

# EXPLORING THE VALUE OF SPECIAL RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA

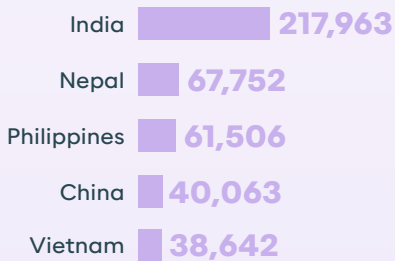
Based on: Special Religious Education in Australia and its Value to Contemporary Society

By: Zehavit Gross & Suzanne D. Rutland

## AUSTRALIA REPRESENTS A MULTICULTURAL AND MULTIFAITH NATION



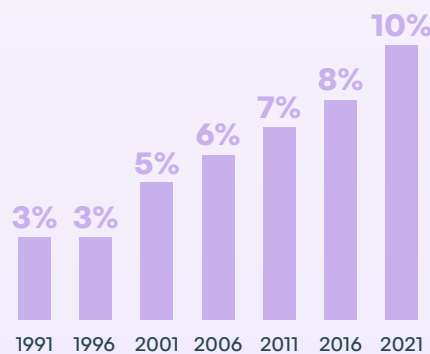
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Growth in people from above countries, ABS Census 2016-2021

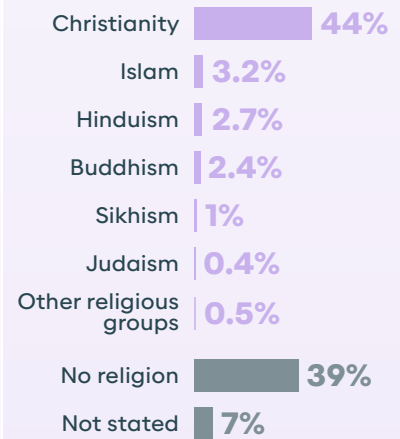


The proportion of Australians affiliated with religions other than Christianity is growing:



ABS Census 1991-2021

Religious affiliation in Australia 2021:



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).

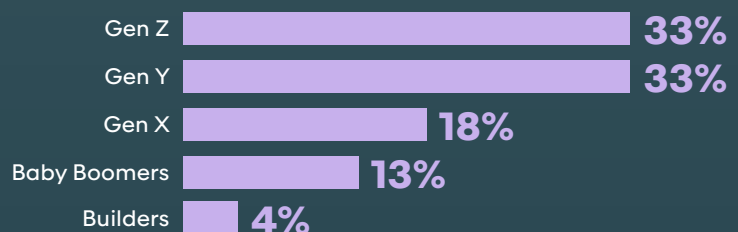


**74%** of Australians believe **racism** is negatively impacting Australian society today (McCrindle 2022).



**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



## 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 in 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.

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Introducing professional development for Department of Education teachers and school executives to deal effectively with religious bullying.

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**Additional research**  
McCrindle 2022,  
online survey of 999  
Australians in field  
26 June-4 July 2022.



Storytelling and  
visualisation by

**mccrindle**



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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).

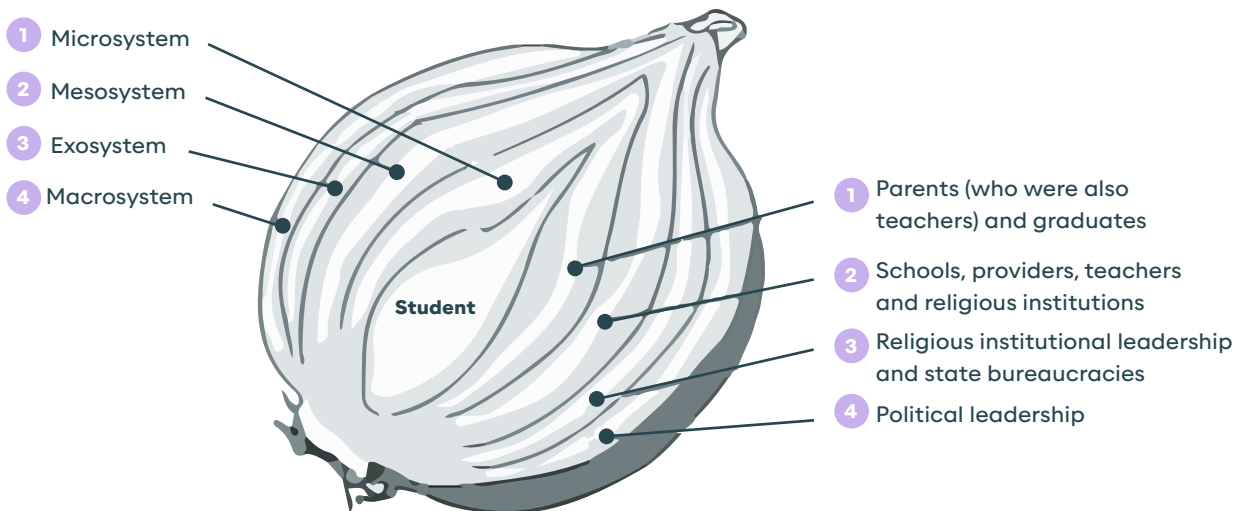
In 2022, McCrindle undertook supplementary research to validate Gross and Rutland’s findings. This is referenced throughout the report as ‘McCrindle, 2022’. This research included an online survey of Australians, focus groups with religious Australians and interviews with faith leaders. Quotes throughout 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.

Online survey: in field from the 26th of June - 4th of July 2022, completed by 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.

### BRONFENBRENNER ECOLOGICAL MAPPING

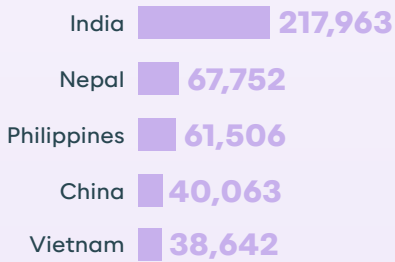


# Executive summary

## AUSTRALIA REPRESENTS A MULTICULTURAL AND MULTIFAITH NATION



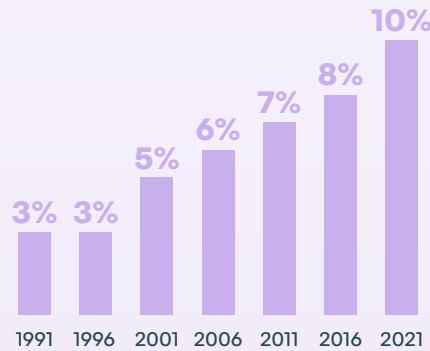
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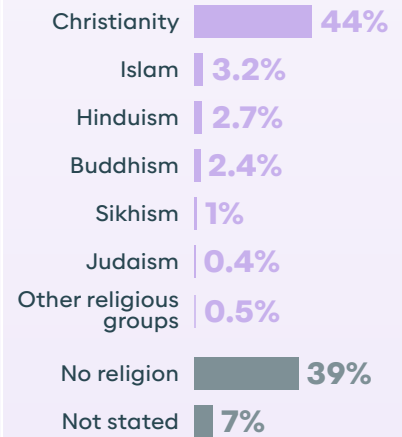


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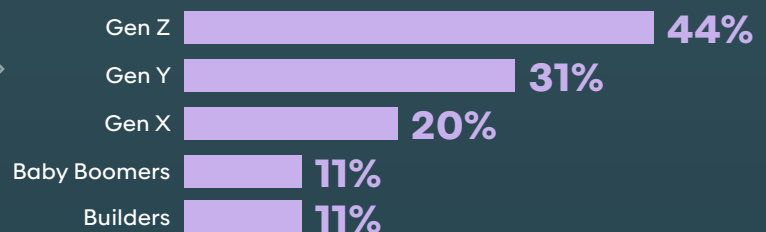


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## BRINGING SRE/RI INTO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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.

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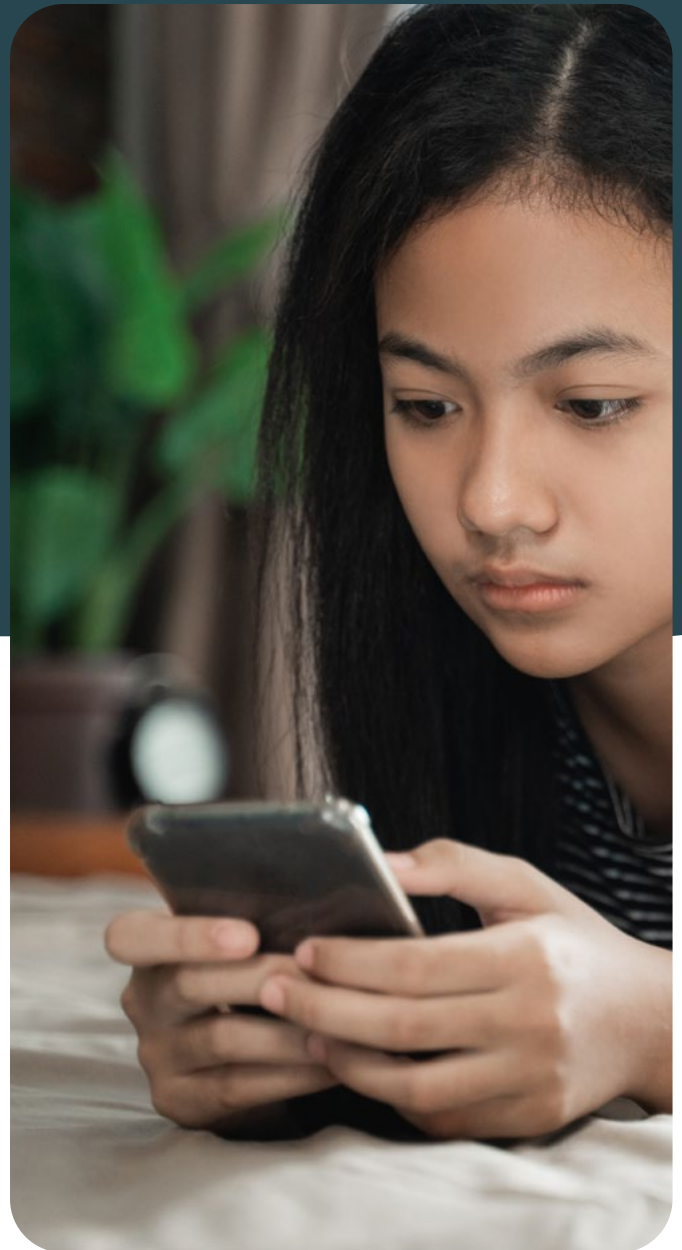
# Challenges facing students today

## A RAPIDLY CHANGING WORLD

We live in an era of radical changes in all aspects of society. As Gross and Rutland (2021) note, "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 (2021) highlight, several scholars, such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hutchins, have written books which are highly critical of institutional religion. Gross and Rutland 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 a 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.

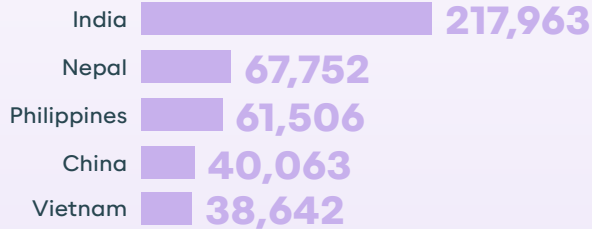
While this may be evidence that the next generation feel empowered and emboldened to make up their mind about the world around them, maintaining a peripheral focus on the value of community and looking outside of themselves is still important. This is a value that is strong in religious traditions.

# Australia's context: growing religious diversity

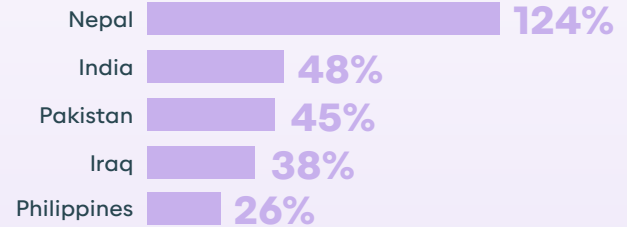
Australia today is as diverse as it ever has been, reflective of the growing range of cultural and religious backgrounds of those who call Australia home.

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

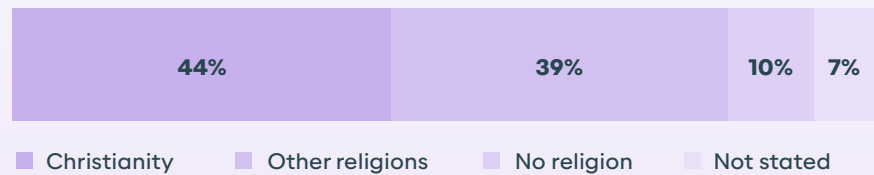


## FASTEST GROWING COMMUNITIES SINCE 2016



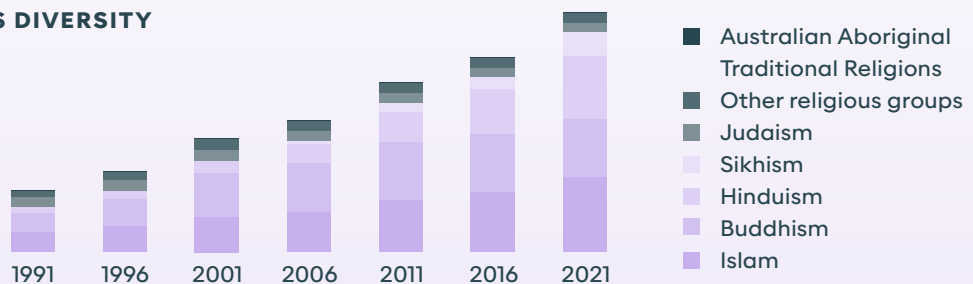
With this proportion of the Australian population having been born overseas, it is unsurprising that the religious landscape is also evolving, including an increasing range of beliefs and identities.

## RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION IN AUSTRALIA 2021

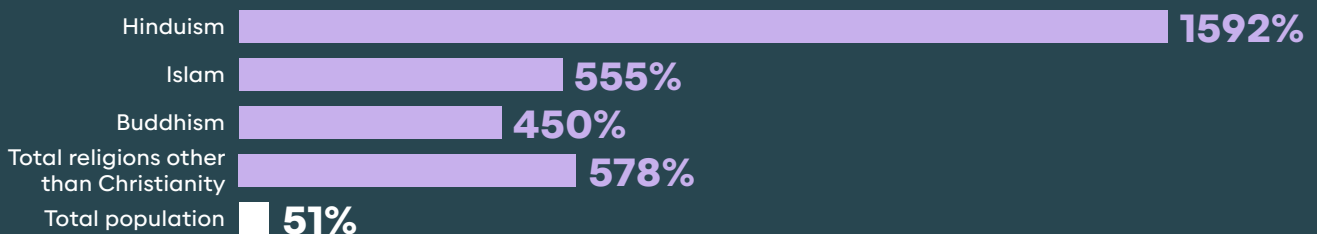


## GROWING RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

*Growth in religions other than Christianity 1991-2021 (ABS Census 1991-2021)*



## AUSTRALIA'S GROWING RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY (INCREASE SINCE 1991)



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. (ABS Census, 2016-2021)

**2016** Three in ten Australians identify as no religion



**2021** Two in five Australians identify as no religion





# 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.

# There has been a push against SRE/RI in government schools.

Reflecting increasing secularisation in the twenty first century, academics and parents alike are critical of religious education in schools. This is a continuation of the global debate around the place of SRE in government schools. Australian scholars such as Byrne 2009, 2013, 2014; Bouma and Halafoff 2009; Maddox 2014 argue strongly against SRE/RI. Australians are concerned that religious education currently offered in Australia does not paint an accurate picture of religion in Australia today, but shows preferential treatment to larger religious groups, particularly Christianity. 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. This demonstrates the need for collaboration between the faith groups to ensure a united approach is achieved and not one group is dominant on the scene.

"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, McCrindle 2022)

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



**Three in four Australians agree that children should be allowed to learn about religion through religious education in schools.**

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 this education has helped them to understand others' beliefs more, which shows religious education is still relevant and important to Australians.

### IMPACT OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION CLASSES FOR AUSTRALIANS WHO HAVE ATTENDED (N=671);

(McCrindle 2022).

- 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



# 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)

Through GRE, students have the opportunity to learn about how different religious groups may approach ethical dilemmas and develop an understanding of the complexities that underlie moral and ethical beliefs (Swanson 2010). In doing so, students are encouraged to step outside of their own beliefs and see the world around them from others' perspectives.

"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 many key factors that help children to understand the society in which they live in" (Christian faith leader, McCrindle 2022).

Gross and Rutland's book revealed 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 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. Within this framework, having a belief in a higher being, a key element in SRE/RI, can contribute significantly to values education (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" (p.82).



# 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. Gross and Rutland (2021) recognise Côté's (2005) proposed 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 (p.103).

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..." (p.115). McCrindle's interviews further expanded on identity formation through SRE/RI, particularly for migrant communities, as respondents commented:

"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).

# Spirituality, health and wellbeing

## **SRE/RI CONTRIBUTES TO STUDENTS' SPIRITUALITY, HEALTH AND WELLBEING**

The holistic needs of children extend beyond the physical and intellectual components of traditional schooling where 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 of schooling and is for some students 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.

"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).

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. 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" (p.137).



# Educating for multiculturalism

## SRE/RI CONTRIBUTES TO DEVELOPING A CULTURE OF ACCEPTANCE NOW AND IN THE FUTURE

Initial multicultural policies adopted by the Whitlam and Fraser governments, primarily focused on ethnic diversity, rather than religious diversity (thin multiculturalism), aiming to create social cohesion. 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.

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 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" (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 with their class 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 towards their religion so it's good to go in and have an open mind about every other religion" (p.169).

## COUNTERING RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM AND EXTREMISM

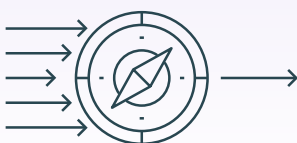
While some scholars believe SRE/RI can discourage religious extremism, others are concerned SRE will push certain religious agendas onto children, potentially removing the safety that a regulated classroom provides. As such, more extreme aspects of any religion may be elevated, presenting a skewed and 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.

**"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 disinfected of sunlight where they can be held to account"**

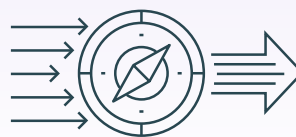
— Christian faith leader, McCrindle 2022

### 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).

# 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 not unique to students and school, but extends to the Australian population more broadly as well (McCrinkle 2022).

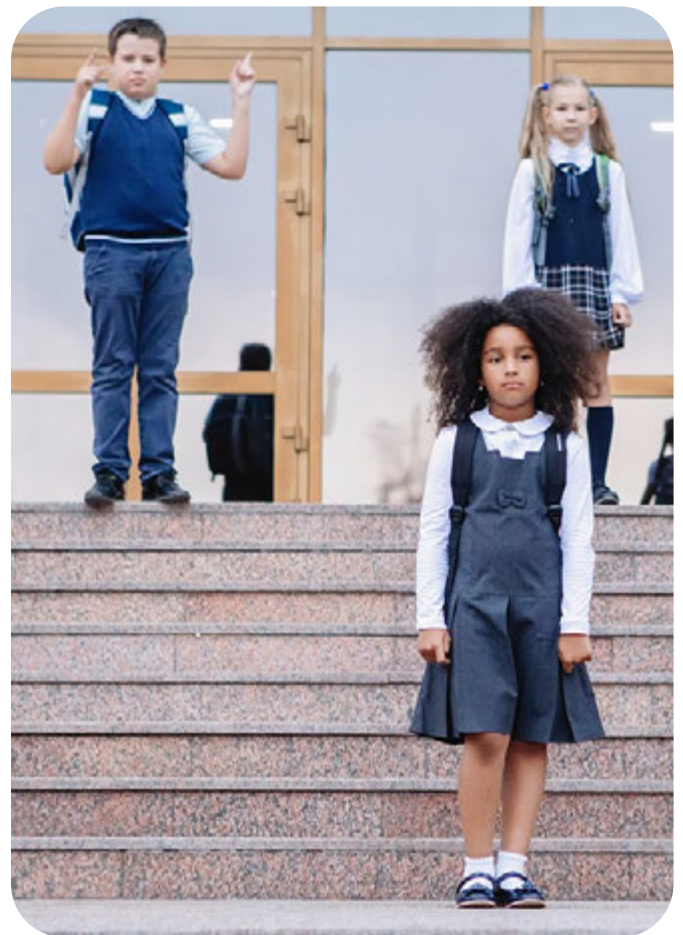


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Australians believe a lack of acceptance and tolerance towards others are key issues impacting society today (McCrinkle 2022). In fact, three in four Australians consider prejudice against others (75%) and racism (74%) to be the key issues negatively impacting Australian society right now. There is a general failure to recognise the role that religion plays in discrimination 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.

One in four Australians today (24%) report having experienced discrimination because of their religion or religious views (McCrinkle 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, McCrinkle 2022).





Students from the different religious groups who have clearly identifying religious markers are particularly prone to religious vilification and bullying. Gross and Rutland (2021) 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.

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. 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 interviewee, McCrindle 2022



# Building effective SRE/RI programs

## It comes down to 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 a more ethics focused class such as the SEE classes offered in NSW. It is essential to invest in alternate options for families who do not wish for their child to be attending religious classes of any sort, providing parents an opportunity to invest in the holistic education of their child without a particular religious context.

**"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

**"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

# A combined SRE/RI and GRE approach

In addition to SRE/RI, Gross and Rutland (2021) argue that GRE should be strengthened in schools and integrated into the general curriculum for all students in order to gain a broader understanding of others' beliefs. 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 creates space for them to be aware and accepting of the diversity within Australia today.

McCrinkle (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, McCrinkle 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.

"In SRE, [students] have an acknowledgement of what makes them, and they can be supported in their particular faith group. 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, McCrinkle 2022).





## Faith communities should lead GRE in schools

McCindle'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, while GRE should also be influenced by religious leaders overseeing the curriculum that is taught by 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/RI 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'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" (Islamic faith leader, McCindle 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 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, McCindle 2022).

# Bringing SRE/RI into the twenty-first century

In the context of the changing global and domestic landscape, 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), 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 socialisation and education in the SRE/RI classroom; to foster a constructivist approach to teaching about the religion, rather than an essentialist approach; to draw on the techniques of experiential and informal education; and to ensure reflective, rather than an instrumental teaching and learning pedagogy.



# 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/RI in government schools so students can learn about the various religions that makes Australia the multicultural society it is today. SRE/RI provides values education within the framework of belief in God or a higher spiritual being, 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. 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, reflective, and critical pedagogy to achieve the core competencies of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL).

Schools today must recognise that the religious education of a child is crucial for their holistic development including their spirituality, health and wellbeing. 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 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.





**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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