports teenager’s decisions, makes them feel good about themselves, meets their needs when called upon but otherwise stays out of the way.” The author contends that:

We have received from teenagers exactly what we have asked them for: assent, not conviction; compliance, not faith. Young people invest in religion precisely what they think it is worth…. “(Dean, 2010, p.37)

The task of renewing the family and Catholic school as structures of plausibility demands inconvenience on the part of both young people and the structures supporting their religious and spiritual development. For young people, Dean (2010, p. 191) suggests a positive aspect of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is that “…teenagers do not buy it as a faith. They buy into it…” Hence, perhaps inconvenience on the part of young people occurs when they shift from benign Moralistic Therapeutic Deism into the possession of a faith of a consequential nature. Such inconvenience arises when decisions need to be taken which may be counter-cultural or which ask for change to the pervading cultural environment.

The evidence also seems to indicate a critical point for activity within renewing the family and Catholic school as structures of plausibility as the transition from primary to secondary education. There is clear evidence for support of a plateauing of commitment in religious practice or involvement in activities which encourage the ability to articulate Catholic beliefs and attitudes as students enter secondary school (Rymarz, Graham, 2006; Rymarz, Graham et al. 2008). An active inclination to learn more about their faith seems to have diminished as a result of both a pedagogy which fails to engage the students as well as a perception of a RE program which is repetitive.

Consequently, to enhance the family and the Catholic school as structures of plausibility during the transition from primary to secondary education, four recommendations to renew families and the Catholic school as structures of plausibility have emerged from the moments of tension within the student vignettes featured in the previous chapter.
1. encouraging parents in the first instance, and competent faith companions, to take a more active role in providing for individualised faith conversations
2. increasing opportunities for participation in the religious community;
3. reviewing current approaches to Religious Education and Catechesis;
4. providing structured opportunities for recognising student voice.

The first recommendation relates to concerns expressed in previous studies that although students maintained close connections with their parents, faith conversations do not occur within the home (Rymarz et al., 2008). The students continue to claim the absence of such conversations across the landscape of family and Catholic school. Furthermore, students do not recognise family or school faith support structures which currently exist. Schools and Church structures must acknowledge and act to provide suitable faith support structures.

The second recommendation reflects the need to build upon the success of opportunities such as Christian youth groups, *Festa Christi* and parish/school bands through enhancing further structured and graduated opportunities for participation of young adolescents in the religious community.

The third recommendation is in response to the urgent need for families and Catholic schools to cater for the diverse range of religious and spiritual needs within the Religious Education classroom. The diversity of student experience suggests the need for an equally diverse response.

The final recommendation relates to the need for families and Catholic schools to consider how young people are currently recognised as *participants* in their Church.

5.3.1 *Provision of faith conversations with competent “faith companions”*

Most obvious during the interviews was the general absence of conversations relating to their religious and spiritual lives and the lack of any accompaniment such as a “faith companion” within the context of family or school across this period of transition.
Thus, we know little about the thoughts and questions young people might wish to ask during this period.

Significant contributions are made by different agencies at different times such as Parish Christian youth groups, employment of the NE Team, Chaplains and School Counsellors. However, while students were able to nominate these roles, none of the students seemed to name specific influential individuals as people or personalities as a readily available faith companion.

Issues of trust in teachers at this time seem to be an important issue for Gordon, Jack and Bree as they seek theological and relational competency (de Souza & Rymarz, 2002). Natasha suggests a period of three years before this trust might develop for such discussions. Bella, Vanessa, Natasha and Gordon discounted parents as a source of clarification in faith matters. Only Jack claimed to be able to speak freely to his mother about his faith life.

These conversations appear to be no less important than at this time of transition from primary to secondary school, a time when young people are beginning to construct a coherent life narrative (Bluck & Habermas, 2000; McAdams, 1985). Gordon has commenced questioning the existence of God and he tells us that he is not alone in this questioning. Jack notes that his practice of talking to God “dimmed down a bit” around the time of transition. Bella, who once saw herself as a “religious person,” in Year 7 now considers the religious as “weird.” Bree lives within a family narrative that is indifferent to Christianity and sees secondary school Science as the location where “you learn and everything starts falling into place” and is surprised when a connection is drawn between her service to the disabled and Christian service.

In some cases, the interviews themselves provided the young people with an opportunity to raise some of their doubts and challenges. Gordon voiced his doubts about the existence of God, and Jack hinted at a renewed understanding of the continuing presence of God as a result of being interviewed. Narrative inquiry has the potential to transform the participant’s experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 1991; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). The very act of sharing their personal narratives and reflecting on the
questions and stimulus materials may have encouraged Gordon and Jack to move beyond simple memory of what happened to a reflection upon and evaluation of their own religious and spiritual journeys.

Outside of experiences such as *Festa Christi*, there was little opportunity for the young people to experience a deepening of their faith through dialogue with a concerned faith companion\(^29\) or mentor. The young people did not feel there was anyone they could turn to who could answer their genuine doubts and questions seriously, and without condescension. The lack of a theologically competent companion with whom they are able to discuss challenges to their faith means that in the end adversarial non-Christian narratives will be accepted due to a lack of any other feasible alternative. It is critical young people have access to relational and theological competency through an appropriate faith companion (Bukowski et al., 1996).

As questions about faith emerge and changes occur within the students, families need to be supported in this role. During the time of transition into secondary school, family need to be supported by other bodies to remain some influence as a source of clarification. Families who value the religious are well positioned to continue to be a positive influence during this time. Three questions should direct this initiative:

- Why have students not identified a viable structure or person (not role) for such faith discussions?
- How do adult perceptions of what is needed in engaging in such faith discussions correspond with what young adolescents say they need?
- What support do parents need in their role as their children’s first faith companions?

5.3.2 Building graduated opportunities for participation in the religious community

Student involvement in opportunities for service in groups such as parish/school bands and Christian Youth Groups have been seen as having significant positive influences upon their religious and spiritual lives during the transition from primary to secondary
Family and school influences on the religious practice and spiritual lives of Catholic adolescents

Catholic education. Given the equally positive influence brought through attendance at *Festa Christi* (currently Year 9) a similar event needs to be considered for students at an earlier time (Year 5, 6 or 7). Increasing such opportunities at this time would provide opportunities for networks of peer support, mentoring and faith companionship during this transition (Schwartz, 2006). Three questions should direct this initiative:

- What are family, school (primary and secondary) and parish perspectives upon the provision of opportunities such as Parish youth groups?
- How do adult perceptions of what is needed in engaging young people in such networks correspond with what young adolescents say they need?
- What perspectives will drive the development of networks of peer support across the transition period?

5.3.3  **Review current approaches to Religious Education and Catechesis**

The vignettes clearly reveal the range of influences and diverse contexts within which young people exist. Rossiter (2011, p. 57) has already outlined the challenge facing religious educators as they bring a “religion curriculum framed within traditional Catholic cultural religious meanings” to young people who have “little identification with this authoritative view” and who, informed by very different cultural meanings tend to regard religion as an optional resource for living.”

These concerns are evidenced when students enter secondary school and, although bringing a variety of religious and spiritual experiences, experience uniformity when in the RE classroom. Vanessa was looking forward to learning RE in secondary school. However, an apparently uniform approach to RE in secondary school resulted in a loss of this enthusiasm. Such an approach in the RE classroom seems incongruent to the individualised religious and spiritual growth and needs as evidenced in the vignettes.

Where there is no family faith narrative or where that narrative is antagonistic, provision of religious instruction in the classroom without an accompanying family or Church narrative may even be hindering the development of this relationship. Such was the claim made by Natasha.
The need to address current perceptions around the uniformity of this approach is underlined by the high degree of confusion around the relationship between Jesus and God pointing to an even greater concern, namely, the lack of an established relationship between students and Jesus Christ. Relationships are extremely important to Natasha and so her rejection of the presence of Jesus in her life was surprising. Catholic education is based on a “Christian concept of life centred on Jesus Christ” who is the “foundation of the whole educational enterprise in a Catholic school” (The Catholic School 1977, n. 33–34). A rejection of the presence of Jesus and confusion surrounding Jesus and God seems to be an area of significant concern. It is difficult to develop an authentic relationship in the presence of such confusion. In light of these concerns, two questions might provide further insight:

- How do family, school and Church foster a personal relationship between young adolescents and Jesus?
- What are the barriers to the development of this relationship?

5.3.4 Providing structured opportunities for recognising student voice

There is a need to continue to listen to young Catholic adolescents to ensure their participation in the building of the Catholic Church. Children and young people attribute a great deal of importance to being recognised and acknowledged as individuals with opinions and feelings of their own and as agents capable of contributing to decisions made in their everyday lives (Parkinson & Cashmore, 2008; Smart, 2002). Natasha has a strong sense of a community of students travelling and learning together with a potential for the evangelisation of students by students, not always recognised as such by adults.

However, the vignettes seems to indicate a lack of recognition and acknowledgement of their individual religious and spiritual needs, perhaps reflecting less contemporary constructions of children and young people where children are viewed as passive consumers of a culture provided by adults. Grajczonek (2010) has identified the problematic image of the child within Catholic Church documents underpinning Church policy and practice in areas such as curricula, pedagogies and family care. While the replacement of Gordon’s responsibilities as altar server with that of another ministry
without consulting Gordon himself may be an isolated case, such actions seem to reflect these same perceptions. Whitmore (in Hinsdale, 2001) claims that as Catholic Church teaching on the family references children in a familial context, the notion of children remains an underdeveloped theme in Catholic teaching:

Although the rudiments are scattered here and there, there is no developed Catholic teaching on children like there is, say, on the conduct of war or the possession of private property…. [There is] the assumption that we all know who and what children are and why we should care about them. Historical shifts in social views of children indicate that such views cannot be taken for granted. (Whitmore, in Hinsdale, 2001, p. 408)

These “historical shifts” are a present reality and include new ways of conceptualising children and childhood (James and Prout, 1998). Children are capable of making sense of their world and therefore should have a voice in matters that affect them (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Christensen & James, 2008, 2000; Mayall, 2002; Skelton, 2007). Engaging young people as active participants and contributors within their religious community is dependent upon recognising their agency and voice, two attributes explicitly named as key to young children’s education (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007; Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010; Rinaldi, 1993).

Recognising the ability of young people to be participative in socio-cultural contexts of family, school and Church brings challenges on a number of levels. However, such recognition creates opportunities to draw forth otherwise hidden strength and capabilities (Malagazzi, 1993. In seeking further insight as to how to bring to light these otherwise hidden strengths and capabilities, three questions might be posed:

- How and where might young people participate more actively in their Church?
- What are the barriers to increased participation?
- What perspectives, structures and support are needed to support increased participation?
5.4 Recommendation for further research

The previous section, *Renewing families and Catholic schools as structures of plausibility* (Section 5.3) identified four recommendations for future action including a number of questions guiding future research and these are summarised below.

5.4.1 Faith Conversations

- Why have students not identified a viable structure or person (not role) for such faith discussions? (cf. 5.3.1)
- How do adult perceptions of what is needed in engaging in such faith discussions correspond with what young adolescents say they need? (cf. 5.3.1)
- What support is needed for families in their role as faith companions? (cf. 5.3.1)

5.4.2 Building graduated opportunities for participation in the religious community

- What are the perspectives of family, school (primary and secondary) and parish upon the provision of opportunities such as youth groups? (cf. 5.3.2)
- How do adult perceptions of what is needed in engaging young people in such networks correspond with what young adolescents say they need? (cf. 5.3.2)
- What perspectives will drive the development of networks of peer support (social and faith) across the transition period? (cf. 5.3.2)

5.4.3 Review current approaches to Religious Education and Catechesis

- How do family, school and Church foster a personal relationship between young adolescents and Jesus? (cf. 5.3.3)
- What are the barriers to the development of this relationship? (cf. 5.3.3)

5.4.4 Recognising children’s voice

- How and where might young people participate more actively in their Church? (cf. 5.3.4)
- What are the barriers to this increased participation? (cf. 5.4.3)
• What perspectives, structures and support are needed to support this participation? (cf. 5.3.4)

5.5 Summary of the study

The interest for this study lies in the need to develop a relevant but responsive program of faith formation and religious education for young Catholic adolescents in the transition period from primary to secondary Catholic education. In response to concerns relating to the findings of previous studies in the Diocese (Rymarz et al., 2008; Tinsey, 1998), this research used narrative inquiry to seek further insight into these issues through listening to the perspectives of a small group of Catholic adolescents upon key family and school influences upon their religious and spiritual lives.

This study has found these Catholic adolescents mature in their religious and spiritual lives within a diverse and at times challenging environment. However, they respond well to positive influences, engagement with similar others, the support of families and structured opportunities. A consistent message from family, school and Church brings positive responses and opportunities for establishing meaningful religious and spiritual lives. The students suggest five key family and school influences upon their religious and spiritual lives: the support of the family; opportunities to participate actively in the religious community; supportive relationships; placing their religious learning within the context of their life experience; and the existence of consistent and complementary faith narratives.

Based on the changing views and practices of the students over this time, four areas for renewing families and Catholic schools as structures of plausibility have also emerged, namely, (i) a much greater need to converse with young people about their faith lives, (ii) increased opportunities for their participation in the religious community, (iii) the need to review current approaches to Religious Education and Catechesis; and (iv) structuring opportunities for recognising student voice and agency. These four steps will better enable families and Catholic schools to fulfil their roles and bring to every young person a “reason for our faith”, as the “words of eternal life…given to us in our
encountering Jesus Christ, are destined for everyone and each individual” (The New Evangelisation for the Transmission of the Christian faith, 2012, n.167).
Family and school influences on the religious practice and spiritual lives of Catholic adolescents

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Appendix A

Year 5 pilot focus group questions

- What do you think about the Church?
- What do you not like about Church?
- How do you feel when you go to Church?
- What are some of the other ways to feel closer to God?
- What would happen if you came home with a bad report card?
- What about school?
- What things don’t you like about School?
- What do you think about Religion in school as a subject?
- Is there anything about Religion as a subject in School that you don’t like?
- Tell me about yourselves – what sort of things make you feel happy or sad?
- Do you ever talk to God?
- What might be something that makes you wonder?
- What makes you sad or unhappy?
Appendix A (cont.)

**Year 5 individual interview questions**

- What is the range of things that you like doing?
- What are the things that you think you are best at?
- Imagine this: What would happen if you went home with a bad report card?
- How important is praying to you?
- Do you think you feel close to God?
- So what about your family? How religious do you think your family is?
- What do you like about church?
- How religious do you think your school is?
- What bits about studying religion in school do you like?
- What bits don’t you like about studying religion for school?
- Can you tell me what sort of things make you happy and at peace? Inside school or outside school that make you feel peaceful and happy?
- What things do young people like you worry about when you think about moving onto year 6 and then onto high school?
- What things do young people like you really look forward to about year 6 and high school?
Appendix B

Individual interview questions used in Year 7

- Tell us something about the things that you like doing?
- What do you like at school?
- What sort of a report card do you get?
- What would happen if you went home and you had a report card that had mostly D’s on it?
- What would mum or dad say?
- Now on your report card, you also have religion. How do you do in religion?
- What do you think of your religion classes?
- And do you pray in religion classes?
- Do you pray?
- Do you go to church?
- And you’d say your family’s a religious family?
- And would you say you are religious too?
- Are you close to God or is God close to you?
- What about your school? Do you think the school is religious?
- Is there anything that sort of shows you that it’s religious?
- What about your religion classes? What are they like in terms of the other students and the way you say you react to religion classes?
- What are some of the things that you like about religion classes?
- So when you talk about religion and religion classes, can you think back to primary? Is there any difference between primary and secondary?
- What do you think of Jesus? Is he real to you?
- So if you were to go back to a Year 6 class – this time of year they’re starting to think about they’re coming into secondary next year Any words of advice would you give them?
- Now in the next few years at school, what do you think it’s going to mean for you?
- Religion, is it important to you? Is it part of you or a part of your family, or both?
### Question or discussion starters used in semi-structured interviews in Year 9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Areas of interest and relevant question or discussion starter</th>
<th>Dimension/s of experience</th>
<th>Possible area/s of interest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. What is important to you? (A suitable commencement point for the interview providing a familiar area for comment). | • Inward (Personal)  
• Outward (Social)  
• Backward (past)  
• Present  
• Forward (future)  
• Context, time and place | • Personal history/state of being |
| 2. Many of the other children said that prayer was a way to get close to God. What do you say about this now? | • Inward (Personal)  
• Backward (past)  
• Present  
• Context, time and place | • Prayer  
• Relationship with God |
| 3. For many children, going to Mass and saying prayers at school made them feel like they were developing “good” attitudes in life. What do you think about this finding now? | • Inward (Personal)  
• Outward (Social)  
• Backward (past)  
• Present  
• Context, time and place | • Mass attendance  
• Prayer  
• Connection between religious practice and behaviors |
| 4. Being “religious” for many of the children said that actions like going to Mass and saying prayers. Would you be able to add any others now? | • Inward (Personal)  
• Outward (Social)  
• Backward (past)  
• Present  
• Context, time and place | • Mass attendance  
• Prayer  
• Connection between religious practice and behaviors |
| 5. Could you tell me about the changes from primary to secondary school? What changes stand out? | • Inward (Personal)  
• Outward (Social)  
• Backward (past)  
• Present  
• Context, time and place | • Changes during transition  
• Major events/people |
| 6. Who stands out as being a big part of those changes? | • Inward (Personal)  
• Outward (Social)  
• Backward (past)  
• Present  
• Context, time and place | • Major events/people |
Family and school influences on the religious practice and spiritual lives of Catholic adolescents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix C (Continued)</th>
<th>7. Could you tell me if your thoughts about religion or your faith have changed in any way during the time from primary school?</th>
<th>• Inward (Personal) • Outward (Social) • Backward (past) • Present • Context, time and place</th>
<th>• Change to faith beliefs, practice, attitudes during transition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8. So is your Religion still important?</td>
<td>• Inward (Personal) • Outward (Social) • Backward (past) • Present • Context, time and place</td>
<td>• Importance of religion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. What is your family’s religious practice now? Has it changed?</td>
<td>• Outward (Social) • Backward (past) • Present • Context, time and place</td>
<td>• Family religious practice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. How has your attitude to God changed during the time from primary school to now?</td>
<td>• Inward (Personal) • Backward (past) • Present • Context, time and place</td>
<td>• Attitude to God • Relationship with God • Religious Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Do you pray or talk to God? When would you find yourself talking to God?</td>
<td>• Inward (Personal) • Outward (Social) • Backward (past) • Present • Context, time and place</td>
<td>• Relationship with God</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. What makes you feel supported in praying or talking to God? What would have to happen?</td>
<td>• Inward (Personal) • Outward (Social) • Backward (past) • Present • Context, time and place</td>
<td>• Support for relationship with God</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Where do young people like you go if you have a question about God or a question about your life?</td>
<td>• Inward (Personal) • Outward (Social) • Backward (past) • Present • Context, time and place</td>
<td>• Support for relationship with God</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Can you describe how it felt to be in primary school compared to when you moved into secondary school?</td>
<td>• Inward (Personal) • Outward (Social) • Backward (past) • Present • Forward (future) • Context, time and place</td>
<td>• Transition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Can you tell me who might have been influential in these changes, either negatively or positively?</td>
<td>• Inward (Personal) • Outward (Social) • Backward (past) • Present • Context, time and place</td>
<td>• Influential figures • Religious Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix C (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Inward (Personal)</th>
<th>Outward (Social)</th>
<th>Backward (past)</th>
<th>Present</th>
<th>Context, time and place</th>
<th>Value of faith</th>
<th>Value of RE</th>
<th>Value of Catholic education</th>
<th>Attitude to Jesus</th>
<th>Relationship with Jesus</th>
<th>Religious Education</th>
<th>Influences</th>
<th>Peer influence</th>
<th>Transition</th>
<th>Agency and Voice</th>
<th>Improving question schedule</th>
<th>Particular insights</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16. Do you feel different to those kids who do / do not have a strong belief or practice in their faith? How?</td>
<td>• Inward (Personal)</td>
<td>• Outward (Social)</td>
<td>• Backward (past)</td>
<td>• Present</td>
<td>• Context, time and place</td>
<td>• Value of faith</td>
<td>• Value of RE</td>
<td>• Value of Catholic education</td>
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<td>17. Does Jesus fit into all these things we have been talking about and all of these changes? How?</td>
<td>• Inward (Personal)</td>
<td>• Outward (Social)</td>
<td>• Backward (past)</td>
<td>• Present</td>
<td>• Context, time and place</td>
<td>• Attitude to Jesus</td>
<td>• Relationship with Jesus</td>
<td>• Religious Education</td>
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<td>18. How have your family / parish / school been a part of your religion, your relationship with God and Jesus over this time from primary to secondary school?</td>
<td>• Inward (Personal)</td>
<td>• Outward (Social)</td>
<td>• Backward (past)</td>
<td>• Present</td>
<td>• Context, time and place</td>
<td>• Influences</td>
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<td>19. What do young people like you value about having people your own age around you during this time?</td>
<td>• Inward (Personal)</td>
<td>• Outward (Social)</td>
<td>• Backward (past)</td>
<td>• Present</td>
<td>• Forward (future)</td>
<td>• Context, time and place</td>
<td>• Peer influence</td>
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<td>20. What would you say to teachers, parents etc. about action to enable positive change from primary to secondary school life?</td>
<td>• Inward (Personal)</td>
<td>• Outward (Social)</td>
<td>• Backward (past)</td>
<td>• Present</td>
<td>• Forward (future)</td>
<td>• Context, time and place</td>
<td>• Transition</td>
<td>• Agency and Voice</td>
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<td>21. What other questions do you think I should be asking students if I want to find out how they think about God and religion? Can you think of any other areas that I should be asking you about?</td>
<td>• Inward (Personal)</td>
<td>• Outward (Social)</td>
<td>• Backward (past)</td>
<td>• Present</td>
<td>• Forward (future)</td>
<td>• Context, time and place</td>
<td>• Improving question schedule</td>
<td>• Particular insights</td>
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