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A question of faith: reforming religious education in schools

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Last month, a Victorian tribunal found that the state department of education did not discriminate against children opting out of Special Religious Instruction (SRI) classes.

The plaintiffs – parents who chose to opt their children out of the classes – argued the students were treated differently, on religious grounds, and were not being offered proper instruction during SRI time.

The case has succeeded in creating public awareness of the flaws in the current system and in undermining the priority it gives to Christianity. But the victory is limited, and parents, educators, scholars and community leaders are continuing to call for improvements to SRI.

Reform is needed to create a more inclusive and equitable model of religious education.

From exclusion to inclusion

Victorian legislation states that public education is secular, but SRI programs remain exempt. SRI classes are taught by volunteers from various religious groups but the diversity of religions is not taught in a single class. The focus of each class is given to just one religion and most schools who offer SRI only provide a Christian option.

Before 2011, SRI was run as an opt-out system, which meant that all students were automatically enrolled in Christian SRI classes unless their parents specified otherwise.
A number of recommendations have been made in Australian studies over the past decade to either reform or abolish SRI, or SRE as it’s known in New South Wales, including calls to introduce the study of diverse Religions and Beliefs Education (RBE), also known as General Religions and Ethics Education (GREE) in Australia. This alternative model is more inclusive and teaches about a variety of religions and beliefs rather than just one.

These findings are in line with leading research emerging from the UK and the EU that has documented the benefits of these programs, which have been running in schools since the 1980s, as peacebuilding strategies in increasingly religiously diverse societies.

However, up until this recent case, these recommendations have largely fallen upon deaf ears in Victoria.

**Inequalities persist**

The lodging of the Victorian case catapulted SRI and alternatives into the press and led to a huge public outcry, within the print and social media. The department, too, was swamped with complaints.

It acted as a catalyst for some of the above research to be taken seriously by state actors and diverse religious and non-religious communities. It also galvanised groups such as *Fairness in Religion in Schools* (FIRIS), and the *Religions, Ethics and Education Network Australia* (REENA) into action. These groups helped to highlight the problems with the current models and the benefits of changing to others that were more inclusive.

These developments led to the Victorian department of education making two significant changes to the SRI policy in August 2011 well before the Victorian case was even heard early this year. These changes include a shift from an opt-out to an opt-in system for Christian SRI and to a commitment that children who chose to opt-out of SRI would be engaged in meaningful activities.

But there’s still much that needs to be done in order to at least make SRI more equitable, and to ensure that Victoria’s government schools are resourced to provide RBE/GREE. Until the current SRI funding model is reviewed, the controversial Christian SRI provider ACCESS Ministries will continue to receive substantial state support for providing both SRI and Chaplaincy programs while other faith groups and RBE/GREE programs will not.

Christian SRI will also maintain a privileged position in Victoria’s government school system.

**Minority perspectives**

Despite these inequities, so-called minority faiths have been largely silent in this debate.

For example, children of families from South East Asian countries, as well as China, India and Japan, and many children of families of so-called convert Buddhists attend Buddhist SRI classes.

For these children, SRI classes are places for inclusion and affirmed identity in schools. They are also particularly important for children from migrant families who normally don’t see their religion and cultures represented in the curriculum.

Each of the minority faiths’ SRI programs are modest and stretched to their limits. They run on volunteer time and local and international donations, unlike the sizeable amount of state funding provided to ACCESS ministries. Many of these communities are, understandably,
attached to their SRI programs and this to a large part explains their reluctance to engage in the public debate.

While these might initially be difficult conversations for faith communities, the education of all Victorian children will surely benefit from much needed reforms of SRI and the introduction of RBE/GREE in Victoria’s government schools.

As Australia moves into the Asian Century, there is tremendous potential for government schools to be sites for furthering understanding of diverse cultures, religions, beliefs and ethics of religious and non-religious communities. This includes Asian communities who in many cases, have long histories of settlement in Australia.

This can be achieved through educational leadership in the spirit of goodwill and inclusion that Victoria is famous for.

More reform needed

REENA and others have made numerous calls for the entire SRI/SRE system to be reviewed to meet the needs of our increasingly secular and multi-faith society. Indeed across the border in NSW, an independent review of SRE in 2014 looks promising for reform.

The Victorian case definitely generated a groundswell that will not be quelled by its dismissal. A comprehensive review of the SRI system would allow all voices, including majority and minority religious and non-religious voices, to be heard and hopefully result in some long overdue changes to the 2006 Education Act, SRI policies and funding agreements.

It’s definitely time for Victoria to follow NSW’s lead on this issue and conduct a review of SRI to ensure that our students receive a comprehensive and critical education about diverse religions.

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