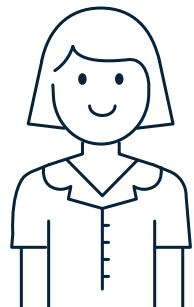


# Study of Special Religious Education and its value to contemporary society

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Zehavit Gross and Suzanne D. Rutland



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Professor Zehavit Gross is Associate Professor, Head of the graduate program of Management and Development in Informal Education Systems in the School of Education, and the UNESCO/ Burg Chair in Education for Human Values, Tolerance and Peace, Bar-Ilan University, Israel. She is Honorary Research Associate in the Department of Hebrew, Biblical & Jewish Studies, University of Sydney. Her main area of specialisation is socialisation processes (religious, secular, feminine and civic) among adolescents. One of her latest publications with L. Davies, & A. Diab (Eds.) is *Gender, religion and education in a chaotic postmodern world* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013). She is the president of the Israeli Society of Comparative Education (ICES) and recently received the Good Work Award (2017) from the Association of Moral Education (AME) for an outstanding research project with practical implications to moral education.

## Professor Emerita Suzanne D. Rutland OAM

Suzanne D. Rutland (MA (Hons) PhD, Dip Ed, OAM) is Professor Emerita in the Department of Hebrew, Biblical & Jewish Studies, University of Sydney. Her main area of specialisation is Australian Jewish history, with a focus on Australia, the Holocaust, Israel and Jewish education. Her latest books are *The Jews in Australia* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), and co-author with Sam Lipski, '*Let My People Go: The Untold Story of Australia and Soviet Jews, 1959-1989*' (2015), which was co-winner of the 2016 Australian Prime Minister's Literary Awards, Australian History. In 2008 she received the Medal of the Order of Australia for services to Higher Jewish Education and interfaith dialogue.

# Executive summary

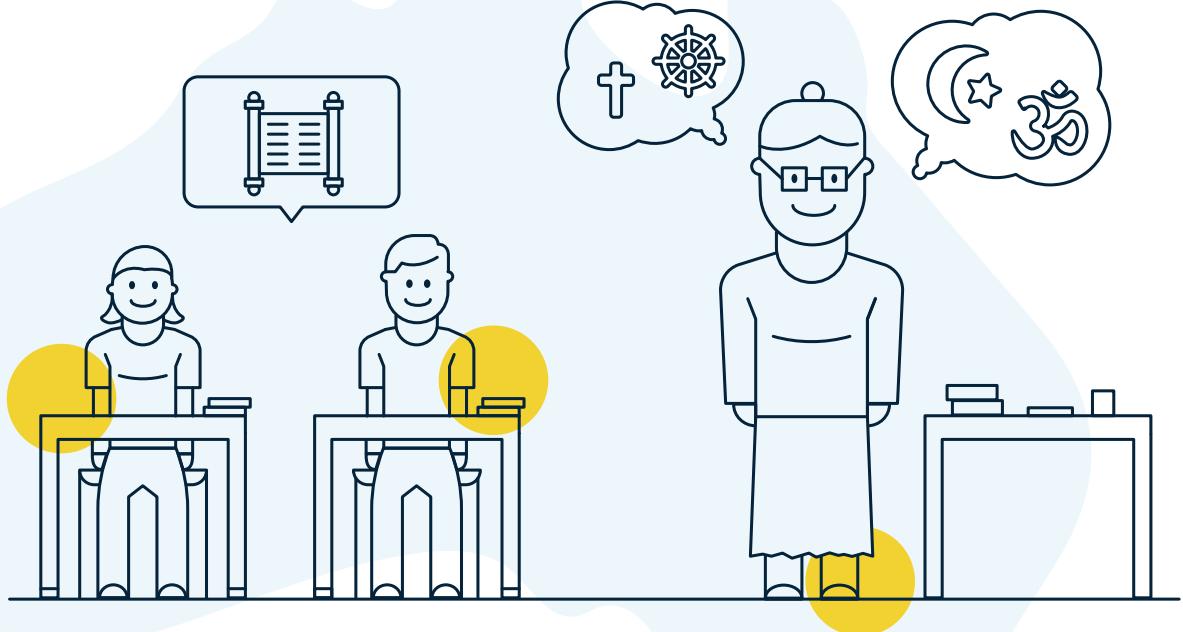
## Special Religious Education is an important part of the rich tapestry of contemporary Australian society

Australia is a dynamic contemporary society comprised of a diverse range of cultures, faiths and beliefs. While the number of Australians identifying with Christianity has been declining in recent decades, two in three Australians currently identify with a religion or have spiritual beliefs, with Christianity being the largest religion.

Faith and belief continue to be an integral part of contemporary Australian society and therefore need to be supported in the public arena. Special Religious Education (SRE) provides an important opportunity to integrate **religious education** into the Australian educational system.

This report outlines the importance of maintaining SRE while ensuring that programs are developed within a reflective and critical lens. Programs should also consider the Australian Government's nine key values and all the key recommendations from the 2015 government review.

Implementing these recommendations will strengthen young people's **personal identity** and convey the importance of special religious education for their **moral and ethical development**.



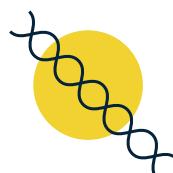
## SRE provides key benefits including:



- An effective **values education** that empowers student decision making, fosters student action and assigns real student responsibility



- Important **psychological benefits** to students' mental health and wellbeing



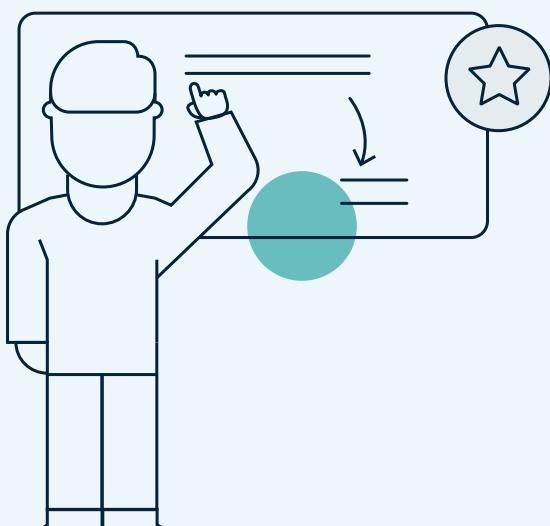
- **Strengthening the multicultural fabric** of Australian schools



- Creating **safe places** for students to explore deeper questions of identity

## Ensure best practice teaching and learning techniques

Meaningfully engaging the next generation will require effective teaching and learning strategies. SRE facilitators need to be trained in the best practice approaches to religious education in order to provide a robust curriculum that understands and addresses the challenges facing contemporary society.



# Introduction

## A changing world

Our world is changing. The way we make sense of our context and what we value is increasingly being shaped by a more global perspective.

The key forces that are shaping our future as a society include:



Globalisation



Digitisation



Materialism



Pluralism



Individualism

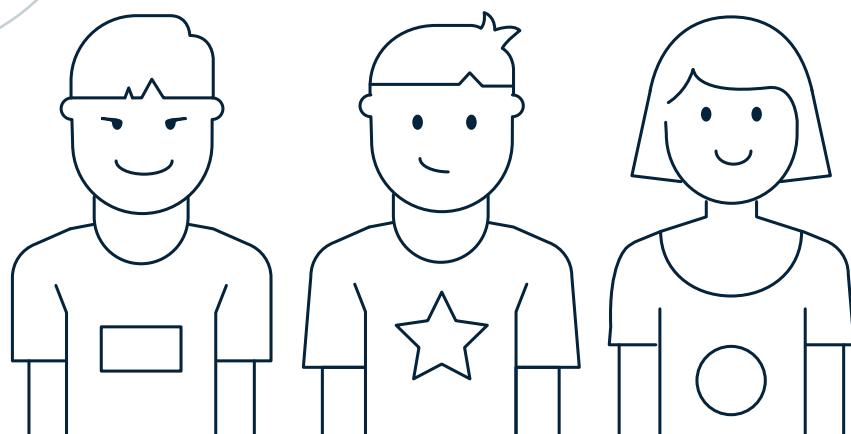


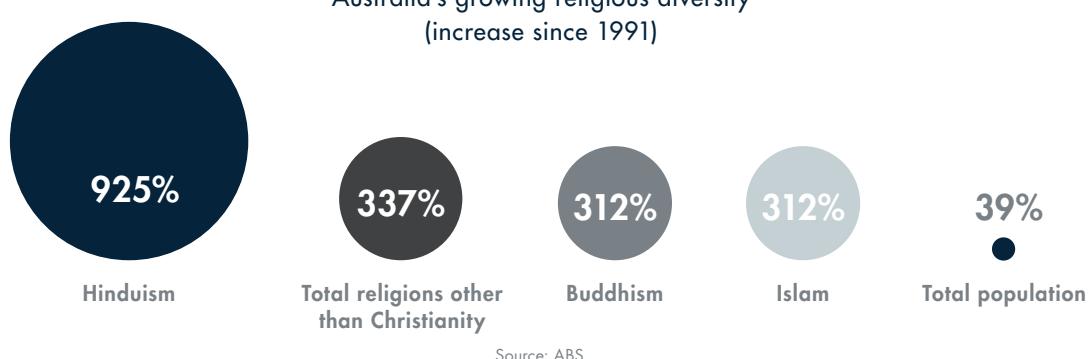
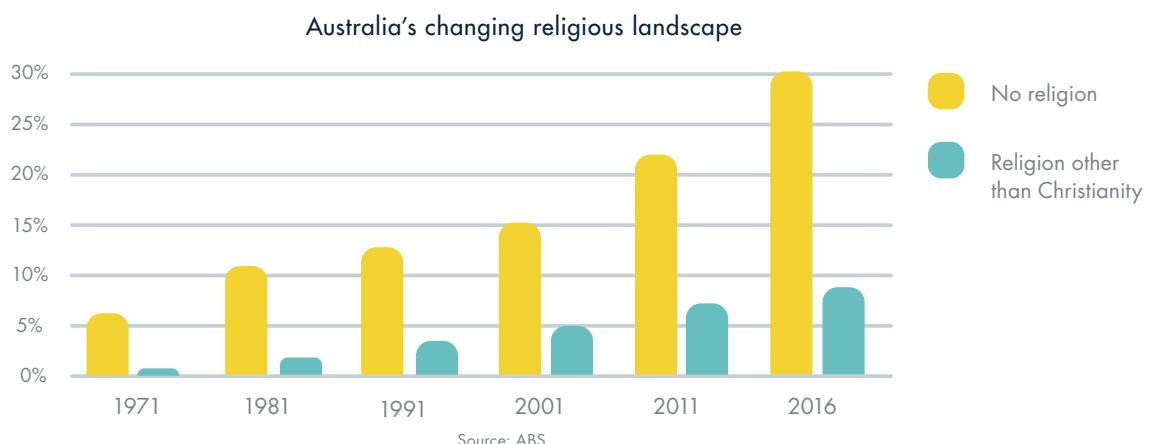
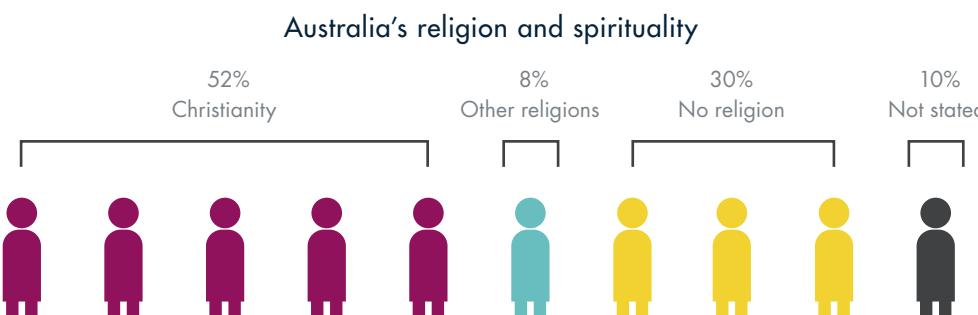
Secularisation &  
fundamentalism

## A changing Australia

These global changes are also shaping Australian society and culture. Religion is one marker of our changing cultural landscape. Overall, the number of Australians identifying with a religion or spiritual belief is declining.

Despite this, religious diversity is increasing, and more than two in three Australians (68%) currently identify with a religion or spiritual belief (McCindle, 2017).





## Development of Special Religious Education in New South Wales

This history of religion and religious education in Australia is reflective of our country's broader social and cultural changes. Special Religious Education (SRE) began in New South Wales in 1880 with weekly classes known as 'Right of Entry' or 'scripture' classes. Today, parents choose whether their child attends SRE classes, and there are alternative options of Special Ethics Education (SEE) or No Religion.

In 2015 the NSW Department of Education commissioned a major review of both SRE and SEE. The aim of this study, the first of its kind, was to understand how SRE and SEE is currently operating in schools.

# The advantages of maintaining Special Religious Education

## SRE's positive contribution to contemporary society

The global debate regarding religious education in government schools has stimulated discussion in Australia around the merit of SRE and its place in contemporary Australian society. Providing SRE classes for NSW students and their diverse religious backgrounds allows for a more intentional teaching and learning approach to fostering spirituality, religious belief, and religious

values. In addition to providing important psychological benefits to students' health and wellbeing, SRE classes can strengthen the multicultural fabric of Australia and foster social cohesion by providing a sense of belonging and **safe places** for students to explore deeper questions of cultural and religious identity in an environment of **trust and respect**.



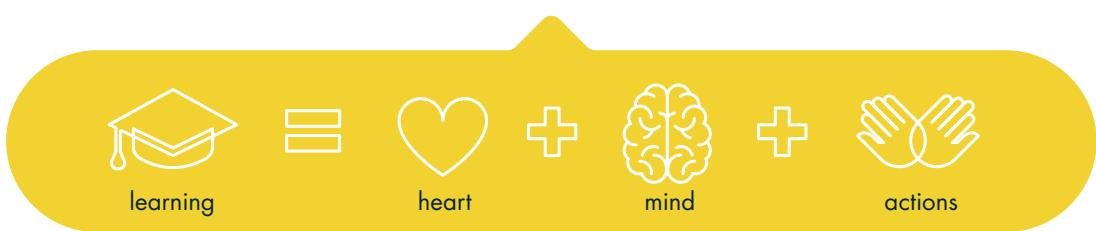
## Values education

As Australia entered the 21st Century the Commonwealth Government became concerned by the increasing social challenges such as marriage breakdown and family dysfunction, drug problems, crime, as well as ethnic and religious tension. These problems were increasing in prevalence despite Australia's increasing wealth, education and standards of living.

In 2004, the Commonwealth Government introduced the National Framework for Values Education to address the adverse trends in childhood and adolescent development and wellbeing that were deemed to be associated with these social problems (Hill, 2010).

The government justified this emphasis on values education on the basis that schooling educates the whole child and must necessarily engage a student's **heart, mind and actions**. Values education is also supported because it is seen to empower student decision making, foster student action and assign real student responsibility.

By retaining SRE but encouraging a values education approach, students will be able to investigate what it means to be human and how to put this into action within their own individual belief system.



## Key values outlined in the National Framework for Values Education



## Facilitating children's mental health and wellbeing



The NSW Department of Education believes in the importance of the health and wellbeing of school students. Recent studies have shown that Australia's child and adolescent wellbeing indicators have not matched simultaneous increases in Australia's wealth and prosperity. Given these findings, the Department of Education has increased their focus on facilitating children's health and wellbeing.

Today's students are operating in a highly individualised society and have been referred to by some as "Generation Me" (Twenge, 2009). This contemporary focus on individual needs rather than looking outward has created psychological problems that can be countered by focussing outward, on the 'greater good'.



**"Consistent with prior literature, our results suggest associations of frequent religious participation in adolescence with greater subsequent psychological well-being, character strengths, and lower risks of mental illness and several health behaviours."**

*Chan and VanderWeele, Harvard University,  
American Journal of Epidemiology, September 2018*

### Studies link positive health and wellbeing outcomes with:



belief in a higher spiritual being, public and private prayer, meditation (Chen and Vanderweele, 2018)



concepts of giving and generosity to others (Nielsen, 2010)



expressing gratitude (Nielsen, 2010)



values education (Gross, 2013)

SRE, as a form of religious education, fosters many of these attributes and can therefore strengthen child and adolescent health and wellbeing.

# The advantages of maintaining Special Religious Education

## Strengthening students' culture and identity

Students need to be empowered to develop their own identity and understand their place in broader society. School can play a major role in helping young people understand the different social spaces they are connected to, such as family, work, school, sport, and their social and moral obligations within each of these spaces.

SRE aims to assist students in constructing their own identity through **appreciating their religious and cultural heritage**, and using this as a basis to teach students how to work through the different moral and social obligations placed on them



## Strengthening multiculturalism in Australia by enriching religious diversity

Multiculturalism continues to be important for Australia and New South Wales, acknowledging and celebrating the great cultural and religious diversity that makes up contemporary Australian society.

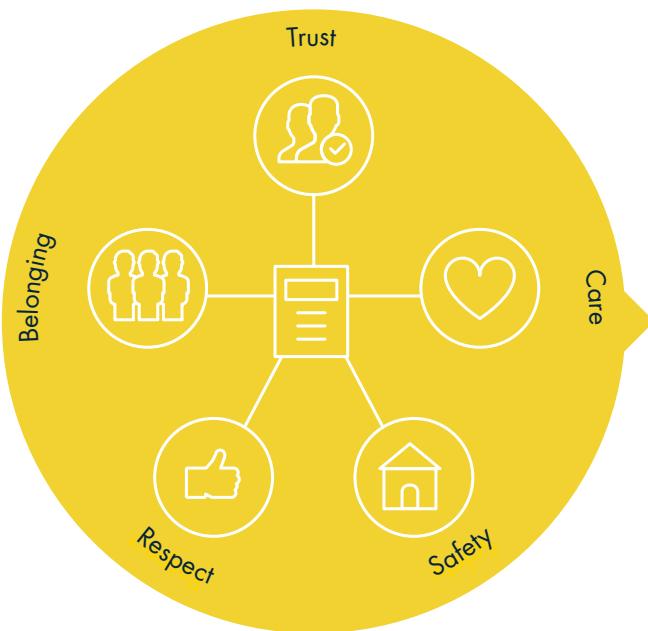
Religion is a key component of cultural heritage, and religious education is therefore vital to maintaining Australia's rich cultural diversity. SRE provides an opportunity to incorporate a multicultural emphasis in the school curriculum, thereby playing a crucial role in **strengthening multiculturalism** in our school system. Continuing to offer parents the choice of SRE and SEE ensures that this multiculturalism is integrated in a way that maintains parents' autonomy.



## Creating a 'safe place' for exploring religious identity at school

The concept of a safe place is an integral part of students developing their own social identity, as it enables students to think through their religious identity within a warm and fun environment (Gross and Rutland, 2015). By studying the traditions and culture of their own faith, children can develop a **positive sense of self** which can assist them to counter negativity they may encounter in the playground and later in life. This complies with the recommendation of the Council of Europe (2010) in creating the religious education classroom as a 'safe place' (Jackson, 2014).

Each religious faith develops its own conception of the good life, and SRE classes allow students the opportunity to be exposed to various religious heritages within the classroom in government schools. This exploration of general religious concepts, as well as students' own religious heritage, enables the construction of a safe place in government schools for students to develop their unique religious identity (Gross, 2006).



Research has demonstrated that four core values are important in the classroom: **trust, respect, care and safety** (Adalbjarnardottir, 2010). These are key values for reflective teaching and religious education (Gross, 2010). In a previous study, the authors found all these four values were fostered in Jewish SRE classrooms (Gross and Rutland, 2015).

The teachers built an atmosphere of trust with the children who felt free to express their feelings and existential dilemmas. They also demonstrated respect for the different levels of the students' beliefs and home practices in a non-judgmental fashion and created an atmosphere of care and safety in the SRE classroom. Our research also highlighted a fifth core value, that of developing a sense of belonging. These five core values need to be incorporated into the SRE professional development program.

# Bringing the system into the 21st Century

## Recommendations from the 2015 report

In 2014 the NSW Government commissioned a full review of SRE, with the first detailed study of the whole system undertaken in 2015. This Review made a total of 39 recommendations relating to SRE. In response, the NSW Department of Education formed a Consultative Committee

with representatives from all faith groups offering SRE to act on the key recommendations in conjunction with the Department. The Review's key findings relating to SRE and the Department and Committee's responses are summarised below.



The need for monitoring, transparency and accountability



Significant need for more government involvement in the implementation of SRE



Better teacher accreditation, professional development and evaluation



Age appropriate curriculum content



Understanding new modes and patterns of delivery using advanced technology



Improved complaints procedures and protocols



Registration of SRE Boards, Associations and Committees

## Importance of pedagogic approaches and best practice for SRE

A number of the recommendations of the 2015 Review relate to pedagogic issues which are crucial in bringing SRE into the 21st Century.

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 will require effective teaching and learning strategies. 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.

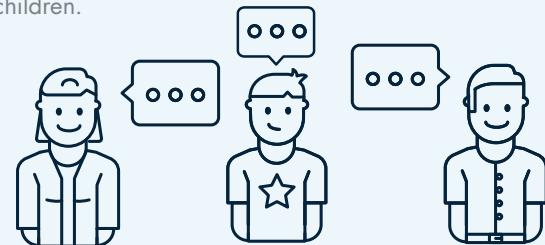
The following pedagogic concepts are key to providing best SRE practice in the future.

### 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).

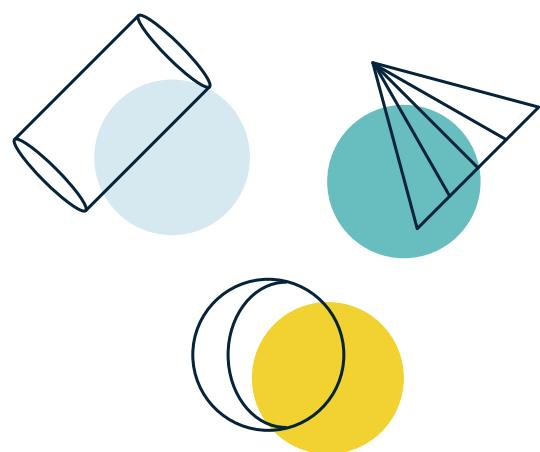
Experiential learning and informality are the mediums where socialisation and education can be fostered in a complementary manner to initiate students into their cultural and religious heritage (Gross and Rutland, 2017).

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 participatory learning experience (Dewey 1963, Sfard 1998, 2007, Gross and Rutland, 2015, Gross and Rutland, 2017). SRE pedagogy needs to understand the importance of experiential learning and incorporate these elements into its teaching and learning strategies.



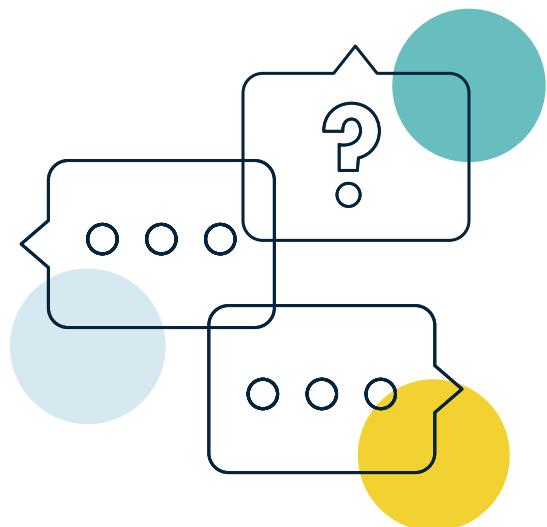
# Bringing the system into the 21st Century

## 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; Gross, 2013).

**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; Jackson, 2014).



## Instrumental vs. Reflective teaching

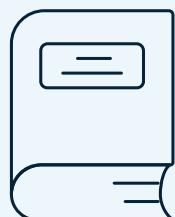
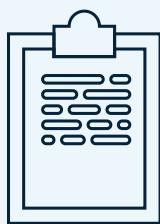
Pedagogical literature distinguishes between two teaching styles (Gross, 2010):

- **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 as fostering 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).

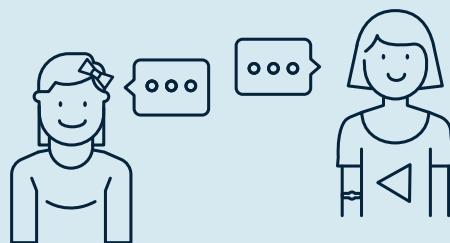
### Instrumental teaching approach to religious education

- 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



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).

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.

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