Chapter 6
Spirituality, Health and Wellbeing

Abstract  The emphasis on health and wellbeing in government schools is a new development, drawing on the problems created by the postmodern era. Despite Australia’s wealth, recent studies have shown that health and wellbeing, as well as a sense of belonging, have declined in Australian society and schools. The aim of this chapter is to investigate to what extent SRE/RI can contribute to addressing this problem. Educationalists have become aware of the importance of positive psychology (Seligman 2002), developing on the earlier theories of Maria Montessori ([1915] 1997). They have also developed a better understanding of the concept of the “greater good” and the psychological problems created by the contemporary focus on individual needs rather than community needs. The study of (Chen and Vanderweele 2018) demonstrates the centrality of belief in a higher spiritual being, of prayer, both public and private, as well as meditation, as directly producing positive health outcomes and protecting against negative behaviours. As well, Nielsen (2010) has demonstrated the importance of gratitude as a factor in giving and this is a key component of all religious prayer. These important findings are discussed in this chapter as well as our research findings from 58 interviews with directors, teachers and graduates either individually or in focus groups of the six main faith groups: Christianity (18), Islam (12), Buddhism (9), Hinduism (7), Judaism (7) and Baha’i (5). The chapter concludes with an explanation of the connections between spirituality, wellbeing and religious belief. We argue that SRE/RI can develop these important attributes so that SRE/RI can foster better health and community and social cohesion.

As discussed, the postmodern era has created many new challenges, which have led to increasing mental and physical health issues. Despite Australia’s wealth, recent studies have shown that health and wellbeing in Australian society have declined. These have led government schools in Australia to introduce an increased emphasis on health and wellbeing, a new development created by the current era. For example, the New South Wales Department of School Education website stresses that public schools “provide safe learning and teaching environments to encourage healthy, happy, successful and productive students” and recommends that parents...
visit Wellbeing and learning to learn more (https://education.nsw.gov.au/public-schools/going-to-a-public-school/quick-guide-for-parents. Accessed 6 September 2018). This chapter will discuss this issue in terms of the role that religious belief and spirituality can play in contributing to mental and physical wellbeing.

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6.1 Spirituality, the Integrative, Non-confessional Approach and Confessional Religious Education

When speaking about religious education, scholars differentiate between in-faith or confessional religious education, that is education for religion, and integrative or non-confessional religious education, that is education about religions, where students learn about different religions in mixed religious classes, rather than about their own religion in separate classes. Alberts (2010) stresses that: “There is no ‘middle way’ between a secular and a religious approach to RE. If RE is to be integrative and obligatory, the aim of the subject cannot be to provide children with faith or spirituality, as this would necessarily promote particular religious traditions” (p. 284). Yet, this approach ignores children’s needs for faith and spirituality, especially for new immigrants in multicultural and multi-faith societies (Gross and Rutland 2019).

The importance of spirituality and mental well-being has been explored in depth by Kenneth Pargament (2007). He takes spirituality as a major constituent within the process of psychotherapy and stresses that it is important to draw on spirituality in terms of a process of a cure. In doing so, Pargament has stressed that:

The sacred speaks to our deepest dreams and aspiration, the truths we hold to be timeless, our sense that there is something that lies beyond our everyday experience, and our most fundamental assumptions as to why we are here, how we should live our lives, and what if anything we should leave behind. Any psychology of human behavior remains incomplete without an appreciation for our desire to know and connect to the sacred. (p. 342)
There is an international movement today that draws on these concepts of religiosity and spirituality in terms of psychological approaches, so that these elements become an asset in terms of dealing with mental illness.

At the same time, Pargament emphasises that there are positive and negative elements to spirituality. He states that:

The effectiveness of the search for the sacred lies not in a specific belief, practice, emotion, or relationship, but in the degree to which the individual’s spiritual pathways and destinations are well integrated, working together in synchrony with each other. At its best, spirituality is defined by pathways that are broad and deep, responsive to life’s situations, nurtured by the larger social context, capable of flexibility and continuity, and orientated towards a sacred destination that is large enough to encompass the full range of human potential and luminous enough to provide the individual with a powerful guiding vision. (p. 342)

Based on Pargament’s definition, spirituality and religiosity deal with the establishment of the individual’s identity, which is the basis for diversity and multiculturalism. Thus, religiosity enables us to understand the oneness of ourselves as unique human beings who, at the same time, are part of a broader community.

**6.2 Wellbeing and Positive Psychology**

There is extensive literature on wellbeing, which begins with ancient Greek philosophy with Aristotle’s ‘notion of *eudaimonia*, which means “happiness” involving living the best possible life (Clement 2010; Irwin 1988). The concept of wellbeing refers to “the condition or state of being well, contented and satisfied with life” (Webb 2010, p. 959). On the basis of Carr’s (2008) and Irwin’s (1988) and research, Clement notes that it must be “multi-faceted and holistic and include personal, cognitive, affective, social, physical, psychological, moral and spiritual dimensions” (Clement 2010, p. 38). Whilst this is a complex and multi-dimensional concept, it can assist in indicating the strength and values of modern societies (Webb 2010, p. 959).

Positive psychologists define mental wellbeing as being related to happiness. This perspective has been recently developed further by Martin Seligman, who has related this to the concepts of positive psychology. He stressed that people need to focus on change to building the best qualities in life through well-being, joy, and constructive cognitions about the future: optimism, faith and hope (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2014). Research over the past decade or so has shown that ‘when we feel good we are more capable, productive and creative’ (Nielsen 2010, p. 617) but the concept of wellbeing has only recently come to the top of the educational agenda, even though earlier educationalists have stressed this point.

Well-known educator, Maria Montessori, whose philosophy has led to the development of a whole school system across the globe from early childhood to matriculation, recognised the importance of faith to a person’s wellbeing (Carnes 2015). She wrote: “religious persons know well that... myth must cease to be real as soon as the child’s mind matures, whereas faith must accompany a human being until the end of his life” (Montessori 1997, p. 46). Fostering the spiritual element also relates to
affective elements of learning and positive psychology. This is central to the Montessori philosophy (Colgan 2016), which seeks to develop a positive approach to student learning and to foster within them intrinsic motivation, which includes enjoyment, interest and engagement, which are all elements of positive psychology (Rakhunde and Csikszentmihalyi 2005).

Robert Biswas-Diener (2011) argues that the Montessori system is a “happiness enabler” (p. 214) and thus facilitates wellness. Drawing on the study of Lillard and Else-Quest (2006), he stresses that whilst they did not find significant differences between the Montessori system and other types of schooling in terms of cognitive ability, they outperformed their peers in terms of their social ability and behaviour. He analysed the elements which foster happiness, including active learning, the role of choice, which leads to self-motivation, and creating “structures that support growth, mastery, independence and other psychological needs that are strongly associated with happiness” (p. 216), fitting in well with the positivist theory of psychology.

Montessori was one of the leading scholars who advocated for an optimistic educational approach, aiming at building an environment which develops self-esteem and enhances the positive elements within children and youth (Larson and Paulino 2014, p. 19) thereby creating transformational change. They define transformation as “the renewal of one’s mind, a new way of being, a solution giving meaning to life” (p. 23).

Seligman (2002) identified three types of happiness: the “pleasurable life”, involving self-gratification of our senses; “engaged life”, where we are completely immersed in our activity; and “meaningful life” where we focus on a higher purpose. This issue of giving meaning to life is central to the SRE debate. Nielsen argues that “while sensory pleasure and engaging activities are not to be dismissed, we enjoy higher and more steady levels of happiness and recuperate more easily from trauma when our lives also contain meaning and we are doing something for the greater good” (pp. 622–623).

6.2.1 Wellbeing: The Focus on the “Greater Good” and Giving to Others

All religions focus on the concepts of the “greater good” and also on the importance of “giving”, where ten characteristics have been defined. These include: religious celebrations and gratefulness to a higher being helping others to help themselves, seen as the highest form of charity; forgiveness; courage; respect (a key element of the ten commandments); compassion; loyalty; and listening (Nielsen 2010, p. 623). Medical research has demonstrated that expressing gratitude each day, which is a central part of religious prayer, has the same health benefits as direct giving (Nielsen 2010).

Nielsen, of the University of Canberra, asked his students to test this assertion of the value to mental health of expressing gratitude. At the start of his course they
took the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index survey. Then he asked them to keep a
diary for six weeks and at the end of each day to list three things for which they
were grateful. At the end of the six weeks, all of the participants had increased their
satisfaction noticeably in all eight areas listed by the Wellbeing Index. Whilst Nielsen
commented on the limitations of this project, because there was no control group
and it was difficult to assess the impact of the material they were studying in class,
it was clear that positive psychology/giving, whether through the education process,
the experiment or both, led to improved wellbeing (Nielsen 2010, p. 624). In the light
of his research, he asks: “Giving to others would seem to be a powerful medicine
– perhaps an antidote to our own inertia, apathy and fear. Could it be that we can
create a strong ballast, a conscience in students by simply enabling them to do good
on a daily basis?” (p. 624).

Yet, the importance of giving in terms of students’ wellbeing and happiness is a
relatively new concept in education. In our secular society, the focus has been on
putting one’s own needs ahead of the needs of others, which is the diametrically
opposite approach which has fostered the “me generation”. The VEGPS 2 Final Report (DEEWR 2008)
stressed that “effective values education is not an
academic exercise; it needs to be deeply personal, deeply real and deeply engaging”
(p. 11).

Another element of giving is what has been described in the literature as “service
learning”, that is, when students are engaged in action-based activities applying to
their curriculum learning in direct service to others or their community (Nielsen
2010). When we undertook our research for the Montessori International School,
Ganenu, in Beijing, run by the Jewish Chabad movement, we found that the school
encouraged concern for others, with the Jewish value of tzedakah (charity) being
stressed for both Jews and the non-Jewish community. Every Friday morning, the
primary aged students volunteered for a Chinese charity, sorting clothes and assisting
in other ways. Through this activity, their Chinese language skills improved, but
more importantly, they built a sense of social justice together with an empathy for
the mainstream Chinese society and became part of giving to that society (Gross and
Rutland 2019). Hence, religious practice encourages giving from an early age, so
that as students mature, it becomes second nature to their behaviour.

Service learning does not have to be a part of the formal school curriculum.
Developing social competencies is central to any modern school curriculum, and
service learning is part of that competency. However, it is important to recognise
that if we are to understand the meaning of giving, it should not be considered as
a means to an end, but rather an end in and of itself. According to this reasoning,
“giving emerges as a living principle that could underpin our educational practices,
not just because we want children to do better at school, but also because we want
them to live better” (Nielsen 2010, p. 626).

Encouraging giving amongst students, something which over centuries was inbuilt
into religious practice, can be transformational. To give of oneself, one needs to
understand the importance of giving, something which is fostered with religion.
Nielsen stresses:
That giving is one of the most profound things we can do is not only a scientific claim made by positive psychology, but also a key tenet of most religions and spiritual traditions. Whichever of these beliefs we subscribe to, there seems to be common ground on which to proceed. (p. 626)

He notes the paradox that:

This still does not completely explain why improving others’ lives has such a powerful effect on our own. Ultimately, our hearts, rather than our powers of reason, will have to recognize the truth of that. The heart has reasons that reason does not know... I have cited empirical research to show that ‘giving’ and ‘love’ work – even though we might not fully know why. Knowing this does not matter to some extent. Knowing that it works does. (p. 626)

It is within this paradox between emotion and reason that religious belief is so important. Religious belief is, in the final analysis, an emotional and spiritual response that requires love and transcendence which cannot be explained rationally. Victor Frankl (1985), in his book, Man’s Search for Meaning, wrote:

…being human always points, and is directed, to something, or someone, other than oneself, be it a meaning to fulfil or another human being to encounter. The more one forgets himself, by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love, the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself. What is called self-actualization is not an attainable aim at all, for the simple reason that the more one would strive for it, the more he would miss it. In other words, self-actualization is possible only as a side-effect of self-transcendence. (https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/religion-and-philosophy/spiritual-life/man-s-search-for-meaning.html)

As we have demonstrated, in our rapidly changing post-modern world, it has become more important than ever to provide young students with a basis to manage their fears and anxieties. The focus on giving at both the practical and spiritual levels fostered by religious belief can only be introduced into SRE classes. For those who feel the need for religious education, SRE can significantly add to the students’ sense of wellbeing.

Research has also shown that people suffering from alcoholism, drug abuse and eating disorders have lost their sense of meaning in life and their belief in a higher being. Thus, in groups such as alcoholics anonymous, the first thing that participants are told is that they need to have a belief in God—it does not matter which religious belief they follow, but if they can gain a belief in a higher being and a sense of spirituality, they will understand better not to destroy their God-given bodies.

6.2.2 The Concept of ‘Wholeness’

Michael Ben-Avie (2008) defines the concepts of “wholeness” when children’s development combines the six main pathways (physical, cognitive, psychological, language, social and ethical) which are ‘critical to academic learning’ and that of the ‘who-ness’, when children not only have a cognitive knowledge of who they are, but also an emotional attachment to their group (pp. 99–100).
For SRE, this means an attachment to their religious community, filling the need for belonging to a group, enabling self-regulated behaviour and ensuring that commitment overrides indulgent behaviour. Ben-Avie argues that if children develop well, they learn well, so the focus for all education should be on child development and not just on child learning. Including SRE, even for one period a week, contributes to whole child development, because it is part of Ben-Avie’s six main pathways, which ensures balanced child development.

### 6.2.3 Health and Religious Practice

Currently, there is a growing awareness of the importance of promoting protective factors for good health, rather than just reducing risk factors, and that there is a need to start this process from an early age. Empirical evidence from recent studies has shown that religious practices are associated with better health and well-being in adults, with earlier research demonstrating a strong connection between attendance at religious services and lower mortality risks. Other studies have shown that religious involvements and other religious practices are linked to other positive outcomes including greater psychological wellbeing, character strengths, reduced mental illness and healthier behaviours. Most of these studies have only involved adults, with fewer studies including the connections between adolescence, religious involvement, protection against certain negative behaviours and the promotion of positive health practices. However, most of these studies have been fairly limited in scope.

To validate the hypothesis that religious practices lead to better physical, psychological, and mental health, as well as strengthening character traits, Chen and Vanderweele (2018) sought to further investigate this link. They conducted a major longitudinal study from 1999 to 2013, using the frequency of attendance at public services and of private meditation and prayer to examine this hypothesis. Their sample was predominantly white, with more female participants. They found that 60% attended religious services weekly and 36% undertook meditation and private prayer daily.

The results from this study “suggest that religious involvement in adolescence may be one… protective factor for a range of health and wellbeing outcomes” (pp. 6–7) with the active religious participants demonstrating greater psychological wellbeing, character strengths and lower risks of mental illness. Religious behaviour reduced the probability of smoking and drug abuse (both major health risks), deviant sexual behaviours, depression and anxiety, and fostered forgiveness (Chen and Vanderweele 2018, pp. 6–7). They found that adolescents with physical disabilities tended to practice a higher level of prayer, both public and private.

Thus, religious practices foster protective factors for good health. They help to maintain self-control, develop negative attitudes to harmful behaviours, and foster positive coping practices including meditation and forgiveness. Religious involvements also provide peer support mechanisms and networks, a sense of community and
positive adult role models. Education providers and curriculum planners in Australian
government schools need to take cognizance of these positive, protective factors for
good health in the broader community.

6.2.4 Wellbeing and Values Education: Australian Research

As discussed, the research of Crawford and Rossiter (2006) focused on the impor-
tance of the search for meaning (beliefs and values), identity and spirituality for young
people’s development, seeking strong integration between these three elements. They
note that traditionally spirituality has been associated with religion and prayer but in
the post-modern world the concept has taken on a separate connotation to that of the
traditional religious understanding. They argue that spirituality “has become a ubiq-
uitous term covering many different aspects of personal life and culture… it figures
in areas as diverse as ecology, new age, healing, health sciences, business and educa-
tion” (p. 9). Rossiter (2011) stresses that spirituality is “strategically placed like a
bridge connecting traditional religious ways of seeing people in God’s universe with
contemporary secular psychological ways of interpreting personal development”
(p. 16). In this regard, education can play an important role.

However, Rossiter (2011) and Crawford and Rossiter (2006) believe that while
the concept of spirituality has taken on these additional, broader aspects, the key
role religion can play in young people’s lives should not be discounted. As well,
the focus on the good life means that the reality of young people’s experiences
cannot match up to the images they see on their screens, often leading to a sense of
failure, disappointment and a loss of hope. This can result in “the new prominence
of nihilistic thinking - a tendency to believe that there is no meaning in life.…
Having nothing much to believe in or hope for can contribute to increasing levels of
boredom, depression, drug and alcohol abuse and suicide, especially among youth”
(p. 11). These arguments have been reinforced by other Australian scholars working
in the field.

In 2010, a major study illustrated the vital importance of values education for
students’ wellbeing. Reinforcing Ben-Avie’s message, this study “comes as ‘values
education’ widens in scope from being concerned with morality, ethics, civics and
citizenship to a broader definition synonymous with a holistic approach to education
in education in general” (Lovat 2010, back cover). Resulting from this study, an
International Handbook was edited by three key Australian scholars, Terence Lovat,
Ron Toomey and Neville Clement, and included sections stressing the role of well-
being for the curriculum and pedagogy, personal integrity and social engagement.
In his introductory chapter, Lovat highlighted the key elements in values education
as set out in a 2003 Australian government study, entitled “Values Education Study”
(DEST 2003) as follows:

1. that education is as much about building character as it is about equipping students
with specific skills.
that values based education can strengthen students’ self-esteem, optimism and commitment to personal fulfilment and help students exercise ethical judgement and social responsibility; and

3. that parents expect schools to help students understand and develop personal and social responsibilities (DEST 2003, p. 10).

Current research stresses the importance of integrating values, including understanding that there is meaning to living, with a strong sense of identity and spirituality, and that these key elements need to be integrated into the school curriculum. Yet, finding a way to integrate these goals into the general curriculum has not been very successful, despite the efforts to do so (Crawford and Rossiter 2006; Rossiter 2011).

In a specific study of prayer in Australia, De Souza and Watson (2016) argued that prayer is a major communal religious practice which fosters solidarity among students assisting them to create a sense of community through the prayers. Prayer is a spiritual act which reflects the inner layers of spirituality which is innate in human beings (De Souza and Watson 2016, p. 344). Further, she argues that it helps to cultivate a sense of friendship (De Souza and Watson 2016) and a feeling of togetherness (Kohn 2020). In our research (Gross and Rutland 2015) of Jewish SRE classes, we could see through class observations how prayers create a “safe zone” for the students, thereby contributing to their health and wellbeing.

More recently, as discussed in the previous chapter, Allen and Kern (2019) have researched the problem of the declining sense of belonging within Australian school communities. They refer to the research of John Hattie (2009) demonstrating the fundamental importance of student–teacher relationships to a student’s success and academic achievements at school. From their research, they have found that the student–teacher relationship “appears to be a more powerful influencer on belonging than relationships with peers and parents. For example, a survey of 699 secondary students found that although parent support was indeed important, for school belonging, teacher support mattered more.” However, this is not in an academic context, but rather if “their teacher was caring, empathetic, fair and able to help them with personal problems”. They argue that this is a foundational part of school belonging and is very important in terms of contributing to students’ wellbeing, creating a positive attitude to life and lowering the risk of suicide in young people, as well as improving academic performance.

As well, recent research in both neuroscience and epidemiology has demonstrated the close connection between wellbeing pedagogy and values education. This research has shown how the holistic growth of each student involves their social, emotional, moral, spiritual development as well as their intellectual and cognitive growth and that all are important for the processes of teaching and learning in government schools. These concepts have become embedded in the most recent policies of the New South Wales Department of School Education and other Australian states, but the spiritual and religious dimension is excluded from these policies, as if it is not a contributing factor. Yet, our research has demonstrated the importance of special
religious education for health and wellbeing, reinforced by the comments made by our interviewees.

6.3 Findings

The responses of the teachers from all the faiths highlighted the role of spirituality in a child’s school education, and its contribution to the health and wellbeing of children.

6.3.1 The Importance of Spirituality

All the interviewees strongly supported the human need for spirituality. The teachers from the different faith groups explained that people need to be aware that we have a body, a mind, and also a soul or spirit, and that all three are important in education. In the Baha’i faith, for example, the teachers explained that Abdul Baha’i, the son of Bahá’u’lláh (meaning the glory of God) who was the founder of the Baha’i faith, argued that there are three types of education: one is intellectual, incorporating the mind, one is physical, incorporating the body, and the third is spiritual. He argued that the third was the most important compared with the other two types of education, because “an intellectual education without a spiritual education can be dangerous. Children can use science in [the] wrong ways, whereas if you include spiritual education, you can use it to benefit humanity and to serve mankind. So that’s how we believe in the long term it will benefit the children” (male SRE teacher, #5 Baha’i, New South Wales).

Similarly, from a Hindu perspective Hinduism is for “spirituality because it’s only teaching spirituality. It talks about the inner sense” (female SRE teacher, #4 Hindu, New South Wales). A Hindu leader explained that it is very important because one has a mind, “which can be a very dangerous fellow. If you can control your mind you will become a good person... So controlling one’s mind in Hinduism is basic” (male religious leader, #1 Hindu, Tasmania). The mind “is why a human being is called human” and one needs to connect to it (male SRE teacher, #3 Hindu, New South Wales).

These beliefs infused the responses of other interviewees who stressed that it was important to educate the whole child and this includes bringing the spiritual aspects to the table. This is often very important at the secondary school level when adolescents are struggling with many issues. As one Christian interviewee explained: “One of the parts and makeup, the holistic part of a person, where I would argue that religious education will educate the spirit of the person. Which is, I would say, the third part of a holistic person, being body, mind and soul/spirit”.

In terms of a holistic education, the teachers noted that schools focus on the importance of an academic education—students need maths and English skills to function
as adults—and physical education but, as one Christian interviewee explained “I think it’s really neglectful to think schools can do without the spiritual component of a person and it needs to be included… [if not] people will degrade and of course that degradation will have a cost” (SRE director, #16 Christian, New South Wales).

A Jewish SRE graduate/teacher further elaborated: “SRE is all about spirituality, connecting their souls to something greater, teaching them that it’s not just the HSC [Higher School Certificate for matriculation] that’s daunting them. There’s so much more to offer them in life and not just work, not just the pressures of the physical world but also there’s a spiritual world, just trying to enrich their souls as much as possible” (Female SRE graduate/teacher, #1 Jewish, New South Wales).

Given these understandings, the SRE/RI teachers obviously felt special religious education did need to be part of the school curriculum. As one Christian teacher explained:

It makes some formal inroads into the expression of spirituality in a school context. There wouldn’t be another lesson in a public school situation where there is prayer, or even interacting with religious text. …it reinforces to the children that spirituality is for all of life, not just in the privacy of home or in the worship space. So it gives you a whole of life spirituality, not just this is something that our family does, or something that our church does. (male SRE teacher, #1 Christian, New South Wales)

These concepts were constantly stressed by the teachers, but also that it needed someone who was spiritual themselves to act as a model for the students so that the children “feel they’re part of something more than just their small family. They’re part of something greater… they have this spiritual guide who teaches them right from wrong” (female SRE teacher, #2 Jewish, New South Wales). Therefore, what SRE does is “to allow students to benefit from being in the learning environment with someone who has a shared faith, someone who has the same faith as them, but probably someone who is more experienced in their faith, someone who has got some professional learning and can model a life lived in faith” (SRE teacher, #2 Christian, New South Wales).

Developing the spiritual dimension of a child thus better equips them for life. As one Muslim teacher explained “they’re no longer just looking aimlessly for a solution on Facebook or whatever it is. They’re actually tapping into their spiritual side and able to find solutions to their problems within themselves” (SRE teacher, #3 Muslim, New South Wales). Even if the classes are only once a week, the spiritual messages they give ensures that they have “something they look forward to, something that they can hold on to” (SRE teacher, #4 Muslim, Queensland).

Spirituality is also central to Buddhism. One of the Buddhist teachers who came from a Christian background turned to Buddhism during a period of trauma in her life and she noted that during times of trauma people turn to religion and spirituality. For her Buddhism was a “spiritual self-awareness and so for me it has huge benefits in all those categories”. As such, she hoped to give her students “a tool they will be able to tap into at any time of their life” (Female SRE teacher, #9 Buddhist, New South Wales).

The graduate students we interviewed strongly agreed with the importance of spirituality. As one Muslim graduate explained:
From my personal experience like a spiritual connection is very, very important for me to overcome challenges I face in my life and anxiety, work issues, university issues. Having just a spiritual connection with God helps a lot. That’s why I believe everybody should have a spiritual connection with something. (SRE graduate, #6 Muslim, New South Wales)

Similarly, a Baha’i student commented that: “Yes. Well, spirituality means a lot to me. And in order to have a better world we need to have spirituality because today there’re lots of people who are suffering from lack of spirituality in our society” (SRE graduate, #2 Baha’i, New South Wales).

In explaining the importance of spiritual education, the teachers and graduates focused on a number of factors: the need for positive psychology and hope; the role of prayer and meditation; the significance of giving; developing a sense of community and belonging; and countering youth suicide and other negative forces in our contemporary society.

6.3.2 Positive Psychology

Research has demonstrated the importance of positive psychology for the human psyche and this was also stressed by the interviewees, who saw religion providing a positive approach for people and providing them with hope in terms of facing life’s challenges. In Christian theology this is seen through Jesus as well as God, since belief in Jesus provides one with salvation. One Christian SRE director explained it in this way:

So in primary school, special religious education provides a basis and introduces young people to Christianity, to the Bible and to Jesus; it allows them to ask questions. So in the materials it looks at questions like where did I come from? … And it teaches them that there is a God that loves them and there is a God that sent his only son so that they can be restored to him”. (Male SRE director, #15 Christian, New South Wales)

Another commented: “it’s about planting seeds so that one day, because we all know life is complicated and these children are young and we respect that. But as they get older, all of them will face problems in life… and we believe we’ve got something to offer… So we point to the Bible, we point to Jesus, to core Christian teachings so that they can know there is something else out there” (Female SRE teacher, #17 Christian, Queensland).

Another Christian teacher expanded on this, saying:

“It comes back to my sense of self-worth. My value comes from knowing that I am extremely important to God” (Female SRE teacher, #5 Christian, New South Wales). In this way, another teacher argued, it can be “uplifting” for students to receive “the amazing message of hope of the gospel of Jesus Christ, it can’t be anything but overwhelmingly good for their wellbeing, for their state of mind, and for the hope that they can have in their hearts and the strength; it gives them strength to face all those issues and to understand them. Yeah, I feel privileged to be able to present words of light in that context of darkness”. (Female SRE teacher, #4 Christian, New South Wales)
Similarly, in Judaism the concept that there is a higher being, God, who cares for them and listens to their needs was stressed. One teacher explained that “I've taught them that, think Hashem, God, is listening to you. Believe that he’s there” (Female SRE teacher, #4 Jewish, New South Wales) while another stressed that “if bad does happen, it is for a reason. We may not see it, and if good happens it also has reasons behind it and they can find comfort in the fact that they’re being looked after and there’s HaShem (God) and he loves us and… looks after us. And it’s not just a bad, rotten world out there; there’s actually good stuff happening” (Female SRE teacher, #6 Jewish, New South Wales).

Teachers from the other faiths expressed similar beliefs. One Muslim teacher noted that when the children enter the class they are greeted with the saying “Peace of God be with you”. She stressed “this is something we all need to think about when we walk into the room: God is with us. We’re all peaceful here and we talk about positive things. So I think it definitely assists the children - they really calm down. They calm down from the outside environment, so busy and negative, and hard to keep up with the peer pressure. But when they come here they can just relax and be themselves” (Female SRE teacher, #2 Muslim, Queensland).

One of the Baha’i teachers explained the difference between the teaching of values and ethics, which tends to focus on the negative—on the ego and on punishment—and religious education, which focuses on kindness and love and selflessness. She commented “the children are so precious that they need to polish all the positive attributes in them. They don’t need to dwell on the negative. They don’t need to know about ego or punishment. It’s the love that we have for humanity that helps us to bring out all those beautiful gems inside us” (Female SRE teacher, #4 Baha’i, New South Wales).

These comments from the different faith groups demonstrates the teachers’ clear awareness of the need to stress the positives in life and to give their students hope through their belief in a higher being—in something larger than themselves who cares for them and loves them. Within this framework, prayer and meditation are very important as a way to say thank you and to look outside one’s material world to the spiritual.

6.3.3 The Role of Prayer and Meditation

A central part of religious belief and practice is prayer and, for the Eastern religions, meditation. All the teachers spoke about the centrality of prayer to their traditions and to their classroom practice. As a Muslim teacher stressed: “According to our Islamic practice, ritual practice, we have to pray five times, so for the five times we wake up early in the morning and we take ablutions, we pray. When we pray we actually concentrate our prayer where we try to remember our God” (Male Muslim leader, #11, Tasmania).

A Baha’i teacher expanded on these concepts:
I think that when we trying to say to kids that we must believe in God as the Creator then we can feel His presence in our life. In some problems or issues we can connect to Him. We can pray. We can ask for help. We can consult with Him from when we are praying or when we are reading the holy books or something like this. Then it's good for resting our soul and to feel good. And yeah, it's good for the spiritual things that it's very important in this world because the materialism – buying, eating, sleeping and working, paying the loans – and then again and again as a cycle. We need something different from these things…. (Male SRE teacher, #1 Baha’i, New South Wales)

The Baha’i teachers noted that they always begin their lessons with a prayer. For example, another teacher explained one of the prayers that they say, a short one, is: “Oh God, guide me, protect me, make of me a shiny lamp and a brilliant star.” He asks the children to think about it: “What does it mean to make you a shiny lamp and a brilliant star? Does it mean like a literal lamp, or does it mean like a spiritual lamp, you know, like a virtual lamp? So yes, we foster and nurture spirituality in them in this way” (Male SRE teacher, #5 Baha’i, New South Wales).

Prayer, meditation and yoga are also central to Hinduism. One teacher explained:

Oh yes, definitely, because let’s assume, for example, when you get up in the morning, how do you clean yourself externally – I mean, everybody knows and teaches about how you brush your teeth in the morning, and how you take baths to clean your external things. But how do you clean the internal ones? Internally, in your mind, you’ve got all the rubbish. So how do you want to get rid of the rubbish in your mind? By praying, you know, like the amount of prayers. (Male SRE teacher, #3 Hindu, New South Wales)

This volunteer teacher professionally works in the field of science and so he demonstrates this point with a scientific experiment, taking a foam cup, filling it with mud, and showing that when he tips it upside down there is still mud clinging to the side. He then asks the students how does one clean the cup and they respond by washing it. That helps him to explain why prayer is so important because “it helps to clear the dirt in your mind” (Male SRE teacher, #3 Hindu, New South Wales).

Similarly, the Christian interviewees stressed the importance of prayer. One teacher with a background in biomedical science noted that she had read studies on the importance of prayer and spirituality for health and wellbeing. Prayer was a regular part of Christian RE, but a number of teachers noted that it was voluntary as one cannot force people to pray: “the child can’t be made to pray, and should never be made to pray… it’s up to them, but we do ask for respect” (Female SRE teacher, #17 Christian, Queensland). Another explained:

So by actually giving kids the building blocks of faith. So that would include things like understanding how to read and engage in the Bible or Holy Scriptures and also some of the skills of the faith like prayer and different aspects of worship that form part of that faith life… So they’re actually equipped with some tools from that faith tradition to help them navigate through life. So in a way it gives them some tools hopefully for resilience and for dealing with things that come along in life. (Female SRE teacher, #9 Christian, New South Wales)

Prayer is also an important form of expressing gratitude. This is very strong in Judaism, where there are many different blessings to thank God for what he has provided. As one teacher explained:
Well, spirituality is… we always start our morning classes with the basic prayers and that already sets the tone that we believe there is a superior being. We often tell the children that there are many things they need to be thankful for and to realise what they need to be thankful for. And we might go around the class asking children what they are thankful for and we make a point of saying, “We’re not talking about [material] things but about actual nature and health and wellbeing and family that one needs to appreciate”. (Female SRE teacher, #5 Jewish, New South Wales)

Jewish RE teachers always begin the lesson with the children chanting two basic prayers—the Sh’ma, which sets out the importance of belief in God, and Modeh Ani, where one thanks God after waking for “returning my soul to me”, in other words of waking up and being alive, and encouraging the children to thank God for life and good health.

In Buddhism, meditation is a central form of their faith practice. All the Buddhist RE teachers explained how they use meditation and why it is so important for their students, starting from Year K as “they learn about calming the mind… controlling aggression, controlling anger… so it’s a spiritual tool that you use to stop yourself and have a look, slow down” (Male SRE teacher, #3 Buddhist, New South Wales). Meditation teaches the children to sit still, and learn to do things with calm and quietness.

The Buddhist interviewees stressed that Buddhism is not a traditional form of religion because they do not worship the Buddha. Rather he is a teacher and his teachings are “to be mindful, and I find it’s very good for the students” (Female SRE teacher, #4 Buddhist, New South Wales). They do not see their goal as teaching about the faith tradition, but rather helping their students to work on themselves, to practise meditation techniques not only in the weekly class but throughout the week. This helps them to navigate through “school life, the challenges they face in the playground, socialising… as a support mechanism” (Female SRE teacher, #6 Buddhist, New South Wales).

The children are also encouraged to practise meditation before going to sleep, rather than doing computer games, so that “they have a sound sleep, and then wake up… like a blooming flower, like a blossoming flower without any lethargy” (Female SRE teacher, #7 Buddhist, New South Wales). This skill becomes particularly important at the high school level. One Buddhist RE teacher explained that when the high school students come to her class, they are exhausted, not just physically but also emotionally, mentally and spiritually. This was a result of their “spending time on the computers; their research issues or whatever they are doing on their assignments; and what is expected of them from their parents, from the school” (Female SRE teacher, #8 Buddhist, New South Wales). When they come to her classes, they just ask for meditation, as the students find this helps them to “come to that place of harmony, that place of emptiness, that place of no expectations. You know – that peace; you know – that tranquillity” (Female SRE teacher, #8 Buddhist, New South Wales). This teacher also found that chanting helps the high school students.

A Jewish interviewee found the same with her SRE high school classes in terms of the break from the stress that the students experience: “of just really giving them that break between their classes, but also enriching them, so that the class, that
hour that we get together every week, every two weeks, every month, gives them enough energy and mental strength, emotional strength, spiritual strength to conquer whatever challenges they face until the next class” (Female SRE teacher/graduate, #1 Jewish, New South Wales).

As can be seen, all the SRE/RI teachers stressed the value of prayer, of meditation and of chanting or singing something in unison. These elements are something which can be fostered in SRE/RI classes, but are not part of the regular school lessons.

6.3.4 The Significance of Giving

Thinking about others, rather than oneself, and giving to others is another important aspect of health and wellbeing. One Christian RE teacher explained this concept: “and I think knowing something about this is what God is like and this is how He wants us to treat other people, which covers love their neighbour, because we talk about grace, getting something that you don’t deserve, then there’s a level at which we treat other people” (Female SRE teacher, #5 Christian, New South Wales).

Generosity is also stressed in Buddhist RE, although the focus is more on the intention. One Buddhist RE teacher explained: “We look at the giver and the receiver is on the same level. You give but the other will receive, providing the giver with the opportunity to give. So we delve into generosity” (Female SRE teacher, #1 Buddhist, New South Wales). The Buddhist teachers also encourage their students to be helpful and talk about ways that they can be helpful, and this also applies to the other SRE/RI classes. In Buddhism there is a specific form of meditation called “loving kindness meditation” seeking to develop friendliness and love for others, which one of the teachers noted she specifically uses in her classes (Female SRE teacher, #7 Buddhist, New South Wales). In Jewish RE the children will have charity drives at some point in their school year, teaching the children the importance of giving or tzedakah in Hebrew.

The importance of thinking about others and giving to them was also recognised by the graduates. One of them commented:

“Well it helps me because when I do all of these things [giving to others] you just feel this feeling – that you’ve achieved something and you just feel good in the inside. And it kind of helps to get closer to God.

Interviewer: “Why is it important to be closer to God?”.

“So in the next world we don’t suffer and we don’t spiritually suffer. And also, just to help others out. That is the whole point of life”. (Female SRE graduate, #3 Baha’i, New South Wales)

This response summed up succinctly the key role of giving from her religious perspective as well as how this can contribute to health and wellbeing by making a person feel good about themselves. Through community efforts of giving, a sense of belonging can also develop among students.
6.3 Findings

6.3.5 Sense of Belonging

Another aspect of religious education contributing to a person’s sense of wellbeing is creating a sense of belonging to a community. One Muslim teacher explained this in the following terms: “Well, that comes from community, as well as from our teachings. If you’re in a community where you’re loved and you’re cared for and you’re nurtured and you’re educated; I think definitely the spiritual and the positive things come out of that” (Female SRE teacher, #2 Muslim, Queensland).

The importance of belonging to a group was also stressed by a Jewish teacher/graduate:

It is also creating a sense of community between the kids, bonding them based on their religious affiliation as opposed to their academic achievements. Most classes in high school are ranked based on if they’re the top of maths, or they’re not doing so well. There’s a stream system within high schools whereas SRE is bonding you on something different. It’s allowing different kids from different classes to interact, based on a similar heritage, that really helps them with wellbeing. Creating a different friendship group, they’re also giving them that break between the mathematics and English classes. (Female SRE teacher/graduate, #1 Jewish, New South Wales)

So, by developing a sense of community based on a similar religious affiliation which goes across the grades contributes to the students’ sense of health and wellbeing.

The role of the SRE teacher is considered as central by all the interviewees, as they understand their primary role is to be caregivers, and to assist the children in their spiritual development because these classes “I think children just know it innately, if it’s safe or not safe… that no-one one’s going to judge them, that they feel included. It’s where they’re safe” (Female SRE teacher, #2 Jewish, New South Wales).

Creating this sense of belonging, this sense of community and feeling safe, together with developing a positive psychology, with an ability to express gratitude and help others, are important elements in countering negative elements that young people are faced with in contemporary society.

6.3.6 Countering Youth Suicide and Other Negative Forces

With our rapidly changing world, issues relating to youth suicide, mental illness, particularly anxiety and depression, and problems of alcohol and drug abuse, have increased markedly in Australia, as in other parts of the world. All the stakeholders that we interviewed were acutely aware of these issues and believed that religion was an important antidote against these problems.

This was highlighted by one of our Christian interviewees, a young teacher who had grown up in regional New South Wales and who was a graduate of the SRE program. She told us how a childhood friend of hers had just committed suicide a few days earlier, and that she was devastated by the news. She told us what she thought was the problem:
But I think being able to share what the Bible says in that context, and speak God’s word into their lives, in that crazy, chaotic dark context; it’s like we are giving students a breath of fresh air, a ray of sunshine, that could lead to a solid course of hope in life.

Yeah, I think so many other school subjects, they just present darkness. Geography, you learn depressing facts about over-population, climate change and the end of the world. Science, you learn similar things. In English, a lot of the dramas and texts that you study are quite dark and depressing, like Shakespeare. From memory, I didn’t study really uplifting texts. It was all like 1984, and Macbeth, a lot of really twisted plot lines. Art, there is some pretty weird, dark stuff, that I studied about in art. Anyway, there is a lot of darkness and hopelessness in the curriculum that kids are exposed to on a week to week basis. (Female SRE teacher, #4 Christian, New South Wales)

As well, she noted the cycle of life, that “we could have the most delicious meal one night but we wake up the next day and we are hungry again, or we will always need a new item of clothing, or we need another holiday or another relationship”. People think if they just have that they will be happy, until “some people get to the point where they see through the illusion … and the only answer for some people is just to end it”. She felt that, in contrast, the positive messages of Jesus and belief in God, the Creator, provides a meaning in life: “without knowing the one who created us, we’re never going to find that fulfilment” (Female SRE teacher, #4 Christian, New South Wales).

This message was reinforced by another Christian RE teacher, who had grown up in a religious household but had gone through a period of rejecting his religious background, and had ended up with “depression, a lot of difficulties with relationships, a lot of uncertainty”. When he regained his faith, he found that his life changed (Male SRE teacher, #4 Christian, New South Wales).

These concepts were stressed by SRE teachers from the other faiths. As one of the Muslim RE teachers said: “And if you have lost that spiritual connection of what’s real, then your mind is not going to be sound… I see all the issues that these high schools have and to me it’s a lack of that spirituality… there’s a lot of angry kids; there’s a lot of hormones; there’s a lot of disrespect. It’s like the moral compass of society is slowly deteriorating and this is showing up in our kids. We need to, for me personally, you need to be in touch with our Creator to be connected” (Female SRE teacher, #3 Muslim, New South Wales).

Similarly, a Hindu teacher commented:

Yeah. You see, at the moment, I personally feel that at the moment, if we see young generation is absolutely getting addicted to drugs, drinking, alcohol, cigarettes, and they don’t have much value in their life, because both parents are working, both parents are busy. They really don’t know why I am doing, what I’m doing, and if I have to speak truth, why do I have to speak truth? If I have to be loyal, why do I have to be loyal? They don’t know all these things (Female SRE teacher, #2 Hindu, New South Wales).

She felt that it was here that SRE can fill an important gap, because spiritual, religious teachings can contribute to ensuring that we have “good human beings, who are helping others, understanding others, and that role SRE does”. (Female SRE teacher, #2 Hindu, New South Wales)

The graduates were also very aware of such problems with some of their peers in high school. As one of them explained: “And the lack of spirituality can be the cause
of many different problems such as, for example, depression. Some people because they are not strong enough; they don’t have that spirituality; they don’t have that foundation; they get distracted with drugs and have too much alcohol and other problems… Yes, there’s a lot of negative forces in our society today and spirituality has helped me to not get distracted and just stay on the right path” (Male SRE graduate, #3 Baha’i, New South Wales).

As one of the Buddhist SRE teachers commented:

I’m really there to guide them so that they can help themselves with depression … it’s just rampant… So for me the children need it. No matter what the religion is, they need to have some core beliefs and moral obligations. And I think all religions and spirituality, if not taken to the extreme, we need to make it clear that there is goodness in all of them. And to take out SRE in the public system would be a really big mistake. I really do believe this, regardless of the religion, because I’ve seen the benefit. (Female SRE teacher, #9 Buddhist, New South Wales)

These personal stories and comments illustrate clearly the research findings that spirituality, positive psychology, prayer, gratitude and giving all contribute to students’ health and wellbeing as will be analysed in the next section.

6.4 Discussion and Conclusions

The most important finding in our study was that interviewees from all the faith communities found a strong correlation between spirituality, health and well-being, a finding that is well supported by other studies (Diener et al. 2009). According to the subjects of our study, as well as findings in other studies (Plater 2017), spirituality is one of the significant dimensions of life (Pargament 2007, 2013) and is an important element of the students’ human development. They noted that while secular studies did not include spirituality, SRE classes were premised on conveying spiritual messages and so they fill an important gap in the children’s education.

According to the findings of the study, the spiritual aspect and the need for spirituality appear to be universal (Park et al. 2017) because spirituality is cross-cultural and part of all religious beliefs and faith traditions. This finding is supported by other studies (Benson et al. 2012). For example in a study of adolescents in eight different continents, 70% of young people claimed that spirituality was a significant dimension in their lives (Benson et al. 2012).

The interviewees also felt that religion provided a positive message of hope, which is stressed by the theories of positive psychology (Montessori 1997; Seligman 2002; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2014). They acknowledged the fact that in addition to the intellectual and physical aspects of human existence there is a third important component—that of spirituality, which ensures a holistic approach within the school environment, contributing to the “who-ness and wholeness” of the child (Ben-Avie 2008).

Moreover, spirituality was found in many countries to be a significant contributor to physical health (Miller and Thoresen 2003) and people’s ability to cope with
illness. This has been found in secular countries like Russia or Sweden and as a major means of coping with psychological crises and post-traumatic conditions (Benson et al. 2012). The teachers in our research from the different faith groups agree that spirituality, which is the central element of SRE teaching and learning, also serves as a psychological coping mechanism and as a source of identity anchor. Furthermore, many studies of patients in need of psychiatric help have argued that mentally ill patients should be encouraged to undertake a program on spirituality during their treatment because they believed that finding some form of spirituality could help such patients cope more effectively with their mental distress (Van Dierendonck and Mohan 2006; Russo-Netzer and Mayseless 2017).

In regard to the importance of prayer, this again was a central message for all the faith groups, and with Buddhism and Hinduism this also included meditation. The teachers stressed how they found prayer and meditation really assisted the children and helped to bring a sense of calm and security to the children, supporting the findings of Chen and Vanderweele (2018) in their Harvard study.

It is interesting that while the SRE teachers stressed the importance of expressing gratitude to a higher being, not all referred to the role of “giving” in contributing to health and wellbeing (Nielsen 2010). For example in both Judaism and Islam charity is a central value of extreme importance. In Judaism, the concept is expressed in Hebrew as *tzedakah* which means “justice” and the tradition stresses that everyone should give something to help others, no matter how small. In Islam, alms (*zakat* in Arabic) is one of the five pillars, so again is a central plank of the religion. However, the connection between giving and health and wellbeing seems to be less well understood by these teachers.

In contrast, the Buddhist teachers did stress the importance of helping others, which is a form of giving. They explained that this was a key teaching of the Buddha, and did see this as contributing to student welfare. This is also a key message in the Baha’i faith, with one of the graduates acknowledging that helping others made her feel good. Thus, the attribute of helping others contributes to the sense of focusing on the “greater good”, taking students away from the everyday, material pressures into something of a higher spiritual level.

Another key element in student wellbeing is creating a sense of belonging within the school community. The teachers in our study stressed that SRE classes, which include spiritual elements and a culturally and socially supportive community, meet students’ need for spiritual discourse and empowerment so that SRE classes contribute to the mental well-being of their students. Similarly, Diener et al. (2009) found that the sense of a supportive community enhanced the sense of meaningfulness in life and contributed to the mental well-being of patients (Diener 2012).

Allen and Kern’s (2019) study has demonstrated that teacher-student relationships are a key component in creating a strong sense of belonging for students, and that indeed teacher/student relationship was more important than parental and peer relationships. All the SRE/RI teachers stressed that this was a key component in their teaching. Even though they only saw the children once a week in class, they often taught the same children for a few years, would often interact with them outside of school, at the shopping centres, or other places in the neighbourhood, or for the more
observant students at their place of worship. Thus, they were able to build a rela-
tionship with their students based solely on the care and concern for their students’
wellbeing, rather than being concerned with academic or test results from NAPLAN
(testing of basic skills in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9) to the HSC (matriculation).

Prayer was found in our research to be a major constituent of all SRE classrooms.
Kohn (2020) argues that studies of prayer in religious schools have revealed that a
major tension often occurs during prayer time because of the formalistic orientation
of these prayer classes, where it is obligatory and is imposed upon the students as a
religious requirement. This compares with a spiritual approach where the teachers’
mission is to create a spiritual experience as occurs in SRE. Research has found that
formal prayer time can be very challenging (Gross 2003; Goldmintz 2017; Kohn
2020) and sometimes prayer classes are a battlefield in religious schools leading
to many discipline problems (Kessler 2007; Siegel 2016; Drelich 2017), but in
our research we found that prayer within the schedule of SRE classes was a time
of relaxation. SRE teachers perceive prayer and meditation as precious moments
which allow students to be connected with the transcendent (Kay 2005; Scarlett and
Perriello 1991) and as “spiritual practice” (Jacobson-Maisles 2013). These elements
are important for the cultivation of the spiritual life of the students (McClure 1996).

It seems to us that within the SRE framework, prayers are treated differently by the
students because SRE is a voluntary educational framework and those who choose
to participate in SRE also choose to pray. As was reflected in our interviews, the
SRE teachers from all religions convey a strong message to their students that it is
very important for them (the teachers) and hence it becomes very important also to
the students. In this way, the SRE teachers are role models and agents of spirituality.
When prayer is not compulsory but encouraged by the teacher, the attitude of the
students is more positive and responsive and this “enriches the spirit of the school”
(Stern 2018) or the spirit of SRE. Our findings also reinforced the literature that
prayer helps to build a sense of friendship and togetherness (De Souza and Watson
2016).

In the current research, all the teachers we interviewed stressed that prayer and/or
meditation were a major necessary component of human spirit (see also Drelich
2017). Usually the SRE classes start with prayer and that enables the teachers to
create a moment of togetherness (Kessler 2007; De Souza and Watson 2016; Kohn
2020). A Buddhist SRE teacher told us that his students urge him to start the classes
with meditation because they feel they need it for their wellbeing. Prayers are used
mainly for spiritual growth and the cultivation of the inner world of the students
(Steinsaltz 1996), rather than for studying the structure or the history of the prayers
(Simon 1996). As we have seen in our research SRE teachers from different religions
reported that prayer time is used as a venue to create moments of transcendence and
purification, with a Hindu SRE teacher using the metaphor of removing the mud.
This experiential approach to prayers as practised by the SRE teachers of all religions
makes prayer time a moment of grace, transcendence and happiness.

SRE classes offering prayer and meditation with a religious focus was seen to be
of particular importance for high school children but at present SRE classes appear
to be mainly offered at the primary school level on a weekly basis, with most high
schools often only offering classes once a fortnight, once a month or even only once a term, and not at the senior level. Interviewees across the faiths noted that for the students to be able to come to a class or seminar in high school and be able to have time for their spirituality, rather than stressing over their school results, was particularly important. In this regard, one boys’ high school with a high proportion of Muslim students in Sydney’s inner western suburbs does offer the classes on a weekly basis in Years 11 and 12. This is because the principal has found that SRE really assists the students with their general wellbeing, as well as with behavioural problems, by fostering respect for their teachers and for academic learning.

In our post-modern society, where there has been an increase in the levels of student anxiety and depression as well as the incidence of youth suicide, creating spiritual bulwarks against these mental health issues has become increasingly more important. While efforts to build students’ values, identity, sense of belonging and spirituality are being recognised within the secular government school curriculum, the important role religious education can play should not be underestimated (Crawford and Rossiter 2006). This is understood by a significant proportion of parents who are still choosing to opt into SRE/RI classes and even in Victoria, where classes are not being offered in curriculum time, the SRI system is still operating. For many parents, who do not attend regularly a place of worship and would not consider themselves actively religious, their desire to ensure that their children receive some form of religious education is an important indicator of this understanding. To remove this opportunity for students and their families would be to weaken the broader health and wellbeing of students in government schools.

Parents are also aware of the limitations of the secular, scientific approach. As pointed out by one of our interviewees, a volunteer SRE teacher, who is also a scientist, in the post-modern, supposedly empirical world where the rationality of the scientific approach is revered, there is a dilemma of how to deal with questions to which science has no answer (Russo-Netzer and Mayseless 2017; Russo-Netzer 2019). This dilemma has become even more pronounced during the coronavirus period, which has demonstrated the limitations of scientific knowledge.

Yet, many scholars ignore the important role that religion can play. In their study, Allen and Kern (2019) do not include a focused chapter on the community in general, nor on the role which religious communities can play. Our study has demonstrated how important special religious education/instruction in government schools is in terms of strengthening students’ sense of belonging.

Spirituality has been found in our research, as in other research, not only to be a means to deal with difficult situations, but mainly for student growth and their ability to “thrive” (Mayseless and Russo-Netzer 2011). In our research we have also found that there is a relationship between spirituality and pro-social behaviour, reinforcing the findings of other studies (King et al. 2011). In their SRE classes, the teachers also employed informal and pro-social methodologies as they felt that the exposure of the students during SRE to spiritual contents such as compassion and charity (zakat, tzedakah) enhance pro-social behaviour and strengthen the connection between spirituality and pro-social attitudes. This is supported by other research (Russo-Netzer and Mayseless 2017). Parents and stakeholders support SRE as they
feel that there is a strong connection between spirituality and pro-social attitudes and these contribute to the identity building of their children, providing them with a healthy basis for life (Russo-Netzer and Mayseless 2017), as well as reducing violent behaviour in schools.

Unlike the Australian private school settings, which are mainly within religious frameworks, SRE/RI classes take place in integrated, multicultural settings, which contribute to the development of students’ values, identity and spirituality, thereby enriching students as will be discussed in the next chapter.

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