

Special Religious Education vs. Philosophy Based Ethics in Australian Primary Schools¹

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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. However, some supporters of SRE opposed the ethics classes, provoking a heated public debate; extensive media coverage; a change to the NSW Education Act; a parliamentary inquiry into the ethic classes; and a 2015 review of SRE and the ethics classes.

Since 1866, the NSW Education Act (i.e., the laws regulating education in that state) has required all government schools in NSW to offer SRE. SRE is a type of religious education that aims to inculcate students with the beliefs of one particular religion. It requires students to be segregated into faith based groups. Since 1880, parents have been able to *opt out* of SRE classes. However, this *opt out* enrolment process is one 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 selects a religion on their school enrolment form. This has helped ensure high levels of participation in SRE.

SRE is not part of the formal school curriculum and, thus, it is not taught by teachers employed in schools. Rather, SRE programs are developed by approved religious organizations, who also train and accredit volunteers to deliver SRE classes. This enables the government to maintain that state schools are secular (i.e., religiously neutral). Unlike the USA, Australia's constitution does not explicitly mandate a separation of church and state. Nonetheless, there is an assumption that public schools should be secular since they are supposed to cater for *all* students. In fact, the NSW Education Act specifically states that public schooling must "consist of strictly non-sectarian and secular instruction."² However, it has been argued that SRE undermines the secularity of public schools.³

Many students opt out of SRE classes.⁴ Most of these students are from non-religious or religious minority backgrounds (i.e., non-Christian). While there are dozens of diverse religious organisations approved to provide SRE in NSW, 80% of SRE classes are Christian focused.⁵ Until 2011, students who sat out were not offered alternative educational programs. They partook in teacher-supervised, self-directed

¹ For a detailed account and philosophical analysis of this case, see the following chapter by the case author: Bleazby (2019) *Education*. In: Oppy G (ed) *A Companion to Atheism and Education*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 383-394.

² New South Wales Government (2015). *1990 Education Act, No 8*, <http://www.legislation.nsw.gov.au/#/view/act/1990/8> (accessed September 3, 2018).

³ Byrne, C. (2014) *Religion in Secular Education: What, in heaven's name, are we teaching our children?* Leiden: Brill.

⁴ 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 (accessed 31 August, 2018).

⁵ Crawford, K.A. (2012). "Education, ethics and religion: A case study". *Citizenship, Social and Economics Education*, 11 (2), p. 121.

activities, like reading, playing, or watching a movie because the Education Act explicitly forbid schools from running alternative educational programs:

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.⁶

The above clause ensured that religious parents and students would not have to choose between SRE and other valuable activities. However, as Australian society become increasingly secular and multicultural and more students sat out SRE, this clause became increasingly contentious.⁷ Complaints of the following nature became increasingly common:

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.⁸

This led parents' groups to lobby the NSW government to allow schools to run ethics classes for students not attending SRE. In 2010, the St James Ethics Centre was permitted to trial philosophy based ethics classes in some schools. These classes were also delivered by trained volunteers. The program was developed by Australian philosopher, Philip Cam and influenced by Matthew Lipman's Philosophy for Children program, which involves students sitting in a circle and participating in whole-class philosophical dialogues with the aim of fostering critical, creative, and caring thinking.⁹ In Cam's program, students undertook small group tasks based around moral dilemmas, which then led into whole class dialogues. Topics included justice; fairness; lying and telling the truth; graffiti; animal rights; environmental ethics; the good life; children's rights; virtues and vices.¹⁰

In 2010, the NSW government amended the Education Act, allowing all schools to offer the ethics classes. This provoked considerable controversy, as some religious groups claimed the ethics classes created unfair competition for SRE. In 2011, a new, more conservative, government was elected, which

⁶ Quoted in Parliament of New South Wales Legislative Council (2012). *Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011 Final Report*. <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/lcdocs/inquiries/1769/120530%20Final%20report.pdf> (accessed September 3, 2018), p. 7, italics added.

⁷ The proportion of Australians identifying as Christian has decreased from 88.2% in 1966 to just 52.1% in 2016 with 30% of Australians now stating they have "no religion" Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017) *Religion in Australia: 2016 census data summary*. <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/2071.0~2016~Main%20Features~Religion%20ata%20Summary~70#>

⁸ Quoted in Bleazby, 2019, op cit, p. 384.

⁹ Cam, P. (2012). *Teaching ethics in schools: A new approach to moral education*. Melbourne: ACER; Lipman, M. (2003). *Thinking in education*. Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁰ Bleazby, op cit., 2019, p. 385.

enabled an evangelical politician, the Reverend Fred Nile, to propose a bill to abolish the ethics classes.¹¹ This resulted in a parliamentary inquiry into the ethics classes, followed by a 2015 review of both SRE and the ethics program. While the inquiry and the review raised some concerns with both SRE and the ethics classes, it also recommended that both programs continue to be offered.¹²

However, the provision of ethics classes has not resolved all points of contention. Many students do not attend either SRE or ethics classes and, thus, are still left with nothing meaningful to do. In particular, students from religious minority backgrounds who cannot access SRE in their own faith continue to feel excluded. Some perceive the ethics classes to be atheistic and, as such, they are an unsuitable alternative for religious minority students.¹³ Some religious families also prefer that their children only receive religious instruction outside of school. A survey of parents whose children did not participate in either SRE or ethics classes found that 75% (n=397) were dissatisfied with the alternative activities their children were offered.¹⁴

Another criticism relates to the quality of SRE classes. The 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”.¹⁵ That is, the programs tended to emphasise the uncritical rote learning of information. There have also been concerns that SRE aims to indoctrinate, which may also discourage critical thinking and autonomy.¹⁶ Additionally, parents have complained about inappropriate content, e.g.:

- “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.”¹⁷
- “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.”¹⁸
- “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.”¹⁹
- “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

¹¹ Crawford (2012), op cit., p. 125.

¹² Parliament of New South Wales Legislative Council (2011), op cit.; Department of Education (2016), op cit.;

¹³ Bleazby, 2019 op cit., p. 392.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. xxvii

¹⁵ Ibid, pp. xxvi-xxvii

¹⁶ Bleazby, op cit., p. 387.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 108

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 109

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 72

someone who doesn't love Jesus is the enemy; and that children who had stopped going to scripture would go to hell."²⁰

- "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."²¹

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.²² For example,

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.²³

[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.²⁴

In actual fact, the ethics curriculum explicitly rejects 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*.²⁵

However, an evaluation of the ethics classes found that some teachers were encouraging relativism because they thought their role was solely to encourage students to express their opinions and "learn to disagree without anger". Consequently, they did not prompt students to justify their opinions and critique arguments.²⁶ This problem likely stems from the fact that the classes were taught by volunteers, not qualified teachers skilled in philosophical pedagogy.²⁷ Some students also got the impression that the classes promoted moral relativism, as one stated:

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.²⁸

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

²⁰ Ibid, p. 108

²¹ Ibid, p. 108

²² Bleazby, 2019, op cit., pp. 390-391.

²³ 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).

²⁴ Ibid, *public submission no. 211*

²⁵ Quoted in Bleazby, 2019, op cit., p. 291.

²⁶ Knight, S. (2010). *NSW Ethics Course Trial Final Report*, Sydney: NSW Department of Education and Training.

²⁷ Bleazby, 2019, op cit., pp. 391-392.

²⁸ Ethics student quoted in Parliament of New South Wales Legislative Council (2012), op cit., p. 16.

two alternative school curricula. However, there remain significant concerns about the content and delivery of both curricula.

Notes