



The battle over religious education

A principal's stand over special religious education has paved the way for primary schools to make decisions for themselves.

A furore has broken out over the teaching of Special Religious Education (SRI) in Victoria's primary schools. SRI, as it turns out, has few supporters, although those who are behind it conduct their activities with great passion. For different reasons secular parents, educational experts, principals and some religious denominations are rejecting it. It has been the practice of the Department of Education to imply that SRI is compulsory, but even that is beginning to loosen. An era of religious instruction in primary schools may be coming to an end.

The practice of having non-teachers teach religion in Victorian public schools arose because of then bitter sectarian divides. Throughout the nineteenth century, and much of the twentieth century, governments wished to avoid exciting animosities between Catholics and Protestants. The Education Act of 1928 thus sat on the fence. It said that: "religious instruction may be given in any State school" but that "otherwise secular instruction alone shall be given in State schools". Teachers employed by the Department were not to be involved.

In 2006, a new Act was implemented. It re-stated clearly that public education should be secular. But it also said that religious instruction "may" be given in government schools. But now, teachers could teach "General Religious Education" though not "Special Religious Instruction". SRI would be handled by an outside body: ACCESS Ministries. It is a body made up of 12 churches, although they hardly speak with a unanimous voice.

Since the renaming, ACCESS Ministries has tended to become more evangelical, disturbing a number of the denominations putatively involved in the organisation. It has also aligned itself with volunteers from Outreach and Church Ministries (OAC), which is openly evangelical. ACCESS does about 95 per cent of the religious instruction in Victoria.

Much has revolved around the meaning of the word "may" in the 2006 Act. In normal English – bearing in mind that legal language is anything but normal and certainly not English – the word "may" would suggest there is a choice. Principals may decide to have SRI, they may not. Parents may decide to have their children instructed in this way, they may not.

In practice, the Education Department turned "may" into "shall" (must), claiming this was their legal advice. Although "must" was not what the law, *prima facie*, suggested, that is how they enforced SRI.

Michael Bachelard, writing in *The Age* in 2011, asserted that the "Victorian Education Department is forcing primary schools to

run Christian Education classes." He wrote that an email exchange he had obtained showed a department official saying the school "must" keep its religious instructor whether it wanted to or not.

Bachelard claimed that the Education Department was telling schools they had no choice, they must keep their religious instruction. Further, an email from the Department said that "secular instruction may not be timetabled while students from the class are attending SRI."

Some offended parents took the issue to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal but lost. They claimed that their children were being treated less favourably because they had opted out of SRI. But because they could not prove their children had suffered significant detrimental effects, the case failed. However, the judge did say "for the provisions of the Act to operate according to their intent, the parents must be told that they have a choice and be given a means of exercising that choice." "May" it seems, was once again "may" and not must (shall). Liberty Victoria became aware of the case and challenged the Education Department, saying its position was incorrect in law. They cited the Interpretation of Legislation Act of 1984, which says "Where in this Act or any Act passed or subordinate instrument made on this Act, the word "may" is used in conferring a power, that word shall be construed as meaning that the power so conferred may be exercised, or not, at discretion."

The loosening of SRI had begun. In 2011, Departmental policy was changed from "opt out" – parents saying they did not want their children involved – to "opt in" parents saying they desired their children to be taught SRI. A form (GC 566) was given to parents to elicit their consent.

In theory this was a shift to a more reasonable position, but in practice there was little change. Lara Wood, a parent active in criticising ACCESS Ministries, says parents were under impression that SRI was approved by the school and part of its normal curriculum. "When they enrol their children it is one of the forms they fill out. They think it is just being done by the school. So it is misleading on a number of factors."

A more potent step came from the principal of Cranbourne South Primary School, Joe Kelly. In 2013 he told ACCESS Ministries' volunteers that they were not wanted at the school. The representatives of ACCESS Ministries protested that the legislation mandates that if an accredited SRI instructor is available, the school must provide for SRI (as per the Departmental interpretation of the Act).



But Kelly stood his ground. Although ACCESS Ministries protested to the Department, the decision stood. Kelly had won the day, and in so doing set a clear precedent. Principals could exercise the discretion that is implicit in the use of the word “may”. It was a move that was also in line with a push to devolve authority to individual schools.

Kelly outlined his reason in a letter to ACCESS. “My decision is based principally on my assessment of the instructional material you provided me with, and my observations last year of several SRI sessions conducted by your fellow SRI volunteers in various classrooms. In my educational judgment, this material and associated teachers and teaching methods do not reach the standard of quality educational practice that this school requires.”

Kelly then cited the work of other experts to assess the pedagogical suitability of the SRI syllabus Religion in Life. One analyst, Professor Marion Maddox, director of research at the Centre for Social Inclusion at Macquarie University, concluded that the Religion in Life material is “significantly at odds with public schools’ important values such as welcoming and valuing people regardless of their religious or other identity”. She added that ACCESS Ministries material may “lead to significant conflicts and confusion for children” and that “valuable class time can be consumed as professional teachers try to untangle the educational amateurs’ effects and restore students’ regard for the mandated curriculum”.

The other expert Kelly consulted was Dr David Zyngier, senior lecturer in curriculum and pedagogy at the Faculty of Education at Monash University. Zyngier describes the five Religion in Life booklets as “appalling”. “The program is full of what we call busy work, which is filling in blanks, word finds... (that is designed) to teach views when children are exhausted to fill in time. There is no educational foundation for the work that is done.

He states: “I wasn’t looking at it from a proselytising view, that wasn’t my brief. I was asking ‘Is this educationally sound pedagogy?’ They (ACCESS Ministries) make a claim that it is based on the up to date educational principles. I compared it with the Education Department’s Principles of Learning and Teaching, and found that it was failing on all six principles. Then I compared it to international research and also found it failing. It is all pitched at the very lowest level of intellectual ability.

“It is a deliberate strategy, because if you allow the children to question what you are teaching them, you can’t proselytise. It is called propaganda. ‘You listen to me and repeat it when you need to.’ That is how armies operate and authoritarian governments operate. It is straight out of (George Orwell’s novel) *1984*.”

Many are calling for SRI to be substituted by teaching about religion. Dr Anna Halafoff, lecturer in Sociology and project leader

of the Education about Religions and Beliefs in Australia project at Deakin University, argues for a more general religious and ethics education (GRE), which is part of the curriculum and taught by qualified teachers. Students should learn about diverse religions and about ethics. She believes it could be taught as a separate subject or it could be woven through subjects such as History, Geography, Civics and Citizenship and Intercultural Education. Indeed, Australia’s new National Curriculum already allows for studies of religions across these learning areas.

“There is broad-based community support for including general religious education (GRE) in Australian government schools – indeed Victorian legislation has allowed for both SRI and GRE to be delivered since 2006, although there is yet to be a significant commitment to the development of a GRE program and/or resources,” she wrote.

“In a deliberative democracy such as Australia, governments must reach these decisions in consultation with a broad array of community groups. That is why a new review is necessary – not only in Victoria, but nationally – in order to decide on the most appropriate model of religious education for all Australian government schools.

“Australia witnessed a rise of political influence from the Christian Right under the former Howard Government. However, the current federal and state governments are failing to recognise that the world and their political constituencies are changing. There has been a widespread backlash against conservative religions in recent years as people realise that they don’t want to live in a world full of prejudice and fear. Australians treasure their freedom, and the more progressive groups – be they religious or not religious – are stepping forward to fight for their rights and for the rights of others. This has created new holy-unholy cosmopolitan alliances among progressive actors to call for much needed changes.”

To Halafoff, it is not a battle between the religious and the non-religious, it is rather a clash between cosmopolitan and anti-cosmopolitan actors, between those who seek equal rights for all and those who seek to preserve their positions of power. “We live in a globalised world and religion is playing an increasingly public role in the twenty-first century, witnessed in the rise of conservative, progressive and anti-religious movements. Young Australians, therefore, need to develop religious literacy, and a critical view of diverse religions, examining the role they have played in advancing cultures of peace and cultures of violence. It’s time that State and Federal governments demonstrated some leadership on these issues, in consultation with religious and non-religious individuals and community groups, for the greater good of all Australians, and not just a privileged few.”

Education Department bureaucrats are slowly changing their



emphasis towards SRI, although they are not keen to go on the record. Zyngier says they are now privately saying that principals can choose not to have SRI. The Department would prefer to be notified, but it will not object. Principals are considered to have autonomy.

The Department is coming under pressure about its handling of religious education. ACCESS Ministries is legally required not to proselytise. But for a number of years it had been involving Outreach and Church Ministries (OAC) as volunteers. OAC is openly evangelical and, because it is not paid, not subject to governmental guidelines. It has been proselytising by the back door.

The department, which was unaware this was happening, issued a hasty memo when it found out:

“The Department has recently become aware that a number of religious organisations are providing programs or events to schools potentially outside departmental policy.

These events can include a focus on music, food, gifts, creative displays (e.g. puppetry), youth groups, discussion groups. Sometimes other out of school hours activities are promoted to students within these events (e.g. camps).”

The memo advised that schools must ensure that any organisation providing programs or events to schools that contain religious messages, are offered by a religious organisation or are offered by an agency with links to a religious organisation are doing so in accordance with departmental policy.

It was a rushed attempt to correct the problem. Zyngier believes it was inadequate. “Under their watch these things are happening and they are liable. They are covering themselves by putting out the memo. What it means is that illegal activities have been going on in schools and they have done nothing about it. They should have known about it. In the same way that in South Australia the

State Minister of Education lost his job because there were a couple of cases of abuse in the schools that he didn’t act on. A little email mailed out to principals is not sufficient. They don’t even name OAC.”

“They only did it under duress,” says Lara Wood. “If we had tiptoed around them and been nice and polite that memo would never have been sent.”

The problems with SRI are not just legal and pedagogical, they are theological. Many of the churches listed as being participants in ACCESS Ministries are becoming disturbed about the courses. A report by the Uniting Church on Christian Religious Education (the course taught by ACCESS) noted the divisions it was creating amongst churches. “Not a week went by when there was not a complaint from members of one or more denominational partners who felt they were being offended, compromised or misrepresented by the content of the material.”

The report criticises the content, noting that it seems to have been prepared for volunteers who have little teaching experience. “While the production values of the material are of a high quality, they mostly presume a method of teaching and learning that has been generally supplanted in the classroom by newer methods that utilize exploration and the digital possibilities that new technology offers.

“One outcome of this may be that CRE appears anachronistic and therefore may not be relevant to, or even speak the same language as, the current primary school participant. The danger of this is an implied connection to a God that might also appear redundant and outdated. Much of the material is presented in question and answer format with answers either right or wrong and does not encourage students to have inquiring minds or wondering conversations.”

The Uniting Church report comments that there is a slant in the material towards biblical literalism. “The ACCESS Ministries curriculum has a limited focus. There is little, or no acknowledgement, or exploration of other world views, and world faiths. It does not reflect social and religious diversity, or address or recognise indigenous spirituality.

“It should be noted that in the short time, 30 minutes, available for CRE there is a limitation to what can be covered. The delivery of the curriculum relies on the volunteer teachers that have a wide diversity of theologies and biblical understandings. These teachers are expected to teach within the constraints of the material. Breaches of this expectation are unlikely to be detected.”

Other Christians have problems with the manner of teaching. Reverend Ronald Noone is senior chaplain at Melbourne Grammar and a former voluntary teacher in primary schools. He wrote on the ABC’s Religion and Ethics site that he does not “object to Christian stories and values being taught to state primary school children – quite the opposite.” But he argues that the approach is critical.

“In the early church “indoctrination” – as in learning the

beliefs or doctrines to become a Christian – was a good thing,” commented Noone. “So was “propaganda” – as in the propagation or spreading of the faith. Nowadays, the terms suffer from negative connotations and tend not to be used, in preference for terms like “instruction” or “education.” But these terms should not be used interchangeably as they are in the current debate. If the word “instruction” was replaced by “education” then there must also be a corresponding change in the philosophy and practice associated with the word.”

Noone believes instruction should be confined to settings like parish churches and confirmation classes, where the people are all willingly present and expect to be instructed. “The state school classroom is not the place for conversion or proselytizing. While ACCESS Ministries would claim that this not what they do, I’m afraid that is their default position and when challenged they will revert to type.”

Gary Bouma, UNESCO Chair in Interreligious and Intercultural Relations at Monash University makes a similar point about instruction not belonging in the class room. He draws a distinction between “teaching about” and “instructing in” comparing two statements. “To say ‘God loves you’ is to use the language of instruction, declaring a believed truth. To say ‘Some Christians believe that God loves you, and some Christians believe that God loves you as long as you do not do certain things’ is to describe beliefs of Christians, that is, to teach about Christianity.”

ACCESS’s theology is coming under fire. Noone is critical. “Just consider the statement made by ACCESS Ministries CEO Evonne Paddison, that ‘the children in our state schools would be lost without Jesus.’ This statement reveals her theology and educational philosophy, and I would imagine that of many of the teachers ACCESS Ministries train to take SRI in schools.”

Noone does not doubt the sincerity, but says the claim is untrue. “There is, of course, a certain kind of evangelical Christian who believes the message is the same regardless of the context in which it is expressed. They believe this task is carrying out the God-given role assigned to them – to preach the Gospel and make disciples of all.

“Given this is a primary text for many evangelicals, is it any wonder that conversion is an aim of their presence in school classrooms? In contrast to a parish setting, a classroom is where formal education takes place and the overall aim is to promote knowledge and understanding of the ways in which human beings have made sense of the spiritual dimension in all of human experience.”

The quality of ACCESS’s volunteer instructors is also questioned. Noone comments that the best curriculum materials in the world won’t do much good in the hands of a poor teacher.

The dispute over ACCESS Ministries is sometimes characterised as a debate between the religious and the non-religious, but it is much more about Australia’s educational traditions. Historian



Scott Hedges compares ACCESS Ministries with a “profiteering contractor” getting cash incentives.

“Just ask the teachers and principals, who have to look on while these dodgy religious contractors get about their work in the classrooms, effectively installing faulty religious products in our children’s minds,” he writes. “A friend recently told me that his 8 year old daughter’s Scripture teacher told her that Easter Eggs were hollow to symbolize that Jesus’ tomb was empty.”

Hedges believes the origin of the present system can be traced to a Cold War clerical-political alliance spurred by fear of communism and what was seen as declining public morality. There was no common statutory religious instruction before World War II. The current volunteer based system began in the 1950s. The teachers union would have nothing to do with teaching Bible lessons. Conservative politicians believed that the state should participate in promoting religion for certain social ends.

“Why should this history matter?” writes Hedges. “Australians, including Australian Christians, should care about the legacy of “secular” education and the importance of such education in a pluralist democratic society. But the current SRI system does not belong to this legacy. It is a Cold War aberration. By disregarding our past, we are threatening our future.”

Catherine Byrne, a researcher at the Centre for Research on Social Inclusion at Macquarie University, commented that the secular principle is not an atheistic idea. Rather, it is a way of ensuring that what children learn is not limited or controlled by any church or religious group, but by the people and the state.

“This is an idea that lies at the heart of Australian democracy. Critical, secular education about philosophy, religions and ethics enables children to examine their understanding of, and their relationships, with the cosmos, the planet, the nation, their cultures, their neighbours and their families. It is a subject area in which basic understanding of concepts, language and cultural perspective has implications for many other fields of human endeavor.

“For a child to navigate this plethora of diverse opinion, they must develop a critical approach to the subject area. They must learn the concepts and language of that area and engage in the ‘agreed’ and ‘disputed’ interpretations of those concepts and terms. In so doing, as they sift through the various arguments, they may come to a position themselves and be able to defend that position.”