Chapter 9
Pedagogic Approaches

Abstract While SRE can continue to contribute to social cohesion and a healthy society, pedagogic approaches need to be updated so that they can comply with current educational theory and government policy. This chapter will discuss key pedagogic strategies which need to be introduced. These include the need to combine both socialisation and education in the SRE/RI classroom; to foster a constructivist approach to teaching about the religion rather than an essentialist approach; to draw on the techniques of experiential and informal education; and to ensure reflective rather than an instrumental teaching and learning pedagogy, including the implementation of the interpretative approach as delineated by Robert Jackson. This will ensure that SRE/RI creates bricoleur teachers who draw on critical religious pedagogy, encouraging students to ask questions, express doubts and through a process of questioning and exploration pass through the threshold of liminality to have a transformative experience (Meyer and Land in Overcoming barriers to student understanding: threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge, Routledge, London and New York, 2006; Cousin in Planet 17:1–2, 2006; and Rymarz in J Adult Theological Educ 13:163–170, 2016). As well, there needs to be a higher level of transparency and accountability through clear and accessible curriculum statements, teacher accreditation and basic, mandatory professional development to enable this transition from a didactic, essentialist approach, criticised in academic studies, to a constructivist approach. We shall argue that SRE/RI teachers see their role as a vocation but if they can be assisted to incorporate these key elements of current educational thinking into their teaching and learning, SRE/RI classes will address current criticisms and be much more effective.

9.1 Introduction

In this age of pluralism and multiculturalism, a new approach is needed to special religious education which incorporates modern educational theories and pedagogy which are constructivist, rather than the traditional didactic approaches which are essentialist. Research highlights the need to avoid indoctrination, whether from the supporters of SRE/RI or from those who are strongly opposed due to their secular
or atheistic beliefs (Davies 2014). Baidhawy (2007) argues that it is important for confessional religious education to avoid taking a dogmatic, indoctrinating approach to the teaching and learning processes because students in contemporary society react negatively to such an approach which can also affect students’ health and wellbeing. Religious educators can be assisted to take a critical and reflective approach in their teaching through professional development of confessional religious educators. The essence of this is asking critical questions and facilitating the skills of listening and responding through the use of experiential education techniques.

Dogmatism has been defined as indoctrination which “entails the inculcation of attitudes and beliefs that are contested, where there is intent to instil those beliefs, and where the methods circumvent important arguments or evidence” (Merry 2018, p. 164). Religious education can be seen as “guilty of indoctrination if and when they discourage rational thinking and instead opt for coercive forms of faith indoctrination” (Merry 2018, p. 164). As discussed earlier in the book, both Hitchens (2007) and Dawkins (2006) have argued that religions involve indoctrination of children because they do not meet the criteria of rational evidence. For Hand (2003, 2004), the teaching of faith does not meet the criteria of rational, decisive evidence and as such all confessional, in-faith education is indoctrination and should be abolished. At the same time, indoctrination is seen as harmful and has also been described as “child abuse” (Hitchens 2007; Dawkins 2006). These arguments are extended by Taylor (2017) who discusses in more depth why indoctrination is harmful, and the ethical implications for teachers and policy-makers. She argues that indoctrination poses a threat to both knowledge and understanding because it encourages closed-mindedness which can have a long-term negative effect on students, although these effects may be overcome with the passage of time. A closed-minded person is “psychologically incapable of engaging in rational enquiry as a result of brainwashing… to be open minded, an agent must be open to intellectual good. She must be receptive to opportunities to improve her knowledge and understanding” (p. 47). Taylor analyses the key elements of being open-minded, which she describes as “virtues” as having “intellectual humility, intellectual courage and intellectual diligence” (p. 47).

These issues of the problems of dogmatism and indoctrination support the Australian scholars’ critique of SRE/RI (Byrne 2009, 2014; Maddox 2014; Bouma and Halafoff 2009). They claim that SRE/RI teachers take an indoctrinating approach, discouraging their students from asking difficult questions and from seeking to explore existential issues relating to religious beliefs. However, as this study has demonstrated, there are many positive features of retaining SRE/RI for those parents and students who makes this choice. By improving the teaching and learning of SRE/RI and bringing the pedagogy into the twenty-first century, the problems discussed by these scholars can be mitigated. SRE/RI teachers should be encouraged to become critical religious educators who can act as “pedagogic bricoleurs” and respond to complex and contested questions (Zembylas et al. 2019). In this chapter, we shall first discuss the current pedagogic approaches which it is important to utilise for the teaching and learning of SRE/RI drawing on the theoretical literature, then revisit the findings of the 2015 New South Wales Report. Following this discussion we shall examine the interviewees’ responses to the question relating to pedagogy
and then discuss the results of these findings, as well as drawing conclusions about these issues.

9.2 Current Educational Theories and Pedagogy

In recent years the concept has emerged that teachers and students need to be “pedagogic bricoleurs”, and this includes researchers “who utilise a multiplicity of theories, concepts, methodologies and pedagogies” (Freathy et al. 2017, p. 425). This section draws on a multiplicity of theories and concepts in order to understand how the teaching and learning of SRE/RI can be improved. Current education theory argues that there is a difference between socialisation and education and to achieve the best results a combination of both is required. As well, in the contemporary world, a didactic, essentialist approach to education is seen as producing negative results and forms the basis of dogmatism and indoctrination. Instead students need to be encouraged to explore and ask questions—what is termed taking a constructivist approach which recognises complexity and contested ideas; this is particularly important in religious education. To achieve this goal, teachers need to draw on both experiential and informal education techniques so that the teaching and learning processes are student- rather than teacher-oriented. Above all, SRE/RI teachers need to encourage a reflective approach, which follows what Jackson (1997) has termed “interpretative” religious education. These concepts are discussed in the following sections.

9.2.1 Socialisation and Education

Within the context of SRE, a combination of socialisation and education is required. Austrian-born American sociologist, Peter Berger (1990 [1967]), defines socialisation as a “learning process” which enables one generation to transmit its cultural values to the next generation, thereby initiating them into ‘the meanings of the culture’ (p. 15). The new generation ‘learns to participate in its established tasks and to accept the roles as well as the identities that make up its social structure’ (p. 15). Socialisation is important in terms of fostering group identity, relating to both ethnic and religious education, and allows for a holistic approach. Berger, however, emphasises that socialisation not only involves learning about an objective meaning but also incorporating and being shaped by these meanings. Thus, he explains the need of the individual “to draw them into himself and to make them his meanings” (p. 15). However, to successfully achieve this goal, there needs to be a symmetry between “the objective world of society and the subjective world of the individual” (p. 15).

Educational historian, Lawrence Cremin, defines “education” as “the deliberate, systematic and sustained effort to transmit, evoke or acquire knowledge, attitudes, values, skills or sensibilities as well as any outcomes of that effort” (1977, p. viii).
Joseph Reimer (2007) argues that education involves three types of deliberate activities: transmitting knowledge (in terms of transferring information); evoking knowledge (in terms of involving students in the learning process more actively); and, from the learner’s perspective, acquiring knowledge, where students initiate the learning on their own volition.

Socialisation and education are in fact complementary processes. Within the context of Jewish education, Reimer argues that “socialization gets Jews to a point where they experience Jewish life as plausible; education allows them to make Judaism personally and communally meaningful” (2007, p. 21). This understanding applies to all religious education. Following Reimer, Jeffrey Kress (2014) argues that socialisation allows for the initiation of students as “a gateway to education” (Reimer 2007, p. 14), but that for effective education to occur, this needs to go beyond the social interaction to facilitate a deeper level of learning (Raviv 2000). In other words, when we are talking about SRE, socialisation means to get the students to a point where they experience religious life, while education enables the students to make religion meaningful both at the individual level and within their faith community (Gross and Rutland 2017a, b).

Socialisation usually takes place in informal settings and, in many cases, it resides where experiential education also occurs. Thus, experiential learning and informality are the medium where socialisation and education can be fostered in a complementary manner in order to initiate students into their cultural and religious heritage (Berger 1990 [1967]).

These concepts are central to understanding the value of SRE as being part of a child’s holistic education for those families who choose it, because SRE allows for a combination of the socialisation of the students into their specific cultural and religious heritage, as well as providing moral education for a set of values.

9.2.2 Essentialist vs Constructivist

It is very important for SRE teachers to use a constructivist approach for SRE teaching, but many do not understand what this means and how it compares with an essentialist approach. Sagi (2002) distinguishes between essentialist and constructivist definitions of identity. The essentialist definition assumes that the “self” has political/religious/cultural characteristics that are independent of the historical, cultural, and social contexts within which it is situated. The constructivist approach assumes that personal identity is constructed and produced within the historical, cultural, and social contexts. Whereas an essentialist approach emphasises the holistic, harmonious, static aspect of identity, the constructivist approach emphasises the fragmentary, dialectic, and constructive nature of identity.

The essence of much of the strong criticism of SRE as discussed above lies in its essentialist approach. Hence, this report argues for SRE teachers to be enabled to employ a more open-ended, constructivist approach in their classes. Research has shown that the current generation responds better to concepts that are adapted to their
personal lives through interactive learning (Twenge 2009, p. 398), especially when it relates to the process of religious education. SRE teaching needs to encourage participation and exploration, drawing on informal learning techniques and experiential, interactive pedagogic strategies, which facilitate relevance and a better understanding of their identity.

9.2.3 Experiential Learning

At the centre of informal education is the need for students to actually experience for themselves what is being conveyed. There is a debate among scholars regarding how to delineate the boundary between “informal” and “experiential” education. Recently, some scholars have argued that the term “informal” refers to the setting, such as camps compared with the formal classroom situation, while the term “experiential” refers to the teaching methodology or approach and is not necessarily tied to either setting (Kress 2014; Bryfman 2008).

Learning through experience is a “process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (Kolb 1984, p. 41). According to Jeff Jacobs, experiential learning is “a process through which a learner constructs knowledge, skills, and value from direct experiences” (Jacobs 1999, p. 51). Joseph and Rea Zajda differentiate between experiential learning theory (ELT) and experiential learning, with the latter relating to “a classroom strategy where pedagogues create a cooperative learning environment, engaging learners in a meaning-making process” (Zajda and Zajda 2008, p. 243). ELT, on the other hand, refers to the theoretical basis relating to “experimental learning”, stressing “the significance of life experience in learning” on which those classroom strategies are based (pp. 242–243).

Learning through experience is “a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (Kolb 1984, p. 14). In today’s secular society, this transformational approach is particularly required in religious education.

The concept of experiential learning began with John Dewey. As a science teacher using experiments both in the laboratory and in the field as part of his pedagogy, he recognised the importance of experience in the learning process, which he analysed in his seminal book, Experience and Education (Dewey 1963 [1938]). Experiential learning provides opportunities for students to be actively engaged in the learning process. Students can thus move away from being recipients of information to active knowledge acquisition. However, in the second chapter of his book, headed “The Need of a Theory of Experience”, Dewey distinguishes between experiences which are educationally worthwhile and those which are not. He posits that:

The belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative. Experience and education cannot be directly equated to each other. For some experiences are mis-educative. Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience.
An experience may be such as to engender callousness; it may produce lack of sensitivity and of Responsiveness. (p. 13)

Dewey relates to an “experiential continuum”, through which one experience generates another experience (p. 17). He concludes that “the central problem of an education based upon experience is to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences” (p. 45). From this point of view, “every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after” (p. 27). Hence, every experience can be seen as a “moving force”, whose “value can be judged only on the ground of what it moves toward and into” (p. 31).

A primary responsibility of educators is not only to be aware of the general principle of shaping an actual experience, but also to recognise that experience should lead to growth. According to Dewey, experiences are pre-planned educational devices which consciously and intentionally utilise the potential embedded within the social and physical surroundings of the individual to enhance specific educational ends meant to construct and deconstruct the individual’s worldview, value system and moral code.

A number of scholars have analysed the elements of experiential education. According to Bernard Reisman (1991), religious and moral experiential education involves four main elements: (1) the needs of the participants; (2) the creation of effective group contexts; (3) the development of a trusting atmosphere; and (4) the encouragement of participants to explore. Barry Chazan (2003) added four more characteristics: (5) the centrality of the experience; (6) developing a curriculum of religious and moral experiences and values; (7) creating a culture of religious and moral education; and (8) ensuring that this is facilitated by a holistic religious and moral education. All of these characteristics need to be part of a well-integrated educational program (Reimer 2007).

The list of these elements has been further refined by Kress (2014), who delineates a differently weighted set of eight components. These begin with the need for a holistic program; the importance of activities which are interpersonal, engaging and fun; include social and emotional dynamics; are learner-centred; provide scaffolding opportunities for reflection; involve continuity rather than “one-shot” programs; incorporate challenges; and encourage facilitation, rather than being didactic (p. 324). These elements are part of an immersion learning situation.

Key sociocultural elements in pedagogy are also often neglected in the religious education discourse. Referring to Vygotsky (1978), Greenfield and Lave (1982) have argued that learning involves three basic strategies: trial and error, shaping, and scaffolding. Cristancho and Vining (2009, p. 234) argued that trial and error involves a more individual process, whereas shaping and scaffolding are more communal and experiential in approach.

A key element of experiential education is student participation in the learning process. Sfard distinguished between two kinds of discourses: acquisition (learning knowledge), and participation (being part of the broader religious discourse) (Sfard 1998, 2007). Many schools, particularly within faith-based schools, tend to focus on acquisition rather than participation.
SRE pedagogy needs to understand the importance of experiential learning and incorporate all the elements discussed above into its teaching and learning strategies. For example, when teaching about care and compassion, the students can raise funds to buy sweets and presents for very sick children in children’s hospitals. Thus, as well as being participatory and experiential learning, they can also experience the joy of giving and assisting others who are less fortunate than themselves. Through experiencing this compassion, they will fully understand its importance.

9.2.4 Informal Education

While the term “informal” was introduced into the educational lexicon in the early 1970s to contrast with the formal classroom situation, one of the main problems of the investigation of informal systems was the lack of a systematic analytical theory. Reuven Kahane’s “code of informality” (Kahane 1997, pp. 9–11, 23–27) has helped to fill this gap. Referring to youth movements, Kahane claimed that the difference between formal and informal organisations does not lie in their goals or in the way they function, but rather in the codes of behaviour underlying them. Inspired by American sociologist Talcott Parsons’ code of behaviour (Parsons 1967), Kahane attempted to define the code which characterises informal education, using terminology derived from psychology, sociology and philosophy. According to Kahane (1997), the code of informality (in the context of adolescent learning) consists of the following eight components:

1. Voluntarism: The choice to join or leave the activity, thereby increasing the adolescent’s bargaining power and commitment to values.
2. Multiplexity: A wide spectrum of activities which have equal value and meet the different areas of interest of the individual.
3. Symmetry: A balanced reciprocal relationship based on equivalence of resources and mutuality of expectations where no side can impose his or her will on the other.
4. Dualism: Adolescents can simultaneously function in different categories; they can compete and collaborate like children or like adults.
5. Moratorium: Adolescents temporarily postpone their duties and decisions, allowing them to undergo a process of trial and error in different roles and rules. Moratorium enables behavior which is simultaneously normative, radical and innovative.
6. Modularity: Activities are constructed eclectically according to changing interests and circumstances. A system is modular if it consists of units which can be changed or organized differently. This enables participants to adopt and adapt themselves to different circumstances, making the system more flexible.
7. Expressive instrumentalism: Activities which are performed for their own sake and as a means to achieve future goals.
8. Pragmatic symbolism: Ascribing symbolic significance to deeds or the interpretation of symbols as deeds. Man is a symbolic creature. We can understand human beings if we analyze the symbols and concepts which they use. (pp. 23–30)

Kahane’s typology enables us to conceptualise and better understand the informal code dimension and its complexity. The challenge for experiential learning in informal settings is to create a meaningful connection between socialisation and education. As Reimer stresses, ‘fun can be a vital facilitator of Jewish experience’, but there is a need to “design activities that simultaneously demand and delight” (Reimer 2007, p. 22). While this deeper level of approach ensures that the learning is not superficial, implementing such a complicated approach is challenging, and this is a challenge which SRE teachers need to understand and incorporate.

In a longitudinal study (2008–2015) undertaken by the authors of an information religious education camp called Counterpoint, we found that most of the directors found it difficult to incorporate and integrate both socialisation and education (Gross and Rutland 2017b). Some of the directors focused more on the socialisation element while others focused more on the educational elements. However, these binary approaches were problematic. Those who focused on socialisation ensured that the students had fun, but they did not take away with them any in-depth and meaningful religious messages; whilst those who focused more on education, failed to take into account the importance of socialisation as a gateway to that education.

In a follow-up study, a key Jewish educator explained the importance of both approaches:

Definitely both – Judaism cannot be relegated to the cognitive or emotional alone. One of the first questions I am often asked on Counterpoint is what it’s like to keep Shabbat and other meaningful religious activities. In response I ask the person to describe the taste of Coca-Cola to someone that has never drunk liquid before. They generally begin to stammer: “its fizzy … smooth … refreshing … black in colour …” “Yes”, I say, “but what does it taste like?” “What about love?”, I ask. “What does it feel like?” … They reply that one needs to taste coke or feel love. It is impossible to reduce flavours, textures and familiarities to mere technical principles, for cerebral understanding cannot achieve the same tactile sensation or palpable feeling as authentic experience. The same is true with the power and philosophy of Judaism. (Head of Informal Education, Gross and Rutland, 2017b, p. 43)

Thus, Counterpoint aims to operate at many different levels, and to combine both cognitive and affective knowledge effectively.

Yet, we heard very critical comments from some students, graduates and parents, reflecting the difficult challenge of combining socialisation and education. One student complained about the lack of educational challenge at his camp:

So, definitely I would 100 per cent say more learning … right now they’re catering for the middle. But if you incorporate more logical thinking ways … that will maybe cater for the two separate [groups], the religious and the logical [more secular]. (Female student, Year 11, 2015)

The role the educator plays in experiential education is crucial in challenging students to dive deeper, creating an environment which facilitates the combination of socialisation and education. As Reimer stresses, the presence of “a trustworthy and talented
educator who can sponsor that venture and model its rewards” is a key element in this religious educational practice (p. 21). This complicated process redefines the educational approach, and requires a deeper understanding of the functions of socialisation and education and their differences. For this development to occur in the teaching and learning of the SRE classes, the educators need to understand the importance of reflection.

### 9.2.5 Reflective Teaching and Learning

In addition to incorporating experiential and informal teaching and learning techniques into the SRE classroom, reflection is another key component in effective pedagogy. Well-known German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas (2006), argued that all human knowledge is influenced by people’s interests. He delineated three levels of knowledge. The first was pragmatic—for human development knowing where sources of food existed, and moving from there to growing the food and the subsequent technological developments. The second level was influenced by symbols developed within a cultural and social context including language, social constructs and cultural symbols (Crotty 2010, p. 635). The third level was self-reflective and critical. Reflective teaching enables a teacher to examine what she is doing in the classroom and how she can improve her approaches for the future. As such, in relation to pedagogy, this third level of knowledge is very important and can be shared by students as well as by teachers (Gross 2010).

In terms of such critical pedagogy, which is an important element of reflective teaching, a new revolutionary approach is that of critical pedagogy which draws on the concern for the oppressed (Freire 1970/2003; Giroux 2003; Crawford 2010; McLaren 2017). McLaren (2017) argues that critical pedagogy can represent a variety of concepts including with the main aim of giving “students a personal voice and agency” (p. 9). This concept mainly applies to overturning the existing social order, but it can also relate to “the idea that the critical religious educator should draw students into critical discussion of religious truth claims” (Zembylas et al. 2019, p. 170). This concept of critical pedagogy is important for reflective teaching as compared with the instrumental approach where only one truth is acceptable and students are discouraged from expressing doubt.

### 9.2.6 Differences Between Instrumental and Reflective Teaching Styles

Pedagogical literature distinguishes between instrumental teachers, who consider their principal function to be the transmission of knowledge in areas of specific behaviours, rules and customs (Keiny 1993, 1998), and reflective teachers, who
examine knowledge critically and inquisitively enabling an analysis of experiences, thereby conceptualising practical knowledge and transforming it into theories of action (Zeichner 1994; Schon 1987, 1988). The structure of instrumental discourse is rigid, objective, and of an empirical nature, whereas the structure of reflective discourse is tentative, subjective, and constructivist. These two kinds of discourse are discussed below dichotomously. However, in reality, they function as part of a continuum, which may have a combination of components. These two conceptually different pedagogic approaches are particularly relevant to SRE, with research clearly illustrating the value of reflective teaching for SRE (Gross 2010).

Reflection deals primarily with meaning-making based on experience (Dewey 1963 [1938]). Rodgers (2002) claims that “the creation of meaning out of experience is at the very heart of what it means to be human” (p. 848). Meaning-making is also one of the essences of religiosity (Oser 1991) and religious education (Tirri et al. 2006). Thus, it seems that the meeting between reflection and religiosity is a natural one, since both are the products of an experience that makes human beings unique in the universe.

Religious education prepares individuals to be aware of God at all times, to believe in God’s existence, sense God’s sublime presence, and act in accordance with Divine commandments and imperatives. According to the instrumental approach, the school curriculum is a finished product that includes a structured collection of educational activities. It is the teacher’s task to develop a variety of teaching methods and skills with the objective of elevating the quantity and quality of the religious product (that is the extent of religious observance among students) and their “religious consumption” (after Willis 2003, who coined the term “cultural consumption”). Teachers who employ the instrumental approach function according to the basic assumption that the corpus of religious knowledge they are charged with imparting to their students is objective, structured, and organised. Consequently, the learning process involves the passive reception of messages, and the teacher’s role is the systematic transmission of the requisite knowledge.

The reflective approach, in contrast, maintains that the religious education curriculum is neither fixed nor predictable but is part of a dynamic process of interaction between the learner and the knowledge. It perceives the goal of teaching as the structuring of religious socialisation to yield proactive learners whose religious commitment is part of their personal structuring and the result of the internalisation of religious knowledge. Such knowledge emerges and evolves as a result of interaction with the environment and constitutes an integral part of cognition (see Gutierrez and Rogoff 2003). Accordingly, the learning process entails the active structuring of religious knowledge and its implications on religious praxis. The teacher’s role is to foster students’ development as independent learners who structure and “own” their religious knowledge, in keeping with their individual intellectual tendencies, diverse motivations and styles of learning, and other personal traits (see Gutierrez and Rogoff 2003). Reflective teachers learn to respond to students’ differential learning needs, account for the variance in their individual points of entry into the learning process, and design teaching methods to supply anchors and mediation that ensure their progress (McEntee et al. 2003).
The forms of reflection within the context of religious education translate into differential emphases on the teaching of religious skills (technical), the decision to adopt a religious lifestyle under the inspiration of assorted religious ideologies and schools of thought, such as in Judaism ultra-Orthodox, modern Orthodox, Reform, Conservative and the like (practical), and criticism of religious theory and practice from an ethical–social standpoint (critical). The first two types of reflection relate to the instrumental teaching method and the third to reflective–constructivist teaching. Under certain circumstances, practical reflection may also involve a critical approach.

9.2.7 Religious Education: Which Teaching Style Is Better?

The question of whether the instrumental or the reflective style of teaching is more appropriate for religious education is a complex one and depends on the developmental stage of the student’s religious identity and thinking (Bosma and Kunnen 2001). It also relates to the issue of age appropriateness, which is a key element in the recommendations of the 2015 Review. According to Fowler (1981), the higher the stage of religious development, the greater the autonomy exercised in religious reasoning. Thus, instrumental teaching seems more suited to the needs of the early stages of religious development, whereas reflective teaching would be more appropriate to the developmental needs of the later stages.

A study of religious schools in Israel found that the style of most of the religious education teachers is instrumental; only a small minority of those interviewed utilised reflective strategies. However, these teachers had a meaningful impact on their students’ religious socialisation processes.

In general, teachers who maintain a tentative and open-ended worldview are perceived as more conducive to the shaping of a stable and coherent religious world for students than are those who adhere to a more rigid outlook on life. The interviewees stressed the central role of the teacher as a model of respect and openness. This served as a catalyst for transformation and growth.

In an Israeli study of attitudes of students studying in the Ulpana system (the more religious and selective schools in Israel), the respondents recoiled from discourse of an empirical nature that utilised objective evidence and preferred discourse of a constructivist nature (Gross 2010). In some sense, by displaying respect, caring, and concern for their students, Ulpana teachers were conceived both as more human and as embodying “shades of the ultimate Being,” thereby playing an important role in moulding their students’ religious judgment. In contrast, the religious development and identity formation in comprehensive government religious high schools are developed through coercion and punishment. Students considered this approach to be less effective, apparently because of the negative interaction between teachers and students on religious issues (Fisherman 2016; Gross 2010).

In general, pedagogic religious discourse in the school context incorporates very little reflection on reflection (van Manen 1991), an approach considered unsuited to the spirit of most religious schools, which value their role as agents of religious
preservation (apparently because of reflection’s critical slant). The teachers delivered what they wanted to teach and not what the students wanted to learn (see also Rodgers 2002). As such, it is not surprising that only a few students, who attended schools considered highly liberal, described the pedagogic structuring of their religious identity as a critical process of reflection.

There is something extremely human about this reflective approach. The reflective process incorporates an honesty and religious authenticity that transforms the encounter with the sublime into a very personal experience. The move beyond political correctness is called by Vacarr (2001) “the cultivation of mindful presence” (p. 292). These moments where the teacher “sacrifices his own humanity” (p. 292) are “teachable moments” that have a long-lasting educational impact on students.

Thus, Gross (2010) has demonstrated that the use of a monologue approach in religious education, creating a pedagogic–religious style of rhetoric, including conventional religious slogans, clichés, and “closed” religious messages, was perceived as limited and ineffective. In some cases, this instrumental and authoritarian approach led to post-school religious rebellion (Gross 2003). In contrast, religious education that employs reflection, including dialogue between teacher and student, and within the teacher’s inner self, using open-ended and even half-formed messages, is perceived as more meaningful in structuring the religious world of adolescents and shaping their religious integrity and coherence, particularly in the long term.

Such an approach is important in responding to student doubts and what has also been referred to as “troublesome knowledge” or a “roadblock” to students’ understanding. In terms of responding to this challenge, Meyer and Land (2003, 2006) developed the “Threshold Concept (TC)” where students start to deal with such knowledge by entering the threshold, passing through a liminal state before moving to a new understanding which is described as transformative. The liminal state, which is visualised as a tunnel (Land et al. 2014), is the area occupied while the process of mastery of the new concepts takes place (Cousin 2006). Scholars have outlined nine main elements in the threshold concept, which include “jewels in the curriculum”, that is “potentially powerful transformative points” in the teaching and learning process; “listening for understanding”, that is for the teacher to listen to the students’ concerns and uncertainty and then guide them to the new knowledge; “a holding environment for toleration of confusion” where teachers can accept that students may be confused and keep them in the liminal state; and “recursiveness and excursiveness”, reinforcing “the critique of a simplistic, linear learning approach outcome” (Cousin 2006, p. 2). Once the student, understands the new concept, there is no returning to the old knowledge because the student has gained a new understanding, so that the whole experience is transformative (Rymarz 2016).

Rymarz (2016) has noted that “at its heart teaching TC [threshold concept] is a pedagogical imperative. How it is done depends very much on the content of the topic” (p. 167). Whilst the threshold concept has largely been applied to scientific, mathematical and business studies, it can also apply in the humanities, the caring professions studies (Clouder 2005), when students can undergo a transformative process, when they start to work in the field during their studies, and also with religious education and theology (Rymarz 2016). There are many complex issues in
religious beliefs, such as understanding the concept of God, or for Christianity the concept of the Trinity, as well as issues relating to the relationship of science and religious and interpreting religious texts (Rymarz 2016). Morales and Barnes (2018) have investigated how a general religious studies program which involved experiential techniques could also enable students to pass through threshold and transform their views on the role of religion in the postmodern world. Understanding the threshold concept can contribute to a reflective, constructivist and positive approach to religious education pedagogy.

Processes of a positive nature in religious education have a constructivist influence attesting to attachment, caring, and mutual respect. Processes of a rejective nature in religious education have a castrating influence. What constructs the religious horizons of the students in the long run is more the form than the content; into these shapes and structures, students insert different contents through the course of their lives. In the religious arena, students mainly remember the unconventional constructs: those that are not functional and have a nonlinear structure. The tentative construct of the discourse is considered to be more reliable and human. We need to tighten our argument that reflective teaching is the core of SRE and the core of values education.

Thus, as noted above, the moments of tentative reflection in religious education processes are considered “teachable moments” and are remembered as the climax of the educational aspects of the curriculum, as distinct from the instructional aspects. These concepts and processes are important in understanding effective pedagogy for SRE.

### 9.2.8 Religious Education: An Interpretative Approach

In a postmodern, multicultural society, the interpretive approach of Jackson (1997) is relevant to SRE classes. This consists of three basic tenets: first, representation that is taught in ways that recognises the uniqueness of each religion, as well as the diversity which exists within individual religious traditions; second, interpretation, where students’ subjective interpretations are recognised as an essential part of the learning process within a hermeneutic context; and third, reflection, so that students can reassess their own ways of life and take a constructive, critical approach, ensuring that SRE does not indoctrinate.

Further, Jackson (2014), in his book dealing with religious and intercultural education, draws on the 2010 recommendations of the Council of Europe, suggesting the need for “provision of a safe learning space to encourage expression without fear of being judged or held to ridicule” (p. 47). He argues that creating a “safe place” for a religious education student is a prerequisite, and that both policy-makers and practitioners need to take this into account. Even though he uses this concept for the issue of exploring diversity and recognising different viewpoints, he does pinpoint the need for the sensitivity of complexity of the religious education classroom, where “controversial issues are discussed and different claims to truth are made” (p. 57).
9.2.9 Pedagogic Bricolage

As discussed earlier in the book, Hervieu-Léger (2000) developed the concept of bricolage, where in contemporary societies students wish to make their own choices in terms of religious beliefs and practices. This is very different to past approaches to religious practice, where all members of society were expected to remain loyal to the religion of the group and independent agency was rejected. As we have noted, she delineates four main dimensions of religion: “communal”, “ethical”, “cultural” and “emotional” and stresses that students’ religious identity can be formed either through a combination of all four markers, or just one of these markers (Hervieu-Léger 1998). It is in making this type of choice where students in SRE/RI act independently that religious education teachers need to become pedagogic bricoleurs (Freathy et al. 2017; Zembylas et al. 2019; and Hervieu-Léger 1998). They need to meet this challenge, recognising and facilitating different understandings in their teaching approaches.

This concept has been extended by Freathy et al. (2017) who state: “It can be argued that the greater the diversity of hermeneutical and methodological approaches, the fuller and rounder the experience of studying will be (p. 428). To achieve this aim, RE teachers, both for SRE/RI and GRE have to learn to “navigate between contested paradigms” and encourage a flexibility of approach to their students (Zembylas et al. 2019, p. 170). This includes allowing the students to question, probe and challenge the concepts they are teaching, to express doubt and to understand that students in contemporary society will have different responses to religious beliefs and teachings.

These are all important issues, many of which have been discussed above, particular in relation to reflective teaching, the need for a constructivist approach, creating a safe place, and recognising the diversity of students within a SRE/RI classroom. These elements all need to be incorporated into the ongoing professional development of SRE/RI teachers, as recommended by the Department’s 2015 Review as discussed in the next section.

9.3 Pedagogic Issues: The New South Wales 2015 Review

A number of the recommendations of the New South Wales 2015 Review of SRE deal with pedagogic issues. Recommendation 35 notes that:

Providers seek advice from education experts (the department is one source of advice) to develop a shared understanding about what is meant by the terms:

- effective pedagogies.
- relevant learning experiences.
- age appropriate learning experiences. (pp. xxvii–xxviii)
The New South Wales Consultative Committee supported this recommendation, which is certainly very important in terms of bringing SRE into the twenty-first century, and providing a way forward for the other Australian states.

As discussed earlier in the book, there have been major changes in Australian society, reflecting world-wide trends. However, religious curricula and the pedagogic strategies have struggled to keep up with these changes. Many SRE teachers are still using old fashioned, essentialist types of identity definitions rather than building on constructivist, pluralistic, multicultural types, which are more relevant to the needs of the twenty-first century. Thus, there is a challenge to the facilitators of SRE to make their religious education curricula more meaningful to the new generation, to ensure that their teaching approaches are not dogmatic or indoctrinating, and to recognise that intergenerational transmission involves effective teaching and learning strategies.

A key issue for confessional, in-faith education is what are the most effective and relevant pedagogic approaches for this area of education. Opponents to SRE are concerned with the largely exclusively Christian orientation of these classes within the New South Wales government schools, which, they demonstrate, are becoming increasingly multi-faith and multicultural (Lovat 2010; Bouma and Halafoff 2009). As discussed in Chapter 3, Byrne’s (2009) research has demonstrated that in some Christian SRE classes in New South Wales, children have been taught that they will “burn in hell” if they are not baptised (Minus 2010). Byrne claims that the religious teachers’ approaches are authoritarian, discourage questioning and, in some cases, teach creationism. She argues that SRE teachers take an institutional approach, representing the hegemonic voice of the Church in a normative fashion, and fail to consider the voice of the “other.” As such, these opponents see SRE as a form of indoctrination, adding to the public’s suspicion of religion in schools. Referring to both confessional (SRE) and non-confessional (GRE) religious education, Miller (2018) claims that this is “deeply damaging to religious education as a whole” (p. 4). Opponents also claim that it is impossible to teach anything in a 20-min weekly class, so that the lessons are ineffective and a waste of time (Byrne 2009).

The difficulties highlighted by the critics of SRE, as discussed above, can possibly be attributed to the voluntary nature and the lack of training many SRE teachers have. Most of these teachers take an instrumental approach to their teaching of their religion, rather than a reflective approach, which would facilitate questioning of key concepts and encourage the students to struggle with essential existential religious questions, validating student perspectives. Through a reflective process, SRE teachers would be enabled to introduce “teachable moments” into their classroom.

Bringing the expertise of the authors of this chapter in regard to Recommendation 35 of the 2015 Review, and indeed most of the recommendations relating to teachers, pedagogy and the curriculum context, the following key issues need to be taken into account and incorporated into the teachers’ professional development. They include the need for a constructivist, rather than an essentialist approach, using experiential and informal education techniques, developing a reflective rather than an instrumental teaching approach, and implementing Jackson’s interpretative concept.
For most SRE teachers, who are volunteers, teaching SRE is a vocation rather than a profession, and if they can be assisted in developing these techniques then they will be more successful in delivering their religious and spiritual messages for today’s society.

9.4 SRE Teaching as a Profession and/or a Vocation

Most of the teachers in the NSW SRE system, as well as SEE, work on a voluntary basis, so for them, SRE teaching is very much a vocation. At the same time, they do need professional training. In developing a teacher education program for these teachers, we need to focus on the values and respect due to all people. Within this framework, Gellel (2010) sets out that there are three important elements:

(a) the inherent ability and need for there to be a relationship;
(b) the essential element of autonomy; and
(c) respect that every person is unique, unrepeatable and therefore incommensurable. (p. 171)

Whilst these elements are part of humanistic belief, today they have also become part of religious teachings for the Abrahamic faiths and the Eastern religions.

In religious education there is a need, on the one hand, to construct a relationship between the teacher and the students, and the students and the teaching material, which includes a corpus of knowledge and also understandings and practice of moral behavior through religious codes. However, at the same time it is important to make sure that the students can preserve their intellectual freedom and their autonomy as free human beings. Achieving this combination is a complicated challenge, but if SRE/RI teachers can be assisted to incorporate the key pedagogic elements discussed above, it will be much more feasible for them to rise to this challenge in the SRE classroom. Some of the SRE/RI teachers are very aware of these issues as discussed in the next section.

9.5 Findings

The teacher interviewees responded passionately to the question on a “meaningful teaching experience”. As one Buddhist teacher expressed it, “I really like becoming an SRE teacher to share my knowledge with the children” (female SRE teacher, #2 Buddhist, New South Wales).

They all stressed that they had many meaningful experiences, especially relating to their students’ love of coming to class and not wanting the lesson to end:

There are many experiences actually. It’s very difficult to take one, but when I am teaching, I feel that kids really have that urge to learn the scriptures. They really want to know so many things, but in today’s fast life, in today’s – what do you call it – gadget life, they’re not
getting that opportunity. And when I’m giving that opportunity, when I’m talking to them and when they are showing their interest, I feel it’s really meaningful. (female SRE teacher, #2 Hindu, New South Wales)

I just see how much the children enjoy the classes and as I say they rush into the class. (male SRE teacher, #3 Buddhist, New South Wales)

A Hindu teacher noted that all the SRE teachers had those types of experiences and that was very meaningful to them and kept them highly motivated to continue in their voluntary work. She explained that “We share our experiences and we are able to talk to each other, and we appreciate each other and encourage each other. So that is a very good experience for me, meeting the different people with different [religious] ideologies” (female SRE teacher, #4 Hindu, New South Wales).

This sense of all the SRE/RI teachers having the same positive experiences and feelings was reinforced by teachers from other faiths. As one Muslim teacher expressed: “they love to listen about their religion, love to learn about it… that sense of giving and taking and that sweet enjoyment that I get. I have a big fat smile when I come out of scripture class, it really is just that sweet enjoyment” (female SRE teacher, #1 Muslim, New South Wales). Another noted that “when they leave an activity that they’ve been doing, no matter how fun it is, they come, hug you and tell you that they love you and you’re the best” (female SRE teacher, #5 Muslim, New South Wales).

Another commented “Wow, there’s so many. Because I, like I said, once I develop a rapport with these kids my most meaningful thing is when they say to me, ‘I now pray’ or ‘I put the scarf on’ or ‘I gave to charity or ‘I did this’. Everything we teach them, I see them apply it and that to me is like wow, I’ve made a difference” (female SRE teacher, #3 Muslim, New South Wales).

Similarly, one Jewish RE teacher commented: “…having them connect with you and having them look forward to seeing you. And having them so engaged in the lesson that they groan when the lesson is over. That is the reason why we do this” (female SRE teacher, #1 Jewish, New South Wales).

Many of the SRE teachers are part of the local community where their school is situated and they can see the impact they have made on their students, as one Muslim teacher explained:

I think being recognised when you go outside of the school environment and having children appreciate you, remembering your name and wanting to chat about old school days. I’ve met them in a shopping centre or at a restaurant or something and that is really being able to see those children that I’ve taught become good community members and leaders and them appreciating and remembering me. So I think that is a really wonderful thing as an educator. (female SRE teacher, #2 Muslim, Queensland)

These interviewee responses indicate the positive experiences of both the students and the teachers in SRE/RI classes and were expressed across the six main faith traditions. They are particularly important for the minority faiths in government schools and could also be expressed by teachable moments.
A number of interviewees explained this concept of suddenly seeing children understanding what they have been trying to explain or convey. As one Muslim teacher put it: “Once you know they’re engaged and that little light [goes on in] their head and you’ve touched them in some way or inspired them in some way [and] you will go out knowing you’ve changed a life” (female SRE teacher, #3 Muslim, New South Wales). A Jewish teacher commented further: “When you take a child who doesn’t understand the concept and you work with that child continuously and then there’s a moment where you watch it suddenly sink in. There’s a look on the kid’s face when you see ‘You finally got it.’ And that is the most amazing moment” (female SRE teacher, #6 Jewish, New South Wales).

Interestingly, a number of the teachers commented that prayer and meditation was central in creating teachable moments in SRE. In terms of meditation, one Hindu teacher explained:

When they come to my class, because I just get into this meditation level, I could see that they are really calming down. So when the children are calming down, they are able to receive… they are very receptive… they are able to go within themselves, so that is a great experience… That is most meaningful for me. (female SRE teacher, #4 Hindu, New South Wales)

Further, commenting on prayer, one of the Baha’i teachers noted that “some of them … they don’t believe in God and they say when they are chanting those prayers, that it’s good for them” (male SRE teacher, #1 Baha’i, New South Wales). One of the Baha’i students, whose family are members of the Baha’i faith, also commented on how important learning the prayers in SRE was for him:

Well, yes, in our home we’ve been learning lots of prayers but also in scripture we’ve been memorising lots of prayers. That’s been in scripture I’ve been setting my foundation, all the basic prayers and then some of the more advanced prayers and the longer ones. (male SRE graduate, #2 Baha’i, New South Wales)

Similarly a Buddhist teacher noted:

We only do a short pre-pray at the beginning; it only takes about a few seconds, but the reflection on their face, the candles when they pray… It really opens my heart, and also I’m learning a lot by doing it, by helping them and helping myself. I think that it’s very important, because in just that few seconds they’ll be able to tune into themselves, and they cut themselves out of the chaotic of this world, and just being in that moment is very important. (female SRE teacher, #4 Buddhist, New South Wales)

A number of Christian RE teachers referred to examples when they were discussing something and they would see one of their students’ eyes light up as they see the connections between what they are learning and their own lives. In one case this related to the New Testament story of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at a well and offering her water (female SRE teacher, #4 Christian, New South Wales). In another case, this related to when the students were learning about Exodus in the Hebrew Bible and she noted:
So when their eyes light up, they’re like oh! I hadn’t seen that, whoo! I love those moments. I love that when they, or when they just say to me Miss, I thought Jesus was always the right answer. Yes, Jesus is the right answer [chuckles], but we’re back at Moses right now. Yeah, I think that’s great. (female SRE teacher, #5 Christian, New South Wales)

Similarly, one teacher described that when she was teaching about God, “seeing children’s eyes light up when you tell them that there is a God and this God is well disposed towards them; this God loves them and values them. And it just seems to resonate with them in a very special way” (female SRE teacher, #11 Christian, New South Wales).

These experiences, particularly in regard to prayer and meditation are social experiences and the teachers commented on the connections between socialisation and education.

9.7 Socialisation and Education

Socialisation was seen as an element by some of the SRE teachers in making the program successful. One Jewish RE teacher referred to an event she had just experienced with two boys who knew each other on the soccer field but neither realised that the other was Jewish:

And they came in and you could just see it was “Oh, my goodness! We’re both Jewish. This is like awesome.” And they completely connected on a whole other level and they had a completely different respect for each other… And I love connecting those kids that may have been disconnected or not known much about Judaism and I love being able to reconnect them to the community and then as well as teach them about their heritage and other stuff through that. (female SRE teacher, #4 Jewish, New South Wales)

Prayer time can also foster socialisation, especially when students within the class take on leading the prayer service as one teacher described it: “Seeing kids want to take the lead when it comes to the prayer time we share. That they feel empowered to, … we either have a silent prayer or an out-loud prayer. And the kids get more comfortable and want to actually share an out-loud prayer with a small group” (female SRE teacher, #9 Christian, New South Wales).

These community experiences with students being involved in leading prayer constitute an element of experiential education, which is an important element of religious pedagogy.

9.8 Experiential Education

Experiential education was also seen as part of the SRE framework, valued by both teachers and students. The teachers used many techniques from informal education, such as songs, prayers, art, craft, music, dance, exercises, drama, for the students to
discover for themselves key concepts in terms of values and identity. One Islamic RE curriculum developer explained:

We’re making the syllabus more relevant, more engaging, more interactive. Gone are the days where you’re just reading the syllabus. You need to plan ahead. We’ve got visuals with this year we’ve introduced custom made videos that are aligned with each lesson so we’ve got a YouTube channel so things like that…

A number of the teachers stressed how important it was to ensure that the lessons are “interactive within these classes… giving the students a chance to do something…” (female SRE teacher, #7 Buddhist, New South Wales).

For the Baha’i faith, which believes that all human beings have “gems inside”, this can help “the gems to basically come out, for mankind to benefit therefrom”, which is from a Baha’i saying (male SRE teacher, #5 Baha’i, New South Wales).

One of the Baha’i students commented:

We played this really cool game but it kind of … it was related to one of the values, trust. So we all put our hands on each other’s back like this. Then we would walk around. And the first person in the line had their eyes open and everyone else had their eyes closed. And they had to take us wherever they were told so we had to trust that we wouldn’t go anywhere else. (female SRE graduate, #3 Baha’i, New South Wales)

Teaching about Shabbat [Sabbath] observances and Jewish festivals is an important component of Jewish RE, and this is done in an experiential way, so that they can experience all the elements of the Shabbat table:

Even if we’re doing a mock Shabbat we have all of the different elements of the Shabbat table actually there in the classroom. So they can touch, they can feel, they can hold, they can smell. And they get to involve themselves in it, because it’s all about involving the senses, and it’s all about being hands-on, and it’s all about relevance. So if I was showing them pictures of something, I don’t think it would’ve engaged the students as much, but the fact they’re actually able to touch these tangible objects, it makes it much more engaging for them, much more meaningful. And then all of a sudden, a half an hour lesson is over, it’s flown by, and they’re upset that it’s over because they were so engaged in the lesson. That’s the best part. (female SRE graduate, #1 Jewish, New South Wales)

Although the students are engaged, this is not indoctrination. It can also involve exploration in concepts and students can also express doubt about their religious studies, as seen in the following teacher responses.

9.9 Exploration and Expressing Doubt

As discussed earlier in the book, many of the SRE teachers stressed the importance of exploration and the fact that they encouraged this approach in their classes. The importance of exploration was raised by one of the Buddhists interviewees when speaking about her most meaningful experience. She described how often she learns from her students, even those who are in K-2 classes and gave the example of a six-year old who responded to the question “What do you understand about Buddha now?” after she had taught the class about Buddha’s life:
9.9 Exploration and Expressing Doubt

And this beautiful girl told me Buddha likes to explore and then it triggered me to think obviously Buddha liked to explore. If he had not explored he would not have discovered the way to Nirvana and have all these teachings handed down to all of us. And that is how I say hey, yes, I have never taught her about that Buddha like to explore. She just came to this realisation. (female SRE teacher, #1 Buddhist, New South Wales)

This teacher stressed that it was important to think about what students say, so that “So whatever the children come back with, we will have reflection… That’s what they expect. So that’s why I say teachers are sometimes are not teachers. We are students” (female SRE teacher, #1 Buddhist, New South Wales).

Many of the SRE teachers appreciated their students asking questions, even if they expressed doubt. As one Hindu teacher explained:

When they keep asking you lots of questions, and you are able to answer to them and be with them to clarify their questions and doubts, you feel happy, you know. You are able to share what you know, and this is how the progress keeps happening. And I love doing that, for whatever time I can. (male SRE teacher, #3 Hindu, New South Wales)

In order to elaborate on that point, he gave various examples from nature and Hindu tradition to understand the importance of the earth and the physical being and how this interacts with spirituality, “what is behind the physical … how you are able to see, to speak or to smell… And you have to concentrate on that power, and how do you know what that power is, that is what is basically what being taught in the Hindu scriptures” (male SRE teacher, #3 Hindu, New South Wales).

A Jewish teacher commented that one of her most meaningful experiences was “when you’ve got kids actually thinking and they ask questions totally out-of-the-box. So, you don’t just go in with whatever festival you’re doing or whatever story you’re doing and they just chuck it up and they ask general questions. When you get that hand that goes up and you get a totally out-of-the-box question it shows that the child is thinking” (female SRE teacher, #6 Jewish, New South Wales).

Being able to deal with complex questions with young children was seen as another meaningful aspect of SRE teaching. One Muslim teacher gave the example of the Ramadan fast lasting for different periods of time in different parts of the globe due to the different seasons. Students were concerned whether their fast would be meaningful if they were not doing it at the same time, so she explained that “the right way is not the actual day, the right way is accepting that everybody can choose to believe whichever date he or she should follow. So that was a lesson in being open and being, I would say the word is magnanimous” (female SRE teacher, #4 Muslim, Queensland).

A number of the Christian RE teachers commented on the importance of exploration and responding to questions. One coordinator commented that when he visited classes:

So what I love to see, and what I’m really excited about seeing is young people who are exposed to the biblical text, they are presented with what the text has to say, and then they are given an opportunity to wrestle with it, to develop their critical literacy skills, to develop their personal responses, to critique what they are presented with, and make sense of it in their world, in their way, and in situ, in the classroom. (male SRE teacher, #2 Christian, New South Wales)
Some Christian interviewees referred to introducing a session of Q and A at the end of each lesson. One explained that the students “need a forum to be able to ask the bigger questions in life” (female SRE teacher, #4 Christian, New South Wales). Another Christian RE teacher described how she had a question box for her Year 4 students, and they are “putting some very deep questions in about who they are and where they come from. So I just love it… they are light up moments, when the kids finally get a connection” (female SRE teacher, #5 Christian, New South Wales).

These teachers are pro-active in encouraging their students to explore, question and wrestle with key religious concepts in their SRE/RI classes, highlighting the important role a teacher can play.

9.10 The Role of the Teachers

All the interviewees commented on the importance of dedication and commitment to the role. As one Baha’i teacher noted:

It’s commitment. Weekly commitment. And it’s not easy. Year after year, every week. The teachers are planning their lessons according to the guidelines and the curriculum. And they work really hard in making it creative, in engaging the students. If they’ve got a student who’s got, for example, autism these teachers will go and get trained in how to deal with these children. And these are all voluntary. They don’t get paid. They’re spending their own time doing this just because of their love for these children because they know that this can transform society at large in years to come. (female SRE teacher, #4 Baha’i, New South Wales)

A Christian RE Coordinator, who had previously worked in the Catholic school system, commented that she found that students in the government school system are “actually very, very engaged in learning about their faith”. She explained that she believed that this was because the SRE teachers are very “authentic” (female SRE teacher, #3 Christian, New South Wales). The issue of authenticity was elaborated by one Christian RE teacher explaining:

I am convinced that the answers that the Christian faith gives, that the bible gives, are stunningly coherent and fit the questions perfectly. I believe in the answers the bible gives with every fibre of my being, but I don’t force it down their throats. I present, and I say now I want you guys to make up your own minds about what you’ve learnt today. (female SRE teacher, #4 Christian, New South Wales)

Through an SRE/RI teacher’s passion and authenticity, at times they can create a transformation among some of their students.
For many of the SRE teachers, the most meaningful aspect of their teaching is creating a change in their students, which is a form of transformative education which can impact their lives not only in terms of religious education. One Muslim teacher commented that she often meets past students and they will come up to her and say: “You had an impact on my life and I still implement what you taught me and I pray for you” (female SRE teacher, #5 Muslim, New South Wales). Another Muslim teacher explained: “But really if this one program was invested in properly they would see a ripple effect in the behaviour of the students” (female SRE teacher, #3 Muslim, New South Wales).

This concept was also taken up by the Buddhist teachers, particularly the way meditation, even for a short time, can assist very young children to sit still. One teacher gave the example of a little girl who was overactive and the school thought she had attention deficit disorder (ADD). However, this teacher described how by the end of the year “she sat very calmly and she explained to me how she was looking forward to the lesson and how it taught her to sit still. And so for me, when you can really see some changes, actual changes that was amazing” (female SRE teacher, #9 Buddhist, New South Wales).

A Baha’i teacher described this process: “I guess the most meaningful experience would be seeing the change in the children. When they’ve been with us since kindergarten when they get up to year six you see that change in them. They become open-minded. Their heart is full of love and kindness” (female SRE teacher, #4 Baha’i, New South Wales). She commented that after primary school these students went on to become youth leaders in high school, organising youth groups both in and outside of school, teaching the younger children “what they have learnt because they’ve seen a transformation in themselves and they would like to bring about that change in the community and that is interesting to watch” (female SRE teacher, #4 Baha’i, New South Wales).

Similarly, the Muslim interviewees commented that the SRE program has such a positive impact on the graduates that a number of them returned to become SRE teachers after completing their schooling. One Muslim teacher gave the example of a group of young mothers in the Kingswood area, where their school did not offer Islamic RE. They came to her and gathered enough volunteers to undergo the training, so now that school has Islamic scripture classes “so that really brings such a warmth and again such a wonderful feeling that we’ve got individuals like that who are willing to do something that’s not only for themselves but as a collective” (female SRE teacher, #1 Muslim, New South Wales).

Another Muslim teacher gave the example of university students who were protesting about Muslim girls having their scarves pulled off. Even if the girls did not themselves wear the hijab, they still supported the demonstration “because they’re proud of their Muslim identity to go and protest and put up banners and tell the other students that they are there, speaking up because Islam is such a wonderful religion because of what their scripture teacher taught them. So when they say it out loud,
yes, that’s priceless to me, to say the least” (female SRE teacher, #5 Muslim, New South Wales).

However, that personal connection with face-to-face teaching has been challenged with the onset of COVID 19, when the providers had to move quickly to offering their classes online. This mainly occurred in the state of New South Wales as discussed in the next section.

9.12 Moving On-Line with COVID 19

With the closure of all schools in Australia, SRE/RI classes needed to move on-line with little time for preparation. New South Wales (NSW) was the only one of the six Australian states and two territories where the government agreed to allow providers from all the faiths and Special Ethics Education (SEE) to provide learning from home with resources that parents could access for their children available for the time that children were not in face to face SRE classes. The New South Wales Department of Education also provided backup and support with guidelines as well as weekly Zoom meetings for all the SRE providers to help them prepare online lessons. As well, the Department’s website was linked to providers’ websites, facilitating online learning. As the coordinator of one Hindu provider noted, this was “undeniably important in giving children hope and faith in God during these unprecedented times” (female SRE coordinator, #6 Hindu, New South Wales).

The providers from the different faith communities took different approaches, based on budget and other practical considerations but there was cooperation across the faiths in terms of the provision of a joint portal as explained below. Catholic RE took the approach of preparing PowerPoint presentations based on the lesson plans in their Teacher’s Manual, as well as including all the materials and activities such as readings from scripture passages, with voice overs for the younger children, stories and songs. Since the students did not have workbooks with them, they were encouraged to write journal entries.

Another approach was that of Islamic RE, where they decided to record 25 lessons in a professional studio, based on their Term 2 Syllabus. Five of their teachers were selected to present these lessons, with a short script of around seven minutes which was edited and posted on the provider’s lesson web pages. As well, associated work-sheets could be downloaded and printed and supplementary video links were selected for each lesson that the students watched.

After consulting with colleagues in some private schools, Jewish RE decided to use a specific, online education platform and they were able to transfer their full curriculum to the platform, as well as enabling them to creatively build the lessons to be as interactive as possible. A few teachers were selected to be involved with the process. Parents were sent the weekly log-on code and could either register and be sent the code as each new lesson was uploaded, or could check the form every week for the new code and log on anonymously.
The Christian providers partnered to have a joint portal which had curriculums from major providers including Anglican, Catholic and material from the other providers who work together in schools under Combined Christian SRE. As well, the Christian community shared this infrastructure to create a mirror portal for the All Faiths SRE group and material was put up by the Jewish community, a number of Islamic SRE providers, Hindu and Buddhist providers. The Department of Education advertised these learning from home resources (Catholic, Anglican Combined Christian, All Faiths and SEE) to all parents across New South Wales through the school websites.

Despite the pressures of the very short lead-in time, and the other challenges associated with moving online, the coordinators, teachers, parents and students responded positively to the new system. From the educators’ point of view, they were “delighted to know that scripture was available online as they were concerned for their students’ spirituality” (female SRE coordinator, #1 Muslim, New South Wales).

As with all home schooling, the parents, or a member of the family, had to have some level of involvement in the SRE classes, especially primary age children. All the faith communities reported that they have received very positive feedback from the parents. This can be seen with some of the comments the faith communities received:

… So overall both boys found the lessons clear, engaging, appropriate lengths and gave very positive responses. (Sydney grandmother’s feedback, male SRE coordinator, #18 Christian, New South Wales)

… so that means they are perfect for their attention span at this young age. (Sydney parent of three primary age children’s feedback, female SRE coordinator, #1 Muslim, New South Wales)

… Someone wrote to tell me of a friend’s daughter teaching her grandchildren: “The SRE Learning at Home is Fantastic! Really Great and the kids are really enjoying getting into it”. (male SRE director, #… Christian, New South Wales)

Clearly one issue for some parents was the lack of computers, laptops and internet facilities. The corollary of this was that some faith providers found that they could reach students with whom they previously had no possible access or contact.

The respondents also noted that, while they were looking forward to returning to face-to-face teaching, they had benefitted from the steep-learning curve and that they would incorporate some of the features of online pedagogy into their regular teaching approaches once they return to the classroom. Indeed, those teachers involved in the process were “excited to learn new skills” (female SRE coordinator, #2 Jewish, New South Wales). In this way, while COVID 19 created significant challenges, moving to online teaching and learning has also had benefits in terms of pedagogic innovation.

The interviewee responses to the question on their most meaningful teaching experience elicited rich data about the pedagogic approaches used by these teachers. The key issues emerging from their responses will be discussed and analysed in the next section.
9.13 Discussion and Conclusions

As discussed earlier, the scholarly literature has been highly critical of SRE/RI pedagogy describing it as essentialist, dogmatic and indoctrinating, thereby having a harmful effect on children (Hitchens 2007; Dawkins 2006). Byrne based her comments on interviews with informants who had bad experiences in both New South Wales and Queensland, as well as through classroom observations, and there is some basis for this critique (Byrne 2014). As our research has demonstrated, there is value in retraining this religious education program, but at the same time we argue that it is necessary to bring SRE/RI pedagogy into the twenty-first century ensuring a more constructivist approach.

As our findings demonstrate, most of the interviewees in this study were very aware of the need to ensure that they utilise current teaching and learning methodologies. They stressed the importance of exploration and responding in a positive fashion with their students’ questions. They also incorporated interactive and experiential education techniques into their classrooms. As we have discussed in our methodology section, there is a selection bias in the recruitment process which requires interviewees to volunteer to participate in the study. It is possible that the volunteers were more reflective teachers, who believed in a constructivist approach and that this was apparent in our findings. However, a number of the participants were RE coordinators for their provider, or directors, so clearly in their leadership roles they would be encouraging the teachers they are working with to also be innovative and reflective in their teaching approaches. They would also be playing an active role in curriculum development for their faith community, and as such would be very aware of the importance of ensuring that all lessons complied with twenty-first century norms. The graduate interviewees expressing the student voice also stressed the fact that their experiences of SRE/RI classes involved creative and constructivist approaches, which is why they enjoyed participating in the classes. Many of our interviewees commented on how much the students loved coming to SRE/RI classes, and we also witnessed this in our previous study of Jewish RE (Gross and Rutland 2015). As well, the teachers believed that the classes could create a transformation in the students.

These transformative experiences described by all the teachers of the different faiths demonstrate that even though SRE/RI classes are only offered in government schools for one short period a week, those students who voluntarily attend can have very positive experiences that can be transformative. Teachers may be faced with doubts and troubling issues relating to deep questions, such as what is the meaning in life, or what is the nature of God? Yet, the students, even at a very young age, may be enabled to pass through the threshold into the tunnel of the liminal phase and then have the transformative experience of new knowledge and understanding (Meyer and Land 2006; Cousin 2006). This was described by some of our interviewees in this way: “when their eyes light up, they’re like oh! I hadn’t seen that, whoo!” For these teachers, this was the most meaningful aspect of their SRE/RI teaching. As Rymarz
(2016) notes, achieving this aim is a pedagogic process, which requires the teacher to be willing to employ reflective and constructivist teaching techniques.

Those students and parents who choose SRE/RI need to be empowered to make informed choices through critical enquiry. Taylor (2017) argues that indoctrination leads to closed-mindedness, which she sees as harmful for students. By encouraging SRE/RI volunteers to understand the importance of questioning and encouraging exploration this harmful impact can be mitigated. Some of the pedagogic approaches which facilitate this are life story telling, role play and case method teaching (Wang 2013). In addition to incorporating experiential and informal teaching and learning techniques into the SRE classroom, reflection is another key component in effective pedagogy.

### 9.13.1 Indoctrination vs Education

An important component within the values education of SRE/RI is to ensure that students should not be presented with a dogmatic approach to values. Rather, they should be exposed to the variety and multidimensional religious approaches to ethical dilemmas within their specific faith community and encouraged to grapple with this plurality central to crucial moral and ethical beliefs (Swanson 2010). Thus, students need to be provided with the opportunity to reflect on their values and beliefs within contemporary society, including the moral challenges which they face. This can be achieved through religious education and it is important for students growing up in the current materialistic, globalised world. Thus, “at its best, religious education can have a significant role both in developing (without inculcation, still less indoctrination) students’ sense of value and in giving them access to a broader sense of what wellbeing consists of than they might otherwise have access to” (Haydon 2010, p. 199).

Religious education can also provide students, particularly in high school, with strategies to deal with and reflect on the “deep questions” of life. As well, students need to consider issues relating to conflicting values, which can also occur. To give an example from Judaism, the rabbis of the Talmud struggled with the fact that key values of truth and peace can, at times, conflict. They used the example of what does one say to a bride at her wedding when she is not beautiful, and debated the conflict in this case between the truth and peace, not upsetting the bride on her wedding day (https://www.sefaria.org/Ketubot.17a?lang=bi, accessed 20 October 2018).

To be successful, the teachers need to consider the ethnic, cultural and religious background of the students in their SRE class, and this demands professional reflection and finding a balance “between abstract moral ideas, including religious beliefs and the practical situation in the classroom” (Carr 2010). By taking into consideration the social context of their students with their family background and community connections, teachers can also avoid indoctrination (Taylor 2017).
Another element in ensuring that SRE/RI teachers and students utilise critical religious pedagogy rather than a monolithic, essentialist approach of religious hegemony, has been greater government involvement. This has been the case in both New South Wales and Queensland, where the government is planning an active oversight in terms of curriculum and basic teacher accreditation.

### 9.13.2 Accreditation, Monitoring and Transparency

A key factor in the growing awareness of the SRE/RI providers in the importance of education rather than indoctrination has been government involvement in curriculum development in both New South Wales and Queensland. In response to the various critiques of the SRE/RI classes (Byrne 2014; Maddox 2014), both state governments now require much greater transparency and clarification of curriculum goals and materials of each of the faith communities, as well as mandatory preservice programs and better accreditation systems for all the volunteer teachers. These accreditation programs ensure that the voluntary teachers are aware of and follow government norms in terms of teaching approaches and content within government schools. These accreditation programs make it clear that there are some religious concepts which are no longer acceptable as community norms in the twenty-first century. While this has placed extra strains on the various providers, given the voluntary nature of most those involved, all providers have understood and accepted the importance of this increased government oversight. Indeed, as seen in the responses of the various providers to the question relating to online provision of materials, the providers in New South Wales really appreciate the involvement of the Department of Education. This is another way of encouraging a more open approach to special religious education.

### 9.13.3 Educating Against Fundamentalism

All these approaches are important in avoiding a fundamentalist approach in special religious education, which is indoctrination, and results in extremism and closed-mindedness. Drawing on Nandy’s (2002) concepts, Zembylas et al. (2019) delineates two different forms of religious education: religion-as-faith, which refers to educating about religion as a faith with a focus on beliefs and practices; and religion-as-ideology, which refers to religious instruction which draws on nationalist and political themes with a monolithic perspective downplaying the particularity of the Other and thereby encouraging extremism. Religion-as-ideology seeks to appeal to the more affective side of students’ brains. On the other hand, religion-as-faith includes a cognitive approach, as it seeks to convey knowledge and understanding of the faith tradition, as well as affective education. The former is more closed-minded and fosters more fanatical approaches; the latter encourages a more open-minded and reflective approach, and allows for critical religious pedagogy.
By encouraging critical engagement and pedagogic bricoleur in SRE/RI teaching and learning, students can be encouraged to think rationally for themselves, rather than slavishly following a certain religious ideology. Whilst this puts demands on the voluntary SRE/RI teachers, their teaching is more than a vocation and they want to succeed and also to ensure that these classes continue to be offered in government schools. As Zembylas et al. (2019) stresses, teachers have agency and this also applies to the way SRE/RI teachers approach their subject in government schools. This can also affect the way they teach about their beliefs and practices outside of the formal school setting, while using constituents of emotional and cognitive engagement.

By being exposed to some basic professional development and being aware that they have to convey their content and use methodologies that are within mainstream norms, there can be a flow-on effect to churches, mosques, synagogues and temples. Learning new pedagogic approaches and understanding the importance of exploration can only improve what they are doing, hence reinforcing their basic aims.

### 9.14 Pedagogical Bricoleurs

Zembylas et al. (2019) argues that “to be effective pedagogical bricoleurs (Freathy et al. 2017) who can renegotiate hegemonic confessional ideologies and interreligious ideas, teachers need to be provided with intellectual and practical ‘tools’” (p. 182). To achieve this aim, first the voluntary SRE/RI teachers need professional development that discusses Australian government educational norms and policies and provides strategies for these teachers to update their pedagogy to foster intercultural understandings and social cohesion. Secondly, there needs to be institutional support from the state governments’ Departments of Education and Multiculturalism, Better Balanced Futures and the individual providers to enable revision of existing curricula, integrating the pedagogical principles discussed in this chapter. These principles include the need to integrate socialisation and education. Finally, it is important to develop activities that promote critical thinking, pluralism and dialogue and to develop students’ ability to think critically and analytically in their own faith tradition (Zembylas et al. 2019).

Understanding and implementing these steps are important in order to bring SRE/RI pedagogy into the twenty-first century. Older, established teachers have often grown up with fundamental religious ideas and didactic teaching approaches. By encouraging them to become pedagogic bricoleurs through teacher education they can move from a more static, essentialist and fundamentalist approach to a more flexible, pluralistic and reflective approach. Teachers can have a significant impact on their students, which can be transformative, but this can be either negative or positive. For the social cohesion of our contemporary society, it is important to ensure that they become educators, opening their students’ minds, rather than indoctrinators, leading to closed-mindedness, that is they teach rather than preach. Following its 2015 review, the state of New South Wales has started to take steps along the lines discussed above and Queensland has also begun some curriculum review. The
reflective responses of many of our interviewees from all six faiths demonstrate that this process of change has begun. More resources need to be invested to strengthen this process in order to ensure that SRE/RI teachers become pedagogic bricoleurs rather than indoctrinators.

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