

## Special Religious Education vs. Philosophy Based Ethics in Australian Primary Schools

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In 2011, controversy erupted when philosophy based ethics classes were introduced into state primary schools in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. The ethics classes were introduced as an alternative to Special Religious Education (SRE) classes, which run for at least thirty minutes each week in NSW government primary schools. The introduction of the philosophy based ethics classes was met with considerable opposition from supporters of SRE. The debate has resulted in extensive media coverage; a change to the NSW Education Act; a parliamentary inquiry; and a review of both SRE and the ethics classes.

Since 1866, all government schools in NSW have been required to offer SRE. Unlike other approaches to religious education, SRE specifically aims to inculcate students with the beliefs of one particular religion. Since 1880, parents have been able to *opt out* of SRE classes. However, this *opt out* enrolment process is one major point of contention, as it means parents don't need to explicitly consent to their children being in SRE classes. Rather, students are automatically enrolled if their parent states that they have a religion on their school enrolment form. This has helped ensure high levels of participation in SRE.

Government school teachers, however, are forbidden from proselytizing and government schooling is supposed to "consist of strictly non-sectarian and secular instruction."<sup>i</sup> Therefore, SRE classes are not taught by teachers employed in schools but rather by trained volunteers, who are authorised representatives of religious bodies. Until 2011, schools were forbidden from running alternative educational programs during the time set aside for SRE, as explained in the government's now amended religious education policy:

Schools are to support SRE by ensuring that no formal lessons or scheduled school activities occur during time set aside for SRE..... These activities should neither compete with SRE nor be alternative lessons in the subjects within the curriculum or other areas, such as, *ethics, values, civics or general religious education*..... Such activities may create conflict of choice for some parents and for some students attending SRE.<sup>ii</sup>

It was thought that offering alternatives to SRE would unfairly force religious parents and students to choose between scripture classes and some other educationally valuable activity.

However, this policy became increasingly untenable, as increasing numbers of parents and students (at least 20%) opted out of SRE.<sup>iii</sup> Many of these parents and students complained about their children being restricted to busy work during SRE time, such as play, watching movies, reading, or free time. The following is one of the many accounts given by such parents:

My son was made to feel punished for not partaking in the class and sat in the hallway during the sessions and told to keep quiet... So I sent a letter to the teacher asking if my son can be given a work sheet or pencil and paper and if not that I would be happy to provide him an alternative, only to receive a phone call basically bullying me to allow him to partake in the

class... On this note, due to being bullied and feeling that there is no alternative in this situation, I find the only solution is to keep my son out of school on that particular day and give him tasks at home and teach him about life, Australian history and broadening his knowledge on ALL types of religious practices, not just Christianity.<sup>iv</sup>

It was not only atheist parents who opted out of SRE. Many parents opted out of SRE because classes were not available in their faith. Eighty percent of SRE in NSW is Christian based.<sup>v</sup> This educational policy became more problematic as the numbers of Australians who identified as either non-Christian or non-religious increased. In 1971, only 6.7 percent of Australians stated that they had “no religion” but by 2011 this had increased to 22.3 percent, while the number of Australians identifying as Christian decreased from 86.2 percent to 61.1 percent.<sup>vi</sup>

Since 2003, the NSW Federation of Parents and Citizens’ Association and the St James Ethics Centre had lobbied the government to allow for secular ethics classes to be an alternative to SRE. In 2010, permission was given to trial a philosophy based ethics curriculum for grade 5 and 6 students (i.e., 10-12 year olds). Like SRE, this curriculum also had to be delivered by volunteers. The ethics curriculum was initially developed by philosopher, Philip Cam, a leader in the Philosophy for Children movement.<sup>vii</sup> Philosophy for Children involves children participating in collaborative, dialogue based, philosophical inquiries with the aim of fostering critical, creative, and caring thinking.<sup>viii</sup> In the ethics classes, students undertake small group tasks where they take up a position on a moral dilemma. The responses to the small group tasks then form the basis of whole class dialogues. The aim is not just to teach students about ethical issues but to foster the capacity for moral reasoning. The pilot ethics curriculum included topics like justice; fairness; lying and telling the truth; graffiti; animal rights; environmental ethics; the good life; children’s rights; virtues and vices.

After this successful trial, the *1990 Education Act* was amended to allow all government schools to offer the ethics classes as an alternative to SRE. However, this decision was met with considerable opposition. In 2011, the conservative Liberal-National party was elected to govern NSW, along with two members of the evangelical, Christian Democratic Party, led by the Reverend Fred Nile.<sup>ix</sup> Nile proposed a bill to repeal the amendment to the education act in order to abolish the ethics classes. This led to a parliamentary inquiry into the ethics classes. In 2012, Nile’s bill was dismissed, with the inquiry concluding that ethics and SRE should continue to be offered as alternate curricula, providing a “right of choice for students and their parents/carers”.<sup>x</sup> The inquiry recommended that both SRE and the ethics curricula be reviewed by an independent body. That review was undertaken during 2015-2016 and released to the public in early 2018.<sup>xi</sup> While the final report raised some concerns with both SRE and the ethics classes, it also recommended that both programs continue to be offered.

However, the outcomes of the parliamentary inquiry and the independent review have not resolved all points of contention. Firstly, the opt out enrolment procedure continues to be subject to widespread criticism. Furthermore, there are many students who do not attend either of these educational programs and, thus, who are left with nothing meaningful to do during the time set aside for SRE and ethics classes. In particular, those students who are religious but whose schools do not offer SRE courses in their faith continue to feel excluded. Many of these parents perceive the ethics classes to be atheistic and, thus, they don’t see the ethics curriculum as a suitable alternative. Some religious families also

prefer that their children only received religious instruction outside of school. The independent review found that of the parents surveyed whose students did not participate in either SRE or ethics classes, 75% (n=397) were dissatisfied with the activities their children were given as alternatives.<sup>xii</sup>

Another ongoing criticism relates to the educational quality of SRE classes. The independent review found that, “Only nine of the 43 [curriculum] documents expressed desired student learning in terms of knowledge, understanding and skills” and a “considerable proportion of teachers’ manuals privileged teacher-directed lessons and activities for students that required relatively low levels of cognitive demand”.<sup>xiii</sup> That is, the curricula and pedagogy tended to emphasise lower order thinking, such as uncritical rote learning of information. Numerous public submissions to the NSW parliamentary inquiry complained that SRE aims to indoctrinate students, which discourages critical and creative thinking and autonomy. In addition, concerns were expressed about inappropriate content within the SRE curricula. Such concerns were reflected in data collected from parents during the independent review of SRE:

- “SRE teachers who they felt were in the school to proselytise (convert students to their faith and church), and/or promote their own personal religious beliefs, and/or did not stick to the curriculum.”<sup>xiv</sup>
- “an older child not being permitted to ask questions or express their own views”.
- “teaching what parents’ perceive as fundamentalist views or literal interpretations of the scriptures that could be seen as anti-science. For example, creationism or that dinosaurs never existed.”<sup>xv</sup>
- “scare tactics and divisiveness; psychological safety for LGBTI [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and/or Intersex] students; pressure to attend; dogmatic approach; Santa Claus not being real; discourse scaring the students, e.g. themselves or their family going to hell.”<sup>xvi</sup>
- “inappropriate language and topics discussed, which had disturbed and/or frightened their child—most commonly younger infant school-aged or early primary children—or was seen as being too evangelical. For example, parents gave examples of what their child had been told by an SRE teacher: that people who do not believe in God would die young; that someone who doesn’t love Jesus is the enemy; and that children who had stopped going to scripture would go to hell.”<sup>xvii</sup>
- “SRE teachers ‘overstepping’ the mark and addressing personal development issues. A small number of parents objected to secondary school SRE teachers addressing issues of sexuality and expressing homophobic views, which one parent specifically felt could impact on the mental health of students questioning their sexuality.”<sup>xviii</sup>

While the review of the ethics classes was more favourable, some concerns about its educational value have also been raised. In particular, the ethics classes have been criticized for promoting moral relativism, which may encourage moral apathy or even immorality. This criticism was made in numerous public submissions to the parliamentary inquiry:

I am opposing the [ethics] course because how can an ethics course show any absolutes. It can’t because there are no absolutes, nothing is right or wrong if it is being taught by atheists. It is

from the bible that we get our moral truths, from God in the Old Testament and Jesus in the New Testament.... All our ethics come from the bible.<sup>xix</sup>

[The ethics course] teaches relative morals with no absolutes as humanists cannot accept that morals can be laid down by another person or higher spiritual identity.<sup>xx</sup>

In actual fact, the providers of the NSW ethics curriculum explicitly reject moral relativism:

Students are encouraged and supported to make their own judgments about whether something is right or wrong, good or bad and to explain why, using evidence and reason. All Primary Ethics classes are based on this approach *as distinct from blind appeal to authority or moral relativist approaches*.<sup>xxi</sup>

Nonetheless, in her review of the initial trial of the ethics curriculum, Sue Knight found that some of the volunteers teaching the ethics classes expressed the view that there were “no right or wrong answers” and many thought that their role was solely to encourage students to express their opinions “in order that many different viewpoints come to be aired in the classroom or that students learn to disagree without anger”.<sup>xxii</sup> At least one of the students also got the impression that the classes promoted moral relativism:

Every week I look forward to ethics classes. It’s a fun way to talk about morals. *Primary Ethics has taught me that there is no right or wrong answer* and that it’s ok to change your mind.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Knight found that some of the people teaching the ethics classes simply failed to prompt students to justify their opinions with reasons and to critique the opinions of others. This may be due to a lack of pedagogical skill, stemming from the fact that the classes are taught by volunteers who often have little formal training in either teaching or philosophy.

Thus, the current arrangement regarding the teaching of SRE and philosophical ethics in NSW government schools remains contentious. It gives parents and students the ability to choose between two alternative school curricula. However, there remain significant concerns about the content and delivery of both curricula.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> New South Wales Government (2015). *1990 Education Act, No 8*,

<http://www.legislation.nsw.gov.au/#/view/act/1990/8> (accessed September 3, 2018).

<sup>ii</sup> Cited in Parliament of New South Wales Legislative Council (2011). *Education Amendment (Ethics Classes) Repeal Bill 2011*, <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/bills/Pages/bill-details.aspx?pk=2666> (accessed September 3, 2018), italics added.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Fairness in Religion in Schools (2011). *Parent’s Stories*, <http://religionsinschool.com/parents-stories/> (accessed 28 December, 2016). For more examples also see: New South Wales Department of Education (2012). *Public Submissions to the Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011*, <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/committees/inquiries/Pages/inquiry-details.aspx?pk=1769#tab-submissions> (accessed August 1, 2018).

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- <sup>v</sup> Crawford, K.A. (2012). "Education, ethics and religion: A case study". *Citizenship, Social and Economics Education*, 11 (2), pp. 121-132.
- <sup>vi</sup> Henry, N. and Kurzak, K. (2012). *Religion in Australia*, <http://www.australiancollaboration.com.au/pdf/FactSheets/Religion-FactSheet.pdf> (accessed December 28, 2016).
- <sup>vii</sup> Cam, P. (2012). *Teaching ethics in schools: A new approach to moral education*. Melbourne: ACER
- <sup>viii</sup> Lipman, M. (2003). *Thinking in education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- <sup>ix</sup> Crawford, op. cit.
- <sup>x</sup> Parliament of New South Wales Legislative Council (2012). *Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011 Final Report*, p. ix. <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/lcdocs/inquiries/1769/120530%20Final%20report.pdf> (accessed September 3, 2018).
- <sup>xi</sup> Department of Education (2016). *2015 Review of Special Religious Education And Special Education In Ethics In NSW Government Schools*, [https://education.nsw.gov.au/media/schools-operation/2015\\_review\\_sre\\_see.pdf](https://education.nsw.gov.au/media/schools-operation/2015_review_sre_see.pdf) (accessed 31 August, 2018).
- <sup>xii</sup> Ibid, p. xxvii
- <sup>xiii</sup> Ibid, pp. xxvi-xxvii
- <sup>xiv</sup> Ibid, p. 108
- <sup>xv</sup> Ibid. p. 109
- <sup>xvi</sup> Ibid, p. 72
- <sup>xvii</sup> Ibid, p. 108
- <sup>xviii</sup> Ibid, p. 108
- <sup>xix</sup> New South Wales Department of Education (2012). *Public Submissions to the Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011, Public Submission no. 39* <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/committees/inquiries/Pages/inquiry-details.aspx?pk=1769#tab-submissions> (accessed August 1, 2018).
- <sup>xx</sup> Ibid, *public submission no. 211*
- <sup>xxi</sup> Primary Ethics (n.d.). *About Our Classes*, <https://primaryethics.com.au/about-ethics-classes/> (accessed September 3, 2018).
- <sup>xxii</sup> Knight, S. (2010). *NSW Ethics Course Trial Final Report*, [http://www.dec.nsw.gov.au/detresources/Ethics\\_Evaluation\\_Final\\_Report\\_11112010\\_HQssrhmpwK.pdf](http://www.dec.nsw.gov.au/detresources/Ethics_Evaluation_Final_Report_11112010_HQssrhmpwK.pdf) (accessed 27 December, 2016).
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Ethics student quoted in Parliament of New South Wales Legislative Council (2012). *Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011 Final Report*, p. 16. <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/lcdocs/inquiries/1769/120530%20Final%20report.pdf> (accessed September 3, 2018).