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Exploring the Value of Special Religious Education in Multifaith Australia among Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews and Baha'i

Zehavit Gross  and Suzanne D. Rutland 

ABSTRACT



This article analyses the value of religious education in Australian government schools, including the contribution of the combination of Special Religious Education/Instruction (SRE/RI) and General Religious Education (GRE) to contemporary society. It is based on qualitative, grounded research with 58 interviews representing the six major faith groups in Australia—Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, and Baha'i, as well as drawing on McCrindle's quantitative and qualitative data in an unpublished report co-written with the authors. The findings show that SRE contributes to values education, religious identity development and health and wellbeing. The SRE classes multiculturalise the schools and provide support to students who experience religious bullying in schools.

KEYWORDS

Religious education;
multiculturalism; wellbeing;
spirituality; Australia

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to explore and analyze the value of religious education in schools, including the contribution of the combination of Special Religious Education/Instruction (SRE/RI) and General Religious Education (GRE) to contemporary society. While the importance of GRE is acknowledged, in those states where SRE/RI is offered, there has been a push against SRE/RI in government schools. Reflecting increasing secularization in the twenty first century, academics and parents alike are critical of special religious education in schools. Australian scholars such as Byrne (2009, 2013, 2014), Bouma and Halafoff (2009), and Maddox (2014) argue that SRE/RI has no place in government schools and that this can be taught at home. This is a continuation of the global debate around the place of SRE in government schools. Australians are concerned that religious education currently offered in Australia does not paint an accurate picture of religion

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in Australia today, but shows preferential treatment to larger religious groups, particularly Christianity. They claim the existence of “Christian privilege” in religious education in government schools reflects the early years of religious education in schools where there was a strong Christian influence. It does not, however, show the diversity of beliefs and faiths in Australia today (Maddox, 2014).

This article argues that religious education still has an important place in government schools, and that this needs to include all the different faith groups and combine SRE/RI and GRE, which has been described as “cooperative education” (Schweitzer & Boschki, 2004). Responding to the strong critique of SRE, a multi-faith organization, Better Balanced Futures (<https://www.betterbalancedfutures.org.au/>), was formed in 2015 in the state of New South Wales and has developed a strong, cooperative framework. This article outlines key findings and recommendations to effectively implement religious education in government schools.

CHALLENGES FACING STUDENTS TODAY

Current students face many significant challenges which are part of the contemporary world including the rapid changes in our societies, increasing secularization and the focus of the individualism with the “me” generation.

A Rapidly Changing World

We live in an era of radical changes in all aspects of society. As Gross and Rutland (2021) note, “This is an era of globalization. The traditional boundaries that separated ideologies and communities are being broken. The digital innovations—Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Tik Tok, the internet, smart boards—are transforming the education scene. With the internet and Kindle, the whole notion of literacy has changed. The values that may have been context-specific and unique to a particular social milieu are being challenged in the light of a global perspective and increasing secularization. The current era brings with it a breaking and blurring of all kinds of boundaries—national, social, political, technological, and in communication” (Gross & Rutland, 2021, p. 1).

Increasing Secularization

As a result of secularization and our rapidly changing society, the need for religion is being questioned and the percentage of the population which is affiliated with Christianity is declining in Western society. Several scholars, such as Dawkins (2006) and Hitchens (2007), have written books which are highly critical of institutional religion. They claim that religion is irrational and that it has no place in twenty-first century society.

Keddie (2019) argues that both secularity and Christian privilege “characterise Australian schools” (2). Yet, as discussed above, secular scholars support the concerns expressed by Dawkins and Hitchens and believe that any reference to religion should be taken out of schools (Byrne, 2009, 2013, 2014; Maddox, 2014). They argue that religion should be the domain of the home and the church, and not the school. Some scholars argue against in-faith education SRE but support the introduction of GRE or preferably “Worldviews” education, which incorporates other viewpoints such as atheism (Bouma & Halafoff, 2009). They believe that this is particularly important because of the declining proportion of Anglicans in Australia and the increase in the minority Eastern faiths, as well as those who identify as “no religion” in the census, also known as “nones” (Bouma & Halafoff, 2017).

On the other hand, a number of key scholars in the fields of philosophy, sociology, political science and, to some extent, have challenged this notion of increasing secularisation and have also argued that religion still has a role to play in the post-secular world. For example, Habermas has recently acknowledged that there are limitations to the approach of the modern secular Western world. Although he himself is secular, Habermas suggests that religion is an ‘unexhausted force’ that can awaken ‘an awareness of what is missing, of what cries out to heaven’ (Habermas, 2010, p. 18). He argues that, for all the achievements of modernity, there are limitations with the modern secular state in terms of motivating its citizens to act for the common good. Thus, Habermas, as well as other secular scholars, argue that religion’s focus on the importance of community, rather than on the individual is still important for modern secular societies (Aroney, 2023).

The Emergence of the “Me Generation”

Young Australians today faced the challenge of forming their identity in a world that is constantly changing and evolving. While rapid globalization and the emergence of new technologies impacted past generations, students are growing up in an increasingly individualistic environment. So much so, that this generation have been described as the “me generation” (Bourke & Mechler, 2010; Twenge, 2009), which reflects a shift from a focus on broader social needs of society to a focus on the self. The study by Bourke and Mechler (2010) found increasing levels of narcissism among college students which affects their moral development, an issue of ongoing academic debate. They argue that this problem needs to be addressed and recommend various strategies, although other scholars dispute this trend (Roberts et al., 2010).

While this may be evidence that the next generation feel empowered and emboldened to make up their mind about the world around them, maintaining a peripheral focus on the value of community and looking outside of themselves is still important. This is a value that is strong in religious traditions.

AUSTRALIA'S CONTEXT: GROWING RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

Contemporary Australia is a very diverse society, reflecting the growing range of cultural and religious backgrounds of those who call Australia home (Bouma & Halafoff, 2017, McCrindle, 2017, McCrindle, Gross & Rutland, 2022). In fact, in 2021, there were 7.5 million migrants living in Australia, meaning that more than a quarter of Australians (28%) were born overseas (ABS, McCrindle, Gross & Rutland, 2022). The 2021 census has demonstrated that since the previous census of 2016 the largest growing communities are from India (217,963), Nepal (67,752) the Philippines (61,506), China (40,063) and Vietnam (38,642). Of these Nepal is the fastest growing, increasing by 124% and the Philippines the slowest, with an increase of 26% (McCrindle, Gross & Rutland, 2022).

With this proportion of the Australian population having been born overseas, the religious landscape in Australia is evolving, including an increasing range of beliefs and identities. While previously Australia was largely a Christian country, the 2021 census showed that currently only 44% of the population identify as Christians while 10% identify with other religions. Of the remainder, 39% classify themselves as “No religion” and 7% do not state their religious affiliation.

In terms of the growing religious diversity, this is mainly the Eastern religions with Hinduism experiencing the most rapid growth, increasing by 1592%. Islam is next with a 555% increase followed by Buddhism 450%. In total, the religions other than Christianity have increased 578% since 2016, while the total population has only increased by 51%.

However, while the proportion of those who identify with a religion other than Christianity is increasing, so too is the proportion of Australians who identify with no religion. Thus, in 2016 three in ten Australians identified as no religion (30%) in 2021 it was two in five Australians who identified as no religion (39%) (ABS Census, 2016–2021, McCrindle, Gross & Rutland, 2022).

THE AUSTRALIAN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION LANDSCAPE

Religious education is offered in different formats across Australia, with differing legislation governing the various states. There are two main forms of religious education: General religious education (GRE) and Special

Religious Education/Religious Instruction (SRE/RI). GRE is known as integrative religious education. This is education that is about religion, where students learn about different religions and worldviews in their regular classes. It is intertwined into existing curriculums (such as Geography, Human Society and Its Environment) where students learn about various faiths throughout the world. SRE/RI provides in-faith education for religion where students can explore their own specific faith, spirituality and heritage. This type of education is available in some Australian states where parents can choose to send their child to the faith of their choice. It is taught by local people from that particular faith group.

Most private schools, which constitute 34% of the school population, have some form of denominational or faith affiliation. Most of these are Christian, but there are around 19 Jewish schools across Australia, while the Muslim school system is growing rapidly. Government schools offer a mixed picture in terms of religious education. In some states, SRE/RI is offered as part of the school curriculum and parents can opt-in for these classes. There are alternative options available for parents who do not choose for their children to participate in SRE/RI. These include Meaningful Activities (such as homework or reading) or Special Education in Ethics (SEE) (in New South Wales) where children can explore ethical dilemmas in a secular context. In other cases, SRE/RI is offered at school outside of the school curriculum time (during lunch, or before/after school) and parents are required to give approval for their children to attend these classes. In general, GRE or Worldviews Education is not taught in government schools.

METHODOLOGY

This article is based on qualitative research using grounded theory methodology, as well as drawing on the quantitative and qualitative supplementary research undertaken in 2022 by the social research company, McCrindle. Grounded theory is a research method that aims to investigate systematic social processes existing within human relations and actions and to conceptualize them (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). It enables us to follow patterns of interaction and behaviors that are grounded in real life events. The questions we asked were open-ended, relating to overall issues being investigated. The interviews, focus groups, and observations also provided a detailed description of the current problems being investigated, thus enabling us to delineate the components relating to the value of Special Religious Education.

The authors' research spans over a decade exploring SRE/RI (known colloquially as scripture classes) in government schools in Sydney and Melbourne. The research began looking into Jewish SRE/RI, then expanded in 2019–2020 to a broader study of SRE/RI classes in six major faith

groups: Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism and Baha'i. A triangular approach was used, with individual interviews with providers and teachers, focus groups with graduates, informal meetings, and content analysis. The findings are based on both this qualitative research as well as the McCrindle quantitative research undertaken in 2022. Emerging from this additional research an unpublished visual report was produced (McCrindle, Gross & Rutland, 2022).

Population

With the broader 2019–2020 study a total of 58 interviews were conducted across the six faiths and including interviewees from the four Eastern Australian states (New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, and Tasmania). These consisted of 17 Christian, 12 Muslim, 9 Buddhist interviewees, 7 Hindu, 6 Jewish, and 5 Baha'i interviewees.

Tools

INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

A semi-structured, open-ended questionnaire was prepared and approved by the University of Sydney's human ethics procedure, including questions relating to the faith tradition of the interviewee, the major advantages, disadvantages and challenges of teaching SRE/RI, questions relating to what we hypothesized as the main contributions of these classes, and their most meaningful experience in teaching the classes. The responses to these questions form the basis for the "findings" section.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

We also analyzed the lesson plans dealing with the core values of care and compassion of seven different religious providers operating within the SRE framework: Anglican, Baha'i, Baptist, Buddhist, Catholic, Islamic and Jewish. The plans were chosen by the providers and sent to the BBF director. The goal of this research approach to the specific curricula material in use added to the oral interviews and formal and informal meetings we conducted to produce an integrated, holistic description of real-life events, and to establish a framework for discussion and debate relating to SRE/RI pedagogy (Lovat, 2003).

Analysis

Using a grounded theory approach according to the constant comparative method, data from the three sources (interviews/focus groups; meetings;

and documents [curricula and lesson plans from the SRE/RI providers]) were analyzed, thus enabling triangulation (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). The analysis consisted of five stages: (a) open coding, in which recurring topics were identified and defined (e.g. the five key contributions); (b) axial coding, involving the formulation of categories defining criteria and continuing theoretical sampling (values, identity, health and wellbeing, multiculturalism and playground bullying); (c) selective coding, which consists of refining and finalizing criteria to include a series of categories (e.g. similarities and differences of the major faiths); (d) formulating the hierarchy and identifying core categories (analysing the major factors in these key values); and (e) creating a category based theoretical structure linked to the literature and contributing to the theoretical models.

McCrindle Supplementary Research

In order to validate the Gross and Rutland's findings from their 2019–2021 research, the multifaith organization, Better Balanced Futures, commissioned the social research company, McCrindle, to undertake supplementary research in 2022. Drawing on the authors' and McCrindle's research, a joint report was written with Gross and Rutland, with the visuals being produced by McCrindle. Better Balanced Futures distributed this report to the New South Wales Premier, the Leader of the Opposition, Minister for Education, other key politicians and religious leaders and it is referenced throughout the article as McCrindle, Gross and Rutland (2022). The McCrindle research included an online survey of Australians, focus groups with religious Australians and interviews with faith leaders. With the online survey the researchers were in the field from 26 June to 4 July 2022, completed by 999 Australians, represented by age, gender and location. Two focus groups with a mix of Australians from NSW, Queensland and Victoria, representing the five largest faith traditions in Australia; Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism and Buddhism were also held. In addition, ten interviews with faith leaders or those involved in religious education in schools from NSW and VIC, representing Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Baha'i faiths were conducted. The study also drew on previous McCrindle reports dealing with religious affiliation in Australia (Gross & Rutland, 2021, pp. 13–21).

FINDINGS

Australians see the value in well-rounded religious education. The recent survey by McCrindle, Gross and Rutland (2022) found that Australians see the value in religious education with more than three in four (74%)

agreeing that children should be allowed to learn about a range of religions/beliefs while at school. Australians who have attended religious education at school believe this education has helped them to understand others' beliefs more.

In response to the McCrindle survey, respondents explained why they felt religious education was still valuable: 31% stated that SRE/RI “helped me to accept others’ beliefs if they are different to my own”; 30% claimed that it “informed the faith/religion I have today”; 29% stated that religious education “helped me understand others’ beliefs more”; and 28% stressed that it “equipped me to have discussions about faith with others” (McCrindle, Gross & Rutland, 2022).

These responses reinforced the findings of Gross and Rutland (2021). They delineated five major constituents of SRE/RI: values education, reinforcing religious identity, contributing to spirituality, health and wellbeing, educating for multiculturalism; and countering religious bullying and vilification in schools. Together, these elements are important and valuable to contemporary Australia and reinforce social cohesion. They contribute to students’ moral and ethical development and strengthen young people’s personal identity and wellbeing.

Values Education

The Australian government has delineated nine key values that need to be incorporated into the secular curriculum:

1. Care and compassion
2. Doing your best
3. Fair go
4. Freedom
5. Honesty and trustworthiness
6. Integrity
7. Respect
8. Responsibility
9. Understanding, tolerance and inclusion (National Framework, 2005).

Yet, there is nowhere specific within the curriculum where these values are taught, as classroom teachers’ focus is on the pragmatic subjects such as English and STEM subjects in a crowded curriculum.

There is an overlap between the Australian government’s list of nine key values and the values gained through SRE/RI. Interviewees from the six faith groups agree that values such as loving kindness, care and compassion, righteousness and responsibility are foundational to SRE/RI teachings.

Interviewees also stressed that being a good citizen and understanding that they are part of broader humanity was very important, as is respect for parents and teachers.

Within this framework, having a belief in a higher being, a key element in SRE/RI, can contribute significantly to values education (Gross & Rutland, 2021, pp. 86–87). As one Baha’i graduate student expressed:

Well, I learnt many different values such as kindness, friendliness, honesty, truthfulness, patience, caring, and in these...when I was learning about these different things, we would have examples and so we would be able to find out about what the value would be like in a real-life setting (Gross & Rutland, 2021, p. 82).

In addition to a belief in a higher being, this research revealed one significant difference between the religious values and those mandated by the Australian government. The value of “doing one’s best” did not feature in our interviewees’ responses, but there was a strong emphasis on the value of supporting family and community. This difference is because in the modern, secular world, the stress is on individualism, while faith traditions emphasize the importance of going outside oneself and focusing more on community and the wellbeing of others.

Reinforcing Religious Identity

The authors’ 2021 study found that a strong religious identity is of value. A key part of young people’s development is a growing awareness of their own beliefs, beliefs connected to their cultural background and beliefs of those around them. Côté’s (2005) proposed the concept of “identity capital,” where group affiliation is one of the foundations. Anderson et al. (2004) found classroom environments particularly foster an environment of affiliation which increases students’ motivation. This demonstrates how religious identity can form a key component of identity capital (Gross & Rutland, 2021, p. 103).

Religious education remains important in developing social capital by encouraging critical thinking in children, probing them to consider what they believe and why. It awards children the opportunity to question and explore their beliefs for themselves. One Christian SRE/RI teacher explained: “It gives you another opportunity in the school context where you are formulating all of your other ideas about how the world works...” A Buddhist teacher further extended this concept in terms of the importance of understanding one’s family and religious background: “So not knowing where you’re coming from, it could affect your self-esteem... You have to understand about yourself and discussing what you follow and why you have to follow it” (Gross & Rutland, 2021, p. 115).

The SRE/RI classes also provide a supportive environment for religious identity development, with the SRE/RI teachers being seen as an important role model. One Muslim teacher explained: “So I think that’s our job as carers, we’re actually really carers and role models and support people for them” (Gross & Rutland, 2021, pp. 118–119). This is particularly important for the minority religions in schools. As such, these classes reinforce the social networking within each religion in addition to strengthening the students’ religious identity.

McCrindle’s interviews further expanded on identity formation through SRE/RI, particularly for migrant communities: “As a migrant, they will go to their own religion as a kind of security blanket to meet their community and feel that sense of belonging” (Hindu interviewee, McCrindle, Gross & Rutland, 2022).

Spirituality, Health and Wellbeing

The authors’ 2021 study found that the holistic needs of children extend beyond the physical and intellectual components of traditional schooling. Today the school environment is a central actor in young people developing their sense of self and belonging. In fact, according to the 2015 PISA report, belonging is now considered an important outcome and for some students is an indicator of educational success, as well as long-term health and wellbeing. SRE/RI provides an avenue for students to experience the benefits that come with a sense of belonging by having a space to better understand their own identities. One Baha’i faith leader commented: “It (faith) has a huge impact on the way the child views themselves, their confidence and their identity as a spiritual person”—(McCrindle, Gross & Rutland, 2022).

As a person’s religious identity contributes to their overall health and wellbeing, SRE/RI teachers believe special religious education needs to be part of the school curriculum. One Christian teacher explained: “It makes some formal inroads into the expression of spirituality in a school context. There wouldn’t be another lesson in a government school where there is prayer, or even interacting with religious text... it reinforces to the children that spirituality is for all of life” (Gross & Rutland, 2021, p. 137).

Gross and Rutland (2021) found that “Educationalists have become aware of the importance of positive psychology (Seligman, 2002), developing on the earlier theories of Maria Montessori ([1915] 1997). They have also developed a better understanding of the concept of the “greater good” and the psychological problems created by the contemporary focus on individual needs rather than community needs. The study of Chen and Vanderweele (2018) demonstrates the centrality of belief in a higher

spiritual being, of prayer, both public and private, as well as meditation, as directly producing positive health outcomes and protecting against negative behaviors. As well, Nielsen (2010) has demonstrated the importance of gratitude as a factor in giving and this is a key component of all religious prayer” (p. 127).

Given these understandings, the SRE/RI teachers obviously felt special religious education did need to be part of the school curriculum. Thus, developing spirituality and religious belief facilitates student growth and their ability to thrive.

Educating for Multiculturalism

Scholars have delineated two forms of multiculturalism: thin multiculturalism, which is a generalized moral discourse which ignores unique aspects of culture and religion (Walzer, 1994); and thick multiculturalism, which acknowledges the moral, ethical and religious values which are unique to each human group (Greenberg, 2004).

The initial multicultural policies adopted in Australia in the 1970s primarily focused on ethnic diversity rather than religious diversity (thin multiculturalism). Given Australia’s changing religious landscape, the focus of multiculturalism must broaden to include religious differences. Maintaining SRE/RI strengthens Australia’s multicultural fabric through meeting the needs of the religiously diverse population. One Christian RE teacher explained that he came from England, which does not have such a system and that he believes that SRE provides for all faiths: “Well, SRE is for the faith of the family. It’s not Christian SRE, it’s not Muslim SRE, it’s not Jewish SRE. It is all of those, and it’s more as well, the thing that I would fight for, is the fact that it caters for all faiths [and] is open access to all” (Gross & Rutland, 2021, p. 166).

SRE/RI classes also take place in an integrated government school, making them very different from private religious schools. While the students are separated according to their religious beliefs during the SRE/RI classes, they then return to their regular class where students can share about their religion and learn from other faiths. As one very devout Muslim graduate explained: “I, myself, joined the Christian faith for one class. It’s very similar to our faith obviously, but everyone’s got their own morals and their own rules toward their religion so it’s good to go in and have an open mind about every other religion” (Gross & Rutland, 2021, p. 169).

While some scholars believe SRE/RI can discourage religious extremism, others are concerned SRE will push certain religious agendas onto children, potentially removing the safety that a regulated classroom provides. As

such, more extreme aspects of any religion may be elevated, presenting a skewed and incorrect representation of the beliefs that faith groups hold.

SRE/RI should ensure that the core beliefs of religious groups are presented accurately, and that SRE/RI is regulated so all students develop a well-rounded knowledge of the many faiths that make up Australia today. The risk that arises if SRE/RI is not provided through a regulated approach in schools is that potential religious fundamentalism or extremism poses a risk as religion increasingly becomes something excluded from the public eye. As such, it is important to acknowledge the key role that properly accredited SRE/RI teachers can play in countering religious extremism. As one Christian faith leader explained:

If we don't allow scripture in our schools in its current, clearly regulated form and SRE is cancelled, then it may well lead to driving underground faith groups. We run the risk of more extreme elements of faith communities being driven underground doing their work outside of the disinfectant of sunlight where they can be held to account. (McCrindle, Gross & Rutland, 2022)

SRE/RI provides "a marketplace of ideas ... and we need to give people the real transparent choice so that they can choose what is good for their children" (Christian SRE director, Gross & Rutland, 2021). To remove such choice is like "putting up that brick wall and not allowing that faith into our country, just like music and sport ... these things are part of a holistic education" (Christian SRE teacher, Gross & Rutland, 2021).

Gross and Rutland (2021) stress that, "at the same time, a more critical and reflective approach is needed in terms of the pedagogy of SRE/RI." They argue that "reflective SRE Classes multiculturalise schools, whilst GRE contributes to intercultural competence (Dervin & Gross, 2016) by creating better knowledge of different religious beliefs" (Gross & Rutland, 2021, p. 153). A combination of the two has the potential to make an important contribution to the area of intercultural competence. In this way, SRE/RI classes offer an educational milieu which fosters multiculturalism and can also counter religious fundamentalism and extremism.

Countering Religious Bullying in The Playground

Gross and Rutland (2021) found that religious bullying is most prominent among four main faith communities: Muslims, Hindus, Jews and believing Christians (p. 177). This experience is not unique to students and school but extends to the Australian population more broadly as well (McCrindle, Gross & Rutland, 2022). It is especially true for Australians born overseas, having to navigate a new cultural context (McCrindle, Gross & Rutland, 2022).

Australians believe a lack of acceptance and tolerance toward others are key issues impacting society today (McCrindle, Gross & Rutland, 2022). In fact, three in four Australians consider prejudice against others (75%) and racism (74%) to be the key issues creating a negative impact. Yet, there is a general failure to recognize the role that religion plays in discrimination. For religious students this is particularly an issue where the playground continues to be an important space where children learn about social hierarchies and experience the diversity of society from an early age.

One in four Australians today (24%) report having experienced discrimination because of their religion or religious views (McCrindle, Gross & Rutland, 2022). This can be part of the school experience of many students who report having felt teased or being made fun of because of their religion and/or how they practice their faith. This includes observing Christians, who can face negative comments from both students and teachers. One Christian faith leader: "Both me, when I went to school, and my children have experienced humiliation and bullying within the school system. Maybe from a teacher who was anti-religious, or other students" (McCrindle, Gross & Rutland, 2022).

Students who have clearly identified religious markers are particularly prone to religious vilification and bullying. Muslim teachers and graduate interviewees reported such problems with girls who wore a hijab being targets. Students made comments such as "You have a towel on your head" (female SRE teacher, Queensland), creating a sense of alienation, while the boys could be "called bad things" (male SRE graduate, Muslim, New South Wales) including being called "terrorists and bombers" (female SRE teacher, Muslim, Queensland). These attacks increased when there was negative coverage in the media. Often, school principals failed to react when anti-Muslim bullying occurred, adding to the students' sense of vulnerability.

This study highlights the value of SRE in creating a safe place for them to explore their own religious beliefs and teachings and assists the students from the different faith groups to deal with the negative comments and religious vilification that they encounter. Issues prevalent in Australia today including religious prejudice toward others and racism, can be combatted at the source where children learn the beliefs and practices of their peers before forming any preconceived ideas. This was stressed by all interviewees both with Gross and Rutland's studies (2014, 2015 and 2021) and the McCrindle, Gross and Rutland (2022) research. As one Buddhist interviewee stated: "For more people to accept that there are differences out there in terms of religion it just comes down to education. It is as simple as that" (McCrindle, Gross & Rutland, 2022).

BUILDING EFFECTIVE SRE/RI PROGRAMS

For SRE/RI programs to be effective, it is important for SRE/RI programs to be based on parental choice and complemented with General Religious/Worldviews Education (GRE), which has been termed “cooperative education” (Schweitzer and Boschki, 2004).

Parental Choice

Australians and religious leaders alike believe that it should be a choice for the parent or student whether to attend SRE/RI classes so that students can dive deeper into their own faith, or whether they should attend an alternative option.

The importance of choice was recognized by the faith leaders, as one Hindu leader explained: “People should not underestimate religious education because it is the foundation, and it is important that our country supports this. Choice obviously is still with the parents, but no child should ever miss out on religious education if there is an opportunity” (McCrindle, Gross & Rutland, 2022).

At the same time, given the increasing number of families identifying as “no religion” there needs to be a viable alternative to SRE/RI rather than just having a “no religion” class when students simply had free time. One Jewish community leader commented:

Back in the day, you go to SRE, or you have time in the library. We really need to make sure that people have a valuable choice. We can't have SRE or art or music, that's not a good choice... if we have SRE and another option, like citizenship for example. I don't think that doing nothing or doing something that was a time filler was a good situation because it didn't allow families to choose properly. (McCrindle, Gross & Rutland, 2022)

To overcome this problem, the Special Ethics Education (SEE) program was introduced in New South Wales also based on volunteer teachers, so that parents have a choice between SRE/RI or SEE providing them with an opportunity to invest in the holistic education of their child without a particular religious context.

One key finding from Gross and Rutland's study (2021) is that some parents, particularly those living in trendy, middle class suburbs, such as Sydney's inner west are choosing to send their children to Buddhist RE classes, even though the families come from a Christian background. The teachers told us that parents appreciated the traditional beliefs and values taught in Buddhism and recognized the importance of meditation for their children's health and well-being.

Thus, in those states where SRE/RI is still offered, parents can actively choose if they want to send their children to a denominational class, with

its confessional, in-faith teaching, or not. As one Christian teacher in New South Wales commented: “So there is nothing prescriptive about it. Their parents opted them in. Their children sometimes said yes or no, we want to do it, or we don’t want to do it, so they might have had the last word” (Gross & Rutland, 2021, p. 54).

A Combined SRE/RI and GRE Approach

In addition to SRE/RI, GRE should be strengthened in schools and integrated into the general curriculum for all students to gain a broader understanding of others’ beliefs (Bouma and Halafoff, 2009). Australians recognize that a key benefit of exposing children to beliefs other than their own is that it broadens their view of the world around them and creates space for them to be aware and accepting of the diversity within Australia today (Christian director, Gross & Rutland, 2021). In doing so, students are encouraged to step outside of their own beliefs and see the world around them from others’ perspectives. As one Baha’i teacher explained:

It’s good because in Iran all the people ... can’t do what they want. But ... freedom is good here. You can choose and put them in several options. And then, after ten years, the kids can decide which one was better for them. (male SRE teacher, Gross & Rutland, 2021)

McCrindle’s and Gross and Rutland’s research (2022) found that this approach was strongly supported by their interviewees: “The two approaches to religious education (SRE/RI and GRE) are complimentary, they belong together” (Catholic faith leader, McCrindle, Gross & Rutland, 2022). Australians are concerned that offering SRE/RI without the support of a GRE program can segregate children into their own religious “bubbles,” impacting their ability to converse with and share their beliefs with others. It may also limit their ability to understand how to interact in an environment where not everyone shares their beliefs.

Yet, special religious education can play a significant role in equipping children with the skills to share their beliefs outside of the family or religious group they are accustomed to. A combination of these two approaches to religious education creates a system of “cooperative education” (Schweitzer and Boschki, 2004) which is the most effective. If the government schools ensure that parents choose the “Ethics” program, which is currently offered in New South Wales, for those parents of “no religion” who do not wish to participate in the SRE/RI classes, this would further supplement the “cooperative education” approach to religion.

McCrindle’s research found that Australians agree that SRE in schools should be taught by people who practice and uphold the faith of the religion they are teaching. GRE is taught by the classroom teacher as part of

the general curriculum, but religious leaders believe that faith communities should also play a role in the development of the GRE curriculum to ensure that their faith was not misrepresented. Faith groups agree that both SRE/RI and GRE should be provided in partnership with departments of education, ensuring that the education they deliver aligns with the curriculum objectives and goals. An Islamic faith leader stated:

We've got the good and bad in every religion, so we want to be teaching it right. Presenting Islam the way it should be, not presenting Islam in a skewed way... I know people tend to focus on that a little bit, but I think Scripture does the opposite. Scripture just presents the foundations. (McCrindle, Gross & Rutland, 2022)

On occasions where religious education in schools is the responsibility of the classroom teacher through GRE, a collaborative approach can still be achieved through faith groups' involvement in the creation of a curriculum, as well as providing some professional development for teachers. This would ensure that the foundational truths of any religion are taught accurately.

DISCUSSION: THE FUTURE OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA

In response to the scholars who advocate for the removal of special religious education from government schools (Bouma & Halafoff, 2009; Byrne, 2009, 2013, 2014; Maddox, 2014), this article argues that religion still plays a key role in our contemporary society, so that it is important to retain SRE/RI in government schools. At the same time, we argue that it is important to combine it with GRE/Worldviews education, which enables students to learn about the various religions that constitute Australia's multicultural society. The combination of the two forms of religious education—in faith and about religions—can provide students with a holistic understanding both of their own religious background, assisting them to develop their own beliefs and values, while also learning about other religions (Schweitzer & Boschki, 2004).

This study found that SRE/RI provides five main contributions to contemporary society. These are firstly values education within the framework of belief in God or a higher spiritual being, which is proven to be a powerful factor in empowering students to be good global citizens embodying values such as respect and responsibility. Secondly, religious belief has been shown to foster students' sense of identity and belonging and to have important psychological benefits for students' mental health and wellbeing while retaining the rich mix of the different faith communities which strengthens Australia's multicultural fabric. Finally, SRE/RI classes provide safe places for students to explore the deeper questions of their religion and identity, as emerged from our interviews with the students.

Student Voices

Current scholarship in educational research stresses the importance of listening to student voices (Gilead, 2020). Susan Groundwater-Smith (2017) has argued that “we cannot continue to debate the nature of schooling without consulting the consequential stakeholders, the students, themselves” (p. 121). This study demonstrates the importance of listening to student voices. It was the student responses that SRE/RI classes were a “safe place” when responding to our question as to they chose to attend the classes. When we asked them to elaborate, the issue of religious bullying emerged—a problem which we had not realized existed. While there has been this growing awareness of the importance of the student voice in research, scholars have also highlighted the challenges of this approach when implementing in terms of school policies and approach, described by Ruddock and Fielding (2006) as the ‘perils of popularity’. They argue that there are many problems associated with implementation in terms of the demands on teachers’ time, as well as meeting the curriculum objectives, so that there is a risk that teachers’ approach may be ‘tokenistic’ (Ruddock and Fielding, 2006, p. 226). Despite these concerns, exploring the students’ perspectives is important in understanding why students choose to attend SRE/RI classes.

Sense of Belonging

Religious belief is part of families’ identity and group affiliation (Beit-Hallahmi, 1991), with SRE/RI classes strengthening the students’ sense of being part of a religious community. The importance of strengthening a student’s sense of belonging within Australian schools has been highlighted by a recent Victorian study (Allen & Kern, 2019), which focused on the need for consolidating school, community, and family relationships. Whilst Allen and Kern did not investigate the value of the religious community and its impact on a student’s identity, this study has demonstrated the important role which religious communities can play. This was seen through the students’ voices that SRE/RI helps to “solidify” their identity. The fact that SRE/RI is offered in government schools can, therefore, be an important factor in addressing the problem of the declining sense of belonging in Australian schools.

Multiculturalism

The integrated government school system fosters multiculturalism since it provides the students with the opportunity of learning about their own religion while relating to and interacting with children of other religions in their regular classes (Schweitzer, 2007). Scholars have stressed that students

do need to have a deeper understanding of their own tradition, which assists in learning about other traditions (Jackson & Fujiwara, 2007), an argument stressed by our interviewees. Since the in-faith religious organizations provide the SRE/RI teachers, these concepts will also enter the private religious schools, the synagogues, churches, mosques and temples through a process of osmosis.

By strongly opposing confessional religious classes in government schools because of indoctrination, these advocates will weaken Australian multiculturalism, producing a “thin” rather than a “thick” multiculturalism. Currently, GRE is not offered in Australian government high schools, again missing an opportunity to develop “thick multiculturalism.”

Bringing SRE/RI into the Twenty-First Century

At the same time, we postulate that to address the criticisms of those scholars who oppose SRE/RI, its pedagogy needs to be brought into the twenty-first century, ensuring best practice drawing on constructivist, reflective, and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970/2003; McLaren, 2017) to achieve the core competencies of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL).

In the context of the changing global and domestic landscape with increasing secularization, SRE/RI facilitators need to make their religious education curricula meaningful for the new generation. The fact that most SRE teachers are volunteers as opposed to full time educators means they require assistance in developing techniques to be successful in delivering religious education to this new generation. There needs to be a focus on students developing emotional skills and literacy through Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) (Singh & Duraiappah, 2020), rather than just a cognitive approach in SRE/RI pedagogy.

It is vital for SRE/RI providers and teachers to update their pedagogy through curriculum reform and evaluation and ongoing professional development. This includes the need to combine both socialization and education in the SRE/RI classroom (Reimer, 2007; Kress, 2014); to foster a constructivist approach to teaching about the religion rather than an essentialist approach (Sagi, 2002); to draw on the techniques of experiential and informal education; and to ensure reflective rather than an instrumental teaching and learning pedagogy (Gross, 2010; Kress, 2014, Gross & Rutland, 2017,).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Schools today must recognize that the religious education of a child is crucial for their holistic development including their spirituality, health and well-being. This means, a combination of SRE/RI and GRE ensures that we “put

religion on the table” and not “under the table,” providing a holistic response to the students’ need for religious education. Within this framework, parental choice and listening to the student voice are also very important.

To make religious education in Australian schools effective, improvements can be achieved by:

- Introducing a national accreditation framework recognized by the Departments of Education for all SRE/RI teachers.
- Opportunities for ongoing professional development, both within and across the faith groups.
- Developing a national approach to supervision and monitoring of the teaching body.
- Establishing a mixed-faith evaluation committee for GRE to ensure the materials taught offer a broad and inclusive perspective that encourages the students’ autonomy in their religious beliefs.
- Developing a national approach to facilitate greater transparency in all aspects of SRE/RI teaching.
- Developing a holistic education program that includes both SRE/RI and GRE.
- Developing a national approach to addressing and countering religious vilification and bullying in government schools.
- Introducing professional development for Department of Education teachers and school executives to deal effectively with religious bullying.

A robust SRE/RI curriculum which is suitably equipped to develop students in contemporary Australian society combined with a clearly formulated GRE program will enrich Australian society and improve students’ mental health and wellbeing, assisting to equip them to be confident, functioning adults in the rapidly changing contemporary world (Gross & Rutland, 2021, p. 267).

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