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Special Religious Education in Australia

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Introduction

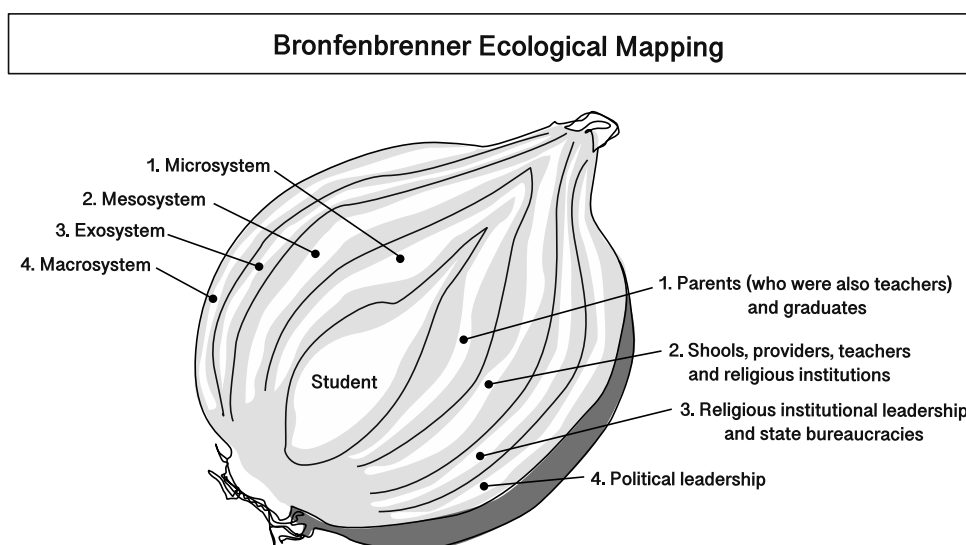
This report is based on Gross and Rutland's latest book, *Special Religious Education in Australia and its Value to Contemporary Society*, published in 2021 by Springer, which explores the multifaith makeup of Australia and the challenges students of faith experience as a result of increasing secularisation. Looking at the value of religious education in schools, including Special Religious Education/Instruction (SRE/RI) and General Religious Education (GRE), this report outlines key findings and recommendations to effectively implement religious education in government schools.

Methodology

Gross and Rutland's research spans over a decade exploring SRE/RI (known colloquially as scripture classes) in government schools in Sydney and Melbourne. Their 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. Gross and Rutland took a

triangular approach towards their study of Jewish SRE/RI including interviews with all stakeholders – SRE/RI providers, teachers, students and parent groups as well as classroom observations. With the broader 2019-2020 study they conducted a total of 58 interviews across the six faiths and including interviewees from the four Eastern Australian states (New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, and Tasmania). They also drew on previous McCrindle reports dealing with religious affiliation in Australia (Gross and Rutland 2021, pp. 13-21).

The research population for Gross and Rutland's 2021 study "drew on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) multi-sustained ecological theory, which was inspired by both Vygotsky's theories that child development can be analysed either within a limited or broader context of the environment in which it occurs. The environment is impacted by a number of micro, macro, meso and exo systems and these, in turn, have a significant impact on the child's world, values and education. The interviewee population is illustrated in the diagram of Bronfenbrenner's ecological mapping" (p.15).



Additional research

In 2022, McCrindle undertook supplementary research to validate further Gross and Rutland's findings. This included an online survey, focus groups and interviews with faith leaders which were conducted by McCrindle to build on the ideas explored in the book. Quotes throughout this report that refer to focus group participants are attributed to 'interviewees', while quotes from the interviews are attributed to 'faith leaders'. Additionally, quotes that have come from interviews by Gross and Rutland are referenced throughout.

- An online survey in field from the 26th of June - 4th of July 2022 with 999 Australians, representative by age, gender and location.
- Two focus groups with a mix of Australians from NSW, QLD and VIC, representing the five largest faith traditions in Australia; Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism and Buddhism.
- 10 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.

Executive summary

Australia represents a multicultural and multifaith nation.

Australia has seen the largest migration population growth in communities from East, South and Southeast Asia since 2016:

- India: 217,963
- Nepal: 67,752
- Philippines: 61,506
- China: 40,063
- Vietnam: 38,642

(Growth in people from above countries, ABS Census 2016-2021).

The proportion of Australians affiliated with religions other than Christianity is growing:

- 1991: 3%
- 1996: 3%
- 2001: 5%
- 2006: 6%
- 2011: 7%
- 2016: 8%
- 2021: 10%

(ABS Census 1991-2021)

Religious affiliation in Australia 2021:

- Christianity 44%
- Islam 3.2%
- Hinduism 2.7%
- Buddhism 2.4%
- Sikhism 1%
- Judaism 0.4%
- Other religious groups 0.5%
- No religion 39%
- Not stated 7%

(ABS Census, 2021)

School students are faced with challenges.

Religious discrimination in Australia does not exclude the playground

- Young people report having felt teased or made fun of at school because of their religion or how they practice their faith (Gross & Rutland 2021).
- 75% of Australians consider prejudice against others to be negatively impacting Australian society today (McCrindle 2022).
- 74% of Australians believe racism is negatively impacting Australian society today (McCrindle 2022).
- 24% of Australians have experienced discrimination because of their religion or religious views (McCrindle 2022).
- Younger generations are more likely to face discrimination because of their religious views:
 - Gen Z 44%
 - Gen Y 31%
 - Gen X 20%
 - Baby Boomers 11%
 - Builders 11%

Religious education can provide a sense of belonging and understanding of others.

Gross and Rutland (2021) found five major constituents of SRE/RI:

Values education

Children develop their understanding of the world based on the cultural, moral and intellectual foundations of their community. Exploring and questioning these foundations are crucial developing their own identities and understanding the formation of others' identities.

Identity development

Growing an awareness and understanding of one's own beliefs are critical in forming identity. Religious education plays a critical role in helping students form their own identity.

Spirituality and wellbeing

The holistic needs of children extend beyond the physical and intellectual components of traditional schooling. An opportunity to explore one's own spirituality alongside others contributes to the overall wellbeing of students.

Educating for multiculturalism

Through students developing a deep understanding of their own background and religious traditions, they can gain a better understanding of other religions which strengthens multiculturalism in schools.

Countering religious bullying

SRE/RI provides a safe place for children to learn about and explore their own religious identity, which legitimises their voice and choice in religion and faith, while fostering a sense of belonging within their school environment. This is all while observing other students do the same, therefore reinforcing social cohesion of the school and Australian society.

Bringing SRE/RI into the twenty first century and recommendations for religious education.

- Introducing a national accreditation framework recognised 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.

Challenges facing students today

A rapidly changing world.

We live in an era of radical changes in all aspects of society. As Gross and Rutland note in their 2021 book:

“This is an era of globalisation. 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 secularisation. The current era brings with it a breaking and blurring of all kinds of boundaries—national, social, political, technological, and in communication” (p.1).

Increasing secularisation

As a result of secularisation 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. As Gross and Rutland highlight in their book, several scholars, such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hutchins, have written

books which are highly critical of institutional religion. Gross and Rutland (2021) point out that “since the beginning of the twenty-first century secular scholars have argued about the irrationality of religion” (p.7).

The emergence of the ‘me generation’

Young Australians today are faced with the challenge of forming their identity in world that is constantly changing and evolving. While rapid globalisation and the emergence of new technologies impacted past generations, students are growing up and establishing themselves in an increasingly individualistic environment. So much so that this generation have been described as the “me generation” (Twenge 2009), which reflects a shift from a focus on broader social needs to the self.

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

Australia today is as diverse as it ever has been, reflective of the growing range of cultural and religious backgrounds of those who call Australia home. 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, 2022).

Largest growing communities since 2016:

- India: 217,963
- Nepal 67,752
- Philippines: 61,506
- China: 40,063
- Vietnam: 38,642

Fastest growing communities since 2016:

- Nepal: 124%
- India: 48%
- Pakistan: 45%
- Iraq: 38%
- Philippines: 26%

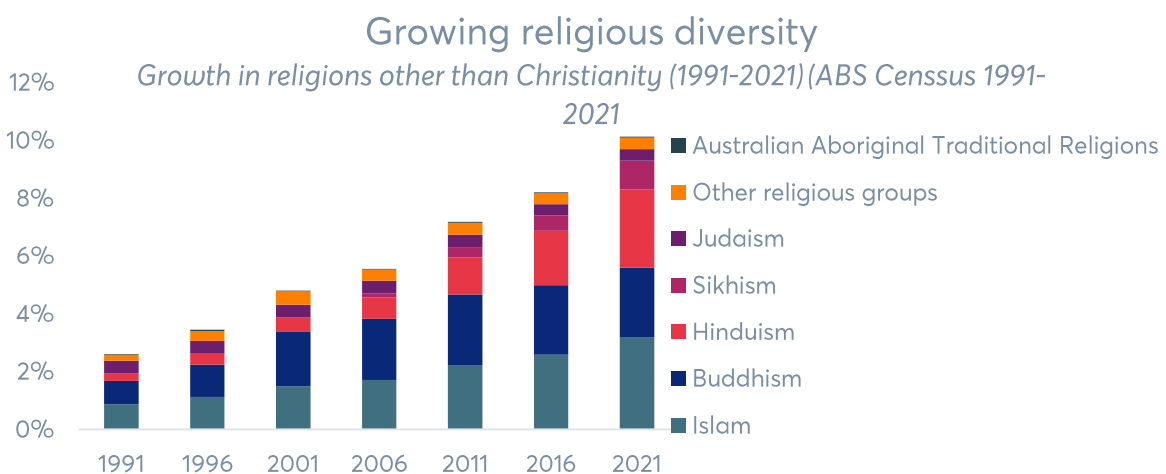
With this proportion of the Australian population having been born overseas, it is unsurprising that the religious landscape is also evolving, including an increasing range of beliefs and identities.

Religious affiliation in Australia 2021:

- 44% Christianity
- 10% Other religions
- 39% No religion
- 7% Not stated

Australia's growing religious diversity (increase since 1991):

- Hinduism: 1592%
- Islam: 555%
- Buddhism: 450%
- Total religions other than Christianity: 578%
- Total population: 51%



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.

- 2016 - Three in ten Australians identify as no religion (30%)
- 2021 - Two in five Australians identify as no religion (39%) (ABS Census, 2016-2021).

Current challenges for SRE/RI

With the radical societal changes occurring in the twenty-first century, several academics and parents began to challenge the continuation of SRE and to express strong criticisms of the system. This reflects the global debate regarding religious education in government schools.

A key concern of Australians is that religious education does not paint an accurate picture of religion in Australia today but shows preferential treatment to larger religious groups, particularly Christianity. The existence of what is known as 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 the Australia of today. Australian scholars such as Byrne 2009, 2013, 2014; Bouma and Halafoff 2009; Maddox 2014 argued strongly against SRE/RI.

"Even though Christianity dominates this scene (religious education), I think the way forward for us as providers is as a multifaith group... Our society

doesn't have an appetite for Christian driven initiatives. But I think it does have an appetite for collaboration between faiths." Christian faith leader (McCrinkle, 2022)

Other Australians believe that religion simply has no place in government schools, rather that it is a choice of the parents that should operate outside of the classroom and class times.

In their 2021 book, Gross and Rutland strongly argue that: "... for a system of SRE for those families who choose SRE classes where students will be immersed in their own religious and cultural heritage and values, while at the same time having respect for all other faiths and cultures. The teaching of General Religious Education (GRE) is, therefore, also very important and we argue for a combination of the two, in what has been termed "cooperative education" (Schweitzer and Boschki 2004)" (p.64).

This theme is revisited throughout the book.

The SRE/RI landscape

Defining GRE and SRE/RI

General religious education (GRE)

General religious education (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 (e.g. Geography, HSIE) where students learn about various faiths throughout the world.

Special Religious Education/Religious Instruction (SRE/RI)

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.

Differences in religious education across Australia

Religious education is offered in different formats across Australia, with differing legislation governing the various states. In some instances, SRE/RI is offered as part of the school curriculum, where parents choose for their children to participate in SRE/RI and 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 NSW) 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 have to give approval for their children to attend these classes.

Australians see the value in well-rounded religious education in school

The recent survey by McCrindle found that Australians see the value in religious education with three in four (74%) agreeing that children should be allowed to learn about a range of religions/beliefs while at school (McCrindle 2022). Australians who have attended religious education at school believe the impact of this education has helped them to understand others' beliefs more.

Australians who have attended religious education classes believe them to have increased their understanding and tolerance of others' beliefs:

- 31% helped me to accept others' beliefs if they are different to my own
- 30% informed the faith/religion I have today
- 29% helped me understand others' beliefs more
- 28% equipped me to have discussions about faith with others
- 23% helped me understand my own identity (n=671, McCrindle 2022).

These findings demonstrate that SRE/RI is still relevant and important to Australian parents.

The value of SRE/RI to contemporary Australia

Gross and Rutland (2021) found 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 in contemporary Australia and reinforce social cohesion. They can contribute to students' moral and ethical development and strengthen young people's personal identity and wellbeing.

Values education

SRE/RI contributes to 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 2021).

Gross and Rutland's 2021 study revealed that there was definitely significant overlap between the Australian government's list of nine key values and their analysis of key values emerging from the 58 interviews with the different stakeholders of the six faith groups in their study, but there were also differences. In particular, they found that "there was less emphasis on Value 2: students "doing your best... and pursue excellence" because the focus in SRE/RI tends to be more within the sphere of social good, rather than individual educational attainment. Another important difference relates to Value 4: 'freedom', regarding enjoying one's

rights. This was due to a greater emphasis on duties and responsibilities in SRE/RI classes" (p.94).

In their interviews, the teachers stressed that respect was a key value that they sought to convey to their students in SRE/RI. One Hindu teacher in New South Wales explained:

"Respect your parents, making sure not to talk back to them or say anything that's abusive or rude and having that respect for elders translates after [school] as well when we start talking to our bosses or anyone who's a little bit older than us in the workplace...so SRE provides that valued education that does translate out of school and into the workplace" (Gross and Rutland, 2021, p.82).

Other key values raised by the interviewees was loving kindness, care and compassion, righteousness and responsibility. As one Baha'i graduate student expressed this:

"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 and Rutland, 2021, p.82).

They also stressed that being a good citizen and understanding that they are part of broader humanity was very important. Within this

framework, having a belief in a higher being, a key element in SRE/RI, can contribute significantly to values education (Gross and Rutland, 2021, pp.86-87).

Through GRE, it is important that students are exposed to the variety and multidimensional aspects of religious approaches to ethical dilemmas within their specific faith community to help them unpack the complexities that underlie moral and ethical beliefs (Swanson 2010). Values education is an opportunity to explore and question these foundations which may also encourage young people to step outside of their

own beliefs and see the world around them from others' perspectives. This can instil within children a general awareness of varying beliefs and promote acceptance of those beliefs from a young age.

"Religion is such a significant component of any culture. Any culture that you study whether it's a culture in another land or in your own land, [religion helps] to understand the way people think and operate. [Religion] is one of the many key factors that help children to understand the society in which they live." (Christian faith leader, McCrindle 2022).

Reinforcing religious identity

SRE/RI helps to build personal identity

A key part of young people's development is a growing awareness of their own beliefs, the beliefs connected to their cultural background and the beliefs of those around them. As Gross and Rutland (2021) note, "Côté (2005) proposed the concept of 'identity capital', that is the importance of each individual developing her/his own optimal identity. According to Côté, group affiliation is considered one of the foundations of identity capital. Anderson et al. (2004) have shown that a classroom climate that fosters a sense of affiliation can increase students' motivation. Thus, religious identity is an important constituent of identity capital" (p.103).

In fact, religious education remains important in developing social capital by encouraging critical thinking in children, probing them to consider what it is they believe and why they believe it. It awards children the opportunity to question and explore their beliefs for themselves, as opposed to the dominant beliefs of their culture and family. As 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 and Rutland, 2021, p.115).

In their in-depth interview, McCrindle's respondents commented:

"In terms of personal identity and a sense of belonging, it is essential they have that understanding [of their faith]. They can then make the choice whether it's for them or not" (Jewish religious educator, McCrindle 2022).

"I've seen the impact firsthand in terms of students understanding their identity. What I'm seeing

teaching Kindergarten to Year 5 is that they all need an identity, they need to belong somewhere. Having the ISRE (Islamic Special Religious Education) program, you can see they connect, they understand where they belong, they understand what it is to be a Muslim" (Islamic faith leader, McCrindle 2022).

For many cultures and ethnicities, religion plays a significant role in a person's identity. The community that religious groups provide offers a sense of belonging, and for many migrants to Australia, this becomes an extension of their family. The impact of the community that Special Religious Education classes provide cannot be overlooked, particularly as young people seek a sense of place and belonging.

"I think in migrant communities, a lot of people use religion to not forget who they are... when you're living in a new country or a new environment, it is a way for them [migrant families] to feel connected" (Christian interviewee, McCrindle 2022).

"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. Before they go into the bigger, wider world [they] can become part of that community" (Hindu interviewee, McCrindle 2022).

The SRE/RI classes provide a supportive environment for religious identity development, with the SRE/RI teachers being seen as an important role model. As 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 and Rutland, 2021, pp.118-119). This is particularly important for the minority religions in the school and as such these classes reinforce the social networking within each religion.

Spirituality, health and wellbeing

SRE/RI contributes to students' spirituality, health and wellbeing

The holistic needs of children today extend beyond the physical and intellectual components of traditional schooling in that the school environment of today is a critical component of young people developing their sense of self and belonging in the world. In fact, according to the 2015 PISA report, belonging is now considered an important outcome of schooling and is for some students an indicator of educational success, as well as long-term health and wellbeing.

"Where kids are allowed to explore their spiritual side and find solace in a religious framework or worldview, that's a good thing ... it doesn't really matter what faith you've got, whether you're Muslim or Buddhist or Christian or Jew, all indices say that life works better... where we can have the faith of children nurtured, we would expect to see key psychological benefits flowing" (Christian faith leader, McCrindle 2022).

"It (faith) has a huge impact on the way the child views themselves, their confidence and their identity as a spiritual person" (Bahai'i faith leader, McCrindle 2022).

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 behaviours. 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. As 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 public school situation where there is prayer, or even interacting with religious text....it reinforces to the children that spirituality is for all of life" (Gross and Rutland, 2021, p.137). Thus, developing spirituality and religious belief facilitates student growth and their ability to thrive (Mayselss and Russo Netzer 2011).

Educating for multiculturalism

SRE/RI contributes to developing a culture of acceptance now and in the future

Multiculturalism was adopted by Australia's Whitlam and Fraser governments in the 1970's as an approach to policy that supports newcomers to maintain cultural ties with their home country (Maxwell et al, 2012). The policy aims to build social cohesion. At the time, these policies focused mainly 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. The most effective approach to multiculturalism is one that acknowledges the unique values to each human group (thick multiculturalism). This is also important when thinking about education in schools.

Thin multiculturalism: generalised moral discourse which ignores unique aspects of culture and religion (Walzer, 1994).

Thick multiculturalism: acknowledges the moral, ethical and religious values which are unique to each human group (Greenberg, 2004).

In educating children on both the beliefs that make up Australia today, and how those beliefs are practiced, it impacts not only their community now, but it will also have positive ramifications as they enter the workforce in the future.

"[Things are changing] in the workplace. I can wear a headscarf, or wear clothes that are longer... I could still work in McDonald's but my uniform might have to look a little bit different because my faith says I need to cover up... [People understanding our multicultural society] has paved the way for people to be more open minded and that not everyone dresses the same." (Muslim interviewee, McCrindle 2022).

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 and Gross 2016) by creating better knowledge of different religious beliefs" (Gross and Rutland, 2021, p.153). A combination of the two has the potential to make an important contribution to the area of intercultural competence.

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 and Rutland 2021, p.166).

Countering religious fundamentalism and extremism

SRE/RI classes also take place in an integrated government school setting, and as such, are very different from the 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 the children often share with the teacher and other students about their religion. They also celebrate festivals of different religious faiths or rotate between the faiths. As one very devout Muslim graduate explained: "And that's open to every student of every knowledge. Like 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 towards their religion so it's good to go in and have an open mind about

every other religion" (Gross and Rutland 2021, p.169). In this way, SRE/RI classes offer an educational milieu which fosters multiculturalism and can also counter religious fundamentalism and extremism.

Some scholars argue that SRE/RI can discourage religious extremism. Others share concern that SRE will mean certain religious agendas will be pushed onto children, and in some dire cases, will remove any safety that a regulated classroom environment 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 that all students develop a well-rounded knowledge of the many faiths that make up Australia today. Gross and Rutland found that a central message of all the SRE/RI teachers was that "we are all God's creatures", so that we are all equal (Gross and Rutland 2021, p. 170). As one Muslim SRE teacher explained: "We're all the children of Adam and Eve and we all belong on this planet. And God makes no mistakes. Everyone is different and we're made that way, so it's appreciation of God's creation... Everyone is beautiful and unique in their own way" (Gross and Rutland 2021, p. 170).

Through reflective teaching in SRE/RI classes that stresses the acceptance of the other, SRE/RI teachers can convey this important message to their students, assisting them to resist and reject the more violent messages conveyed by religious fanaticism:

"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" (Christian faith leader, McCrindle 2022).

Through the partnership with the government Futures at both federal and state levels, together with Better Balanced Futures, this challenge can be met, and Australia can ensure that its multicultural and multi-faith society is strengthened, and religious extremism is countered. The combination of interfaith GRE with intra-faith SRE/RI taught in a critical and reflective manner in the integrated government school system, together with interfaith education, will strengthen social cohesion in Australia, as well as the wellbeing of the students (Gross and Rutland 2021, 173).

Countering religious bullying in the playground

SRE/RI can counter religious bullying or discrimination

SRE/RI can assist in countering racism and prejudice by creating a safe place for school children of different religions. 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 especially true for Australians born overseas, having to navigate a new cultural context and having to make sense of how their religion fits into their new surroundings (McCrindle 2022).

The McCrindle 2022 online survey found that Australians believe a lack of acceptance and tolerance towards others are key issues impacting society today. In fact, three in four Australians consider prejudice against others (75%) and racism (74%) to be the key issues negatively impacting Australian society right now.

There is a general failure to recognise the role that religion plays in racism in Australia today, especially in the experience of young people. This is particularly an issue where the playground continues to be an important space for children to learn about social hierarchies and experience the diversity of society from an early age.

"I think [Islamophobia] creates stress and trauma and will also marginalise and almost force them (Muslims) to withdraw and not fully participate in society. If you think about Islamophobia and the threat it poses to Muslims, particularly the most vulnerable, hijab wearing women and her children. The reality is, most of the women who wear the hijab will be abused" (Islamic faith leader, McCrindle 2022).

"One day, she (my daughter) took dahl and chapati to school and one of the boys sitting next to her said 'Oh today you brought poopoo in your

food'. That day she cried a lot and she asked 'Why did you make be born into Indian culture? People make fun of me'. I had to say they are not aware of food and different cultures. That's their bad luck not your bad luck" (Hindu interviewee, McCrindle 2022).

One in four Australians today (24%) report having experienced discrimination because of their religion or religious views (McCrindle 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.

"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. One of my kids was being teased on the bus by other students for being a Christian" (Christian faith leader, McCrindle 2022).

Students from the different religious groups who have clearly identifying religious markers are particularly prone to religious vilification and bullying. Gross and Rutland's (2021) study found that Muslim teachers and graduate interviewees reported such problems:

"The girls who wore a hijab could be particular targets for teasing, with students making 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 teased for being "terrorists and bombers" (female SRE teacher, Muslim, Queensland). These attacks increased when there was negative coverage in the media. Often, the school principals failed to react when anti-Muslim bullying occurred, adding to the students' sense of vulnerability.

For the Hindu students, the girls could also be specific targets of attack because of the Bindi, a round, red dot considered to be a third eye, but both sexes suffered from attacks based on stereotypical views (Gross and Rutland 2021, p. 185).

Issues prevalent in Australia today including religious prejudice towards others and racism, can be combatted at the source where children learn the beliefs and practices of their peers before forming any preconceived ideas.

"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." (Buddhist faith leader, McCrindle 2022)

"Religious literacy is fairly low now in Australia. So people have preconceived ideas about religion based on very little fact, probably based more on

media than reality." (Christian faith leader, McCrindle 2022)

"Some people don't go past television because that's their source of information. It really does come down to education because if you tell the world that all Muslims are terrorists because Muslims overseas are bombing places, then that is what you are going to believe." (Muslim interviewee, McCrindle 2022)

The study by Gross and Rutland (2021) highlights the value of SRE in enabling students to reinforce their religious identities and creating a safe place for them to explore their own religious beliefs and teachings. This assists the students from the different faith groups to build a positive image of their religion and to deal with the negative comments and religious vilification that they encounter.

Building effective SRE/RI programs

It comes down to choice

While Australians have varying opinions as to the place of religious education in schools, most Australians, faith leaders and politicians agree that it must be a choice of the parent or student as to what class they attend. In fact, Australians and religious leaders alike believe that it should be a choice whether to attend SRE/RI classes so that students can dive deeper into their own faith, or whether they should attend a more ethics focused class, such as the SEE classes offered in NSW.

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 and Rutland 2021, p.54)

These sentiments were reinforced by McCrindle's focus groups:

"I think there is definitely a choice by the parents and if it is in a high school situation, I think kids should also have the opportunity to make a decision in that area" (Christian interviewee, McCrindle 2022).

"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" (Hindu faith leader, McCrindle 2022).

It is also important to invest in an alternate option to SRE for families that do not wish for their child to be attending religious classes of any sort. By

ensuring that families are given an option similar to SEE classes in NSW, it provides parents the opportunity to invest in the holistic education of their child without a particular religious context.

"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" (Jewish community leader, McCrindle 2022).

Thus, the choice for those parents who do not wish their children to participate in SRE/RI needs to be a meaningful one, such as SEE in New South Wales, to ensure a holistic education.

A combined SRE/RI and GRE approach

In addition to this, as Gross and Rutland (2021) have argued, GRE should be strengthened in schools as part of the general curriculum for all students to gain a broader understanding of others' beliefs.

Most Australians recognise 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 also creates space for them to be aware and accepting of the diversity within Australia today. Generally, Australians see that there is a benefit to children being able to dive deeper into their own faith, but also recognise the power in understanding beliefs and practices that differ from their own.

McCrindle (2022) found that this approach was strongly supported by their interviewees:

"The two approaches to religious education (SRE and GRE) are complimentary, they belong together" (Catholic faith leader, McCrindle 2022).

A key issue that Australians see in having SRE/RI without the support of a GRE program as part of the regular school syllabus is the segregation of children which can impact 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.

"In SRE, they (students) have an acknowledgement of what makes them, and they can be supported in their particular faith group, and they don't feel as though they need to hide who they are and they can get support from the teacher and from other students as well" (Christian faith leader, McCrindle 2022).

Thus, a combination of these two approaches to religious education creates a system of "cooperative education" which is the most effective.

Faith communities should lead GRE in schools

McCrindle's survey found that while Australians are likely to agree that SRE in schools should be held to the same standards as other subjects, (such as having a set curriculum), many believe religious leaders should lead the provision of GRE which is taught by the classroom teachers. This sentiment is shared by religious leaders, many of whom are concerned that their beliefs are being taught by people who have not lived them out, running the risk of that faith being misrepresented. As with Gross and Rutland's 2021 study, faith groups agree that both SRE and GRE should be provided in

partnership with the Department of Education, ensuring that the education they deliver aligns with the curriculum objectives and goals.

"We have worked closely with [the Department of Education] to come up with [content] which has really improved the teaching we are putting out there... If you are going to teach something, you must also practice what you are teaching" (Hindu faith leader, McCrindle 2022).

"We've got the good and bad in every religion, so we want to be teaching it right. Presenting Islam in 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" (Islamic faith leader, McCrindle 2022).

On occasions where religious education in schools is a 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 training to teachers. This ensures that the foundational truths of any religion are taught accurately.

"[Religious education can improve if] community groups or faith groups actually offer professional development to teachers. In this new curriculum that will be developed around general education, that's one area where we can do it. Contributing to the design of the curriculum itself, helping to craft the curriculum and then offering training to teachers to deliver the curriculum" (Islamic faith leader, McCrindle 2022).

These views highlight the importance of the collaboration between the government departments of education and the faith leaders and providers in both SRE and GRE, again reinforcing Gross and Rutland's findings.

Bringing SRE/RI into the Twenty-First Century

The importance of pedagogic approaches and best practice for SRE.

In the context of the changing global and domestic landscape outlined at the beginning of this report, SRE facilitators need to make their religious education curricula meaningful and engaging for the new generation. This requires effective teaching and learning strategies.

“It comes down to how you express your faith. You can’t obviously force your faith down the throats of people. You’ve got to be sensitive. You’ve got to understand the context, the environment” (Islamic faith leader, McCrindle 2022).

Furthermore, some criticisms of SRE in relation to content and teaching methods can be attributed to the lack of training of many SRE teachers.

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.

The following pedagogic concepts are key to providing SRE best practice in the future and are discussed in detail in Gross and Rutland’s 2021 book (203-232).

Socialisation and education

Socialisation is a learning process which enables one generation to transmit its cultural values to the next, not only learning an objective meaning but also incorporating and being shaped by these meanings (Berger, 1990).

Experiential learning and informality are the mediums where socialisation and education can

be fostered in a complementary manner to initiate students into their cultural and religious heritage (Gross and Rutland, 2017).

SRE allows for a combination of the socialisation of the students into their specific cultural and religious heritage, as well as providing moral education for a set of values. It is therefore an important part of a child’s holistic education for those families who choose SRE for their children.

Experiential learning

Central to informal education is the need for students to actually experience for themselves what is being conveyed. The concept of experiential learning recognises the importance of providing students with opportunities to be actively engaged in the learning process, moving away from mere knowledge acquisition to a participative learning experience (Dewey 1963, Sfard 1998, 2007, Gross and Rutland, 2015, Gross and Rutland, 2017).

A number of Gross and Rutland’s teacher interviewees stressed how important it was to ensure that the lessons are interactive within these classes... giving the students a chance to do something (female SRE teacher, #7 Buddhist, New South Wales, p.222).

This belief was reinforced by the graduate interviewees. One of the Baha’i graduates from New South Wales commented:

“We played this really cool game but, it kind of ... it was related to one of the values, trust. So, we all put our hands on each other’s back like this. Then

we would walk around. And the first person in the line had their eyes open and everyone else had their eyes closed. And they had to take us wherever they were told so we had to trust that we wouldn't go anywhere else" (Gross and Rutland 2021, p.222).

Thus, SRE/RI pedagogy needs to understand the importance of experiential learning and incorporate these elements into its teaching and learning strategies.

Essentialist vs. constructivist approach to teaching SRE

It is important that SRE teachers use a constructivist, rather than an essentialist, approach to teaching SRE.

The essentialist approach assumes that the 'self' has political/religious/cultural characteristics which are independent of its historical, cultural and social contexts. The constructivist approach assumes that personal identity is constructed and produced within the historical, cultural and social contexts (Sagi, 2002).

Much of the strong criticism of SRE lies in the essentialist approach used by many teachers. We recommend SRE teachers employ a more open-ended, constructivist approach in their classes. Research shows that young people respond better to a more interactive and personalised learning approach (Twenge, 2009).

Reflective teaching and learning

Reflective teaching enables a teacher to examine what they are doing in the classroom and how they can improve their approaches for the future (Gross, 2010).

Values education conducted through SRE must ensure that students are not presented with a dogmatic approach to values. Instead, students should be exposed to the variety of religious approaches to ethical dilemmas within their

specific faith community and encouraged to grapple with this plurality that is central to crucial moral and ethical beliefs (Swanson, 2010).

Students need to be provided with the opportunity to reflect on their values and beliefs, and situations where their own values might conflict.

Successful teachers, therefore, need to consider the ethnic, cultural and religious background of the students in their SRE class (Gross and Rutland, 2014). This demands professional reflection and finding a balance between abstract moral ideas (including religious beliefs) and the practical situation in the classroom (Carr, 2010).

Instrumental vs. reflective teaching

Pedagogical literature distinguishes between two teaching styles (Gross, 2010):

- Instrumental teachers – consider their principal function to be the transmission of knowledge in the areas of specific behaviours, rules and customs
- Reflective teachers – examine knowledge critically and inquisitively enabling an analysis of experiences and transforming practical knowledge into theories of action (Zeichner 1994, Schon 1987, 1988)

A reflective approach to teaching perceives the teacher's role is to foster students' development as independent learners who structure and 'own' their religious knowledge in keeping with their individual intellectual tendencies, diverse motivations and styles of learning, and other personal traits (see Guitierrez and Rogoff, 2003).

Instrumental teaching approach to religious education:

- Creates religious rhetoric
- Religious slogans and clichés
- Closed religious messages
- Ineffective

Reflective teaching approach to religious education:

- Dialogue between teacher and student
- Open-ended and half-formed messages
- More meaningful
- Fosters critical thinking
- Coping with complex knowledge and contested beliefs (SEL)

These moments of tentative reflection by both teachers and students are known as 'teachable moments' and have a long-lasting educational impact on students (Vacarr, 2001). Effective SRE pedagogy, therefore, ought to maximise these 'teachable moments' and recognise the importance of reflective teaching methods in achieving these (Gross, 2010).

Interestingly, a number of the teachers commented that prayer and meditation was central in creating teachable moments in SRE. A Buddhist teacher noted:

"We only do a short pre-pray at the beginning; it only takes about a few seconds, but the reflection on their face, the candles when they pray... I think that it's very important, because in just that few seconds they'll be able to tune into themselves,

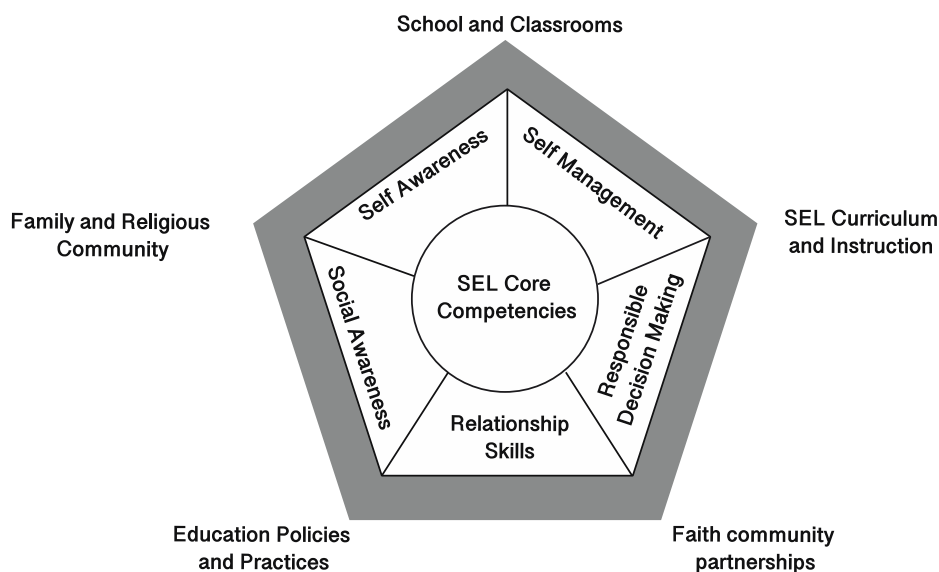
and they cut themselves out of the chaotic of this world, and just being in that moment is very important" (Gross and Rutland 2021, p.220).

Adopting these best practice approaches to religious education will ensure a robust SRE curriculum suitably equipped to educate and develop students in contemporary Australian society.

Gross and Rutland's detailed study of the curriculum area of care and compassion from the key faiths in SRE also highlights the importance of social-emotional learning (SEL), which involves fostering the goals of developing self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, building relationship skills and responsible decision making.

Gross and Rutland (2021) argue for incorporating more effectively the various reflective, critical and bricoleur pedagogic approaches with both cognitive and affective engagement as discussed above. These approaches will assist students with difficult and challenging knowledge, ensuring that the teaching and learning of the core concept of care and compassion in values is education and not indoctrination and incorporates the goals of SEL learning (p. 267).

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Core Competencies and the environment



The future of religious education in Australia: Conclusion and Recommendations

As Gross and Rutland (2021) have demonstrated, religion still plays a key role in our contemporary society, so it is important to retain SRE/SRI in government schools. SRE provides a number of key benefits. These include, firstly, values education within the framework of belief in God or a higher spiritual being, which has been shown to be a powerful factor in empowering student decisions, fostering their ability to act and assigning student responsibility. Secondly, religious belief has been shown to improve students' sense of identity and belonging and to have important psychological benefits for students' mental health and wellbeing. Thirdly, retaining the rich mix of the different faith communities strengthens Australia's multicultural fabric. Finally, SRE/RI classes provide safe places for students to explore the deeper questions of their religion and identity. At the same time, this study argues that SRE/RI pedagogy needs to be brought into the twenty-first century, ensuring best practice, drawing on constructivist, reflected, critical pedagogy to achieve the core competencies of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). This is needed to meaningfully engage the next generation.

As the McCrindle 2022 survey demonstrated, overall, Australians believe that religious education plays a crucial part in increasing acceptance and tolerance towards the multicultural and multifaith Australia of today. However, to make religious education in Australian schools effective, improvements can be achieved by:

- Opportunities for ongoing professional development, both within and across the faith groups
- A national approach to supervision and monitoring of the teaching body
- The establishment of a mixed-faith evaluation committee of curricular and lesson resources for GRE to ensure that the materials taught offer a broad and inclusive perspective that encourages the students' autonomy in their religious beliefs
- A national approach to facilitating greater transparency in all aspects of SRE/RI teaching
- Developing a wholistic education program that includes both SRE/RI and GRE
- A national approach to addressing and countering religious vilification and bullying in government schools
- In-service training for Department of Education teachers and school executives to deal effectively with religious bullying.

SRE/RI empowers students of the different religious faiths by reaffirming their identity and that of their families. In practice, the very fact that the schools cater for special religious education means that the schools officially value religion as a construct and that they respect religion within the public sphere of the school. Thus, 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 of both the universal and particularistic aspects of religious education. Within this framework, parental choice and listening to the student voice are also very important.

- Introduction of a national accreditation framework recognised by the Departments of Education for all SRE/RI teachers

At the same time, Gross and Rutland believe that there is an acute need to understand the boundaries which are required to create respect for all faiths within the liberal state to ensure that one faith does not undermine the other faiths to promote its own ends. In this regard, they posit that "a combination of SRE and GRE is optimal, since it enables students to develop and reflect on their own identity capital, as well as understanding other religious faiths and the different perceptions of the ways to achieve a good and moral existence. This, however, is age related, since children first need to develop their own identity

before they are able to understand broader identities" (p.272).

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 and Rutland 2021, p.267).

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