


# Special Religious Education in a post-secular Australia

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Special Religious Education (SRE) classes are held in New South Wales public primary schools weekly. This article is built on a review of SRE classes based on Anglican past experiences to develop recommendations to ameliorate shortcomings and enhance their quality and value in New South Wales public primary schools in a post-secular society. The research was a literature study and evaluative interpretation of Anglican SRE in New South Wales from the newly emerged post-secular context. It described and discussed the history of SRE and education in New South Wales: making a contextual inquiry into the history of such education in a secular society. It used a qualitative approach to describe and interpret historical interview responses of Anglican adults about their experiences as students in SRE classes while attending New South Wales public primary schools. Three meta-themes arose from their experiences: a space for questioning; the importance of relationship and the temporal experience of SRE lessons. Recommendations to improve and deepen the SRE curriculum were made as a result of these responses, and a possible pedagogical framework to work on improving both the curriculum and learning experiences of students in SRE was suggested. This research confirmed an expectation that there will be religion and Christian teaching within the secular education system to embed virtues, values and ethics into Australian society; it is in programmes, such as SRE, children can question the way we live and act, develop a sense of belonging and a sense that they matter. It also showed that the current way is not the most conducive model for this to occur.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** In the context of the secular/non-religious public reflex in Australian society there are conflicting views in the community about the place of SRE in government schools. In this context, it is critical that Christian educators can support their claims of the continued value and role of SRE.

**Keywords:** post-secular; Special Religious Education; religious education; spirituality; Australia.

## Introduction

Western culture today has clearly moved away from the model of Christendom towards secularism; yet the desire for spiritual and religious guidance and learning is still present: perhaps more sought after and stronger than ever before (Smith & Denton 2009:28). Traditionally, the Anglican Church has been heavily involved in education (Lankshear 1995:17). Starting with monastic and diocesan schools through to universities; and then later into public and elementary schools, the Anglican Church initiated the work of education in England (Branson 1947:263).

And yet while Anglicans have enjoyed an active role within the public education system of the State of New South Wales, in the current context of the secular/non-religious public reflex in Australian society, there are conflicting views in the community about the place of Special Religious Education (SRE) in New South Wales government schools. Some parents and teachers are calling for an end to SRE for various reasons, including that students who do not attend SRE classes are left with 'dead time' (Smith & Singhal 2020). A recent independent review of SRE in New South Wales government schools highlighted how community views on this question are polarised between groups who value the role of SRE in providing 'a much needed spiritual component to the holistic education of children in Government Schools' (NSW Department of Education 2016:5) and others who argue that in the context of the secular or non-religious public reflex in Australian society, SRE has 'lost its relevance and is potentially damaging in the views it espouses' (NSW Department of Education 2016:5). These are signs that, going forward, there will be a greater scrutiny on how religion engages in what have become secular environments: including schools.

## The growth of the secular nation

The word 'secular' derives from the Latin *saecularis*: 'generation, age' (Stelten 1995:236) and *saeculum*: 'a period/concept of time' (Casanova 2012:455); indicating people, activities or a period of time considered to be worldly or non-religious.

Australia moved from a collection of colonies into a Federal Commonwealth in 1901. The states of this new federation were established on a secular basis. This was done with the understanding that Australian society would be religion-free in the public sphere but assuming that the nation would remain Christian. This is seen in the wording of the Australian Constitution (Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act 1900):

WHEREAS the people of New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Queensland, and Tasmania, humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God, have agreed to unite in one indissoluble Federal Commonwealth under the Crown of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.

It explicitly states that God was a part of the political thought process and not absent from the political discourse. While many Australians are affiliated with a religious organisation of some kind, Australian census data does indicate that such affiliations are generally falling, and Australians increasingly claim to have 'no religion' on census reports. In the 2016 census, 30.1% of the Australian population was irreligious, while 52.1% of the Australian population identified as Christian (Buddhism accounted for 2.4%, Islam 2.6%, Hinduism 1.9% and Judaism 0.4% of the Australian population) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016). By 2021, 43.9% of the Australian population identified as Christian (with Buddhism accounting for 2.4%, Islam 3.2%, Hinduism 2.7% and Judaism 0.4%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021) and the category 'No religion' was 38.9%. As such, the number of people affiliated with Christianity in Australia decreased from 12.2 million (52.1%) in 2016 to 11.1 million (43.9%) in 2021 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021).

Secularisation theory promoted secular notions with the intended aim of limiting religious influence on state politics (Wilson 2020:12) and eradicating or removing religion from public and social life (Iversen 2013). It aimed to do so while interpreting decreasing religious affiliation and attendance as a sign that religion was slowly disappearing from industrial and post-industrial societies (Casanova 2011:54) but has been proven wrong in this thought as matters of faith are not fading in their public impact (Bouma et al. 2011:5; Hancock 2019:610) with religion even playing a more prominent role in Australian politics (Rocha 2021; Warhurst 2019). Communities are trying to make sense of diverse and distinctive manifestations and revelatory moments of the divine that they encounter or are challenged by with a sense of implicit religion (Bailey 1997:1). In recent years people have turned to spirituality, and with this turn, there has been a reawakened awareness, and interest, in religions (and the importance thereof): ancient, new and

alternative (Lombaard 2016b:5). Because implicit religion is so conscious of, and receptive to, the experience of faith commitments (the fundamental measure of validity in the emergent post-secular context) a post-secular environment moves us past the closed secularist suppositions and assumptions and enables us to see faith active in society (Lombaard 2016a:260).

## Post-secular Australia

The reawakening to religious and spiritual thought in Australia is leading to a growing interest and inclusion of religion in public dialogue and debate. Embedded in this growing interest is the phenomenon of the post-secular. Post-secularism, as a concept, is used to designate this renewed interest in religion as a 'social, political and cultural force, acknowledging the need for political and social engagement with religious as well as non-faith based groups and voices' (Warwick School of Modern Languages and Cultures 2017).

Post-secularism is an understanding that our society is, (or is becoming), multireligious: including the non-religious and secular as all parts of a multifaceted community (Rosati & Stoeckl 2012:6). This means secular reason, public life and religion will blend and unite in 'a more or less cooperative and shared space' (Staudigl & Alvis 2017:589). Religious organisations and churches being (re-)integrated into public dialogue and debate echoes the changing attitudes towards religion in Australian public life (Wilson & Steger 2013:482). The research by Firth (2022) demonstrated, that in Australia, the assumption that matters of faith are 'dead' in the public sphere is not the case. Religiously marked intercultural conflict is on the rise in Australia. Bringing up children who are secure in their religious identity will help offer a foundation for respect and tolerance in their interactions with people of other faiths and other belief systems. As the shift into the age of post-secularism is recognised, the space for religious and spiritual learning and guidance will become more desirable and competitive (Lewin 2016:12). The Anglican SRE programme, which is currently tolerated, could be strengthened and be an opportunity to run effective and life-changing programmes.

## Religion in schools

Religion has always played a part in the education provided by government schools (more commonly known as State Schools) in New South Wales. Initially when New South Wales was a penal colony, the Anglican chaplains were responsible for overseeing the religious and moral instruction of the children of convicts, emancipists and soldiers (Burton 1840:5). The governors of the colony implemented laws evolving from English, (Protestant); particularly Church of England, institutions (Parliament of Australia House of Representatives Committees 2000), and anticipated that the Anglican Church would administer their education, teaching both secular and religious instruction through the Church's denominational schools (Cable 1952:8).

However, in 1848, a public system of education was launched, and in 1872 the New South Wales (then colonial government) introduced a policy of secular instruction in the state schools. In 1880, the New South Wales Public legislated the *Public Instruction Act* (NSW Government 1880) that enabled the colonial government to take over church schools. As part of this Act an agreement was reached with the Christian denominations establishing General Religious Education (GRE); the work of schoolteachers: teaching children a general knowledge about diverse religions as an identifiable and integral part of the regular school curriculum (Bouma 2011) and SRE; the arrangement whereby children are taught, with parental approval, the distinctive religious beliefs of the home and family and taught by the clergy and volunteers.

## Special Religious Education in schools today?

An ongoing criticism of SRE relates to the educational quality of SRE classes, which characterises the attitude people have towards SRE being taught in schools. The independent review into SRE found that:

Only nine of the 43 [curriculum] documents expressed desired student learning in terms of knowledge, understanding and skills ... [With] a considerable proportion of teachers' manuals privileged teacher-directed lessons and activities for students that required relatively low levels of cognitive demand. (ARTD Consultants 2017:xxvi, 84)

This means Anglicans need to not only have a curriculum non-Churched families will support and feel comfortable with, but that further education and information needs to be given to people, both inside and outside Anglican churches, about what and who SRE is actually for (Daoud 2020). However, hearing from those who have experienced and participated in the Anglican SRE programme can deepen our insight into it. What one experiences is assumed and adopted by them in the form of knowledge (Bachmetjevas 2021:474). Experience then transforms and shapes the individual, but this is only discoverable after the fact.

When asked: *What is your attitude to SRE being taught in schools today?*, eight of the 30 participants in Firth's investigation (2022) were either ambivalent towards its teaching or currently felt it was not relevant or as it currently stood was a waste of time. With the implementation of changes, such as those suggested from the participants themselves, there should be an experience that would not generate these ambivalent or negative thoughts (Nordgren, Van Harreveld & Van der Pligt 2006:252). Out of the 25 participants who thought SRE should still be taught in schools today, 11 made simple positive statements feeling that it was essential, although it would not necessarily bring children to church. Outside of 'yes' statements, two groups of statements came to the fore: those who absolutely want to see it in schools, and those who, while wanting it to be there, still want it to be a choice to participate, for example:

'I think children who want to be taught religious education should be given the chance regardless if it is a public or private [religious] school. Every child should have the opportunity to choose whether he/she would like to know more about religion.' (Danielle, 20, F, 6)

'I believe it should be a life choice not a forced choice of religion being put upon anyone.' (Christian, 29, M, 5)

'So religious Ed. I believe it's a hard one. For myself I want my kids to be brought up and exposed to that, but I also think it should be each family's choice.' (Melissa, 39, F, 3)

These statements show people who are supportive of SRE and believe that it should be there, accessible and promoted in schools, but want to support a world where participation is a choice, and differences of opinion do not divide but rather are balanced within an inclusive culture of diversity. Others felt it was essential to be able to teach morals and simply to share the Gospel, for example:

'I think it's a good thing. I think not only is it a positive moral grounding for children which is objective rather than relativistic ethics classes but it gives a grounding in the understanding and thought of Western culture without which we will fall as a people.' (Dylan, 23, M, 3)

'I still think it's very important and I think it should still happen just to teach even the basics of right and wrong. Just morally if we take that away who will teach right and wrong.' (Floyd, 44, M, 6)

'I think it is a good idea as it gives students an opportunity to learn about religion that they may not otherwise have.' (Peggy, 39, F, 7)

'Valuable part of school, it allows development and exploration of religion.' (Michael, 30, M, 1)

These responses pointed to the real potential of Anglican SRE lessons. The SRE provides with the opportunity to explore themes such as 'how we should be' or 'being human' and focus on ethics, morals, values (virtues), using the biblical stories as illustrative points to help children engage with alternate realities and ways of seeing the world (Heidegger 1962:159). Their responses led to recommendations that would improve SRE, and make it more beneficial, in our post-secular society.

## Recommendations for improving Anglican Special Religious Education curriculum

There are three particular recommendations in relation to improving Anglican SRE that ensued from the study.

### The creation of space to question

From the experiences of the participants a space for questioning (Taylor 2009:76) spoke to the heart of how they were able to explore and create meaning (O'Toole 2010:137). The five areas identified as the definitive concerns of human existence: encompassing the human search for the meaning of life, the search for gratification, the sense of curiosity, the inevitability



of isolation and the awareness of the inescapability of death (Yalom 1980:25), are all able to be explored, questioned and revisited in the space for questioning that SRE can enable.

The results revealed how people are continually engrossed in an unpredictable and changeable interplay of questioning and exploring meaning. Because questioning space is something more than a simple tool at an educator's disposal, when an SRE teacher is aware of the importance of the space for questioning, they are able to engage in building the framework by which the participants will frame their world and how they engage in relationship with self, others, nature, our environment, the universe and the transcendent (Puchalski et al. 2021). As such, it is important that the Anglican curriculum is designed with this space in mind and that SRE teachers are taught how to give it substance so that Anglican SRE can be an effective pathway that leads students to be open and explore religion and spirituality.

Such an open learning environment also moves education from a teaching focus, in which the teacher transfers knowledge to the pupil, to education with an emphasis on student learning.

Learning for the 21st century does not happen in our current classrooms through a traditional educational approach (whereby information and material must be taught at a specific place and time [Williams 2017:92]), but through a new culture of learning that comprises a massive information network that provides almost unlimited access and resources to learn about anything and a bounded and structured environment that allows for unlimited agency to build and experiment with things within those boundaries (Thomas & Brown 2011:19).

To fully implement, resource and support a space for questioning would be at the forefront of SRE educational change. Our society is currently grappling with deep ethical questions (Kunzman 2012:2). Moral discourses around ownership of land, animal protection and the patenting of threatened species (Böhme 2018:116–117) challenge human beings to confront the reality of how they are endangering the very foundations of their own lives. Böhme (2018:4) raised the question about what background and with what arguments one can take part in concrete discourse in order to contribute to a public process of forming opinion on moral questions and in so doing establish social norms. A space for questioning provided by SRE can be a place for children to begin participating in such discourse: this could further their interest in civics and citizenship more widely, and also blend and unite their secular reason, public life, and religion in 'a more or less cooperative and shared space' (Staudigl & Alvis 2017:589); the very embodiment of post-secularism.

## Virtues education

There are studies occurring in the wider context of our society that looked at the need to teach values education, although SRE should rather be focused on virtues. Hill (2008:7)

proposed that values education was an essential part of any religious education as our behaviour is where the effectiveness of our values is tested. This study has indicated that this is true for SRE, which aims to show children how to respond appropriately to the world they belong in. Lovat drew attention to the fact that values education is 'inheriting good things' (Lovat 2019:66) and if done well by teachers in terms of knowledge, pedagogical ability and with an ability to connect with students, they become a social conscience and a model of the attitudes and actions for students to follow. DeNobile (2019:32) pointed out that there appears to be few studies covering the impact of values education over the longer term and the evolution of students' attitudes as they develop. Yet there are identifiable universal virtues across communities and cultures that strongly indicate an historical and cross-cultural convergence: 'courage, justice, humanity, temperance, transcendence and wisdom' (Peterson & Seligman 2004:33). Without serious discussion and integration of virtues, deficiencies in existing ethical decision-making models cannot be addressed (Crossan, Mazutis & Seijts 2013:567). By sitting and reflecting on the values in play during SRE lessons, SRE can create a normalisation of active values, and discussion of such universal virtues, and this could lead to wider societal conversations about desired values and virtues mechanisms by which, through living these, people can grow into their authentic and desired self.

Currently the Anglican SRE curriculum does not use these lessons as an opportunity to engage in conversation about bullying (Hilliard et al. 2014:991), stealing (Dimmock & Fisher 2017:183), inclusion (Reicher, Haslam & Rath 2008:1313), racism (Lamont 2003:36) and fairness (Folger 1998:13): all of which, for example, can be explored through the parable of *the Good Samaritan*; although there are many encounters within both Old and New Testaments by which these issues could be explored: *Racism and the nasty treatment of the Hebrews* (Ex 1–2), *Rachael steals the teraphim* (Gn 31:19), *Fairness at the get-together* (Ja 2:1–4). These passages of scripture may need to be rewritten as narrative prose to tell these stories in such a way that the children can sit in them. The SRE lessons need to be informed and shaped by the values and virtues of the Anglican Church and any future and hopefully Christian community and world would want to live by. This cannot be set up to simply state right from wrong, but needs to be constructed in such a way that SRE lessons offer the children the ability to create and nurture a values framework that they would want to live by that also holds true to the virtues inherent within us.

Sutrop's (2015) research showed that the power to incentivise students to become conscious of their values and give them skills to reflect on them is in the hands of teachers. She argued that in order to advise and support students in reflecting on, and discussing their values, the teacher must first acquire the same skills and therefore more emphasis needs to be placed on teacher education on preparing teachers for their role as values educators (Sutrop 2015:189). Current SRE training (ICCOREIS 2019) has seven modules of which prospective teachers complete five. They cover:

Module 1: Teaching SRE in Government Schools

Module 2: Learning and Teaching

Module 3: Preparing and Delivering a Lesson

Module 4: Communicating in the Classroom

Module 5: Introduction to the Bible

Module 6: Classroom Experience

Module 7: Duty of Care

None of these modules cover values; nor indeed the desired virtue focus, and they do not give teachers the skills to reflect on or discuss virtues or values and yet it is these very things on which our everyday activities and decisions are based (Urbany, Reynolds & Phillips 2008:75).

As SRE teachers will need to be highly competent in the skills of reflecting and discussing their values, and specifically core virtues, a core component of SRE training would need to reflect this. Kopp and Mandl's research looking at actual practical value education in Germany found that there was currently no specific model for analysing values education in a coherent way that will enable researchers to obtain a picture about relevant categories for values education and to compare such categories according to these criteria (Kopp & Mandl 2014:6398). According to Kopp and Mandl (2014:6399): 'values education is the process of acquiring or changing values throughout the lifespan'. Values education takes place when people actively engage with the environment and its diverse and conflicting values (Wals & Jickling 2002:221), and it is into this space that core and universal virtues should be used to cross the divide.

### Relatable lessons

Lessons need to be relatable. As beings who exist in relationship and can define spirituality by relationship with self, others, nature, our environment, the universe and the transcendent (Puchalski et al. 2021), people seek to connect and relate to the people they are introduced to (Totterdell, Holman & Hukin 2008:283). As SRE teachers and students are always in relationship (Peters 2019:441), and these experiences are often influenced by what might be seen by some as minor matters (Segal 2011:469), it is important that the SRE teachers are given a range of options on how to use the stories of the biblical figures to relate them to current, real world, people, scenarios or events. If selected sensitively so that students also relate to these items, this will assist the teacher from appearing as indifferent, too remote or clinical or lacking intimacy.

## Recommendations for improving students' learning experiences in Anglican Special Religious Education

There are two particular recommendations in relation to improving students' learning experiences in Anglican SRE.

### The space to simply enjoy the Bible stories

The reflections on the experiences of SRE have also indicated the need for a focus around the 'useless' stories that can help children explore alternate *worlds that could be* and not just the *worlds as they are*. This place of storytelling should be both a place for children to enjoy stories and empower children to tell stories. Space will need to be given to wondering and exploring the issues these stories raise and will need to be told in such a way that they enable children to enter it in the ugliness of pain and grief and brokenness and not simply to 'teach' anything but let them experience the value of enjoying story-time and giving meaning or value themselves without a preformed right or wrong answer.

The lived world in which those who participated found themselves was a world built on the idea that to do anything or to study anything it had to have a measurable purpose: usually with the aim of attaining a job or skill set. Current educational models of the 21st century are designed around preparing people (as an economic commodity) to enter into the employment market (Roche 2017:623–629). Engagement in exploring alternate *worlds that could be* requires doing things for the simple enjoyment of doing them. This ability to stop and enjoy needs to be included into the SRE curriculum to give students another way of choosing how to engage with their world. This would address a small part of the push by our current society that to do and/or study something it must have a tangible result at the other end (Schindler & Eppler 2003:219).

### Creativity

The necessity of using tactile, sensory and creative elements and materials in religious education has been brought to the fore. Such activities are central if students are to draw upon a range of different learning styles and strategies to assist in more effective learning. For some children in the classroom context, tactile, sensory and creative activities may enable them to better connect (Heidegger 1962:152). The creative arts have been used successfully to hand on religious beliefs throughout history, and they have not been used well for SRE, there is the option of making them an integral component of its teaching. Different options to offer the students to help them to engage are a far more effective teaching method than the teacher being limited to a generic lesson manual that is currently offered for SRE. As such, SRE lessons need to be formed with different learning styles in mind.

Beghetto's (2016:8) research into creative learning pointed out that while it is self-evident that creativity can play a role in learning, children actually need to feel that it is safe to their creativity and ideas and worthwhile. This seemed to play out optimally when the teachers had created a supportive classroom environment. It is essential then, that SRE teachers will need to create safe space to enable the students to feel safe to engage in creative and adventurous activities.

## Recommendations for professional learning by teachers in Anglican Special Religious Education

The limited nature of SRE teacher training and selection limits the perception of professionalism that many have come to expect of those with a teaching responsibility within our wider community (Sachs 1997:449) and the perceptions people have on what Christians believe and how they should live. The current haphazard nature of training for SRE teaching, and apathy towards it, means that there should be a movement towards enhanced professionalism (Eaude 2011:49). This could be either focusing on selecting individuals who are properly trained, qualified and of exceptional calibre or by increasing the training of potential SRE teachers so that they meet this benchmark (Herodotou et al. 2019:u.n.). Excellent teachers can make SRE a wonderful and engaging space that builds identity, community and relationship in a space of exploration. In order to be able to include apologetic topics, even at a rudimentary level, then teachers would need to be skilled in basic theology and equipped to have and lead those discussions with children at a level they could understand, based on their own experiences of the world and in such a way that parents and the wider community are supportive of what is being taught. There also needs to be accountability for what is going on in the SRE classroom, including the provision of better information for parents and caregivers, with regular reports on what is occurring within their SRE classrooms and the conversations that are being generated.

## Recommendations for improving teaching (pedagogy) in Anglican Special Religious Education

From the experiences shared in this research it is evident that what a teacher does, or does not do, influences learning in others. As the importance of quality education has become more clearly understood and desired in Western society (Lipsky & Gartner 1989:3), so too has the teacher's role in the provision of these services. Quality teaching follows pedagogical practices that assist in giving children access to knowledge, activities and opportunities to advance their skills in ways that both build on previous learning and assist in learning how to learn, while also providing a solid framework for ongoing learning (Hyde 2005:294–295).

Hyde (2005:294–295) said that there are three interrelated dimensions needing to be covered within the pedagogical framework:

1. 'Attending to the spiritual dimension: *the felt sense, integrating awareness, weaving the threads of meaning and spiritual questing.*
2. Attending to the affective dimension: *the attitudes, values, reactions and feelings of students.*
3. Attending to the cognitive dimension: *focuses on knowledge, skills and abilities.*

Chalwell's, Horarik's and Noone's (2015:xii) research found four conceptual categories that capture the distinctive nature of SRE pedagogy for the SRE teachers. These are the SRE teachers':

1. 'experiences of guest/host relationships
2. experiences of vulnerability and authority
3. beliefs around truth and hope
4. belief in the importance of relational teaching'.

### Guest lecturer

Chalwell et al.'s (2015) research showed the experiences of SRE teachers who host the SRE lesson as they entered into public schools as guests of both the school and the classroom where they teach. They found that regardless of whether these are positive or negative experiences, the knowledge of being a guest influenced the SRE teachers' pedagogy. The SRE teachers, paid or volunteer, must have formal training to be an expert in children's theological education. They must know the material they are to teach intimately, and they must be prepared to offer appropriate answers and ways to explore questions the material will or may raise safely, in order that the children's future spiritual wellness is never at risk. They need to be trained to sit in a space of questioning and wonder where children can explore the material presented and offer their own conclusions and lead discoveries. The SRE teacher must feel comfortable being uncomfortable (McIntyre, Pedder & Rudduck 2005:149).

### Gateways of realities

Teachers of SRE enter into classrooms with the intent to share God's truth in the hope that SRE will engage with concepts about faith (Confraternity of Christian Doctrine: Diocese of Armidale 2015) and have a deep impact of who the children are in the future. From this research it is clear that SRE teachers offer students new lenses by which they can see worlds. These lenses need to offer perspectives on what the world was like, how it is, and how it could be. Part of equipping the SRE teacher needs to include journeying through these lenses, unseeing what they have seen and finding new ways of seeing. This should enable them to use SRE to take their students on such journeys, using biblical and current stories to engage cognitively with knowledge, skills and abilities of the students, and at the same time do so in a way that explores the spiritual dimension to develop awareness, meaning and their identity in relation to Self, God, nature and other.

### Gregarious relation

From the experiences of the participants, it was evident that the way in which SRE teachers engaged in relationship with them spoke to the heart of how they were valued and affirmed as human beings. Relationships between SRE teachers and students occur by the simple act of being together through the shared practice and involvement in educational activities. As such, anyone wishing to teach SRE must desire to relate. They need to desire relating positively



to the material and content of SRE; they need to desire relating positively to the students, their world and their future worlds; they need to desire relating positively to God so that the children can as well. This greater level of relating should also investigate attitudes and values while pushing students to engage more deeply with their virtues and explore and sit with the reactions and feelings of students. Such a way of relating will play a part in their future when the lessons learnt in SRE become present in their lives.

## Conclusion

This study by Firth (2022) sought to make an original contribution to knowledge by giving voice to the experiences and views of former Anglican SRE students in light of the newly emerged post-secular context. The research confirmed the hypothesis that there is a belief and expectation that there will be religion and Christian teaching within the secular education system to embed virtues, values and ethics into the Australian society, that it is in programmes such as SRE that children can question the way we live and act, develop a sense of belonging and a sense that they matter. But the study also showed the current way of teaching SRE is not the most conducive model for this to occur and addresses this problem. What emerges from the experiences of SRE that were shared is that there is a fundamental aspect, a magical component of SRE, that takes it beyond the normalcy of a regular school subject. In the experience, there is an ordinariness of the lessons, but at the same time something important is conveyed. Going forward, there will be a greater scrutiny on how religion engages in what have become secular environments. If we are to be able to continue to engage in ministry and with children in public schools, then whatever we are doing needs to be worthwhile and be something that (1) children want to do and (2) that parents want their children to be a part of. The seeds planted from SRE give children a resource that will help them act, engage, interpret and then respond to the world they find themselves inhabiting. These small seeds draw people towards deeper things that give meaning to their existence. It will be the seeds we plant, the scaffold we construct in the children that could well determine the future of the Anglican Church of Australia.

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The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

### Author's contributions

W.B.F. is the sole author of this article.

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### Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, W.B.F.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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