

Policy and practice: General Religious Education

The famous Education Act 1880 that allowed the Government, by agreement with the churches, to take over church schools also established general religious education and special religious education.

Special religious education (SRE) provided the churches of the colony with the opportunity to teach students whose parents had nominated their denomination. Time was set aside for up to one hour a day to allow religious teachers to present that denomination.

General religious education was taught by classroom teachers and comprised non-denomination Christianity. Sir Henry Parkes in his second reading speech in the parliament made it very clear that all students needed a strong grounding in the Christian faith.

In the years that followed, the churches never were able to take up the one hour a day provision for SRE and the nature of the school day and the times for SRE gradually changed. The later Acts incorporated SRE but as with the 1990 Education Act SRE is now provided at times negotiated between the school and the approved providers and for no more than one hour a week. In reality primary classes have between 30-45 minutes a week and secondary schools 40-50 minutes in those secondary schools where it is offered.

For SRE, the Government accepted the recommendations of the Rawlinson Committee, Religious Education in NSW Government Schools, 1980 and the providers expanded to embrace most of the religious organisation that operate in NSW. Implementation policy provides support for both schools and the providers of SRE.

The Rawlinson Report also made recommendations about general religious education (GRE) which were never formally accepted by the Government. These recommendations included expanding the definition of GRE to include other religions in the NSW community. This move was supported by the churches which saw teaching about other religions by class teachers through the curriculum as a positive step. There was already a *Moral and general religious education* syllabus in use in primary schools.

Earlier, 1964 a new syllabus for GRE was introduced that caused great concern amongst the churches. It was based on the notion that it would preserve a normative character not by teaching knowledge but by adherence to the “good life”. This normative approach to religion that some commentators called the many paths one heaven (the good life) approach was rejected by the Christian churches and representatives of other religions. To them, using religion to teach the “good life” was not more teaching middle class morality or the absorption of religion into a secular norm.

The corrected syllabus reverted to mainly teaching about Christianity and some material that could be best described as moral education. Although rarely taught in schools, this a syllabus continued until 2000 when the current K-6 HSIE syllabus replaced it.

During the 1980s GRE had crept back into the social studies curriculum although again it was taught by few teachers. The Department recognized these problems

and included the churches in its consultations on the new primary HSIE syllabus to see that GRE, still part of the Education Act 1998 was included.

When the development of this syllabus was transferred to the new Board of Studies in 1990, the Board paid little regard to the need to include GRE for government schools which were the only schools that had to implement the syllabus. It was not until the current K-6 HSIE syllabus was almost complete that a group of representatives of the major religions were invited to comment on the GRE within the syllabus. As a result of this consultation GRE was strengthened within the syllabus.

Currently, schools are still trying to catch up with these changes as they attempt to implement the outcomes and content of the syllabus. There have been several courses each with sessions running over a number of weeks run by both the Department and teachers associations to help teachers improve their understanding of the major religions. In addition, the Department published, *Belief in action*, to assist teachers to teach about GRE in Stage 3. This resource contains examples of how beliefs affect people lives.

In secondary schools there has been less focus on GRE but the place of GRE within secondary schools was set in place through the Education Act and the recommendations of the Rawlinson Committee that, although not formally adopted by the government were accepted by the Department and used to form its policy on GRE as including the worlds major religions, what people believe and that belief affects their lives.

This inclusion of GRE within the HSIE curriculum was also recognized by the Years 7-10 and Years 11-12 Studies of religion syllabuses of the 1990s. Unfortunately the Years 7-10 syllabus did not attract many followers and was listed for review in the revision of the Years 7-10 curriculum by the Board of Studies in 2001, A composite syllabus was suggested that would take up Studies of religion, Studies of Society and Asian Social Studies. When complete the Minister rejected the syllabus and indicated that its contents were important and should be in the “more populous” syllabuses.

This decision and subsequent in action by the BOS has meant that GRE is effectively missing from the Years 7-10 curriculum.

While the Department and the various religions are pleased with the definition of GRE there is a strange anomaly related to a 1970s court case where GRE was found to mean non-denominational Christian education. This matter has caused some problems in government schools where Christians praying with their class, teaching Christian songs and using the Lord’s Prayer for a school pray may not be in accordance with policy, but are legal. In these circumstances the distinction between what is legal and what is appropriate needs to be explored.

It is entirely appropriate for the Department to follow its definition of GRE but these matters would be better cleared up by formal government acceptance of recommendations about GRE so that the use of the term within the Act was newly define to match the policy and remove the anomaly.

In the mean time the agenda for schools and teachers is to improve their understanding of GRE so that the K-6 HSIE syllabus might be fully implemented.

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