

**Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology**

**Paper Three**

**Research Proposal**

**June 2011**

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**From unearthing values to building educational foundations: how can developing  
my work as a freelance educator help create a Religious Education (RE)  
curriculum in a free school without a religious character?**

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Helen O'Connor**

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**From unearthing values to building educational foundations: how can developing my work as a freelance educator help create a Religious Education (RE) curriculum in a free school without a religious character?**

The context of this paper is my practice as a freelance educator. I am also a director of a company proposing to establish a free school in 2013. The aim of the paper is to propose research that leads to unearthing professional values. The specific aim is to develop theory based on practice, which in turn improves practice. The key objective is to enable educational practitioners to live in accordance with, rather than contradiction of, their values. The paper sets the proposed research in context, identifies key questions, develops methodology in terms of a conceptual framework and provides a structured approach to methods and data collection.

This research proposal is based on Living Theory as a form of Action Research. More specifically the methodology has been based on the work of Jack Whitehead and Jean McNiff. The focus of the research is my practice, the practice of colleagues and the formation of the RE curriculum at the proposed free school. The methodology is linked to theological reflection. The reason for this link is explained in the context of the work i.e. Religious Education and spiritual development in schools. In this framework, theology becomes an invaluable critical thinking and reflective tool for the researcher and practitioner. Stage 1 papers have already investigated the partnership between cognitive and experiential approaches to RE and spiritual development and this could thus hold the key to the outcomes of this research.

Therefore this paper proposes to reflect on practice in order to improve what I do, explore ways to inspire others to improve what they do by living according to their own educational values and develop theory within the social formation of a proposed school RE curriculum that can be validated against rigorous standards of judgment.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

As an 'educational activist' (Sachs 2002 cited in Whitehead and McNiff, 2006, p.158) my aim is to explore how I can stop living in contradiction to my values (Whitehead, 1989). Experience as a secondary school RE teacher led to disillusionment in which educational values; the primacy of relationships, the importance of conversation, the integrity of inclusion and the role of freedom, were denied, even buried. Professionally I lived in contradiction to these values. However, I cannot be the educator I want to be whilst living in this contradiction (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006, p.25). Therefore, the purpose of my research is to unearth and explore values as a driving force to improve my own practice, the practice of others and to activate social transformation in the foundation of a free school, with a particular focus on the RE curriculum. The values of the new school will act as standards of judgment for the teachers, governors and learners in order to live in accordance with the principles that embody the whole learning community.

My professional work takes me out of the conventional classroom, searching for ways to live according to my values. In coordinating an RE project, Peacethread (Peacethread, 2011, web source), I aim to research ways in which I can improve my practice to break free of contradiction. Rather than being buried, values such as relationship, conversation, inclusion and freedom are placed at the heart of this project. Furthermore, I will explore with colleagues how our work can in turn influence their desire to be free of similar contradictions.

My involvement in a grassroots community movement, Education Swanage (ES) (Education Swanage, 2011, web source), has arisen because of the denial by the Local Authority (LA) (Dorset for You, 2011, web source) to consider placing relationships at the heart of learning and young people at the centre of the community in Swanage, Dorset, the town where I live. The purpose of this Action Research is to support the creation of a new secondary school in the town despite opposition from the LA. My role in this community group, and as a director of Education Swanage, is to focus on the development of the new school's RE curriculum. It is my intention to explore how unearthing values can form the foundations of a new approach to RE in a school without religious character. These latent values are being revealed rather than being discovered anew. The research proposal is based on the assumption that I, and the other

participants, have values that need unearthing in order to live in accordance with them rather than in contradiction.

This proposal, based on Living Theory as a form of Action Research, has a threefold purpose to:

- Reflect on my practice and values in order to improve what I do
- Inspire others to reflect on practice and values in order to improve what they do
- Develop theory in the social formation of a new school RE curriculum, validated against rigorous standards of judgment (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006, p.106)

## **2. BACKGROUND TO RESEARCH PAPERS (STAGE 1)**

The background to this proposal is based on two areas of interest investigated in my research papers; firstly, the relationship between practical theology and education and secondly the role of spiritual development within UK secondary schools. The key objective has been to investigate whether there are principles from practical theology that can enhance the provision of spiritual development in education. Paper 1 explored key voices from practical theology and examined how their perspectives ‘spoke’ to me as a teacher. My aim was to establish whether or not theology had any relevance in the development of religious literacy and spiritual development of young people.

The voices explored were Terry Veling, Head of Theology at the Australian Catholic University in Brisbane and Thomas Groome, Professor of Theology at Boston College, Mass. Veling’s statement that ‘To venture a theological life is to live theologically’ (2005, p.141) became a motto as I searched for ways to put this assertion into practice professionally. Similarly, Groome’s work enabled me to consider the process of reflection; how could my professional practice be ‘purposeful human activity that holds in dialectical unity theory and practice, critical reflection and historical engagement’ (1991, p.136)?

Analysis of these theologians’ perspectives enabled me to identify common values relevant to my professional work as a teacher. For example, Veling and Groome value the importance of inclusion, conversation and relationship; similarly these are relevant measures of judgment in regard to enhancing educational practice. My research helped me to understand that these theological perspectives are relevant conversation partners,

helping to address how education can move from being a provider of information to being a process of learning, a springboard for transformation and personal development.

Theology throws an interesting light on my educational practice. However, throughout my research I have been aware of an assumption I am uncomfortable with i.e. those dealing with practical theology as a tool for reflection have a faith perspective, usually of a Christian nature (Mowat & Swinton, 2006, Cameron et. al., 2010). To make an assumption of faith silences the voice of practical theology to me as an educator. It only 'speaks' if the model of reflection is not restricted to absolute, rigid and purely 'Christian' values. Therefore my research papers have led me to develop a model of reflection that is derived from theology in terms of method but not content. The research will focus on my practice, the practice of others and the social formation of the new school, based on a cycle of reflection within a 'Living Theory' methodology. The link to theological reflection in the structure of the method is important as the focus of the research is embedded in Religious Education and spiritual development, however, it does not prescribe the content of the analysis.

### **3. CONTEXT**

#### **3.1 Professional**

The professional context of my work is set within secondary education. I am a freelance teacher delivering educational projects and training that have an RE focus. I am the coordinator of Peacethread, an educational project that creates opportunities for young people to discuss faith and spirituality in the light of contemporary issues.

This work is in its second year and was established as a citizenship development project in 2009, part of a national initiative funded by the Learning and Skills Network (LSN, 2011, web source). The project has also been funded by the Community Development Fund's Faith in Action programme (CDF, 2011, web source). The aim is to develop Peacethread further, in order to work with teachers to enhance spiritual development and RE provision.

In June 2011 I am presenting at the Dorset RE teachers conference. The aim is to inform teachers about the work of Peacethread and encourage them to see ways in which this approach may enhance their own practice. The ambition is for teachers to work with me, using Peacethread resources to deliver their own conferences and seminars.

Peacethread has an established link with a Dorset secondary school. I am working with the school towards discovering ways in which post 16 students can access RE. At the time of writing RE is a statutory subject, albeit outside the National Curriculum, for all secondary students up to 18 years. The school finds it challenging to address the statutory requirement. The aim is to give theoretical insights and practical examples of how provision can be addressed. Part of this work will be based on using reflection to unearth the values (standards of judgment) which the teachers are comfortable with.

### **3.2 Education Swanage**

ES was established in 2009 in response to the Purbeck Review of Schools (Dorset for You, 2011, web source). The system of schooling in Purbeck will be reorganised to change from three to two tiers in 2013. This will result in the closure of four middle schools and Swanage becoming the largest town in the UK without a secondary school. All of the local secondary school children will have to travel at least 10 miles to be educated elsewhere.

ES believe there are significant educational, social, economic and environmental reasons why the Purbeck Review should have considered maintaining secondary education in the town, which has a population of over 10,000. Despite a significant campaign to save the local middle school Dorset County Council decided to close this final secondary provision from 2013.

However, concurrently the coalition government have introduced the new free school policy (Department for Education, 2011, web source). This allows parent promoter groups to propose government funded schools in areas where demand can be proven. ES believes it has a good case to propose such a school. In fact, the school's adjudicator stated in his final summing up, 'I therefore believe the LA is correct to proceed with its own plans without seeking to forestall or inhibit the development of the proposed free school' (Schools Adjudicator, 2010, web source).

Following the adjudicator's decision to approve the reorganisation in November 2010 ES have been planning a free school proposal to submit to the Department for Education (DfE) in June 2011. However, critics claim that the free school policy undermines the intrinsic right for all young people to have equal access to the provision of quality of education in this country (Local Schools Network, 2011, web source). Despite such arguments ES has maintained an apolitical stance and operates as a non

hierarchical community led action group that originated from the Transition Towns Movement (Hopkins, 2008). In accordance with government guidelines we have recently set up a company, Education Swanage, of which I am a director.

Ironically, I find myself in a conundrum. In the widest context of national politics, where educational policy is dictated from central government (DfE, The Importance of Teaching, 2011, web source) I find myself immersed in a situation where values exist that are the opposite to those I am interested in living out. Yet, it is this context that enables me to live out my values by providing the opportunity to establish a new school for Swanage. Hence, ES aims to open a comprehensive school based on Human Scale and Cooperative College values (HSE, 2011; Co-Op, 2011, web sources). James Wetz, director of Human Scale Education believes that relationships are the spring board for learning (2009). This premise acts as a core value and the foundation of our criteria of judgment in validating the existence of the school we create, pending approval of our application by the DfE.

### **3.3 Theological**

My theological context is derived from a non conformist upbringing. Currently, like many from similar backgrounds, I am not a practising church-goer. I gradually became disillusioned with mainstream church as a theology undergraduate at Manchester University in the late 1980s. This shift away from religious belief was a common trait amongst my peers and is reflected in the work of philosophers such as Peter Rollins who describes himself as A/theist (Rollins, 2011; web source). However, I feel compelled towards theology as a critical thinking tool and a way to explore my innate sense of spirituality. Rather like Caputo, who confesses to ‘having a weakness for theology’ (2006, p.1), I find it provides a space for me to think and reflect. Exploration of how I can improve my practice is enhanced by theological reflection; in other words it enables me to ask questions of myself and to reflect on my response. As Caputo states, ‘I would say that on my best days I am working at becoming theological’ (p.1).

My approach to practical theology is reflected in the view of Swinton and Mowat:

‘The practical theologian has a necessary prophetic freedom to challenge established interpretations of scripture and experience of church, and to challenge specific forms of practice in the light of scripture and tradition. In this way it can be seen that theory and practice are held together in critical tension with each other feeding



into and off the other, each constantly challenging, enhancing and clarifying the other' (2006, p.82).

Therefore my role as a practical theologian, educational practitioner and qualitative researcher is to challenge, enhance and clarify my practice through effective collaborative partnerships and rigorous methodology. My intention is to use practical theological reflection as a tool for self study, not to impose it in terms of content on other practitioners or on the formation of the RE curriculum of the free school.

Furthermore I am interested in the role of uncertainty in both my theological outlook and my educational values. Rollins states that theology is grounded in 'mystery, doubt, complexity and ambiguity' (2006, xiii). This resonates with the 'Living Theory' methodology I intend to use in this research. Whitehead and McNiff concur with Rayner who states that 'we human beings have made an enemy out of uncertainty' (Rayner cited in Whitehead and McNiff, 2006, p.37). Uncertainty is a critical thinking tool and central to the conceptual framework I am proposing, it creates an impetus to transform and change practice in the light of new experience and ongoing reflection.

Whitehead and McNiff state that 'many schools actively teach people to think in limited and limiting ways, according to the metaphors of empty, bounded spaces that are assumed to be there, waiting to be filled' (p.37). They suggest, and I agree, that education is at its most dynamic when learners are not prevented from 'exercising their ability to question' (p.45). For me this ability to question is derived from my theological perspective, therefore my values, as tools of judgment, are inextricably linked to my theology. This partnership between theological and educational values enables me to address the questions in my practice that cause the most concern; where my values are in contradiction to how I want to live as a teacher.

Therefore theology is embedded in the method of this research because there are strong links to the focus; Religious Education and spiritual development in the secondary curriculum. The content of the research will not necessarily be theological, although due to the nature of the subject matter the outcomes of the research could develop theological content as participants reflect and espouse their perspectives in the process of unearthing their values. As Graham states, theology 'seeks to excavate and evaluate the sources and norms of practice, and the values and visions thereby disclosed' (1996). It is a value based vision that I am aiming to disclose.

#### **4. EDUCATIONAL CONCERNS**

The concerns I have as an educator inform and influence the design of my research, for example, I have become increasingly frustrated with the examination driven approach to education. As a part-time RE teacher at a local comprehensive school I was responsible for 5 examination classes, teaching A level and GCSE qualifications. The students seemed to be jumping through exam hoops; feeling a sense of achievement if they achieved a C grade or above, and failure if not. This begs a significant question for the RE teacher; what value do I place on learning?

Teaching topics such as human rights and freedom of speech seem to be intrinsically important. Yet set in the context of imposed discipline, where students are being told where to sit and when to speak, the value of such learning becomes counterproductive. Effective learning is linked to being and doing. If my 'being' in the classroom is about power, and the learner's 'being' is about powerlessness; how can I live according to my values? If my 'doing' as a teacher is based on imposing my will on the learner, their 'doing' will be undermined. I believe we will be left with young people who neither have a sense of purpose or belonging in our society.

Furthermore, the recent white paper (DfE, The Importance of Teaching, 2011), threatens to take the profession back to a didactic system of imposed knowledge based on technical rationality, rather than forwards to models of learning where students can create their own knowledge from a basis of critical questioning, problem solving and ability to work with others. As my previous papers indicate I am not negating the value of cognitive learning but I want to explore ways to combine this approach with experiential methods in order for students to become, in RE, religiously literate whilst being free to develop their own worldview. The emphasis should be on learners as knowledge and theory creators, not receptacles. Learners are participants not recipients.

#### **5. RESEARCH QUESTION**

Andrews states that a research question can be difficult to form in new or under-explored areas (2003, p.45). My research question is not only under explored but also set within a fluid and dynamic situation. For example, government policy is changing rapidly, the National Curriculum is under review and RE may not be included in the new English Baccalaureate. On the other hand, free school proposers are being asked to submit applications on a competitive basis, with little funding available, in a culture of

austerity. Furthermore, non-faith based free school proposer groups have to ensure they deliver RE, and a daily act of collective worship, despite the apparent rise of secularism.

The research question is not expected to result in a definitive ‘answer’. The nature of my research is that it will be a process of transformation. The purpose of this Action Research is not to find an end point but to work within a ‘living philosophy, a form of artistry, which requires us to change ourselves if we want to help others to become participants in processes of change’ (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006, p.137).

Therefore the key research question is: How can developing my work as a freelance educator help create a religious education curriculum in a free school without a religious character?

Subsequent questions are:

- How can I improve my practice through continuing to unearth my values?
- How can other practitioners improve their practice through unearthing values?
- How will the methodology, conceptual framework and methods of data collection be constructed?

## **6. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The objectives of the research will be met through reflection. The role of reflection in professional development is long established in education, as exemplified by the work of thinkers such as Schön (1986, 1991), Freire (1996, 2004) and Habermas (1987). For example, Habermas advocates transforming entrenched normative social orders by interrupting and transforming public discourse (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006, p.102). On the other hand, he states that any account for action and development in terms of new theory must not just be disruptive but comprehensible, truthful, sincere and appropriate. Therefore the objectives of the research must be consistent with the values being unearthed.

Teachers are familiar with using a reflective cycle as part of their Continuing Professional Development. In churches and faith based agencies the reflective cycle is a familiar tool particularly in the field of theological reflection within practical theology (Ballard & Pritchard, 2006). The key objective for my research is to explore the question through a reflective Action Research approach based on Living Theory. This

will be achieved by developing a conceptual framework inspired by the fields of practical theology and reflective practice.

The key objectives in structuring the research are;

- Establish conceptual framework for reflection
- Construct indicative methods of research based on Living Theory
- Consider ethical implications
- Complete work plan

## **7. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

I aim to discover how educational practice can be grounds for generating educational theory. The first step is to excavate values and then explore how they can be used as a driving force for social transformation from a 'grassroots' level. I am interested in realising social purposes that are to do with 'developing ethical educational cultures that are free of colonialist impulses' (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006, p.44). Subsequently, the creation of educational theory in developing the RE curriculum of the proposed school will be free of hierarchical domination and linked to a cycle of improving practice. There will be an ongoing cycle of creating theory from practice, practice from theory.

Within this exploration I specifically want to investigate how the proposed free school, which will not have a religious character, can develop a values based RE curriculum, generating theory that is transferable to schools with a similar ethos. In order to do this I intend to draw on a conceptual framework in the shape of a model of reflection. This will help construct the way I value being (ontological values) and knowing (epistemological values) as an educational practitioner.

As a small scale action researcher I am faced with a variety of options in terms of methodology. Denscombe points out that there is 'no one right decision' but that 'when you have embarked on a particular approach it is not easy to do a U-turn' (2008, p.4). The design of the research is therefore the lynchpin to success. The first major step in research design is to establish a 'paradigm' (Kuhn, 1996, cited in Leshem and Trafford, 2008, p.94). This is a way of seeing the world or as Kuhn puts it a 'definition of the field' where 'shared paradigms result in commitment to the same rules and standards for scientific practice' (p.94).

The paradigm of my research is situated in is ‘praxis’; reflection on current practice within a professional context that leads to change. This Aristotelian concept is the epistemological basis for Action Research. Action Research is ‘a family of living inquiry that aims, in a great variety of ways, to link practice and ideas in the service of human flourishing’ (Reason and Bradbury, 2008, p.1). Reason and Bradbury state that it is:

‘not so much a methodology as an orientation to inquiry that seeks to create participative communities of inquiry in which qualities of engagement, curiosity and question posing are brought to bear on significant practical issues’ (p.1)

The significant features of Action Research suggest that it is an orientation worth pursuing in that it allows for methodological inventiveness (Dadds & Hart, 2001, p.166). What matters, according to Dadds and Hart, is that:

‘no methodology is, or should, be cast in stone, if we accept that professional intention should be informing research processes, not pre-set ideas about methods and techniques’ (p.169)

The inventiveness of Action Research and specifically Living Theory, enable me to be true to my research purposes.

## **7.1 Action Research**

Action Research (AR) integrates practice and life experiences with philosophical, political and intellectual underpinnings. It enables the ‘web of relationships, events, influences, role models and experiences’ (Reason and Bradbury, 2008, p.16) to underpin the action researcher’s practice. Theory and practice come together in AR:

‘Theory and practice, thinking persons and life experiences, how they interact, fuse, and react in the search for explanations to understand realities and promote social progress appear to have a driving force.’ (Fals Borda cited in Reason and Bradbury, 2008, p.16)

This methodology of interaction provides a platform for the dynamic and reflective nature of my research, whilst also having strong roots in educational transformation.

AR has developed significantly from its origins in the 1940s. Kurt Lewin (1946) is often credited as one of its founding fathers but in terms of education Lawrence Stenhouse’s (1971) work on the Humanities Curriculum Project has left a lasting legacy. John Elliott, at the University of East Anglia, has since been influential in developing Stenhouse’s work to develop AR as a form of professional development for teachers,

albeit based on a social science model (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006, p.21).

Concurrently Jack Whitehead developed new approaches to AR at the University of Bath that resulted in the methodological approach that I intend to use for my research; Living Theory.

## **7.2 Living Theory**

Whitehead's work is based on the premise that teachers are capable of generating their own personal theories by systematically studying their practice (p.21). These theories would contain what they offer to their practice as they begin to answer the question 'how do I improve what I am doing?' Whitehead faced similar contradictions to my own as he questioned his very being as a teacher. The revelatory moment for Whitehead was watching a video of him teaching where he realised that he was actively denying the values underpinning his 'ontological commitments to creative, independent investigations' (p.26). Working in partnership with Jean McNiff, Whitehead went on to develop Living Theory as an approach to AR that enables change which is validated and legitimated by rigorous standards of judgment. Whitehead and McNiff state that:

'Action Researchers who work in a Living Theory tradition tend to espouse the humanitarian values of care and compassion, a concern with freedom and the right of all to make up their own minds about how to do their research and how to live their lives as they wish, in negotiation with others who wish to do the same' (p.24)

Their approach is inclusive, relational and focused on social transformation which contributes to the 'sustainability of humanity and the planet we live on' (p.25). These values are in keeping with my own. Moreover, these values form the framework by which my research will be judged. If I can live according to my values, without contradiction, new practice and theory will be created and have a legitimate claim to validity. However, in order to judge the validity of the research, rigorous methods must be established, based on a carefully conceived conceptual framework.

## **8. RESEARCH METHODS**

One of the traditional methods of AR is the action/ reflection cycle. In this process reflection on learning produces new theory which subsequently feeds back into new practice. The action/reflection cycle will be a key method within my research. The aim of the research is to realise the values that are inherent in my practice in order to show

them as criteria by which it can be judged. This approach will influence not only my own practice, but that of others as well as contributing to the social formation of the new school.

### 8.1 The Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework is traditionally a ‘theoretical overview of your intended research and order within that process’ that can also ‘bridge theory and practice’(Leshem & Trafford, 2008, p.44). Moon defines reflection as a ‘basic mental process with either a purpose or an outcome or both’ (1999, p.10). The model becomes a practical tool for the purposes of this research by providing a conceptual base for practical reflection, subsequent action and data collection.

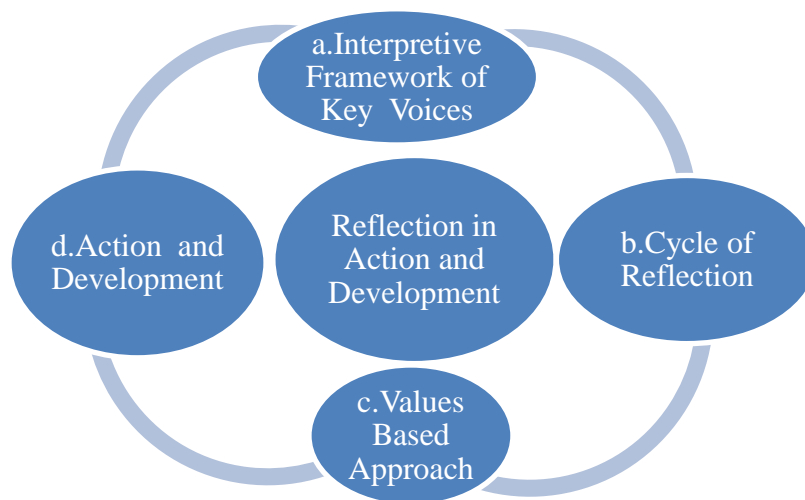


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework

#### a. Interpretive Framework of Key Voices

The aim of the conceptual framework is to provide a pragmatic approach to the method of reflection. Although I have drawn on a theological model of reflection as a key influence this does not presume a faith perspective on the part of the reflector. Cameron et. al. (2010) set the scene for the role of theology in the context of a culture where ‘the religious feel vulnerable before secularism; secularists are threatened by the continuing hold of faith’(p.13). This vulnerable balance between secularism and religion often exists in the context of my practice and within the discussions held by Education Swanage. Therefore the research must be capable of holding this tense balance, hence my inclination to develop a method based on theological influences that can cope with tension and uncertainty whilst being a tool for critical thinking.

The reflective practitioner is not only capable of existing in a fluid dynamic cycle but is deemed to be an artist, according to Schön. He questions the foothold that constructionism has in the world of the professional, based on ‘technical rationality’ (1991, p.49). He states that perceptions become grounded in what are seen as ‘objective’ facts. Schön argues that professional work is not grounded in objective fact but in complexity, uncertainty and instability. The proposal he makes is that professionalism should be focused on reflection in practice as a form of artistry or craft rather than a method of rational technicality. In order to unearth and use values as a driving force for social transformation educational activists need to be artists not constructionists; building foundations not dictating the whole structure.

Winter suggests the ‘epistemological’ crisis of confidence in professional knowledge arises when we lose confidence in the reliability of facts which prove unable to resolve disagreements between opinion and interpretation (1999, p.182). He proposes, like Schön, that the answer to this lack of confidence is in developing the artistry of reflection. Therefore, the reflective practitioner is important in that they are able to understand their underlying subjectivity in the context of a particular situation which is always ‘an act of interpretation’ (p.183). This interpretation leads to a cycle of dynamic transformation, rather than a finished product, such as a particular type of practice or blue print for a school curriculum.

Cameron’s theological framework needs adapting for my purposes, to provide a structure for the model of reflection this research is proposing. Most significant is the second strand of Cameron’s TAR model; the understanding of theology in 4 voices (p.53-56):

**i. Normative**

For the purposes of my study the normative voice will extend to the pre-existent sources of authority within my research arena. This will not necessarily equate to scriptures and creeds, official texts and doctrine, but to working protocols, ethos and mission statements and statutory requirements such as the remit for spiritual development and RE within the National Curriculum. Furthermore my research will involve interaction with practitioners from a variety of faith backgrounds, including atheist and humanist, therefore the inclusion of the ‘normative’ allows for a diverse range of sources to be used.



**ii. Formal**

Within the proposed research the ‘formal’ voice will be seen in the widest context to include dialectic relationships. For example, other practitioners, professionals, dialogue partners from other agencies, academic input from recent research and government initiatives such as the new white paper. These voices will not always be in harmony with each other and they may take ambiguous stances. However, it is important for reflective practice that there is an opportunity to engage with such voices despite the ambiguities. This may be particularly pertinent within an interfaith setting, or in a group made up of atheists, secularists and people of faith, or in a context where a traditional approach to practice is being evolved into a more progressive one.

**iii. Espoused**

The ‘espoused’ voice enables the participant to reflect on how they verbalise their values, how they actually speak about their practice. This proposal suggests that the process of reflection, in the very manner in which it enables practitioners to ask questions and share responses, is a valuable tool in the research process.

**iv. Operant**

Finally this is the voice embedded in the practices of a group, through the analysis of practical skills. The quality that resonates from this work is the focus on reflection as an artistic fluency, the development of a craft to capture a creative way forward in enhancing practice.

Having established the basis of the key voices, the next step is to consider the nature of the actual method of reflection these voices will feed into.

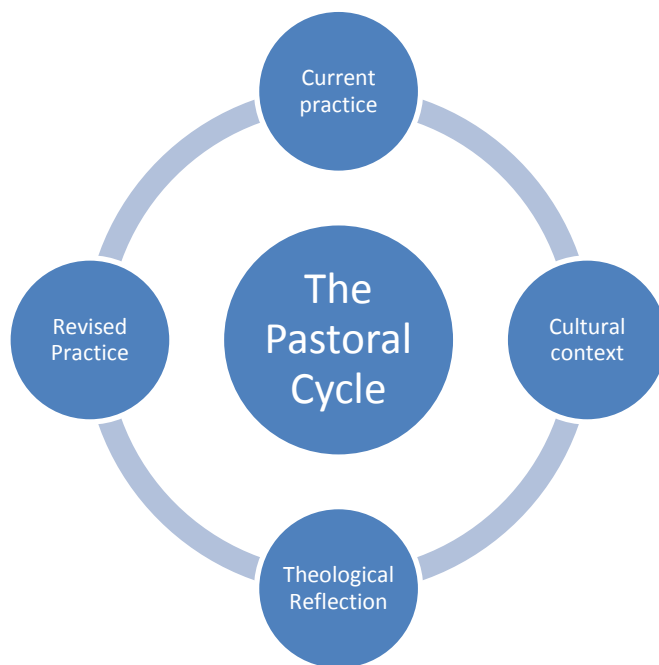
**b. Cycle of Reflection**

The research will involve a cycle of action reflection in order to investigate how change can be effected to improve practice. The aim of the research is not intended to combat the secularism that proponents of a re-visioned form of Religious Education have been debating (Watson, in Felderhof and Thompson, 2007, p.3), but to enable dialogue and mutual conversation in order to enhance practice in RE in the formation of the new school.

Carr and Kemmis contend that AR as a critical approach can ‘inform and develop a critical theory of education’ (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p.43). They propose that AR can

provide an openness to critical discussion and debate about the curriculum. This approach requires a ‘critical community of professionals’ (p.44) in order to carry out the task of informing a critical theory. Similarly the research aims to engage a community of practitioners in critical reflection to enhance confidence in delivery of practice that relate to RE, using the traditional action/reflection cycle as a central part of the methodology.

This cycle is also well established in theological practice. It involves observation of a situation, analysis of the observation, theological reflection on the situation and planning a new course of action (Ballard and Pritchard, 2006, p.71). Pattison’s adapted model of the pastoral cycle, which he describes as a ‘mutual critical conversation’ is adapted by Swinton and Mowat (2006, p.81) into a cycle of reflection that can form a conceptual framework for further research into RE within education. The retention of the theological aspect of the cycle is important when the critical conversation is focused on the development of a cognitive/ experiential approach to RE, this is by its very nature a theological discussion.



**Figure 2: A mutual Critical Conversation (Swinton and Mowat, 2006, p81)**

### **c. Values based standards of judgment**

The model of reflection, and the mutual conversation, are dependent on a values based approach. Initially the values expressed in this paper have been derived from my own educational influences, drawing on theology and education. However, the aim of the research is to unearth values not only espoused by me, but by fellow educational practitioners and members of Education Swanage. The aim is to excavate values as we collaborate to improve practice and create a human scale school, validated by our values as standards of judgment. Veling uses German philosopher Martin Heidegger's concept of 'a forgetfulness of being' (Veling, 2005, p.5) to suggest an abandonment of self is necessary in order to focus the lens elsewhere, on the other. This appreciation of the other is a crucial element of the proposed model of reflection, that all practitioners have parity of esteem and an equal right to be heard, whatever their outlook. Furthermore, rather than entering into the process of reflection with a preconceived idea of imposing one's own preference for change on the others in the team, the intention is to provide the whole group with confidence that one voice will not be dominant over and above another.

### **d. Action and Development**

Another aim is to realise values in the transformation of practice. Demonstrating transformation is reliant on data collection within the action/reflection process as well as monitoring 'out there'. Whitehead and McNiff suggest that the basis of this monitoring is to ask 'how is what I am doing living up to the values I have' (2006, p.65).

The aim of the data collection will be to enable evidence based judgement to be made on the influences of actions, and in turn for this to enhance practice and develop social formation in the shape of the RE curriculum in the proposed school.

## **8.2 Data Collection**

Whitehead states that data collection needs to address two questions:

1. What data am I going to gather to enable me to make a judgment about the educational influences in learning of what I am doing in relation to my values, skills and understanding?
2. In explaining my educational influences in my own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of social formations what

explanatory principles and theoretical frameworks do I use?(Whitehead, 2008, p.5)

In the context of this research, data collection must therefore identify a situation, then collect data over a given time of how values can be more realised into transforming action and development. The action/ reflection cycle, motivated by values, must enable practitioners to collect data in order to make evidenced based judgments on the influences of their actions. In the framework of Living Theory such data can include written, graphic and multimedia information, as long as ethical frameworks are adhered to and collection methods are not manipulative.

The methods of data collection will be qualitative, diverse and dependent on the educational influences I am attempting to understand. For example I will keep a research journal and will invite other participants to do this as well. Other methods of data collection will include interviews, focus groups, meeting notes and emails. There will be an element of ‘triangulation of data to avoid the reliance on one method of data collection’ (Whitehead, 2008).

Data analysis will be inductive as suggested by Denscombe (2007, p.288). Content analysis will be carried out to identify themes and core categories that will be linked back to the empirical data. Relationships will also be identified between themes within units of data. An audit of the process of research analysis will be conducted to ensure reliability and to check the data does not become decontextualised. The analysis will be reflexive in terms of the impact made by myself as the researcher.

Data will be collected by three methods;

**i. Reflection Journal**

Journaling is commonly used by researchers in participatory AR. It involves the use of diaries, notebooks and electronic software such as Microsoft Onenote to keep a record of ‘emerging thoughts in relation to research ideas’ (Lee, 2009, p.43). This method enables the researcher to accurately record thoughts, events, and developments in work as well as extend critical thinking and literacy skills. Journal writing provides a means by which learning can cohere between unconnected areas of meaning, such as between different values within a group context, to allow deeper meaning to emerge (Moon, 1999, p.187).

Moon points out that the value of the reflective process represented in journaling is difficult to assess as there are few evaluative studies (p.187). However, she references reports as evidence that journaling has value in learning (Selfe, Petersen and Nahrgang, 1986; Morrison 1996; cited in Moon 1999, p.187). Whereas a unified outcome for the purpose of journal writing may be elusive, the advantage of journaling in a professional doctorate context comes in the form of being self critical; learning how to understand my personal construction of knowledge and values in the light of reflection on experience. Therefore the key objectives of journaling in this research are: to record experience, to develop learning in ways that enhance other learning, to deepen the quality of learning in the form of critical thinking, to facilitate learning from experience, to enhance professional practice and to foster reflection and creative interaction in a group (Moon, 1999, p.193).

The overarching purpose of this reflection will be to identify values as measures of judgment for my own practice, the practice of others and the social formation of the school. This key purposes will help shape and design the structure of the journal to reflect the conceptual framework i.e. entries will be made on the basis of the three key elements; reflection, action and development.

## **ii. Interviews**

‘Although there are a lot of superficial similarities between a conversation and an interview, interviews are actually something more than just a conversation’ (Denscombe, 2007, p.173). Interviews with a research purpose involve a set of assumptions and understandings such as ethical consent to participate, the knowledge that information can be used to write up the research and that the agenda for the interview is set by the researcher (p.173-174). It is appropriate for this research to conduct interviews in order to gain insights into the influences of learning on the values of others. It is likely that my research will involve delving deeply into the opinions, feelings and experiences of the participants. Therefore the confidentiality and privacy afforded by interviews over a more general survey or questionnaire are important factors in deciding to use such methods.

The intention is to conduct semi-structured interviews with the following participants:

- My work colleague within Peacethread
- Practitioners involved in Peacethread such as RE teachers/ school chaplains
- Directors and members of ES
- The directors of Human Scale Education and The Cooperative College
- Directors of other free school proposer groups

The purpose of using semi-structured interviews over and above structured or unstructured interviews is to maintain a clear list of topics that need to be covered but to allow the flexibility for the interviewee to elaborate on points of interest (Denscombe, 2007, p.177).

Although interviews are time consuming and data analysis is more complex due to the non standard nature of the responses given, they will provide depth and insight into the issues I am researching. The data will be rich in validity yet the subjectivity of me as the researcher may hamper the reliability of the outcomes. Furthermore the inhibitions of the interviewees, coupled with the intrusion into their private thoughts and feelings may skew the outcomes of the data. However, the therapeutic effect of taking part in an interview can be rewarding, particularly set within the Living Theory context, as participants will have an opportunity to reflect and discuss their values and ideas without being interrupted or criticised (p.203).

### **iii. Focus Group**

ES will be invited to participate in the research as a focus group. The aim will be to explore ‘attitudes and perceptions, feelings and ideas about a specific topic’ (Denscombe, 2007, p.178). There will be a focus on values with a particular emphasis placed on the interaction within the group. There will be a ‘stimulus’ for the group to discuss, e.g. the influences learning has had on participant’s values; how participants view the development of RE in the new school. The objective of using a focus group as a research method is to help understand the reasoning behind views and opinions expressed by group members. Participants will be invited to use the action/reflection cycle outlined in the conceptual framework to focus on a particular situation, ready for the focus group meeting.

### **8.3 Ethical Framework**

It is imperative that the ethical framework of the research considers access, safeguarding and assuring good faith in research methods (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006, p.77). An ethics proposal has been submitted to the university to ensure that all safeguarding measures have been met (appendix 1).

### **8.4 Work Plan**

A work plan is attached to this paper (see appendix 2).

## **9. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this proposal outlines the rationale, context and methodology for conducting research within my professional practice. The outcomes, in terms of action and development, are personally and socially validated by rigorously meeting standards of judgment as unearthed in response to the question identified. The values unearthed by the research will generate theory and claims to knowledge by developing social formation. The intended outcome, a proposed approach to the RE curriculum of the free school will be living testament to the validity of the values unearthed as they form standards of judgment for the foundations of a new school.

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## 11. APPENDICES

### 11.1 APPENDIX 1

#### CONFIDENTIAL

#### Anglia Ruskin University: Ethics Application Form

**PLEASE COMPLETE THE FORM IN WORD PROCESSING FORMAT.  
HANDWRITTEN APPLICATIONS WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED.**

Name	Helen O'Connor
Faculty	Practical Theology
Title of Proposed Research	From unearthing values to building educational foundations: how can developing my work as a freelance educator help create a religious education curriculum in a free school without a religious character?
Address	Northlease, Knitson, Corfe Castle, Wareham, Dorset, BH20 5JB
E-mail address	Helenoc2410@gmail.com
Type of Researcher (please tick)	<input type="checkbox"/> Undergraduate student <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Postgraduate student <input type="checkbox"/> Member of staff
Supervisor/Project Director	Zoe Bennett
Collaborators	N/A
Expected date of commencement	July 2011
Approximate duration	18 months
Externally funded	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No

**The University offers indemnity insurance to researchers who have obtained formal written ethics approval for their research. For details see page 25 of “Ethics Committee Procedures for the Conduct of Research”.**

1. Briefly describe the rationale for and state the value of the research you wish to undertake.

The rationale of my study is to investigate and reflect on:

- My own practice as a freelance educator, with a focus on unearthing my educational influences and values
- How my practice influences the educational values of other practitioners
- How my practice influences the creation of a Religious Education (RE) curriculum at a free school that I am helping to found

The rationale for the research is about social formation. The aim is to generate theory to help create an RE curriculum in a new free school, which will not have a religious character.

The value of the research is to enhance my own skills through self study and reflection and to explore the influence my work has on other practitioners and on social formation. The aim of the research is to enable myself and other practitioners to improve practice by reflecting on how values are standards of judgment for practice and for social formation.

The research will focus on how my values link to the founding values of the school which are in turn grounded in the ethos of Human Scale Education and the values of the Cooperative College.

2. Suitability/qualifications of researchers to undertake the research.

I am a fully qualified teacher of Religious Studies with over 20 years experience in state secondary schools. For the last two years I have been working as a freelance educational consultant delivering projects that focus on RE and spiritual development. For example I have developed and delivered an interfaith citizenship project for post 16 students; Peacethread. The project has focused on themes such as peace in the Middle East and forgiveness. I have also been involved in training practitioners; in February 2011 I carried out training on behalf of the Diocese of Salisbury and Dorset County Council’s RE advisor with Church of England school chaplains. I am conducting some further training with secondary school RE teachers in June 2011. I am a director of Education Swanage, a community group where I live, established in April 2011 to propose a free school for the town of Swanage, Dorset. In terms of our free school submission to the Department for Education, I am responsible for the development of the proposed school’s ethos, curriculum and organisation of learning. I have completed papers 1 and 2 of the Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology. These papers have established a theoretical framework for my proposed research.

3. What are the aims of the research?

This will be an Action Research project set within a Living Theory framework.

The research aims to:

1. Investigate on my own practice in order to improve what I do:
  - a. Consider the educational influences that effect my practice
  - b. Identify values that I use as standards of judgment of my practice
  - c. Reflect on how I can live without contradiction to these values in my work
2. Reflect on how:
  - d. Practitioners I work with can live without contradiction to their own values
  - e. The values unearthed in Education Swanage can enable an RE curriculum that is not a living contradiction of the group's values
3. Generate theory in the social formation of a new school RE curriculum that can be validated against rigorous standards of judgment (values)

4. Briefly describe the overall design of the project

The overall design of the project is based on Action Research, particularly Living Theory.

I intend to use an action reflection cycle as a conceptual framework for the design of the research. The aim is that participants in the research will be invited to reflect on their educational values. The participants will be asked to reflect on which values they are influenced by in their practice and how these values either influence their work or are contradicted in their work. The participants will be invited to keep a journal of reflection, particularly focusing on specific examples of their practice where they have considered how values act as standards of judgment for their work, and how they might change their practice in the light of this reflection.

The model of action reflection is derived and adapted from a theological framework. The model enables the practitioner to reflect on different key voices that may influence the way their values are espoused and acted on; these voices may or may not be theological. The model engages the practitioner by considering how their values interact with the values of other people and other groups. Furthermore the model enables reflection on how individuals may act in accordance, rather than in contradiction, with their values, which form standards of judgment for practice.

Therefore the aim of the research design is to enable reflection that leads to transformation of practice by generation of theory that leads to social formation.

5. Briefly describe the methods of data collection and analysis

The methods of data collection will be qualitative, diverse and dependent on the educational influences I am attempting to understand. For example I will keep a research journal and will invite other participants to do this as well. Other methods of data collection will include interviews, focus groups, meeting notes and emails. There will be an element of 'triangulation of data to avoid the reliance on one method of data collection' (Whitehead, J., 2008. Sourced online. Date accessed 03.05.11).

<http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/jack/jwarphdprops280508.pdf>.

Data will be collected from July 2011 until the end of the academic year in July 2012.

Data analysis will be inductive as suggested in *The Good Research Guide* (Denscombe, M., 2007, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. p.288). Content analysis will be carried out to identify themes and core categories that will be linked back to the empirical data. Relationships will also be identified between themes within units of data. An audit of the process of research analysis will be conducted to ensure reliability and to check the data does not become decontextualised. The analysis will be reflexive in terms of the impact made by myself as the researcher.

The aim of the data collection will be to enable evidence based judgement to be made on the influences of actions, and in turn for this to enhance practice and develop social formation in the shape of the RE curriculum in the new school.

6. Describe the participants: give the age range, gender and any particular characteristics pertinent to the research project. *For experimental studies state the inclusion and exclusion criteria*

All participants will be over the age of 18. The age range will be approximately between 25 and 60 and will be a balance of male and female.

Participants in the research will come from six areas of practice:

1. Myself as a freelance educator
2. My work colleague and fellow coordinator of Peacethread
3. Practitioners that Peacethread engages with such as RE teachers and chaplains
4. Directors and members of Education Swanage
5. The directors of Human Scale Education and The Cooperative College
6. Other free school proposer groups

Although the research proposal refers to the development of an RE curriculum in a school, it should be noted that this school does not yet exist therefore there will be no risk of harm to anyone under the age of 18. In the case where research takes place with a participant working in a school, such as a head of RE, permission will be gained from the head teacher of that organisation and from the teacher involved. No young people under the age of 18 will be participating in the research.

7. If your participants are under 18, please attach a copy of your clearance letter from the Criminal Records Bureau (if UK) or equivalent non-UK clearance, or, if not, explain below:

Although none of the research participants will be under the age of 18 I have attached an enhanced CRB check. This is because I am a teacher and the work I am reflecting on pertains to work in secondary schools.

8. How will the participants be selected and recruited?

Participants will be selected according to the list in section 6. They will be invited to

take part by letter or email.

9. How many participants will be involved? For experimental studies, specify how the sample size was determined. In clinical trials, a Power calculation *must* be included.

The research sample will be purposive to allow for in depth cases to be researched. An illustrative example of the number of participants is:

1. Myself
2. My work colleague within Peacethread
3. Practitioners involved in Peacethread such as RE teachers/ school chaplains – up to 10
4. Directors and members of Education Swanage – up to 12
5. The directors of Human Scale Education and The Cooperative College - 2
6. Directors of other free school proposer groups – up to 10

10. What procedures will be carried out on the participants (if applicable)?

N/A

11. What potential risks to the participants do you foresee?

There are practical risks to the participants such as equipment breaking and causing injury, e.g. a chair breaking. Other risks could be accidents occurring when travelling to and from the venue where the research will take place.

There is some risk with this form of Action Research that the participant will be concerned that they have been misrepresented by the researcher. This is particularly likely where the research touches on contentious issues such as religion and politics.

12. How do you propose to ameliorate/deal with potential risks to participants?

I have public liability insurance to cover unforeseen situations which may cause a risk to participants. A risk assessment will be conducted to establish existing risks in the venues being used. Potential risks will be dealt with by ensuring that meetings and interviews are held in places where there is access to other professionals working nearby.

Participant consent forms will be issued and completed by all participants before the research begins. These documents will outline the purpose and nature of the research. The consent letter and information sheet will inform participants of their legal rights and any potential risks. They will also state how the participant can withdraw from the research, how information will be confidential, anonymous and destroyed after completion of the research analysis. The development of the research will remain visible to the participants and views of others' will be negotiated before being published (Denscombe, M., 2007, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., p. 129). The design of the research will consider how to minimise psychological harm in the sense of avoiding leading the participant into talking about traumatic experiences or views that may involve emotion. For this reason the research will not be designed to be intrusive or touch on sensitive issues that will



threaten the beliefs of the participant.		
13. What potential risks to the interests of the researchers do you foresee?		
There is a slight risk of harm if an interview is being conducted on a one to one basis with an individual, for example if the researcher is injured by a piece of equipment. There is a slight risk of psychological damage to the researcher if the method of data collection touches on sensitive and/or emotional issues.		
14. How will you ameliorate/deal with potential risks to the interests of researchers?		
I intend to conduct interviews in locations and at times when other professionals will be present in the building. The consent and information letters provide participants with details of the research to ameliorate the risk of harm to the researcher if someone has misunderstood the aims of the research. Risks will be dealt with sensitively if they do occur, for example with the suspension of an interview.		
15. How will you brief and debrief participants? ( <i>Attach copy of information to be given to participants</i> )		
Participants will be briefed via the participant information sheet and consent form. These documents will provide details of the researcher as well as the nature and purpose of the research. The letter and consent form will also explain why the participant has been selected and what the methods of data collection will be. Assurances are given in these documents that the participant will be anonymous, data will be confidential and that participation is voluntary. All questions relating to the research will be answered before the consent form is signed and it will be made clear to participants how they can withdraw their consent.		
16. Will informed consent be sought from participants?	Yes (Please attach a copy of the consent form)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>If no, please explain below:</i>		
17. If there are doubts about participants' abilities to give informed consent, what steps have you taken to ensure that they are willing to participate?		
N/A		
18. If participants are aged 18 years or under please describe how you will seek informed consent		

N/A	
19. How will consent be recorded?	
Consent will be recorded on an excel spreadsheet and kept as a hard copy in a locked filing cabinet.	
20. Will participants be informed of the right to withdraw without penalty?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	No <input type="checkbox"/>
<i>If no, please detail the reasons for this:</i>	
21. How do you propose to ensure participants' confidentiality and anonymity?	
Participants will be anonymous in all forms of data collection. Codes will be used for analysis and identification of core categories.	
All data collected will be treated as confidential and will only be viewed by myself.	
22. Please describe which of the following will be involved in your arrangements for storing data:	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Manual files (e.g. paper documents or X-rays) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Home or other personal computer <input type="checkbox"/> University computer <input type="checkbox"/> Private company or work-based computer <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Laptop computer <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please define)	
Please explain, for each of the above, the arrangements you will make for the security of the data (please note that any data stored on computer must have password protection as a minimum requirement):	
Password protection for files kept on computer.	
Secure back up of files on mini hard drive to be kept in locked filing cabinet.	
Manuel files to be kept in locked filing cabinet.	
23. Will payments be made to participants?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>
	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<i>If yes, please specify:</i>	

24. Modification of Proposal	
N/A	
25. <b>(EXTERNALLY-FUNDED PROJECTS ONLY)</b> Has the funding body been informed of and agreed to abide by Anglia Ruskin University's Ethics Procedures and standards?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
	No <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
<i>If no, please explain below:</i>	
26. <b>(EXTERNALLY-FUNDED PROJECTS ONLY)</b> Has the funder placed any restrictions on a) the conduct of the research b) publication of results?	
<i>If yes, please detail below:</i>	
27. Are there any further points you wish to make in justification of the proposed research?	
N/A	

### **UREC REGISTER**

UREC publishes a list of approved projects on the University intranet, which is searchable by all staff and students of the University. The entry for each project comprises the following data:

- project title
- funding body (if appropriate)
- duration of project
- date and expiry of ethics approval
- name of researcher
- 

**Inclusion on this list is a condition of ethics approval, unless the Committee is informed of compelling reasons for an exemption. If you wish to request that your information is withheld, please tick the box below and state the reasons for your request.**

I **do not** wish my project details to be included on the UREC list for the following reasons:

Please indicate that you are enclosing with this form the following completed documents:

✓ Participant consent form

✓ Participant Information Sheet

✓ Summary of the research

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Statement of Supervisor's / Project Director's support\*

I support this application:

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Title \_\_\_\_\_

**\*applications not countersigned by a supervisor/project director will not be accepted; please note that this applies equally to members of staff who are also students**

## 11.2 APPENDIX 2

### WORK PLAN FOR PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATE

Helen O'Connor  
Student no. 0819631

May 2011	<b>Submit ethics application</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Checklist</li><li>2. Ethics application form</li><li>3. Participant information sheet</li><li>4. Participant consent form</li></ol>
June 2011	<b>Reading</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Action Research/Living Theory</li><li>2. Reflective practice e.g. journaling</li><li>3. Research methodology e.g. Denscombe and Trafford</li></ol> <b>Writing</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Design architecture of thesis</li><li>2. Create reflective journal</li><li>3. Design semi-structured interview</li><li>4. Prepare focus group material</li></ol> <b>Action</b> <p>Contact Jack Whitehead and Jean McNiff</p>
September – December 2011	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Research interviews</li><li>2. Convene focus group</li><li>3. Continue reflective journaling</li></ol>
January – April 2012	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Analyse and evaluate data</li><li>2. Re-evaluate architecture of thesis</li></ol>
May 2012 – April 2013	Write up thesis