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A Holistic Classroom: Integrating Religious Education and Social, Personal and Health Education for the Holistic Development of the child.

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A Research Dissertation submitted to the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education, Maynooth University, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education (Research in Practice)

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Abstract

The purpose of this action research project was to explore how I can change and develop my practice to create a holistic learning environment in my classroom for the well-being of the child. The research was conducted in a co-educational urban school in Dublin with Catholic patronage. The majority of the children in my class come from a disadvantaged socio-economic background.

This self-study research project was designed by integrating the curricular areas of Religious Education (R.E.), through the *Grow in Love* programme, and Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE). The stark contrast in time allocation between these two subjects was one of the factors which prompted this study. An integrated approach to planning and teaching aimed to address this issue of time allocation. The intervention took place during R.E. and SPHE lessons. The qualitative data was collected through observation, a reflective journal, and questionnaires. The data was stored in a password protected file or a secure folder to ensure confidentiality.

The data collected was coded and analysed to uncover any emerging themes and findings. The emerging themes were reflection, relationships, and external factors. The three findings that emerged were: integrating SPHE and R.E. can lead to a more inclusive classroom environment; integration can cause an increase in workload for the practitioner; and starting with the child facilitates the creation of a holistic learning environment.

Considering my future practice, this research caused a change in my teaching and planning. I began this project with the aim of enabling all children in my class to feel more nurtured in a caring and inclusive environment. With the increasingly diverse nature of the classroom, it is crucial to ensure all children feel included. Although it can create an increase in workload, the implementation of integration in planning was worthwhile for the creation of a holistic learning environment. The positives of planning meaningful integration between R.E. and SPHE, out way the negatives.

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

Declaration of Authenticity

"Plagiarism involves an attempt to use an element of another person's work, without appropriate acknowledgement in order to gain academic credit. It may include the unacknowledged verbatim reproduction of material, unsanctioned collusion, but is not limited to these matters; it may also include the unacknowledged adoption of an argumentative structure, or the unacknowledged use of a source or of research materials, including computer code or elements of mathematical formulae in an inappropriate manner."

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I hereby declare that this project, which I now submit in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education (Research in Practice) is entirely my own work; that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

Signed: _Grace Kenny_

Date: 07/09/2022

List of Figures and Tables

List of Abbreviations

DES: Department of Education and Skills

HRE: Human Rights Education

NCCA: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

PSC: Primary School Curriculum

R.E.: Religious Education

RSE: Relationships and Sexuality Education

SPHE: Social, Personal and Health Education

ZPD: Zone of Proximal Development

1 Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This chapter will identify and discuss the context and rationale for this research project. The research question guiding this study was "How can I integrate the curricular subjects of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Religious Education (R.E.) (*Grow in Love*) for the holistic development of the child?" It was inspired by my professional and personal belief that R.E. and SPHE should be respected equally and work together to enable all children to feel included and respected in the classroom. They are two subjects that aim to support the social and emotional development of the child, yet there is a significant difference in the time allocated to them respectively.

During my undergraduate degree, I wrote a dissertation on a similar topic to this thesis. I considered how SPHE teaching methodologies could be implemented in R.E. lessons for the holistic development of the child. That work inspired this current research project as I believed it created a more inclusive learning environment and allowed for all children to be heard and respected. While this research took place in a different setting and constituted a different approach, I maintain the opinion that integrating these two subjects is a worthwhile pursuit for the child.

To begin planning and implementing the intervention for this thesis, I needed to delve into my values and what I believed was missing from previous research. This chapter will describe the rationale for undertaking this self-study action research project, and the educational intervention that was implemented during the research cycle. The potential contribution that this study could provide to the educational community will be discussed and an outline of the structure of this thesis will be provided.

1.2   Research Rationale

As mentioned above, the rationale for this research stemmed from the belief that integrating SPHE and R.E. learning objectives can enable the creation of a holistic learning environment. What a holistic learning environment is understood as will be discussed in Chapter Two, it is particularly relevant following the enactment of legislation to allow children of all religions and none to enrol in any Primary School in Ireland, regardless of the school's patronage. The Admissions to Schools Act (2018) amended the Equal Status Act (2000), ensuring children cannot be discriminated based on the grounds of religion. The change to this legislation acknowledged the increase in religious diversity in Irish society today. As classrooms become a more diverse environment, I wanted to ensure that every child feels safe and included while they are in my care.

This value of care was at the root of this self-study action research project. The Teaching Council (2016: 6) defines care as the:

> "Teachers' practice is motivated by the best interests of the pupils/students entrusted to their care. Teachers show this through positive influence, professional judgement, and empathy in practice."

The above quote summarises the value of care in my practice. Throughout this research project, it was important to have underpinning values in mind. I am entrusted to care for a class of children, and I want to ensure they feel safe and included at all times by making decisions with their best interest in mind. Teaching is a value-laden practice which asks us to make judgement calls every day. Considering teaching as a 'practice' includes the planning and pedagogical choices, or micro decisions, that we make and actions that follow from our own decisions (Sullivan, et al., 2016). It was important that throughout this self-study action research project that I considered my value of care when making decisions and planning. This value felt challenged as I considered the discrepancy between R.E. and SPHE in time allocations in the curriculum.

Curriculum areas	Full day		Short day [infant classes]	
	One week		One week	
	Hours	Minutes	Hours	Minutes
Religious education (typically)	2	30	2	30
SPHE	0	30	0	30

Figure 1.1 Allocation of time in the 1999 Primary School Curriculum (Government of Ireland, 1999a).

As seen in figure 1.1 above, the recommended amount of time allocated to SPHE per week is thirty minutes (Government of Ireland, 1999a). This is in stark contrast to the two hours and thirty minutes allocated per week to R.E. This contrast may be a result of many attributing factors, which have been considered further in the review of literature that pertained to this project in Chapter Two. This contrast contributed to the rationale and planning of this project; how can I ensure all children are being cared for in my class when they are asked to disengage for (typically) thirty minutes a day? In a Primary School with a Catholic ethos, this disengagement can take shape through children being provided with work relating to other curriculum areas while the rest of the class engages in the *Grow in Love* programme.

Schools are free to build on the R.E. curriculum in a way that is most suitable for the needs of their pupils (Government of Ireland, 1999a). The R.E. programme *Grow in Love* was developed for schools in Ireland with Catholic patronage in response to the shifting cultural and education context of society (Veritas, 2015). The SPHE Teacher Guidelines (Government of Ireland, 1999b) state that the curriculum provides support and opportunities for personal and social development and growth. The curriculum is designed to enable the

child to become an active citizen in society and to maintain supportive relationships. Running parallel to this is the *Grow in Love* programme which is constructed in two dimensions, namely, an educational dimension, and a faith-formation dimension. This programme enables children to develop skills of emotional, social, and moral literacy among others. During this research project, I worked to enable children of all faiths to engage in R.E. lessons in an inclusive, respectful way.

1.3 Intervention

The educational intervention was designed based on the rationale discussed above, the interconnectedness of the SPHE and R.E. learning objectives and bearing in mind the discrepancy of time allocation. This action research project investigated the effectiveness of integrating SPHE and R.E., through the *Grow in Love* programme, for the holistic development of the child. This was investigated through the educational intervention, discussed in Chapter Three, which was constructed to challenge my approach in the teaching and planning of *Grow in Love* and SPHE lessons. The intervention was formed with the objective to create an inclusive, holistic learning environment, and was shaped by the following quote stated in the Education Act (1998:5), that all pupils will have the opportunity to experience an education that:

> "Respects the diversity of values, beliefs, languages, and traditions in Irish society and is conducted in a spirit of partnership."

I planned the intervention to organise and facilitate integration in the classroom. The intervention was to be facilitated through fifteen lessons over a three-week period. It took place during five SPHE lessons and ten *Grow in Love* lessons. The intervention was not implemented at any other point during the school day. The intervention took place in a Senior Infant classroom of twenty children in an urban area. Seventeen children were Catholic, and three children were Muslim. Muslim children were enabled to take part through talk and

discussion, questioning, and stories. During the research cycle, I observed the children's attitudes and discussions, reflected on my own practice, and maintained a reflective journal. Children were given the option to opt out of the research at any time. The methodology of this action research project and how it was organised will be discussed in further detail in Chapter Three.

1.4   Potential Contribution of the study

Undertaking an action research project can have many significant outcomes. There potentially can be significance for me as a result of undertaking this research and significance for the wider educational community. Given the lack of research on the integration of the SPHE curriculum and R.E., through the *Grow in Love* programme, this action research project will aim to identify and evaluate the effectiveness of integrating these two subject areas. This study has the potential to contribute to the body of knowledge on R.E. in Irish primary schools, particularly primary schools with Catholic patronage, and how it can, in theory, be connected with other subject areas for the holistic development of the child. The changes in legislation mentioned above occurred four years ago, there is a likelihood that classrooms will become increasingly diverse in the future. In this case, there is a capacity for this action research to contribute to the teaching and planning of educators in the future. This contribution can be made possible through the sharing and discussion of this research project and its findings.

This study can potentially contribute to the redraft of the 1999a Primary School Curriculum currently being undertaken. The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (2020) is being built on the foundational principles of inclusive education and diversity, and relationships. It is concerned with the competencies of active citizenship and fostering well-being. This framework aided the development of this research project. As the 1999 curriculum is under review and this action research project is concerned with the areas of curriculum and

planning, an alternative approach to the teaching and planning of R.E. and SPHE could be provided for future drafts made of the curriculum.

1.5   Thesis Outline

This section will detail the outline of this self-study action research project.

In Chapter One, the Introduction, the context and rationale of the study is identified. The research question is stated, and the potential contribution of this research is discussed.

In Chapter Two, the Literature Review, the existing relevant literature is reviewed to identify the key areas of knowledge pertaining to this action research project. These areas are; integration as operation, the SPHE curriculum, the *Grow in Love* programme, and the holistic development of the child.

In Chapter Three, the Methodology Chapter, the theoretical framework is presented. The adoption of a qualitative, self-study action research approach is justified, and the tools and techniques used in the broader research design are discussed.

In Chapter Four, the Findings and Analysis Chapter, the results and emerging themes from this research will be discussed following the discussion of research methods. The three main findings residing in the data will be discussed and examined.

In Chapter Five, the Concluding Chapter, the significance of the research is discussed, along with the limitations that presented themselves. Recommendations for any potential further research is stated, along with a personal reflection and discussion of the journey undertaken during the research is shared.

1.6   Conclusion

This chapter identified and discussed the context and rationale of this study. The research question guiding this study was "How can I integrate the curricular subjects of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Religious Education (R.E.) (*Grow in Love*) for

the holistic development of the child?" In Chapter Two, the Literature Review, the relevant

literature pertaining to this project will be analysed and discussed.

2 Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Chapter One dealt with the rationale, context, and thesis outline of this action research project. In this chapter, I shall analyse the relevant literature related to this self-study action research project. Creswell (2008) explains that a literature review's purpose is to summarise the relevant documents, articles, and topics for the study. The Primary School Curriculum of 1999a, relevant policies and guiding theorists will be examined in this chapter through four main themes. These themes are 1) Integration as Operation, 2) the SPHE curriculum, 3) the *Grow in Love* programme, and 4) the Holistic Development of the Child.

2.2 Integration as Operation

This research was founded with the idea that integration can play a crucial role in the creation of a holistic learning environment. Therefore, it is important to consider integration and its role in the classroom. Curriculum integration can be described as the way the different elements of curriculum areas can be given unity (Bacon, 2018) through teaching and planning. This unity can be achieved through a set of outcomes or on the basis of a pedagogical approach. There is a variety of pedagogical approaches to integration, different subjects can be integrated in different ways. Similar to Bacon (2018) mentioned above in relation to holistic education, Dewey (1938) believed that effective education comes primarily through social interactions and that the school setting should be considered as a social institution.

This view is relevant to this study as the integration of SPHE and R.E., through the programme *Grow in Love,* is researched and examined. They are two subjects which I believe can be integrated seamlessly at times as both are designed for the interpersonal and intrapersonal development of the child. Bacon (2018) discusses the benefits of integration for pupils as the real world is not divided into separate disciples but is rich with connections.

Children receive a richer education experience through integration (Government of Ireland, 1999a) as the distinction between subject areas is not important to the child.

More recently, it has been noted that it is crucial to ensure there is sufficient time and subject planning for meaningful integration to take place in the classroom (McPhail, 2019). Only by bringing together subject areas with a clear, conceptual overlap where pupils can deepen learning and critical thinking will effective curriculum integration take place in the classroom.

2.2.1   Organising Integration in the Classroom

In order to aid children to make connections between learning taking place, it is the responsibility of the teacher to act as facilitator and implement Vygotsky's (1978) tool of "scaffolding," which he described as a tool to support growth and development for children. Implementing this tool can be seen as learners work in collaboration with a skilled facilitator, or more knowledgeable peers, to help make connections between subjects or concepts in order to enable pupils to achieve independence. This tool can be organised in a variety of ways to best suit the learning objectives. Kurt (2020) describes scaffolding as:

> "The idea of scaffolding is the basis of instruction. Students can achieve their learning potential with guided instruction from their teacher. The teacher constantly reassesses the levels of achievement of the student and creates the next task as a building block to the goal. As an added benefit, the student also learns problem-solving skills from performing levelled tasks on their own."

Vygotsky's views on cognitive development were based on the importance of social interaction for the promotion of mental development (Kurt, 2020). This can then support the child in building their knowledge in a safe learning environment within their individual Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Kurt (2020) describes the ZPD thus:

> "The zone of proximal development consists of two important components: the student's potential development and the role of interaction with others. Learning occurs in the zone of proximal development after the identification of current knowledge. The potential development is simply what the student is capable of learning."

By implementing meaningful scaffolding to bridge gaps for children in their learning, and keeping the ZPD in mind as described above, I planned to create a holistic learning environment for pupils during this research. Beginning with the child's prior knowledge was crucial for the planning of effective integration between SPHE and R.E. learning objectives. The social and community-based nature of Vygotsky's theories on learning supported the planning of teaching and learning during this research project. Kurt (2020) highlights the importance of regularly considering the pupils' progress and learning during this process. Responding to the child's needs is crucial for meaningful scaffolding to take place in the classroom. It is the teacher's responsibility to adjust learning goals or activities to support the learner's progress appropriately. As this project focused on the interpersonal and intrapersonal development of the child it is necessary to consider further the different types of learners in the classroom.

2.2.2   Facilitating Integration in the Classroom

As discussed in the Primary School Curriculum (1999a), each child is unique and needs to be catered for in their individual way. When considering the different types of learners in the classroom and their personal ZPD as discussed above, it is important to keep Howard Gardner's (1983, 1993) theory of multiple intelligences in mind. This theory of intelligence is grounded in the thinking that a person's ability can be differentiated into modalities of intelligence rather than one general ability. Gardner (1979) formulated this theory with the belief that Piaget, referred to above, had a flawed view of human intellect, and considered it to be one general ability. Gardner (1999) defined intelligence as the:

"Bio-psychological potential to process information that can be activated in a cultural setting to solve problems or create products that are of value in a culture."

The multiple intelligences have been organised in the following categories:

- Intrapersonal
- Interpersonal
- Verbal-linguistic
- Logical-mathematical
- Bodily-kinaesthetic
- Musical
- Visual-spatial
- Naturalistic

This theory has been criticised by educators and psychologists for its lack of empirical evidence. Cherry (2019) explains that the critics argue that this theory of multiple intelligence is too broad and can be redefined as talents, personality traits, or skills. However, teachers can utilise Gardner's (1993) theory of intelligences to consider the needs of each child in the classroom. As mentioned, a key element of this study was that educators work to cater for the uniqueness of the child (Government of Ireland, 1999a) and draw out their individual spark. Gardner and Hatch (1989) challenged these critics due to the belief that traditional, pen-to-paper, assessments of intelligence favour linguistic and mathematical abilities. Considering the intrapersonal and interpersonal abilities of children was an important factor during the organisation and implementation of this study. Understanding the children's abilities while considering the integrated learning objectives of the SPHE curriculum (1999b) and *Grow in Love* programme aimed to support the teaching and learning process. As this research was motivated by the discrepancies in time allocations in the Primary School Curriculum (1999a) between two subjects with similar learning goals, an integrated approach to teaching and learning intended to support the minimising of this discrepancy.

2.2.3 *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (2020)*

The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (2020) is reconsidering the structure of the 1999a curriculum. An integrated approach to teaching and learning is being considered to optimise the progression of learning for children and the creation of rich learning experiences. In this

framework, each curriculum area contains subject-specific learning objectives that can complement and draw upon other subjects within the curriculum area. The framework states:

> "Children live their lives in an integrated world, and, for most real-world problems, children need to apply knowledge and skills from multiple areas. Facilitating natural connections and encouraging a flexible use of knowledge and skills develops their ability to reflect and transfer their learning to life outside school. Consequently, they need opportunities in school to develop the disposition to use knowledge and skills flexibly and integrated learning experiences can provide that context." (NCCA, 2020: 22)

This framework acknowledges the fact that children do not see subject boundaries, as discussed previously. It encourages and supports integration, enabling teachers to make professional judgements on what is the most effective way to teach their class. Connecting the curriculum to the children's lives and lived experiences is central to this framework and enables fruitful learning experiences. The framework includes practical strategies on integration. Further supporting the assumption that integration as operation is a worthwhile pursuit for the child.

2.3 The Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) Curriculum

This research has been influenced by the belief that SPHE plays a crucial role in the interpersonal and intrapersonal development of the child. SPHE was included in the Irish primary school curriculum in 1999. Until the introduction of SPHE as a curriculum subject, programmes had been introduced to tackle the social issues of the time such as drug abuse, health education and sexuality education (Department of Education and Science, 2009). These programmes were the following: the Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) Training Support Service for Schools, the Child Abuse Prevention Programme, and the Walk Tall Programme Support Service. While these programmes were designed to mitigate the issues at hand, there was no cohesive standard that schools had to work towards. Introducing SPHE as a curriculum subject was a way to provide a systematic and standardised framework

for objectives to be achieved for the benefit of the child. Currently, SPHE is under the spotlight as the RSE curriculum has been reviewed and is undergoing consideration to ensure inclusivity.

By including this subject in the curriculum, officials acknowledged the role school plays in a child's social and emotional development. It has been a key component in the curriculum since 1999. Figure 2.1 below provides an outline of the strands and strand units of the subject which are taught yearly in primary schools.

Figure 2.1 Strands and Strand Units of the SPHE Curriculum

Source: PDST (2021).

Until 1999, it had been accepted that schools would address these topics and children would develop necessary skills implicitly. This informal teaching and learning is known as "The Hidden Curriculum" (Thompson, 2017) and refers to the unwritten rules, values, and behaviours that pupils are expected to conform to in school. Examples of the Hidden

Curriculum include respecting others' opinions, and respecting authority, topics that can be seen in the structure of the SPHE strands and strand units in figure 2.1 above.

Including SPHE in the Primary School Curriculum 1999a has enabled explicit teaching of these values and behaviours. Explicitly teaching interpersonal and intrapersonal skills in primary school benefits children both now as they grow, and in the future as they are encouraged to be active, responsible citizens (Government of Ireland, 1999a). Shaping values, attitudes and informing decision making is the framework behind the SPHE curriculum. Children are at the centre of teaching and planning in SPHE (Government of Ireland, 1999b), enabling children to develop self-awareness and to understand themselves and the impact they can have on those around them.

As mentioned above, SPHE is designed to foster children's well-being, self-confidence, and sense of belonging. Through the SPHE curriculum, children are encouraged to become critical of information they receive and can access. Being aware of the influences in their lives is crucial in order to become a competent member of society as they grow up. The diverse nature of the planet today is highlighted in SPHE. Children learn about the various ethnic, social, and cultural communities in society and are encouraged to develop a sense of inclusivity and appreciation for others.

These goals and learning objectives are clearly structured through the strands and strand units of SPHE illustrated above. It is the teacher's responsibility to use professional judgement on the best way for learning objectives to be achieved.

2.3.1 Teaching and planning of SPHE

SPHE has regularly been integrated with other subjects in a cross-curricular manner by teachers (Department of Education and Science, 2009) in their teaching. An integrated approach to SPHE enables topics to be dealt with in the context of relevant subject areas (Government of Ireland, 1999c). Subjects typically integrated with SPHE by teachers in this

2009 report were Visual Art, English, and Geography. However, inspectors at the time deemed that of the schools inspected, integration was happening in an informal manner and there was a significant lack of evidence in the teacher's planning. A cross-curricular approach towards SPHE has been highlighted to benefit the development of literacy and oral language in children (Joyce, 2014). While Joyce (2014) focused on Human Rights Education (HRE) through SPHE, she reflects on the use of integration between literacy and SPHE for meaningful and purposeful learning for the child.

Integration is a useful tool for the teaching of SPHE because of the low time allocation it currently receives. SPHE is allocated thirty minutes per week (Government of Ireland, 1999a). This is a very limited provision for the subject. SPHE is at the bottom of all other subject areas in the Primary School Curriculum in terms of time allocation. In addition to the teaching of the SPHE curriculum itself, various programmes mentioned previously also need to be covered by teachers during the academic year.

This contrasts with what other government bodies have put into practice. Many countries are attempting to develop a comprehensive curriculum that promotes the social and emotional development of the child known as Social-Emotional Learning (SEL). Countries such as the United States of America, Finland and Australia are focusing on the mental health and well-being of the child through exclusively using programmes in schools and not discrete learning objectives. Rather than the somewhat rigid approach in Ireland, SEL is being embedded in the entire curriculum (Baldrick, 2018). Examples of SEL programmes are the *MindUp* programme in America and the *Be You* (Australian Government, 2021) syllabus in Australia. However, the English government expresses that while Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) Education is a non-statutory subject, all schools should make provisions for it as part of good practice (PSHE Association, 2019). Guidance on this subject is

available to schools online and there are currently consultations taking place to make it a statutory subject.

While there is more progress in Ireland than in some states, the discrepancy in time allocation and value of SPHE in Ireland is one of the factors which lead me to undertake this research. As mentioned previously, the review of the 1999 Primary School Curriculum (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2020) has a clear focus on integration and on supporting this teaching and learning approach. This new framework is to address the changing expectations and priorities in primary education. Part of this review included the combination of SPHE and Physical Education (PE) under the umbrella of "well-being" and being recommended three hours in time allocation. Displaying an awareness of the discrepancies discussed above.

2.4   The Religious Education Curriculum: The Grow in Love Programme

In the 1999a Primary School Curriculum, the development and implementation of R.E. in school is recognised as the responsibility of the relevant patron body of each primary school in Ireland. In the case of schools with a denomination system of patronage, the development of such curricula falls to the different church authorities (Government of Ireland, 1999a). According to the Primary School Curriculum (1999a), the aim of R.E. in Ireland is to allow each child to come to a knowledge of God, enabling them to grow spiritually and morally. It is the parent's right to choose a school whose ethos reflects their own religious beliefs. This is a positive structure to R.E. in Ireland, allowing autonomy for the individual. In Ireland, there are Educate Together schools which follow the *Learn Together* programme, Community National Schools which implement the *Goodness Me! Goodness You!* programme and Church of Ireland, Methodist, and Presbyterian- ethos primary schools that implement the *Follow Me* programme. Regardless of ethos, R.E. is allocated two and a half hours per week in the 1999a Primary School Curriculum (Government of Ireland). Russell (2016) discussed that this structure mirrors that in Scotland where there is a mixture of

denominational and non-denominational schools, all of which follow a form of religious and moral education or R.E. programmes (Scottish Government, 2011) to the same time allocation. However, this is in stark contrast to France's approach to religious education, where, by law, R.E. is not taught as part of the school curriculum (RFI, 2021). This is due to the fact that France is a secular state, and any knowledge of religion is only deemed necessary for the understanding of other disciplines such as history or literature.

2.4.1 Primary Schools with Catholic patronage

As this research took place in a Catholic-ethos primary school, I will focus on the Catholic Church and schools of that religious denomination. It is also important to consider the historical context of R.E. in Ireland and how it is connected with the Catholic Church. Since the sixth century, religion and education have been intertwined (Renehan, 2014). Historically, in one particular epoch, education in Ireland was used as a tool for colonisation by the British and the ascendency of the English language. Education was also used as a means to exclude the Catholic population from intellectual participation in Ireland; the Penal Laws (1695) banned Catholic children from schools. Catholicism and Irish identity became synonymous. Upon independence in 1921, the State acknowledged the pivotal position the Catholic Church played in education and allowed the two to hold binary control over education until the end of the twentieth century. In 1975, Boards of Management were introduced as parents became more involved in the running of schools. This did not see an end to clerical presence in schools as, in many cases, the chairperson of the board remained to be the parish priest. This continues to be the case in Catholic ethos schools across the country. While there are many examples of primary schools with Catholic patronage where the chairperson is someone other than a priest. The impact of the intertwinement of the Catholic Church and education in Ireland throughout the centuries can be seen in the time allocations of the 1999 Primary School Curriculum as discussed above. The Department of

Education (2020) released a statistical bulletin stating that 88.7% of primary schools in Ireland have a Catholic ethos.

In modern Ireland, a Catholic school is committed to a spiritual and moral value system, rooted in Jesus Christ's teaching, which permeates throughout the school community in a meaningful way (Catholic Primary Schools Management Association, 2016). This ethos can be seen in the characteristic spirit of the school, the children, and all stakeholders in the community.

2.4.2   The Grow in Love Programme

Grow in Love is the current R.E. programme in Catholic ethos primary schools in Ireland. It replaced its predecessor, which was introduced to schools in 1996, *Alive-O!* in stages. Beginning in September 2015 in Junior and Senior Infants classes, through to September 2018 when it reached Fifth and Sixth class. This research has taken place in a Senior Infants classroom. While the entirety of the *Grow in Love* programme will be considered in this chapter, particular attention will be paid to the Senior Infant/Primary 2 handbook.

Studying this programme, the pedagogy of *Grow in Love* (Veritas, 2021) takes place through the "Let's Look, Let's Learn, Let's Live" structure of lessons. Pupils are educated on the Catholic faith and consequently encouraged to draw meaning from their individual experiences and to consider the programme's teaching in their daily lives. These lessons are structured in an age-appropriate way which enable conversations to be held between pupils to reflect and learn from each other (Veritas, 2021). This programme has been critiqued by a small number of people, for not being truly a Catholic or Christian curriculum. For example, Johnson (2016) notes its lack of traditional catechesis, prioritising human experiences above Catholic catechesis. Allowing oneself to be guided by the Holy Spirit is the meaning of catechesis (Vatican, 1997). This can be seen in *Grow in Love* as it has been developed to enable children to form their own beliefs, using their own experiences and have

discussions in a safe learning environment with their peers. The conversations that take place in the classroom based on the *Grow in Love* structure are centred on respect. The Declaration on Religious Freedom (Vatican, 1965) notes the importance of respect when considering R.E.

> "In spreading religious faith and in introducing religious practices everyone ought at all times to refrain from any manner of action which might seem to carry a hint of coercion or of a kind of persuasion that would be dishonourable or unworthy, especially when dealing with poor or uneducated people. Such a manner of action would have to be considered an abuse of one's right and a violation of the right of others."

These conversations are facilitated through the themes into which the yearly programme is divided: Our World, We Belong, Advent and Christmas, The Holy Family, St Brigid and the Spring, Jesus, Holy Week and Easter, The Church, Baptism, and Grow in Love (Veritas, 2021). *Grow in Love* lessons such as "We all belong in one human family" and "We can grow in love" enable children to develop an understanding of friendship and each other through the strand of communication and understanding. This can be commended and celebrated as it creates an inclusive classroom.

An inclusive classroom is more crucial than ever in Irish primary schools as Irish society has changed vastly in the past twenty years since 1999 when the curriculum was published. The Marriage Equality Act (2015) and the repeal of the Eighth Amendment of the Irish Constitution (2018) are examples of significant changes that have occurred in Ireland that are obviously not reflected in the 1999a PSC, since it predates them. The Department of Education and Skills (DES) data show that in the period from 2013/14 one in nine children in the classroom was from a non-Irish household (Duncan and Humphreys, 2015). Every child deserves the opportunity to a holistic education and with increased pressures from parents (NCCA, 2016) the curriculum must evolve with the times.

Despite the importance of developing an inclusive classroom as discussed above, Johnson (2016) criticises the practice of *Grow in Love* as he deems it "potentially harmful to the faith of Catholic pupils" as the other faiths are not looked at purely through a Catholic lens. The space for other religions to fit into *Grow in Love* lessons is seen as a weakness by Johnson, describing it as an "Inter-Religious Education" experience as opposed to a firmly Catholic one. However, to challenge Johnson's criticisms, programmes should not be looked at as an end in themselves (Guilarte, 2011), but as a means to an end. In this situation, aiding the development of well-rounded, spiritually, and emotionally able children.

To support this development, teachers fill the role of the "older members" who are communicating values to their pupils. For a teacher who is of the Catholic faith and teaching in a Catholic ethos primary school, creating a safe, inclusive classroom is a fundamental part of delivering the *Grow in Love* programme in school. The Gospel lives in the heart of believers as they transmit their beliefs to those around them. It can be looked at as a responsibility of older members of the faith to communicate these values to new members. While Johnson heavily critiques *Grow in Love* for being too open to other beliefs or faiths in its planning, it can be seen that the programme is living closely to the values stated in the 1965 Declaration on Religious Freedom.

2.5   *Holistic Development of the child*

This research grew out of a belief that a holistic learning environment is crucial for a child's development where all aspects of the child are nurtured. Huang et al. (2012) describe holistic education as a type of movement in education that engages all aspects of the learner, namely the mind, body, and spirit. The goal of a holistic classroom is to engage children in meaningful learning in a way which acknowledges the various dimensions of what it is to be human. It is based on the idea that individuals can develop a sense of meaning, identity, and purpose when connections are made between their local community, values, and the natural world. Holistic education nurtures a love of learning (Miller, 2000). This cannot be achieved

using only a curriculum. Engaging with the environment of the child is crucial for holistic education to be achieved.

As well as a fostering a meaningful love of learning, holistic education nurtures a sense of wonder in learning. Friedrich Froebel's (1782 – 1852) philosophy of education was guided by key principles which link closely to the values of holistic education. His principles included (Tovey, 2020):

- Freedom with guidance
- Unity, connectedness, and community
- Engaging with nature
- Learning through self-activity and reflection
- The central importance of play
- Creativity and the power of symbols
- Knowledgeable and nurturing educators

Froebel particularly wanted children to be enabled to become free-thinkers, active learners, and be supported by the environment in their investigation. As mentioned above, holistic education engages all aspects of the learner. The PSC (1999a) recognises the importance of developing all aspects of the child; spiritual, moral, cognitive, emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, social and physical. Froebel's philosophy connects easily with the concept of holistic education. Enquiry-based learning is crucial for the holistic development of the child, allowing them to develop at first hand their own understanding of the world around them. Froebel strongly believed in enquiry-based learning through play and rejected the traditional, teacher-led approach to education.

An alternative approach to the provision of an enquiry-based, holistic learning environment is the position of Engelmann and Becker's (2015) approach of "Direct Instruction." This is a teaching and learning method which emphasises pre-planned, prescribed teaching tasks. This approach is designed to eliminate misinterpretations of learning by children and improve academic performance. Teacher stands in front of the classroom, presents

information, and gives direct, explicit instructions. This mirrors Freire's (1970) "banking" model of education. Children are framed as passive, listening subjects to the teacher. Children are expected to listen and retain knowledge provided by teacher, and information is rigid and compartmentalised for the learners. This is not the form of education that modern educators prefer to implement as we aim for the development of active citizens.

Educators can strive for the counterapproach to the banking model of education and direct instruction, this is known as "problem-posing" which is proposed by Freire (1970). This model allows for communication and dialogue in the classroom. The pupil's learning is enhanced, not just academically but also socially and emotionally through critical thinking. Freire (1970) describes this model as a solution to the student-teacher contradiction as it recognises that education is not something that is passed from teacher to student but is formulated through dialogue between the two parties. Freire (1970) concludes that:

"Authentic education is not carried on by "A" *for* "B" or by "A" *about* "B", but rather by "A" *with* "B."

This problem-posing method is evident in early years education through Maria Montessori's (1870 – 1952) philosophy of education. This system of education known as The Montessori Method (Montessori, 1909) is outlined by Holmes (1912) in the introduction to Montessori's book. Holmes points out that her philosophy is similar to Froebel's as they both affirm the need for children to be able to develop socially, emotionally, and morally in a safe learning environment. The social experience in the Montessori system is less structured that Froebel's approach but both philosophies are rooted in the recognition of the importance of learning through experiences. Montessori's method enables children to learn together in a constructivist model, learning concepts through experience rather than the direct instruction method described above. This is particularly relevant to this research project as it took place in a Senior Infants classroom.

This approach to education focuses on children's interests, building on what they already know and based on active learning experiences. The origin of this theory is linked to Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development (McLeod, 2020) as children do not simply acquire knowledge but develop their own understanding of it. Piaget's stages of cognitive development support the approach of starting with the child's prior knowledge, not treating them as passive creatures in the learning process but as active beings who will formulate their own sense of the world. In this theory, McLeod (2020) states that children go through the same stages of development and the pace of development is determined by biological maturation and interaction with the environment. During the timeframe for this research, it was assumed that most children were in the "Preoperational Stage" and were able to consider the world symbolically. This is a key element of project planning as I was focusing on the spiritual, moral, and emotional development of the child throughout this research. This approach recognises that learning is a social experience. It is directly associated with our friends, family, and peers (WGU, 2021). It is crucial that children are enabled to learn in ways which are based on their own experiences and in a contextual way. Children cannot learn isolated facts. They learn in ways which are related to their prior knowledge. It is the educator who will scaffold learning for the children to make these connections. One reservation which may be suggested in relation to this approach to teaching is the lack of structure than can manifest itself from it. However, as discussed above, among its positive attributes are that it enables opportunities of conversation and dialogue in the classroom. Pupils' learning is enhanced, not only academically, but also socially and emotionally through teamwork and problem solving.

2.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, the relevant literature pertaining to this action research project was analysed and discussed. Children are entitled to an education that prepares them for the "real world." This includes an education that involves both moral and spiritual lessons. It is the role of the

teacher to ensure that all children are included in an education that equips them emotionally, socially, and intellectually for life beyond school. In the next chapter I shall discuss the research methods used during this study and the rationale for choosing these methods.

3   Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1   Introduction

In the previous chapter I dealt with the relevant literature pertaining to this research project. The purpose of this chapter, the Methodology Chapter, is to outline how this action research project was organised and why an Action Research paradigm was deemed appropriate. This chapter will consider the ontological and epistemological values of the research being undertaken. I will discuss the methods of intervention chosen for this project. I will discuss the instruments of measurement that will be utilised to quantify the effectiveness of the various interventions as I investigate how integrating SPHE and R.E., through the *Grow in Love* programme, can contribute to the wellbeing of the child. Finally, I will disclose any other relevant information for this study, such as the research site and ethical considerations.

3.2   *Research Paradigm: 'Self-study' Action Research*

The research methodology is a crucial pillar in the development of a research report (McDonagh et al., 2020). In typical circumstances, the methodology can be dictated by the subject that is being researched. However, McDonagh (2020) discusses the importance of allowing a research paradigm to inform the methodology being chosen. The research paradigm is the view the researcher holds of the world around them. In order to be able to choose an appropriate research tool, the researcher must identify their own values and what they want to see a change of in the classroom. The unpredictable nature of a classroom does not allow for one prescribed method of research.

Action research is based on values that motivate many educators (McDonagh, 2020). It is described as critical and transformative. The aim of action research is to make a knowledgeable claim and to discover something you do not already know (McNiff, 2016). It becomes part of the practice of your everyday life (De Certeau, 1984) through questioning your practice or own knowledge. Considering what you do well, what you are successful at and what you can improve on is at the root of the action research process. McNiff (2017)

states that many researchers begin their enquires because they want to improve certain aspects of their work or work situation in order to live more closely in the direction of their values. This research was a result of feeling that values were being denied by my own practice. Self-study is grounded in the desire to improve one's own practice by focusing on the self in relation to those around us and our practice (Glenn, 2021). Action research enables the researcher to reflect on the gap between theory in one's research topic and their practice. Researchers are encouraged to challenge their current practice and construct knowledge to open their own learning. McDonagh (2020) further explains that this methodology provides the researcher with opportunities to take responsibility of their actions and engage in good professional practice.

Vanassche and Kelchtermans (2015) describe self-study as a research approach in the field of teacher education which privileges the use of qualitative research methods and collaborative interactions. Therefore, self-study action research is an extremely personal journey for the researcher. For this reason, McAteer (2013) highlights the importance of a reflective diary in this type of research. This tool will be critical in the research as Chomsky (1987) described the responsibility that a person holds when striving to achieve this goal of self-improvement, being truthful during this process and exposing lies. Noticing that one is not living to the values they believe themselves to hold is known as being a living contradiction (Ilyenkov, 1977). Practitioners can find themselves feeling emotionally and cognitively dissonant when contradicting their values. The process of self-study action research reveals these clashes of values and McNiff (2017) states that is leads to a shift in self-perceptions and self-identification, particularly in this context of the classroom. The action research approach to this research can lead a researcher to consider what value their research can add to school practice or policy decisions.

In this study, I planned the integration of R.E. and SPHE learning objectives to discover if this can be successful for the holistic development of the child. The reflective journal supported my research as I observed myself, my attitudes, and my practice throughout this journey. It is particularly relevant as there were no quantifiable tools to measure progress in these subject areas. As a Froebelian teacher, this form of research supported Froebel's philosophy of inquiry-based learning, enabling the researcher to form knowledge based on their own experiences. Overall, the action research approach has enabled me to think professionally, act and reflect on my values, and consider how this research project may contribute to the knowledge base of the teaching profession.

3.2.1 *Research Paradigms*

Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) explain that a paradigm provides beliefs and influences what should be studied, how it should be studied and how any results of the research should be considered and interpreted. McDonagh (2020) names three key paradigms; positive, interpretive and action research. During this research process it was important for me to reflect on my place, professionally, within the paradigm. I considered my autonomy in my practice and if there was something I felt could be developed within my teaching practice. A positivist paradigm offers teachers a methodology for developing knowledge about teaching. An interpretive paradigm enables the researcher to make meaning of data through their own thinking and understanding, informing themselves through interactions with participants by observation (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). While a positivist paradigm offers teachers a methodology to gain new knowledge, it is based in fact which is not suitable for my research project. An interpretive paradigm can demonstrate the complexities of scenarios in a social context. The purpose of my research project was to investigate how I as a teacher can integrate the SPHE curriculum and *Grow in Love* programme for the holistic development of the child. After considering positivist and interpretive paradigms, as

mentioned above, it became clear to me that a self-study action research approach was best suited for this research.

3.3 Ontology and Epistemology

As discussed previously, self-study action research is a deeply personal journey. It is crucial to consider the values which have inspired the research (McNiff, 2017). Ontological and epistemological commitments are important areas to think about in order to be living true to one's values and avoid becoming a living contradiction, as mentioned above. McNiff (2017) describes ontology as the study of being. It influences how one views themselves in relation to others. This is particularly relevant within the action research context as action research is democratic and egalitarian values based, morally committed and dialogical, inclusional and relational. Engaging in action research involves acting on what has inspired the researcher to take a stand. It takes place in the real world with other people. As this research has taken place in the classroom, considering the participants that will inform the ideas developed was imperative.

In conjunction with this, epistemological values are based in how we understand, find, and develop knowledge. Epistemology underpins action research by referring to the "object of enquiry" (McNiff, 2017). This was the focus of the research; in the context of self-study action research the focus is the researcher themselves. Personal accountability is crucial. The reflective journal mentioned above enabled the researcher to recognise that they might have been mistaken at times. During the action research process, it was important to reflect on the idea that there is no one answer to a research topic and that knowledge can be created as well as discovered during the process, and can still be further critiqued (Berlin, 1998). An epistemological commitment during the research process will enable the researcher to reflect on themselves throughout. Therefore, in action research, you research yourself, yourself and others, and your practice with an aim for change based on concerns founded from values.

Figure 3.1 below displays a typical action research cycle in which the research engages in reflection on their practice and values.
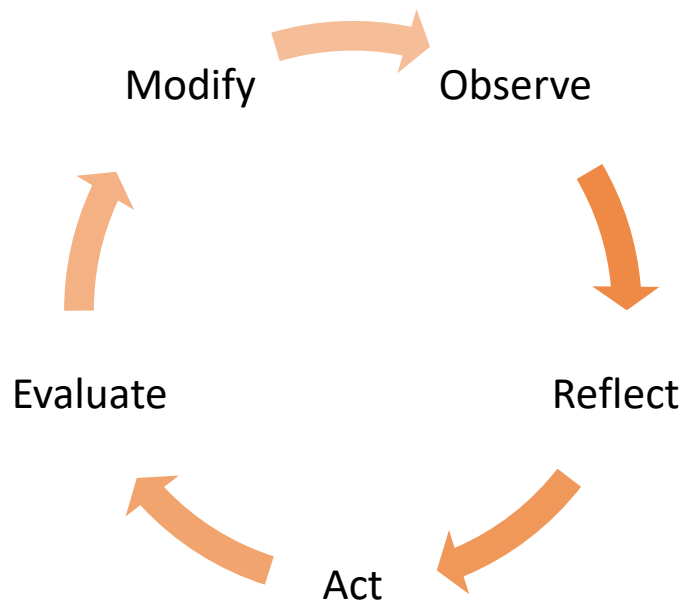
Figure 3.1 A typical action-reflection cycle

As this research is founded from my values and based in practice, McNiff (2016) refers to this as "practice-based research" or "practitioner research." Key values underpinning this research have been care and inclusion. As mentioned in chapter one, caring for the pupils in my class is a pillar of my practice. The discrepancy of time allocation between subjects, which has been discussed, goes against my value of care. This conflict arises as there were pupils in this class who, in my experience, disengaged with learning for thirty minutes a day because they are of a different faith. It is the responsibility of the teacher to ensure that every child is supported to reach their full potential during the school day. The Education Act (1998) specifies that the primary function of teachers and principals is to encourage and foster learning in students. In conjunction to this, the Primary School Curriculum (1999) outlines that the general aims of primary school are:

"To enable the child to live a full life as a child and to realise his or her potential as a unique individual, to enable the child to develop as a social being through living and cooperating with others and so contribute to the good of society and to prepare the child for further education and lifelong learning."

The aims and objectives mentioned above not only provide contractual obligations for educators in Ireland, but also create a foundation for values to be built on.

3.3.1 Qualitative Research

As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, qualitative research is the most appropriate approach to this research as it is concerned with constructing meaning from how individuals interact with the world (Merriam and Grenier, 2019). This is particularly relevant as this project was focused on participants' behaviours and attitudes towards teaching and learning in the classroom. The use of qualitative research influenced the methods used during this project. By methods, it is understood that this means the range of techniques used to gather data for the basis of interpretation and inference of findings (Cohen et al, 2007). Methods that were used will be discussed further in this chapter. As qualitative research is taking place, the methods implemented needed to be flexible to allow for the constantly changing environment that is a Senior Infants classroom. As Williamson et al. (2018) discusses, qualitative research is accommodating to the research site and lacks the uniformity that other forms of research are structured on. Ethnography was crucial to keep in mind for this research. It was relevant as it focuses on the how and why of pupils' behaviour to unveil new findings. A study of representation of culture (Van Maanen, 2011) allows for immersive, social research.

3.3.2 Research Site

This research was conducted in a Senior Infants co-educational, primary school with a Catholic ethos. The school was in the East of Ireland in an urban, DEIS band one setting. Ages of the twenty pupils ranged between five and six years old. English was the first language of the majority of children, while five used it as a second language. Three children

were Muslim. All children have engaged with the SPHE curriculum in Junior Infants and seventeen had taken part in the *Grow in Love* programme previously. The work or observations made of the children were protected by using pseudonyms.

3.3.3 Research Design

As mentioned, this research focused on the integration of the SPHE curriculum and the *Grow in Love* programme for the holistic development of the child. SPHE and R.E. run parallel to each other as they support the social and emotional development of the child. It is difficult to measure or observe the development of these skills through the implementation of an educational intervention. Additionally, due to the age group of the children taking part in the research, there was limited options on data collection tools to ensure pupil participation. However, indicators of well-being were established to ensure a focus during this action research project. Before discussing the interventions that were put in place in the classroom, we must consider these indicators of well-being that were be observed during this project, as seen in figure 3.2 below.
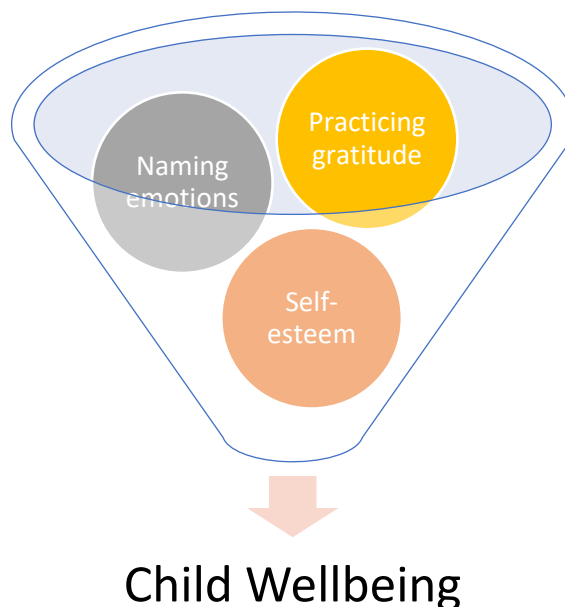
Figure 3.2. Indicators of child wellbeing.

There is an array of indicators of wellbeing depending on one's perspective (Ramos, 2020). The above indicators of wellbeing have been chosen for this research project based on the age of the participants and the topics that will be taught during the SPHE and *Grow in Love* lessons.

Practicing Gratitude

Gratitude is a feeling that happens in exchange-based relationships when one person acknowledges that they have received something of valuable benefit from the other (Parks and Schueller, 2014). Gratitude helps regulate, solidify, and strengthen relationships. Expressing gratitude helps foster child wellbeing in a variety of ways (Houck, 2020). Children who practice expressing gratitude display increased levels of social and emotional wellbeing. As described by Crick (2018):

> "To be thankful is to recognize that as a living, breathing human being I am in this thing called life alongside others and that I can only live with their support."

Gratitude is foundational to wellbeing and mental health (Parks and Schueller, 2014). Having a disposition of gratitude in life has been associated with prosocial traits such as empathy, forgiveness and having a willingness to help others. Gratitude does not always need to be in response to a gift being given, but towards positive occurrences in life, such as being offered a helping hand or enjoying company of peers and family.

Identifying Emotions

Putting a name on a feeling is known as "affect labelling" (Lieberman, et al., 2007). It is thought to help manage negative emotional experiences by decreasing the activity in the brain's emotional centres and allowing the frontal lobe, the part of the brain that thinks and makes decisions, to have greater power over solving the problem. It is thought that by labelling an emotion, a distance between the individual and the experience is created which

32

can allow a person to choose how to respond to challenges. Instead of reacting to an event, the body can slow down, and respond is a less damaging way. The individual is enabled to observe an emotion, practice mindfulness, and see the reactive emotion (like anger) rising but recognise that they are not anger themselves but are simply feeling it. Miller (2021) explains that using language such as "I am feeling angry" can be much more productive than "I am angry" when implementing affect labelling. The individual's emotional response is calmed, the brain is enabled to evaluate options and implement a level of emotional intelligence.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is crucial to the child's academic achievement, participation, relationships, and sense of wellbeing (Sutton, 2021). Guindon (2009) describes high self-esteem as an area of importance that affects motivation, behaviour, and life satisfaction. Low self-esteem has been shown to relate to negative phenomena in later life. Lawrance (2006) explains that:

> "The positive qualities of self-acceptance, respect for the needs of others and the ability to empathize are characteristics of the person with high self-esteem. Children in whom these characteristics are forming will be confident, enthusiastic for school and ready for new experiences."

It is between the ages of 6 to 12 years that school becomes of primary importance for the child both socially and cognitively. Guindon (2009) further explains that children as young as 5 years old are capable of recognising their successes and failures in terms of competence and self-worth. This is particularly relevant to this study as this research site is in a Senior Infant classroom where the children are aged between 5 and 6 years old. Teachers are in a powerful position to influence a child's self-esteem (Lawrence, 2006), the relationships the teacher establishes, and ethos created by the teacher play an important role. This was an important role to keep in mind throughout this research. During this research I planned to provide support to the children to express their emotions, ensuring I gave opportunities for

the children to give themselves positive feedback, allow the children to take risks and develop an acceptance of self.

3.4 Action Planning: Educational Interventions

This research investigated the effectiveness of integrating the SPHE curriculum and the *Grow in Love* programme for the holistic development of the child. The SPHE teacher guidelines (1999b) emphasise active learning and enabling children to work together. Children are placed at the centre of the learning process to provide opportunities for the development of new skills and attitudes.

The *Grow in Love* programme aims to support children in maturing spiritually and morally through communication and participation (Veritas, 2015). The SPHE strand units (1999c) that integrate with these aims are: *"My friends and other people," "Myself and my family," "Growing and changing," "Relating to others," "Self-Identity,"* and *"Developing citizenship."* These units are emphasised as they are crucial for enabling the child to explore relationships, self-confidence, and the world around them.

As mentioned previously, the discrepancy of time allocation between SPHE and R.E. prompted this research project. Action planning is described by McNiff (2017) as how to manage a systematic process of personal or organisational change. In my research project I will be integrating SPHE and *Grow in Love* to contribute to the wellbeing of the children in my class. I will be measuring gratitude, emotional literacy, and self-esteem. In order to test the effectiveness of my research question, educational interventions will take place through five SPHE lesson and ten *Grow in Love* lessons over a period of three weeks, one intervention per day.

3.4.1   Structure of Interventions

Lesson one: The Disney and Pixar film "Inside Out" (2015) was used as stimulus for children to develop awareness of emotions. The characters are seen in figure 3.3 below. A chart was displayed in the classroom for the children to display their emotions.

Figure 3.3. Inside Out characters, Fear, Anger, Joy, Sadness and Disgust.

Lesson two: *Grow in Love* story "Ruby's Rook's Spring Challenge" was read and discussed. Connections to the "Inside Out" character was made.

Lesson three: *Grow in Love* story "I remember" was read and discussed. Teacher will share stories and connections to feelings was made.

Lesson four: SPHE lesson to consolidate feelings and how different people can show how they are feeling. Children will work in groups to show emotions through drama.

Lesson five: *Grow in Love* story "Grandad, Tell Us a Story" was read and discussed. Questions were asked to prompt reflections on feelings and emotions.

Lesson six: *Grow in Love* poem "Stories" was learned by the class. Talk and discussion of remembering emotions and connecting to SPHE lesson of feelings and discussions took place.

Lesson seven: SPHE lesson discussing the importance of friends and family and appreciating all those considered special in their lives.

Lesson eight: *Grow in Love* lesson using images as prompts to discuss stories of Jesus in the Bible. A focus was placed on how stories help us learn about people.

Lesson nine: SPHE lesson discussing what we are grateful for. Children considered people in their lives that they are glad to know.

Lesson ten: *Grow in Love* lesson building a parish. Children discussed what makes a community and why people gather in certain venues.

Lesson eleven: SPHE lesson on people in our community. Children discussed how they can help make the community a happy place.

Lesson twelve: *Grow in Love* scripture story "A House of Prayer" was read. Children discussed if they have ever been to a house of prayer.

Lesson thirteen: *Grow in Love* lesson. Talk and discussion of what is found in a Church. Children of other faiths shared what their place of worship is like.

Lesson fourteen: Development *Grow in Love* lesson on the Church. Children of other faiths were invited to engage in discussion on their places of worship.

Lesson fifteen: SPHE lesson discussing the importance of family and the different kinds of families we can have. Children were invited to share stories about their families or families they know.

3.5   Data Collection Methods

The combination of two or more research instruments will aid the development of a deeper understanding of the research question (Cater et al., 2014). This method is known as triangulation. Sullivan et al. (2016) describe it as a tool that provides more perspectives to check the accuracy of what is being described and claimed in the research. For this reason, I decided to utilise a reflective journal, observation, and questionnaires. Journals, observation logs and questionnaires are a type of documentary data.

Reflective Journal
Reflecting and reflexing on attitudes, values and presumptions that appeared during the study.

Classroom observation
Direct observation of children's behaviour during interventions.

Questionaires
Investigating child's feelings and attitudes concerning with self-esteem.
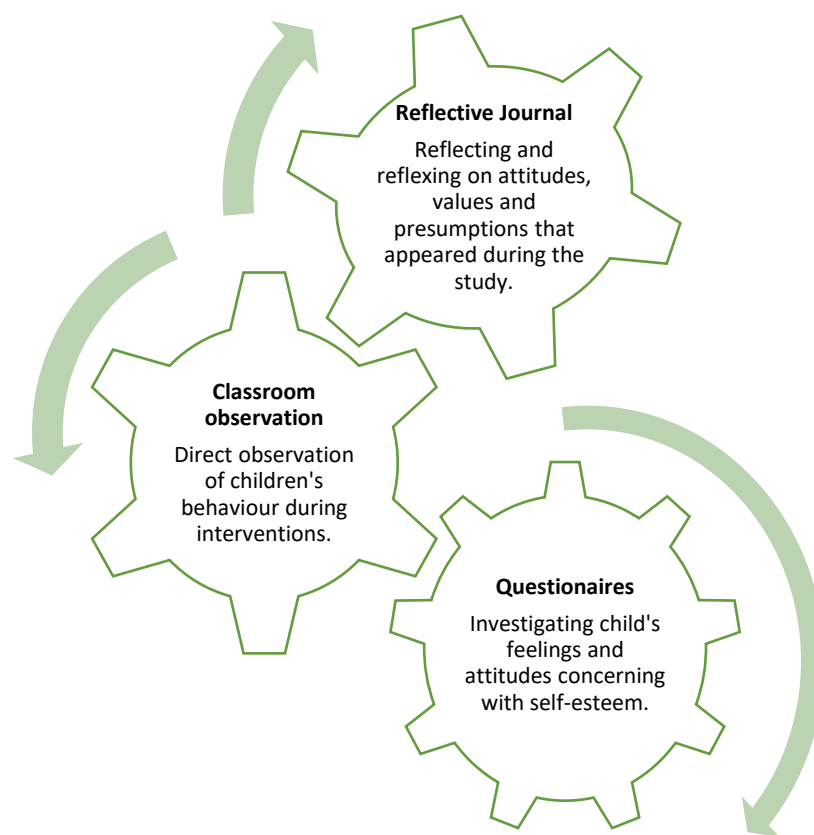
Figure 3.4 The methods used in conjunction with each other during the study.

3.5.1   Reflective Journal

To collect data, a reflective journal was used by the researcher as good practice of self-study action research, as mentioned previously. Throughout this process the researcher looked back on previous reflections. This was in order to engage in critical reflection to unearth

uncomfortable or stressful parts of one's practice (Sullivan et al, 2016). By implementing this research instrument, the researcher was forced to examine the values, attitudes or assumptions that are held about teaching and learning. This was deemed an appropriate tool for this research project as it was a self-study to improve one's practice. Sullivan et al. (2016) highlights the importance of being cable of analysing and reflecting on one's own practice for development and improvement. Reflecting on your practice is an opportunity to enhance, develop a deeper understanding or improving an area of it (Roche, 2020). Monitoring my own learning process and any changes in my practice helped provide key insights during this process.

3.5.2   Observation

Observation can also be described as field notes (McNiff, 2017). These observations work in parallel to support the maintenance of the reflective journal described above. Observation has been deemed as an appropriate tool for this research as it is a purposeful, systematic research instrument (Kumar, 2011) that is appropriate in situations where data cannot be collected through elicit questioning. This research has focused on the behaviour of the children. I choose practice participant and non-participant observation, because at times I was involved in the activities through facilitation, while at other times I was observing the children's interactions and behaviours.

3.5.3   Questionnaire

A questionnaire is used in action research to gain information from participants about their opinions and experiences. The questionnaire in this project acted as a baseline and end-line tool in relation to the children's feelings of gratitude and self-esteem. It was used before the implementation of the educational intervention and again after the intervention. To ensure privacy, children's names were not recorded on the questionnaire, instead, pseudonyms will be used. This questionnaire can be seen in Appendix A.

3.6 Validity and Credibility

Shipman (2014) describes key pillars to check for quality research and these were used to guide the validity and credibility of this research. The pillars are: 1) Replicability, 2) Reliability, 3) Credibility and 4) Generalisability. Understanding that replicability of an action research is not possible was key. McDonagh (2016) supports this by discussing the constantly developing nature of pupils and varying situations. McDonagh (2016) further elaborates on generalisability, stating that rather than ensuring generalisability, the valid criterion of research projects is to be applicable elsewhere and that researchers can communicate their findings to others for future reference.

Therefore, reliability and credibility are key criteria in quality research. Whitehead (2010) discusses the importance of grounding research within the professional context with others to ensure accuracy can be tested at a personal and social level. To ensure credibility in research, it is recommended that teacher researchers date their data. This is relevant in this project as reflective journal entries were used as a source of data. Ensuring that the tools being used for the data collection are appropriate for the research is another form of credibility being displayed (McDonagh, 2016). An additional method for checking validity is triangulation, which has been discussed above in this chapter. Presenting my work to others aided the validity of the project. It is essential to do so as research is a systematic enquiry that is made public (McNiff and Whitehead, 2011). This was made possible during the research through critical reflection, engaging with critical friends, validation, and triangulation process. Teacher research is a constantly evolving and open domain, knowledge and studies from the past provide no guarantees for what will happen in the future. Immersing myself in journals and research articles relevant to this study aided my understanding of the language of my practice to ensure credibility. In the case of this self-study action research project, I considered and put a variety of methods in place to ensure reliability and credibility in this research.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

As this research involved working with children, the power and status of the teacher could lead children to accepting ideas they may otherwise have rejected (DCYA, 2012). The dual role I held during this research had been taken into consideration when planning research methods to ensure no discrepancies arise. Ethical approval was granted on this research project. As this research involved R.E., it was crucial that it was clear to all participants that respect would be maintained for all beliefs. This is particularly relevant for the three Muslim children that took part. A mother of two siblings in the class asked for clarification on what would be taking place in the classroom. I ensured the mother that her children would not be engaging in Catholic practices but achieving planned SPHE learning objectives. I emphasised my value of care and respect in the classroom.

3.7.1 Consent

Information sheets and consent forms were provided to parents and children involved in the project which can be seen in Appendix B, C, D and E. The principal and other stakeholders involved in the school received the documents presented in Appendix F, G and H. The letters shared with all stakeholders ensured that the five key pillars of informed consent were met: information, understanding, voluntariness, competence, and consent (Pierre, 2018). It is considered unethical to collect data without the consent of the participants (Kumar, 2011). The documents explained the action research project in comparison to what normally happens during a typical school day. The degree of anonymity that could be guaranteed was also explained (DCYA, 2012). Consent is not valid without the participants' knowledge and understanding of the researcher's work.

3.7.2 Child Related Research

The core ethical concepts in this research were: Informed consent and assent, and confidentiality and anonymity (DCYA, 2012). To ensure that it was clear assent was voluntary, children were open to reject participating in the project with no negative

consequences. It was crucial to consider how the children could be affected by this research (Alderson & Morrow, 2011). Interpreting the curriculum for this class enabled more developmentally appropriate topics to be explored. I adopted this approach during the planning process and considered the children's contributions to discussions to shape learning activities.

3.8   Conclusion

In this chapter I discussed why an Action Research paradigm and a qualitative research approach was deemed most appropriate for this project. The educational intervention of integrating R.E. and SPHE was considered in detail, providing the structure of the intervention. The methods of data collection, reflection journal, observation, and questionnaires, used were analysed. These tools were decided to be most effective for a self-study action research project in this research site. The importance of validity, credibility, and ethical considerations were studied to ensure quality research took place. The following chapter, Findings and Discussion, will consider the data collected during the educational intervention discussed above using the tools mentioned previously.

4 Chapter Four: Findings and Discussion

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter dealt with why an Action Research paradigm was deemed most appropriate for this project and the educational interventions implemented during this study. This chapter discusses the data collected during the research cycle through thematic analysis, and reports on the main findings that emerged from this data. As discussed in the previous chapter, the educational intervention was implemented in a class of twenty Senior Infant children in an urban area. Children engaged with *Grow in Love* and SPHE through an integrated approach to teaching and planning. The *Grow in Love* resources of stories, songs and worksheets were used during this research, as outlined. The three main themes and three main findings discussed in this chapter are summarised below in table 4.1. To ensure the findings were fair and accurate, I tested and critiqued the provisional findings throughout the research, the reflective journal and critical friends supported the formation of the findings.

Main Themes	Main Findings
Reflection	Integrating SPHE and R.E. can lead to a more inclusive classroom environment.
Relationships	Integration can cause an increase in workload for the practitioner.
External Impacts	Starting with the child facilitates the creation of a holistic learning environment.

Table 4.1 Summary of themes and findings.

4.2 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis involves a progression from describing what was observed during the research, to interpreting the patterns that emerged (Braun & Clark, 2006), and refining these patterns into themes in order to consolidate the findings of this action research project. As

this research was heavily reliant on observation and maintaining a reflective journal, thematic analysis was a useful tool. The analysing and coding of the data began with categories being identified in the reflective journal and observational notes. I immersed myself in the data to allow the themes to emerge and asked myself the question 'What does this mean?' and 'What does this exemplify?' (Stuckey, 2015). These questions led to the three main themes that will be discussed below. Excerpts from my reflective journal can be seen in Appendix I. The analysis was possible due to the research methods discussed in the previous chapter.

4.2.1 *Theme One: Reflection*

Critical reflection is a key element of self-study action research. Throughout this action research project, I found that a crucial part of shaping my key learning moments occurred when reflecting on the interventions that took place in the class and when thinking about what I had written in my reflective journal. The use of a reflective journal as a tool to collect data was discussed in chapter three. Reflecting on my actions and decisions enabled me to take responsibility for them. I needed to consider the *why* of decisions being made. At the beginning of this project, I believed the *Grow in Love* pupil workbook was a tool limiting the possibilities for integration, I felt frustrated by the limits placed on teachers. However, there are also benefits to using this workbook which will be discussed below. I made the following entry in my reflective journal before implementing my educational intervention:

> "I feel I am a walking contradiction when I distribute the R.E. pupil workbook *Grow in Love* and a number of children from other faith backgrounds in the class are not taking part. I understand the importance of respecting beliefs. However, in my experience, the *Grow in Love* programme is designed in a way that children of all faiths can take part in discussions and activities." (Kenny, "Reflective Journal" November 2021).

As the journey continued, I returned to reflections made at the beginning of the process. The act of examining one's own reflections and work which is known as reflexive practice (Kallos, 2021) is an important element of this process. By reflecting regularly, it ensured I

focused on the original research question. I found I was becoming distracted by other issues in the classroom. Therefore, throughout this action research project, it was important to find strategies to question and review my own habitual actions, assumptions, and values. "Prescriptive assumptions" (Brookfield, 2017: 6) resonated strongly with me during my learning journey. This idea of assumptions based on how things should or ought to be aligned with the tension I was finding in my writing. I had an idea of how teaching should be done based on my value of care and was attempting to enact change through this action research project.

Bolton (2010) discusses the need to acknowledge the limits of our knowledge and how our own behaviour plays into organisational practices. Especially in this context, the teacher plays a fundamental role in the structure and organisation of the classroom. Realising the importance of not only reflecting on what has taken place in the classroom, but why it has happened emerged as a key theme. By reflecting and reflexing, I examined more than just the personal experiences of this process. In order to consider my professional practice purposefully, I needed to examine social and political structures in this field. Examining this highlighted for me that I had not been living as close to my values that inspired this project as much as I had thought. At times, I had appeared to be a "living contradiction" (Whitehall, 1989: 41-52), as mentioned in a reflective journal entry above. My actions did not always match my values. This is not an unusual realisation in self-study action research and was an opportunity for me to engage in further reflection on my practice and deeper reflexive action.

Reflection emerged as a key theme and element of this action research project. It enabled me to challenge assumptions I held, ensured I stayed focus on the task at hand and allowed for meaningful reflection on my practice. This approach to research was grounded in my value of care and the ontological values I hold, namely, how I see myself in relation to others. Reflection is the root of self-study, looking at myself and how I can improve my practice.

4.2.2 Theme Two: Relationships

Developing trust and fostering relationships emerged as a key theme of this action research project. I found this to important due to the sensitive nature of Religious Education and the significant role the Catholic Church has had in the history of education in Ireland. I realised quickly that it was crucial to maintain clear lines of communication with parents and guardians. Communication is a crucial element of establishing strong links between home and school communities. Geisler (2020) discusses the emerging data arguing that by involving parents in the child's schooling, there can be a positive effect on their academic performance. During this action research project, I made clear to parents that the different faiths would be respected, and no child would be asked to take part in a lesson that would not be appropriate. The information was shared with parents through the letters which may be seen in Appendix B. At the beginning of this process, a parent of two children in the class wanted to clarify the research with me. This parent was Muslim, and I felt it was important their children took part in this project to be able to achieve the objectives of the research. I had taught one of her children previously and as a result we already had a positive relationship. Once I explained the intention of this project and the educational intervention that would be implemented, she gave her consent for the children to take part and said: "Only because it is you, Miss Kenny." This incident captures the importance of clear communication and building relationships. I began to consider if I would have got this positive response if I didn't already have a relationship with them.

The theme of relationships was also evident in the classroom. The children were respected and cared for throughout the process in my teaching and planning. Maintaining and building relationships with the children was crucial as it enabled the children to feel comfortable in the classroom and share their thoughts and feelings without any inhibitions. My value of care fostered positive relationships in the classroom. This was evident through the

engagement children had with the research. Examples of ensuring this safe learning environment will be discussed later in this chapter.

4.2.3   Theme Three: External Impacts

The impact of external factors affected this action research project in important ways. The disruption to the research cycle caused great frustration to many of those involved. The COVID-19 pandemic emerged as part of this theme during the process. Due to high absence rates amongst children and staff it was difficult to maintain a consistent routine with this research. During the research cycle, I tested positive for COVID-19 which resulted in delays to my educational interventions. When I returned from isolation, a student teacher was placed in my class for three weeks, further delaying my cycle. This student needed to teach for the full day, each day over three weeks. Originally, they were planning on completing this placement in January but due to the spike of the Omicron variant of COVID-19 it was delayed to March. The addition of Ukrainian refugee children to my class, a development which I greatly welcomed, added further delays to the research cycle. Focusing on ensuring a smooth transition for the students was my priority at that time. These external factors were noted with frustration throughout the action research process. While the project still took place, the impact of the wider world must be noted. This factor highlights the importance of context when embarking on a research project such as this one.

4.3   Findings

As outlined in the table above, the findings that emerged from the themes discussed above were:

1.   Integrating SPHE and R.E. can lead to a more inclusive classroom environment.

2.   Integration can cause an increase in workload for the practitioner.

3.   Starting with the child facilitates the creation of a holistic learning environment.

4.3.1 Finding one: Integrating SPHE and R.E. led to a more inclusive classroom environment.

As discussed in the Literature Review, integration can play a crucial role in the creation of a holistic learning environment. Using this tool in a variety of ways enabled learning objectives to be achieved in R.E. and SPHE. I began to realise the change in my planning was leading to a more inclusive environment. I came to this realisation by the frequent consultation with my reflective journal. In my reflections I became increasingly aware of how well and meaningfully I was ensuring that children were being included in R.E. lessons. This inclusive environment was evident through the engagement of children of faiths other than Catholic in the class and the change in my own practice.

Firstly, as mentioned in chapter two, the Education Act (1998) notes that children deserve an education that respects the diversity of Irish society today and a classroom that promotes a sense of community. At the beginning of this research, I noted the following:

> "The class was engaging in talk and discussion about the seasons of the year. This was connected to learning objectives in the *Grow in Love* programme. I retrieved the pupil workbook for the children from a Catholic background to complete the appropriate page of work. A pupil from a Muslim background reacted to the *Grow in Love* pupil textbook saying, "We don't do that!" This was a Religious Education lesson, but it also connected to geography learning objectives. I was pleased to get this reaction since it showed that children do not see the difference between subject areas, this was the connection of geography and *Grow in Love* on paper but not in the minds of the children." (Kenny, "Reflective Journal," October 2021)

This child had a sibling in the class. While there may be many reasons the child felt the need to exclaim this in the classroom about themself and their sibling, I believe that the child did this because she wanted to ensure that there was no confusion around their beliefs and what they can and cannot do in the classroom. It is the responsibility of the teacher to be committed to equality and inclusion in the classroom (Teaching Council, 2016). As this happened in October, I felt that this indicated that I had not made it clear to the children that when we are using *Grow in Love,* every child can still be included and take part in a different way. The

child had an experience in Junior Infants that caused confusion around this workbook. Clarifying that I understood that they did not use the *Grow in Love* workbook was the first step in creating a safe, inclusive environment for these children.

The inclusive environment being created was evident in my reflective journal on more than one occasion once I had begun the intervention.

"When planning the *Grow in Love* lessons I am finding I am thinking about how I can make the lesson as inclusive as possible for the children who do not come from a Catholic background. It is difficult at times when the lesson's focus is on stories about Jesus and stories from the New Testament. I understand that many stories from the Old Testament are of interest to Muslims, due to the overlap of literature there and in the Koran, I am conscious of the trust parents have put in me by giving consent for this action research project to take place. Being able to implement this action research project with children of different faiths in my class is a great privilege and I do not want to cause confusion between children and parents if they think their children are hearing stories that they should not be. However, I feel positive about the fact that my initial thoughts when planning lessons are now "How can I make sure everyone feels included?" This is a change in my practice taking shape. Before this research I think I simply followed the teacher's manual without giving this aspect much thought." (Kenny, "Reflective Journal," April 2022).

"Talking about the parish was interesting because children that are not Catholic could still get involved in the conversation through a sense of community." (Kenny, "Reflective Journal," May 2022).

Children with a background in other faiths had the opportunity to contribute to class discussions that emerged during R.E. lessons based on the *Grow in Love* programme, when suitable. By directly asking the children questions during lessons, I aimed to encourage them to feel involved. Questions are provided in the *Grow in Love* Teacher's Manual for children who are not of the Catholic faith. I supplemented these questions with my own thoughts to ensure the children stayed involved. An example of this is during the conversation of how babies enter the Catholic Church through baptism, I asked the children of other faiths if there were any traditions in their faith tradition when babies are born. The children were included

throughout the lesson, and the Catholic children had the opportunity to gain experience about other faiths. They were living the Catholic value of inclusion throughout the process.

The inclusive classroom was further supported by the use of the SPHE visual stimulus of the *Inside Out* cartoon characters. Using characters to support discussions directly following the reading of stories from the *Grow in Love* programme allowed children to make connections between SPHE learning objectives and *Grow in Love* activities. I found that by using the same resource in the SPHE lesson and *Grow in Love* lesson, children connected learning objectives independently.

At times, it was difficult to ensure an inclusive environment was being created. I reached this conclusion as a result of some of the learning objectives in the *Grow in Love* programme. These objectives that needed to be achieved were for Catholic children to learn prayers or discuss stories from the New Testament. This was evident in my reflective journal within the reflection mentioned above. The use of scripture and mentioning of Jesus created a sense of unease within me. I further noted:

"I am working to be as respectful and considerate as possible. I am very fortunate to have the relationships I do with the parents. While I feel uneasy at times undertaking this research, I feel confident that the parents know I have only good intentions towards their children." (Kenny, "Reflective Journal," April 2022.)

My research was centred around creating an inclusive learning environment, but there are inevitably times where it is not appropriate or respectful to ask children of other faiths to listen to stories from the Bible. Currently, there is no policy or protocol on how to differentiate, in the teaching of R.E., between children of Catholic and other traditions. In this case, I invited the children of other faiths to engage in visual art or literacy activities based on previous discussions while I read the *Grow in Love* story or prayer for the class. However, some children of other traditions choose to listen to the stories instead of engaging in the activity. This was due to the age and distractibility of the children. I felt it was

necessary to allow the children to listen but not directly ask them questions. Brookfield (2017) notes that teachers cannot make all the decisions in the classroom. Being dictated by learning objectives and resources can cause a tension between values and action. This was the case when attempting to include children of traditions other than Catholic in lessons that were heavily influenced by scripture in the *Grow in Love* programme.

Even with this conflict, the creation of a safe, inclusive learning environment was key in this action research project. As my research cycle was coming to an end, I made this note:

> "One child said, 'Allah made everything.' while we were talking about churches and places of worship. It was an opportunity to talk about how we have different beliefs/gods or that we have different names for the same God, but we can be friends in school. This has made me realise that I care about an inclusive classroom more than anything else." (Kenny, "Reflective Journal," May 2022.)

A child feeling safe and respected enough to share their thoughts and feelings on the world like this was a moment of true inclusivity in the classroom. It can be difficult to ensure no one feels disrespected, but through conscious effort to make everyone feel heard and valued it is possible.

4.3.2   Finding two: Integration can cause an increase in workload for the practitioner.

As discussed above, the integration of R.E., using the *Grow in Love* programme, and SPHE can create a more inclusive classroom environment. I reflected on my practice before implementing my educational intervention and noted the following in my reflective journal:

> "I understand that my goal for this research is to create meaningful integration between RE and SPHE. But I find it so convenient for the teacher to use the *Grow in Love* pupil workbook and complete the appropriate task for the learning objectives being achieved. It is great when it connects to learning in other subject areas, and then it is more meaningful for the child. But on a day like today when there is so much happening in the classroom, it cannot be denied that the ease of picking up the book and completing the premade activity for the relevant learning objectives can be very convenient for the teacher. At times like this

I feel as if I am forgetting my Froebelian values. Especially the reluctance to rely on textbooks." (Kenny, 'Reflective Journal': October 2021).

There is merit in the convenience of the *Grow in Love* pupil workbook and teacher manual. However, in order to live truly by my values, I could not allow myself to be totally comfortable in using programmes for convenience and providing little depth in learning taking place. As discussed in chapter two, integration as operation means the teacher acts as facilitator and enables scaffolding to take place. During this research cycle I noticed that the integration of curriculum areas results in a greater workload for teachers as a consequence of not being satisfied with the convenience of simply opening the pupil's workbook.

Penrice (2011) describes this increase in workload as an intensification of teachers' work in three areas: 1) increase in the number of tasks a teacher must perform; 2) an increase in accountability and demands within the classroom and 3) increase in demands on teachers' responsibilities outside of the classroom. Pacaol (2021) considers that teachers themselves can be the cause of intensification of their own workload by imposing high pedagogical and personal standards on themselves and striving for perfection in their teaching. This thought process of striving for perfection or improvement can be connected to the nature of this self-study action research project. Throughout this process I have been working with the presumption that there is always something in my practice that I can change or improve on. Holding this presumption resulted in the intensification of my own workload. Teachers' workload intensification in the classroom is not the same everywhere (Pacaol, 2021) and in this setting it is directly related to my planning.

Effective teaching is unquestionably necessary and vital to ensure pupils' achievement and learning. The teacher is to act as facilitator of learning and foster the uniqueness of each child (Government of Ireland, 1999a). The change in my planning was a result of recognising the opportunity that integration provides for the inclusion and creation of a holistic learning environment. During the implementation of my educational intervention, I noted in my reflective journal the following:

"There are times when I find it taxing to create integrated lessons. I feel guilty because I know the value of integrated learning for the children, and I believe it is worthwhile. However, when I know that the pupil workbook is there to be used, it is difficult to stay motivated. Especially when the school day is so busy. I've noticed this is my practice before. I need to consider the *Grow in Love* objectives and lessons, along with the SPHE learning objectives and methodologies." (Kenny 'Reflective Journal': April 2022).

This approach to my planning is entirely necessary for the action research project. However, throughout the process I noted frustration at the amount of time consumed by attempting to organise activities to promote effective integration. While I recognise that planning integration is part of preparation, I found it difficult to integrate *Grow in Love* at times. This frustration stemmed from the habitual use of the *Grow in Love* teachers' manual and pupils' workbook without much time on planning being necessary. As this was a controlled environment, the negative results of intensification of workload did not initially appear to me. However, it is important to consider the impact an increase in workload can have on teachers. Karanfil and Khatami (2021) discuss teacher burnout and the environmental variables and occupational resources that can lead to it. While burnout was not exactly the case in this context, frustration and intensification of work were evident. The two key factors discussed by Karanfil and Khatami (2021) that can be related to this action research project are: 1) Time pressures and workloads and 2) Administration and management. If teacher burnout is not treated it can result in poor productivity, low morale, and physiological and psychological health problems (Pienaar and Willemse, 2008). As mentioned previously, R.E. can be a sensitive topic for some teachers and parents. As a result, it needs to be treated with respect and to involve clear communication. Other subject areas such as Literacy and Numeracy do not necessarily need the same type of communication as in most cases, they are not sensitive topics. R.E. requires communication that displays an awareness of the sensitivity of the topic. This increased awareness and potential worry can result in an increased workload for the teacher which can impede the potential good work that was aimed to be achieved.

4.3.3 Finding three: Starting with the child facilitates the creation of a holistic learning environment.

This research has reinforced for me the foundational Froebelian principle that starting with the child is the way forward. As mentioned in chapter two, one of Froebel's key principles of education is to enable freedom with guidance in the classroom. This pedagogy can enable the child to direct their own learning. Enabling children to guide the learning in the classroom was evident during the action research process as I found I was taking cues from the children on what was engaging them best. I noticed particularly that the children were more interested in discussing their own ideas and opinions than spending time discussing the idea of gratitude. I noted the following in my reflective journal:

> "The class did not engage well with the discussions around gratitude. I think it was too abstract a concept for this group. They took more enjoyment from the discussions around feelings and stories in the previous lessons. Perhaps I could work further on this concept, but I think there are good discussions yet to be had with this group using *Grow in Love* as the resource. Considering the limited time frame available for this action research project, I will respond to the children's cues and focus on topics that create rich learning opportunities. Perhaps substituting the word 'thanks' for gratitude would make the concept more accessible and attractive to the children." (Kenny, 'Reflective Journal': April 2022).

This outcome was disappointing as I had begun this action research project with the intention of developing a sense of gratitude in the children for their well-being. However, the project took a different direction as a result of their response. This realisation was a key learning moment during my self-study action research project. The learning around feelings and emotional literacy continued but also became less of a focus during the research. The visual cue in the classroom supported the learning but I noticed that children were more interested in discussing the different elements of *Grow in Love* stories and topics.

Starting with the child was not a new consideration for me. As I have noted, it has been a guiding Froebelian philosophy throughout my practice and it was one of the reasons I choose to undertake this project. Froebel's ideology to educate children to be free, to think and to take action for themselves (Lilley, 1967) came to the forefront during this process. I began

this project with planned objectives for the class. The questionnaire seen in Appendix H was circulated as baseline and end-line indicators of the changes in levels of gratitude and confidence in the children. The objectives were not achieved as a result of following the cues from the children in the class. Due to the time limitations of this action research project, acknowledging the cues from the children was crucial and a professional decision was made to halt this element of the project. As the objectives of this intervention were not achieved due to the change in direction of the project it is unfortunate that these surveys are now deemed void. This is because any changes noted in the responses from the children cannot be directly attributed solely to this action research project. There are many factors that may have caused changes in the responses, such as: children's moods, factors outside of school, relationships with adults, or events that occurred that day. While it is unclear which of these factors may have caused changes, it is clear that I did not continue with my original plan of developing a sense of gratitude in the class. This value was not developed due to the cues being taken from the children. This change in planning may be linked to the external factors discussed above which affected this research. The shift in my approach to this research was noted in the following journal entry:

"I need to move ahead with a theme in the *Grow in Love* programme to ensure the smooth running of this project. The children are not engaging as well as they can. However, in an academic year the teacher cannot just skip themes. I am using my professional judgement and cues from the children while I make this decision. I am disappointed that my goal to develop gratitude with the class has not come to fruition, but I do not want to waste the limited time I have as a result of COVID-19 and other interruptions to the year." (Kenny, 'Reflective Journal': April 2022).

My focus on starting with the child is clear as I discuss the cues being presented to me. While I could have potentially retried this learning goal in a new way, I was conscious of losing time for more learning opportunities. By focusing on the children in my care, I was able to change the direction of this project and still develop interesting discussions that have been examined in this thesis.

4.4   Conclusion

These findings have led to the hypothesis that the integration of *Grow in Love*, and potentially other R.E. programmes, and the current SPHE curriculum is a plausible option available for all educators. The integrity of R.E. learning objectives was respected throughout the action research process. It was evident in the findings discussed above, that children engage positively in *Grow in Love* lessons through the organisation and planning of integrated lessons and learning objectives. Children who were not following the programme, were given the opportunity to contribute and engage with lessons they typically did not engage in. One aspect of the role of the educator is to enable children to become active citizens. Nurturing the child in all aspects of their life, including spiritually, morally, and emotionally, is the goal of the curriculum (Government of Ireland, 1999a). The integration of R.E., through the *Grow in Love* programme, and the SPHE curriculum enabled the creation of a holistic learning environment. Children became active agents in their learning as they guided the direction of our lessons and discussions, thus playing a role in making *Grow in Love* lessons accessible to all pupils in the class. In contrast to the previous rigidity of children who did not follow the programme engaging in other activities for thirty minutes a day. Lastly, the teaching of *Grow in Love* and SPHE using integrated lessons, while increasing the workload, created more positive experiences than negative, as a method of teaching and planning in this instance.

5 Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this final chapter is to summarise and discuss the learning that has taken place, and which has been analysed in previous chapters. The significance and potential of this will be discussed, along with the limitations that presented themselves during this process. Recommendations for any potential further research will be discussed and I will reflect on the impact this self-study action research has made on my emerging identity as a teacher, certainly as a teacher who has studied with the Froebel philosophy of education in mind throughout this process.

5.2 Significance of the Research

As mentioned in chapter one, undertaking an action research project can have many significant outcomes. There was potential for there to be implications for me and my practice by undertaking this research, and consequences for the wider educational community.

Considering the importance of this research for me, I have had to think about what gives meaning to my life, as a teacher, and to learn that values are not defined by words. My value of care came alive through how I lived and enacted change in my classroom. As discussed by McNiff (2017), values emerge when you give time and energy to helping others or when you are engaged in doing the study. In this case, my value of care emerged as children who belong to other religious traditions than the mainstream school tradition, were enabled to become more included in classroom discussions and activities during *Grow in Love* lessons, which they previously would not have been included in. I had the opportunity to challenge my own assumptions and take action to contribute to the body of knowledge already existing around the topics of integration, holistic education, and R.E. in Irish primary schools with a Catholic patronage. In addition to this, as the methodology behind *Grow in Love* involves an initial reflection on the part of the children, on their life experiences, there is a built-in

facility for this programme to be inclusive of all. All children will have some experiences which are relevant to the subject being considered.

Considering the significance of this research on the wider educational community, this work can influence thinking and actions. Through reflections and discussions with colleagues, there is potential for the research to have influenced people's thinking and practices. This research has enabled others to see what can be done or implement similar educational interventions. Children of various faiths other than the Catholic tradition in primary schools with a Catholic patronage across the country can potentially have the chance to be included in *Grow in Love* lessons and discussions where appropriate. This research is significant as I have set an achievable precedent which could encourage others to attempt the same interventions or methodologies. Employing a reflective journal as a methodology encouraged me to examine my own practice. This element can also cause significant change in one's teaching and planning. Considering epistemology, discussed in chapter two, this research has, in theory, introduced a new practice-based way of thinking towards integration and R.E., or other curriculum areas, for others. It will be important that I continue to promote integrating R.E., through the *Grow in Love* programme, and SPHE for that to be possible.

5.3   *Limitations*

The limitations of the study must be discussed to ensure credibility and validity. This study was a small-scale action research project and therefore had limitations that will be discussed below. The findings analysed and discussed in chapter four need to be interpreted in this light, with limitations in mind. This research took place in an urban area, children in a rural area may respond differently. Therefore, is not possible to generalise from this study, but to use it to inform future research in this area. As mentioned above, external factors impacted this self-study action research project. These factors shaped what was possible in the time frame available. The sample size of this study is not deemed to be a limitation due to the nature of qualitative research. A qualitative research approach is not concerned with statistic-

based rules for sample sizes, as is the case in quantitative research. The sample size of this research project is therefore not a limitation as it was a classroom-based action research project. The design of the educational intervention, the sustainability of the intervention and personal narratives of the research were the three main limitations of this action research project that will be discussed.

5.3.1 Design

This self-study action research project took place in a Senior Infant classroom. The *Grow in Love* programme in Senior Infants is different from the programme in Sixth Class. I do not have experience with the programme in Sixth Class and I would be interested to see how this educational intervention would be implemented in Sixth Class, or any senior class in a primary school with Catholic patronage. At times, it felt that this project was more possible to implement in a junior class due to the reliance on stories and age-appropriate discussion. The accessibility of the Senior Infant programme for integration may have been more possible than a senior programme. Due to my lack of experience with a senior *Grow in Love* programme on a project like this, it is difficult to know if the intervention would be as effective in a senior class. The age group of the children, their socio-economic background, their cognitive development, the ratio of different religious traditions involved all contributed to limit this research project. These limitations were obvious even before the study began.

Along with the age group this project was designed for, the short time period within which this project was designed created further limitations. This educational intervention was implemented over fifteen lessons. A greater appreciation of the effectiveness of this educational intervention could have been achieved in a larger timeframe. As discussed above, the timeframe of this project affected the direction of the intervention in the classroom. As a result of factors already outlined, the aim of creating an atmosphere of gratitude in the classroom was not realised.

5.3.2 Personal Narratives

As this was a self-study action research project, my own values and opinions shaped the approach taken and reflections made. And this is as it should be. Qualitative research is heavily reliant on the individual skills of the practitioner and can be more easily influenced by the researcher's personal bias and idiosyncrasies than quantitative research. It is difficult to quantify responses towards the educational intervention that took place in a context which prioritised qualitative research. Relying solely on reflective journal entries and observation logs is the nature of qualitative research. However, one of the disadvantages of this approach is that it may lead to unconscious bias taking shape through the research and discussion.

5.4 Further Research and Recommendations

As this research focused on the integration of R.E., through the *Grow in Love* programme, and SPHE for the holistic development of the child, it is possible for the findings to influence future teaching and planning of *Grow in Love* lessons in primary schools with a Catholic ethos. The integration appeared successful from this practitioner's perspective. The children engaged positively in the integration of these two subject areas throughout the research process. It would be interesting to see this research take place in a school setting under a different patronage, such as the *Follow Me* programme used by schools in the Reformed/Protestant tradition.

In the wider educational community, this research implies further investigation in the region of integration and R.E. Two questions emerged as a result of the findings. First, there is the issue of the time difference allotted to each subject. Secondly, the currently strict framework of time allocation in the curriculum (Government of Ireland, 1999a) is being reviewed in the context of greater flexibility. This is being considered in the draft curriculum framework (NCCA, 2020). As stated in my rationale for undertaking this research, the two subjects of R.E. and SPHE should be respected equally. I believe that each should be allotted the same

time weighting as both strive for the intrapersonal and interpersonal development of the child.

In addition to the points raised above, the effectiveness of workbooks was under consideration at points during this project. In the wider educational community, future research on the impact of workbooks on teaching and learning would be interesting to examine.

5.5   *Personal Reflection*

When I began this action research project, I noted that the creation of a holistic learning environment is very important to me. I became aware that I had not been optimising the opportunities for integration in the classroom and undertook this project to change my practice. I noted a tension between my value of care and the reality of the teaching and planning taking place in the classroom. Action research is an ambitious pursuit as it forces the researcher to acknowledge these tensions. As already mentioned, at the beginning of the project I noticed that while using the *Grow in Love* programme, I was guilty of opening the children's workbook and continuing to the next page that was appropriate to the learning objectives. Speaking with my colleagues, it is clear that this is a common issue. However, this feeling of guilt for using workbooks in the classroom seems to dissipate as teachers progress in their career. A broader issue is whether the *Grow in Love* programme would be improved if the workbook were discontinued. I think that confidence in one's own ability is a contributing factor to shaking that feeling of guilt. As I undertook this action research project and used the pupil workbook more effectively, I noticed that I enjoyed the teaching of *Grow in Love* lessons more. Being able to include every child in the classroom in discussions and stories led me to feel more confident in my abilities and pleased to see that I was living closer to my value of care. While the planning that was necessary for meaningful integration may have been more time consuming, the ability to include all children in lessons was worthwhile. A final consideration might be, whether if I repeated this project in ten

years' time, I could anticipate different results. In other words, the relative inexperience of a teacher who is in the very early years of her teaching career may affect the outcomes which emerged. Where a teacher is on the initiation to retirement spectrum is likely to create its own significance for action-based research.

As a I reach the end of this self-study action research project, I reflect on the Froebelian pedagogies and principles which formed a critical part of my pre-service education. This educational intervention was focused on the creation of a holistic environment for the child, a core element of Froebelian principles. This project supports Froebel's pedagogical beliefs in recognising the uniqueness of the child, the importance of starting with the child in planning, and holding a holistic view of the child's development. I plan to continue to maintain Froebel's ideas in my future teaching and planning. Ireland is becoming an increasingly diverse society. This diversity is being reflected in our classrooms and I plan to continue implementing this educational intervention in R.E. and SPHE lessons to ensure that every child in my care feels safe, included, and respected.

5.6 Conclusion

This self-study action research project began with the rationale that R.E. and SPHE should be respected equally in teaching and planning as they both support the social and emotional development of the child and can be used to support each other. This in turn can create a holistic learning environment in which children can transfer learning to other areas of life. It is the responsibility of the teacher to ensure that the uniqueness of the child is recognised and nurtured in a holistic learning environment. Integration is crucial in this process as the real world is not divided into subject areas. While there was an indication of an increase in workload for the teacher, the positive outcomes of integrating subject areas outweigh the negative. The 2020 Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA) has begun the discussion on reworking the structure of the curriculum. Therefore, I hope this action research project supports future enquiry in the area of integration of R.E. and SPHE, giving SPHE the respect

it deserves as a crucial element in a child's development, beginning with a restructuring of time allocations and an increased emphasis on the importance of integration in the curriculum.

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Appendices

APPENDIX A: Self-Esteem Questionnaire

Initials: _____

LAWSEQ PRIMARY SCHOOL VERSION

	Yes	No	Don't Know
1. Do you think that adults usually like to hear about your ideas?			
2. Do you ever feel sad at school?			
3. Do you like team games?			
4. When you have to say things in front of teachers, do you ever feel shy?			
5. Do you ever feel sad because you have nobody to play with at school?			
6. When you have to say things in front of other children, do you ever feel silly?			
7. When you want to tell a teacher something do you ever feel silly?			
8. Do you ever have to find new friends because your old friends are playing with somebody else?			
9. Do other people think that you tell lies?			
10. Are you good at work in school?			

APPENDIX B: Consent Letter to Children

Hi _____

I am trying to find out if I can teach in a new way. I will be doing this through Religion and SPHE. My plan is to teach Religion in a slightly different way than you might be used to.

We will be working together in this. I will be respectful of you, and you won't have to do anything you do not want to.

You will have a chance to write or draw what you learned during lessons. During this, I would like to watch and listen to you when you are in school. I want to write down some notes about you and get you to answer some questions for me.

Would you be ok with that?

I have asked your [Mam/Dad/Guardian] to talk to you about this.

If you have any questions, I would be happy to answer them. If you are happy with that could you sign the form, I have sent home.

If you change your mind after we start, that's ok too.

APPENDIX C: Information Letter to Parents/Guardians

Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas, Ollscoil Mhá Nuad

Dear Parent(s)/Guardian(s),

I am a student on the Master of Education in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education. As part of my course, I am doing a research project. The focus of my research is on the integration of SPHE teaching methodologies into Religious Education.

In order to do this, I plan to teach Religious Education in an inclusive way that is similar to how SPHE is taught in the classroom. No child will be required to use the Religion programme if it is not of their belief.

I intend to observe children and take notes on how they respond to this change in the way Religious Education takes place, ask children to reflect on learning and record their reflections, which I will collect.

All information will be anonymous and strict confidentiality will be observed throughout this project. Children's names and the name of the school will not be included in the thesis that I write based on this project. Your child will be informed of their right to withdraw from the research process at any stage.

I would like to invite you and your child to give permission for him/her to take part in this project.

If you have any queries concerning any aspect of the research, please do not hesitate to contact me by phone on (01) 677 9856 or by email at: grace.kenny@froebelstudent.ie.

Yours faithfully,

Grace Kenny

APPENDIX D: Parental Consent Form

Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas, Ollscoil Mhá Nuad

PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

I have read the information provided in the attached letter and all my questions have been answered. I voluntarily agree to the participation of my child in this study. I am aware that I will receive a copy of this consent form for my information.

_____   _____

Parent / Guardian Signature   Parent / Guardian Signature

Date: _____

Name of Child _____

Child's signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX E: Child Assent Form

Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas, Ollscoil Mhá Nuad

Child's assent to participate

My parent/guardian has read the information sheet with me, and I agree to take part in this research.

Name of child (in block capitals):

_____

APPENDIX F: Information Sheet for Principals and Teachers

Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas, Ollscoil Mhá Nuad

**Information Sheet
Principals and Teachers**

Who is this information sheet for?
This information sheet is for principals and teachers.

What is this Action Research Project about?
Teachers on the Master of Education in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood, Maynooth University are required to conduct an action research project, examining an area of their own practice as a teacher. This project will involve integrating SPHE teaching methodologies into Religious Education lessons. Data will be generated using observation, reflective journals, talk and discussion and surveys. Students are then required to write documenting this action research project.

What are the research questions?
How can the integration of SPHE methodologies into Religious Education promote the holistic development of the child?

What sorts of methods will be used?
• Teacher reflective journal
• Observation
• Surveys

Who else will be involved?
The study will be carried out by Grace Kenny, a student on the Master of Education in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education. The thesis will be submitted for assessment to the module leader and will be examined by lecturers within the Department. The external examiners will also access the final thesis.

What are you being asked to do?
You are being asked for your consent to permit the teacher to undertake this study with their class in school. In all cases the data that is collected will be treated with the utmost confidentiality and the analysis will be reported anonymously. The data captured will only be used for the purpose of the thesis as part of the Master of Education in the Froebel Department, Maynooth University.

Contact details:
Researcher: Grace Kenny   **E:** grace.kenny@froebelstudent.ie

APPENDIX G: Principal Consent Form

Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas, Ollscoil Mhá Nuad

PRINCIPAL CONSENT FORM

_____, a student on the Master of Education course at Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary & Early Childhood Education has permission to conduct a small-scale action research project with the children in his/her class during the academic year of 2021/2022. I also give permission for them to seek consent from the children in the class and their parents/guardians. I understand that the school's or child's name or any identifying information will not be used in any aspect of the study.

Signed: _____   School's Name: _____

Principal

Date: _____

APPENDIX H: Letter to Principal and Board of Management

Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas, Ollscoil Mhá Nuad

Dear Principal and Board of Management,

I am a student on the Master of Education in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education. The focus of my course is to conduct a research project. The focus of my research is on the integration of SPHE teaching methodologies in Religious Education to aid the holistic development of the child.

In order to do this, I intend to implement teaching methodologies that typically take place during SPHE. I intend to observe pupil's behaviour in the classroom and record what is noticed and implement reflection journals for the pupils to record which I will collect data from.

All information will be anonymous and strict confidentiality will be observed throughout this project. Children's names and the name of the school will not be included in the essay that I write based on this project. Pupils in the school will be informed of their right to withdraw from the research process at any stage.

I would like to invite you and the pupils in your school to take part in this project.

If you have any queries concerning any aspect of the research, please do not hesitate to contact me by phone on 0872668383 or by email at grace.kenny@froebelstudent.ie.

Yours faithfully,

_____

Grace Kenny

APPENDIX I: Reflective Journal Entries

"I understand that my goal for this research is to create meaningful integration between RE and SPHE. But I find it so convenient for the teacher to use the *Grow in Love* pupil workbook and complete the appropriate task for the learning objectives being achieved. It is great when it connects to learning in other subject areas, and then it is more meaningful for the child. But on a day like today when there is so much happening in the classroom, it cannot be denied that the ease of picking up the book and completing the premade activity for the relevant learning objectives can be very convenient for the teacher. At times like this I feel as if I am forgetting my Froebelian values. Especially the reluctance to rely on textbooks." (Kenny, 'Reflective Journal': October 2021).

"The class was engaging in talk and discussion about the seasons of the year. This was connected to learning objectives in the *Grow in Love* programme. I retrieved the pupil workbook for the children from a Catholic background to complete the appropriate page of work. A pupil from a Muslim background reacted to the *Grow in Love* pupil textbook saying, "We don't do that!" This was a Religious Education lesson, but it also connected to geography learning objectives. I was pleased to get this reaction since it showed that children do not see the difference between subject areas, this was the connection of geography and *Grow in Love* on paper but not in the minds of the children." (Kenny, "Reflective Journal," October 2021).

"I feel I am a walking contradiction when I distribute the R.E. pupil workbook *Grow in Love* and a number of children from other faith backgrounds in the class are not taking part. I understand the importance of respecting beliefs. However, in my experience, the *Grow in Love* programme is designed in a way that children of all faiths can take part in discussions and activities." (Kenny, "Reflective Journal" November 2021).

"When planning the *Grow in Love* lessons I am finding I am thinking about how I can make the lesson as inclusive as possible for the children who do not come from a Catholic background. It is difficult at times when the lesson's focus is on stories about Jesus and stories from the New Testament. I understand that many stories from the Old Testament are of interest to Muslims, due to the overlap of literature there and in the Koran, I am conscious of the trust parents have put in me by giving consent for this action research project to take place. Being able to implement this action research project with children of different faiths in my class is a great privilege and I do not want to cause confusion between children and parents if they think their children are hearing stories that they should not be. However, I feel positive about the fact that my initial thoughts when planning lessons are now "How can I make sure everyone feels included?" This is a change in my practice taking shape. Before this research I think I simply followed the teacher's manual without giving this aspect much thought." (Kenny, "Reflective Journal," April 2022).

"I am working to be as respectful and considerate as possible. I am very fortunate to have the relationships I do with the parents. While I feel uneasy at times undertaking this research, I feel confident that the parents know I have only good intentions towards their children." (Kenny, "Reflective Journal," April 2022.)

"There are times when I find it taxing to create integrated lessons. I feel guilty because I know the value of integrated learning for the children, and I believe it is worthwhile. However, when I know that the pupil workbook is there to be used, it is difficult to stay motivated. Especially when the school day is so busy. I've noticed this is my practice before. I need to consider the *Grow in Love* objectives and lessons, along with the SPHE learning objectives and methodologies." (Kenny 'Reflective Journal': April 2022).

"The class did not engage well with the discussions around gratitude. I think it was too abstract a concept for this group. They took more enjoyment from the discussions around feelings and stories in the previous lessons. Perhaps I could work further on this concept, but I think there are good discussions yet to be had with this group using *Grow in Love* as the resource. Considering the limited time frame available for this action research project, I will respond to the children's cues and focus on topics that create rich learning opportunities. Perhaps substituting the word 'thanks' for gratitude would make the concept more accessible and attractive to the children." (Kenny, 'Reflective Journal': April 2022).

"I need to move ahead with a theme in the *Grow in Love* programme to ensure the smooth running of this project. The children are not engaging as well as they can. However, in an academic year the teacher cannot just skip themes. I am using my professional judgement and cues from the children while I make this decision. I am disappointed that my goal to develop gratitude with the class has not come to fruition, but I do not want to waste the limited time I have as a result of COVID-19 and other interruptions to the year." (Kenny, 'Reflective Journal': April 2022).

"Talking about the parish was interesting because children that are not Catholic could still get involved in the conversation through a sense of community." (Kenny, "Reflective Journal," May 2022).

"One child said, 'Allah made everything.' while we were talking about churches and places of worship. It was an opportunity to talk about how we have different beliefs/gods or that we have different names for the same God, but we can be friends in school. This has made me realise that I care about an inclusive classroom more than anything else." (Kenny, "Reflective Journal," May 2022).