

THE ANGLICAN DIOCESE OF SYDNEY SRE SENSITIVITY FRAMEWORK

Special Religious Education (SRE) is a valuable opportunity to provide faith education to primary and high school students in NSW public schools. It is an opportunity the Anglican Diocese of Sydney does not take for granted, and it is essential that as an SRE provider, they ensure that the message of the Bible is taught sensitively and in a manner appropriate for the context and the developmental stage of the students.

This document has been prepared for the Anglican Diocese of Sydney by the Anglican Youthworks SRE Office in consultation with SRE teachers, school counsellors, psychologists and public school leaders to provide a framework for dealing with sensitive issues in SRE classes and seminars. All authorised Anglican Diocese of Sydney SRE teachers and helpers are expected to comply with this framework. This document will refer to them as Anglican Christian SRE teachers. Other SRE providers using authorised curricula and teaching resources of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney are also requested to conform to these guidelines.

1. DEFINITIONS, FRAMEWORKS AND POLICIES

The following definitions and policies provide important information for understanding the SRE Sensitivity Framework. They are:

1. Objectives of SRE
2. The Wellbeing Framework for Schools
3. Keep Them Safe: A shared approach to child wellbeing
4. NSW Department of Education Controversial Issues in Schools policy

1.1 Objectives of SRE

Special Religious Education is defined as education in the distinctive religious tenets and beliefs of the home and family, provided by the churches and other religious groups for parents expressing the desire that they receive such teaching.

SRE should provide opportunities for learners:

1. *to develop an ability to interpret religious data within the traditions of their particular faith;*
2. *to gain an appreciation of specific religious interpretations of issues and problems in which committed people apply their faith to life;*
3. *to translate their learning about their faith into active expression in a worshipping community;*
4. *to encounter, in a peer group-learning context, religious teaching given from a position of faith and commitment by a person explicitly associated with the religious community;*
5. *to be aware of the availability of personal and group counselling in the area of religious need, as occasion demands.*

(Religion in Education in NSW Government Schools (1980), Section 6.57 & 6.58.)

1.2 The Wellbeing Framework for Schools

This foundational document provides the basis on which all Department of Education policies regarding student wellbeing are built. It acknowledges the need for all stakeholders to understand the potential wellbeing has to bring about positive change. The key areas of wellbeing identified in the Framework are:

1. Cognitive wellbeing—associated with achievement and success
2. Emotional wellbeing—associated with self-awareness and emotional regulation
3. Physical wellbeing—associated with feelings of physical safety and health
4. Social wellbeing—associated with experiencing positive relationships and connectedness with others
5. Spiritual wellbeing – associated with students’ sense of meaning and purpose.

The Framework states that “student wellbeing is enhanced when schools connect with and draw on the expertise, contribution and support of their communities. Community engagement maximises how students connect, succeed and thrive.”¹

The body of the Framework is structured around these three themes of connecting, succeeding and thriving underpinned by an enabling school environment. SRE providers play a key role in contributing to the connection, success and thriving of students within the guiding principles of the Wellbeing Framework as key supporters of schools as they create environments that enable these principles to flourish. The Framework goes on to elaborate that “wellbeing can be shaped by a number of broad influences including the degree to which there is an experience of choice, achievement of meaningful goals, positive relationships, enjoyment, personal growth and development, health and safety.”² The policy also points out that “experiences that develop character by promoting mindfulness (self-regulation and behaviour), curiosity, courage, resilience, ethics and leadership benefits children and young people as they grow and develop”.³ SRE has the potential to contribute to a student’s wellbeing in all these areas.

In particular, Anglican Christian SRE connects with the Wellbeing Framework for Schools in the following ways:

Wellbeing Framework for Schools	Anglican Christian SRE’s contribution to the Wellbeing Framework
Connect: Students experience a sense of belonging and connectedness that respects diversity and identity.	Anglican Christian SRE provides a space for students to explore the spiritual aspect of their lives. As students explore ideas of faith together they are able to understand why Christians believe what they believe. The SRE teacher works to ensure that both the students who are professing Christians and the students who disagree with aspects of the Christian teaching are respected and helped to feel safe in SRE.
Connect: Students are connected with their cultural, religious or spiritual backgrounds.	Anglican Christian SRE plays a pivotal role in sharing the tenets of the Christian faith to provide genuine connection for students whose cultural, religious or spiritual heritage is Christian, as well

¹ NSW Department of Education and Communities. (2015) The Wellbeing Framework for Schools. NSW: NSW Government (p. 2)

² Ibid (p.3).

³ Ibid (p.4).

	as for students from alternative backgrounds whose families opt to engage with exploring a Christian worldview.
Connect: Parents and the broader school community actively participate in the school and in helping students to develop positive connections.	Anglican Christian SRE provides an opportunity for members of the broader school community to actively participate in the school. This helps students to develop and strengthen positive connections with faith groups who are members of the community.
Succeed: Parents and the broader school community actively participate in supporting and reinforcing student learning.	Anglican Christian SRE, in partnership with parents and carers, takes an active role in supporting the learning about the tenets of the Christian faith and responsively supports students as they make sense of their religious learning and seek to question, clarify and engage with the tenets of faith as members of a broader school community.
Thrive: Students contribute to the learning of other students and to the school community more broadly.	Students involved in an active faith community are able to share their knowledge, experience and perspectives with other students. The values that are explored in Anglican Christian SRE are values that will enhance the positive community of the school.
Thrive: Students develop the skills to reflect on and positively shape their behaviour in the context of ethical decision making.	Anglican Christian SRE provides a Christian worldview for students to consider as they make ethical decisions. Students are able to consider how a Christian faith would influence the way they make ethical decisions.
Thrive: Parents and the broader community support and enable the aspirations of every student.	Anglican Christian SRE, in partnership with parents and carers, supports and enables the aspirations of students to develop an informed understanding of a Christian worldview, allowing aspirations for spiritual meaning and purpose to develop and grow.
Enabling School Environment: Students are recognised, respected and valued.	Anglican Christian SRE is inclusive of all students and respects and values every person. This is a core Christian belief. Anglican Christian SRE provides a safe place to explore the tenets of Christian belief, respectfully allowing students to develop their own position in response to their learning.
Enabling School Environment: Students are provided with opportunities to exercise choice in the context of self-regulation, self-determination, ethical decision making and responsibility.	Anglican Christian SRE teachers are encouraged through their training and curriculum support materials to support students as they explore and respond to their learning. SRE teachers provide learning opportunities which clearly explain the teachings of Christian faith whilst providing a clear message of personal choice and self-determination as students process their learning. Anglican Christian SRE teachers help students consider how their choices will influence the way they live their lives in relationship with others and in exploring ethics and responsibility from a Christian worldview.

1.3 Keep Them Safe: A shared approach to child wellbeing⁴

Keep Them Safe is the NSW Government’s response to the Wood Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in NSW. Keep Them Safe recognises the importance of the wellbeing of all children and young people, with the aim of providing appropriate support to families earlier, to prevent children and young people from requiring statutory child protection intervention. To achieve this, Keep Them Safe encourages families, communities, government agencies, and non-government organisations to work together to support children, young people and families. SRE can play a significant role in this work.

1.4 NSW Department of Education Controversial Issues in Schools policy and procedures

This Controversial Issues in Schools policy⁵ provides direction for management of controversial issues in schools, whether by the use of teaching-learning material or views expressed by teachers or visiting speakers. The implementation procedures⁶ acknowledge that “Appropriate management allows the study of controversial issues to provide valuable and significant learning experiences.”⁷

The content of SRE lessons are not bound by the policy. This policy applies to SRE providers conducting activities **outside** the provisions in the Religious Education Policy.⁸ However, the Anglican Diocese of Sydney is committed to the principles of the policy within the scope of the agreed objectives for SRE.

Like other teachers involved in teaching potentially controversial issues, SRE teachers need to recognise in their teaching that:

1. Groups within society hold differing views about controversial issues
2. Individuals do not always deal with controversial issues in reasonable or logical ways
3. Different individuals will interpret the same information in different ways
4. They need to provide a supportive environment to engage students to be involved in exploring issues.⁹

In particular, Anglican Christian SRE connects with the Controversial Issues policy in the following ways:

Controversial Issues policy	Anglican Christian SRE’s relevance to the Controversial Issues policy
1.1 The study of controversial issues is acceptable for educational purposes consistent with the delivery of curriculum and provision of school programs and activities.	Anglican Christian SRE teachers should avoid initiating the discussion of controversial issues outside of the curriculum guidelines provided. In cases where a controversial issue is raised by a student, Anglican Christian SRE teachers must firstly ascertain the issue’s relevance to the curriculum

⁴ Keep Them Safe. (2013) *Policy Definition of Significant Harm* Available at: http://www.dpc.nsw.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/83733/10_KTS_FACT_SHEET_-_PREAMBLE_TO_POLICY_DEFINITION_OF_SIG_HARM.pdf.

⁵ NSW Department of Education Controversial Issues in Schools Policy Statement PD/2002/0045/V04 (5th March 2019) Available at” <https://education.nsw.gov.au/policy-library/policies/controversial-issues-in-schools> (viewed 26th August 2019)

⁶ NSW Department of Education Controversial Issues in Schools – Procedures PD/2002/0045/01/V4.0.0 (12th December 2017) Available at: <https://education.nsw.gov.au/policy-library/associated-documents/controversial-procedures.pdf> (viewed 26th August 2019)

⁷ Controversial Issues in Schools – Procedures. See page 4.

⁸ Controversial Issues in Schools Policy. See Section 2.2

⁹ Oulton C, Day V, Dillon J, et al. (2004) Controversial issues: Teachers' attitudes and practices in the context of citizenship education. *Oxford Review of Education* 30: 489-507.

	objectives to determine whether it should be addressed during SRE and if deemed consistent with the delivery of the approved curriculum programs and activities, the Anglican Christian SRE teacher should guide an appropriate and balanced response aligned with the curriculum objectives.
1.3.8 Parents, carers and students may hold different views. These views should be treated in a respectful manner. Expressing a view which may result in harassment, vilification and/or discrimination is not a right.	Anglican Christian SRE teachers acknowledge a wide range of views on issues of faith and are sensitive to these while teaching, ensuring respectful treatment of all those with whom they interact. Whilst managing a classroom, Anglican Christian SRE teachers will remind students of their responsibilities in sharing differing views and relating to others in a respectful manner and refer any discriminatory behaviour by students to school SRE coordinators.
3.1 The study of controversial issues provides valuable and significant learning experiences when managed appropriately.	Anglican Christian SRE teachers have a responsibility to appropriately manage the discussion of potentially controversial issues which may arise in lessons with respect, sensitivity and with a view to guiding valuable, inclusive learning for all students.
3.2 Schools are places where students are preparing for active informed and reasoned involvement in community life through the co-operative study of social issues.	Anglican Christian SRE provides the opportunity for students to become informed about Christian beliefs and tenets many of which intersect with social issues and may elicit responses to these issues. Anglican Christian SRE teachers should be ensuring that students clearly understand how responses formed from a Christian worldview may vary to others and we hold and share views with a respectful, caring attitude towards others.
3.4 Principals, teachers, external providers and visitors are in a privileged position to influence students. All staff therefore have a responsibility to address controversial issues including the study of controversial issues in accordance with this policy.	Anglican Christian SRE teachers should value the privileged position of influence they hold as external providers of religious education for the students in SRE classes. In cases where controversial issues arise, it is essential that Anglican Christian SRE teachers consider the guiding principles of this policy and respond and manage each situation appropriately.
4.15 Teachers, other school staff, contractors and volunteers should ensure that the delivery of curriculum, school programs and activities, presentations and activities by external providers or other events involving students are age appropriate, relevant to curriculum aims and objectives and consistent	The provision of a well-planned and developed Anglican Christian SRE curriculum supported by a rigorous training program for volunteer SRE teachers, ensures that Anglican Christian SRE teachers are presenting material that is age-appropriate and relevant. The Anglican Diocese of Sydney's SRE Multimedia Policy ensures that any additional material has also been approved for use in the Anglican Christian SRE classroom. The core values of public education (integrity, excellence, respect, responsibility, cooperation,

with the values of public education and the school's purpose and goals.

participation, care, fairness and democracy) are values that Anglican Christians also hold and teach in SRE.

In particular, Anglican Christian SRE connects with the Controversial Issues in Schools—Procedures in the following ways:

Controversial Issues—Procedures	Anglican Christian SRE's relevance to the Controversial Issues—Procedures
<p>2.1 A teacher's personal view should not impact on teaching a subject. Sharing their knowledge or view may be necessary to assist students to form their own views or to answer a query from students relevant to the discussion. In such situations the information given should be balanced and presented as one opinion to be considered critically along with any others. Teachers are required to ensure that all views and evidence are presented impartially in all discussions of controversial issues.</p>	<p>SRE legislation allows SRE teachers to teach from a position of faith. It is important that Anglican Christian SRE teachers help their students understand that their personal views are based on orthodox biblical teaching that may be different to other views. Students in SRE are given the skills to critically appraise concepts and themes being taught in SRE.</p>
<p>2.4 Visitors and external providers are in a privileged position to influence students at school and on excursions. They must avoid distortion of discussions, and acknowledge and uphold the right of students and parents to hold a different viewpoint.</p>	<p>Anglican Christian SRE teachers acknowledge the position of influence they hold and appreciate the privilege and subsequent responsibility embedded in this role. Anglican Christian SRE teachers are permitted to express their own views whilst acknowledging the broad range of views held by students and their parents and respectfully ensure the rights of others to share their points of view without imbalance of power during discussions.</p>
<p>3.3 Staff and students may advocate for issues or activities that are important to them in a manner consistent with expectations outlined in the department's Code of Conduct for staff and Behaviour code for students.</p>	<p>Anglican Christian SRE teachers may advocate for issues or activities related to Christian beliefs and the activities of the church communities they represent within the bounds of the SRE classes they teach. This should be done with sensitivity and respect. Anglican Christian SRE teachers can offer information about these activities but not expect that it be received or welcomed and graciously accept rejection when invitations are offered.</p>

2. SENSITIVE ISSUES

The Anglican Diocese of Sydney acknowledges that there are some issues that may be raised in Anglican Christian SRE that have the potential to trigger a negative response from students or disclosure of serious harm. This trigger could be a lesson activity, topic, question or other interaction between the SRE teacher

and student, or student and student. A trigger may also be something that has taken place prior to the SRE lesson that is communicated during SRE.

This paper defines a sensitive issue as an issue that is acknowledged to have the potential to trigger a negative response or disclosure from a student. A lesson activity, topic or question should not in itself be the cause of “significant harm”, rather it may be that the activity, topic or question triggers a response from the student to indicate that s/he is at risk of significant harm. It is important to note that if the conduct of an Anglican Christian SRE teacher causes significant harm, to a child or young person, this should be immediately reported to the appropriate authorities. For example, if a student is bullying for his/her views, or there are indicators of an Anglican Christian SRE teacher grooming a student, these should be reported immediately. For further information refer to the Anglican Diocese of Sydney Safe Ministry Training.

Creating a list of sensitive issues in SRE is complex because what is understood to be a sensitive issue will vary across different developmental, cultural, and familial contexts. The following list has been developed by the Anglican Youthworks SRE Office through consultation with school leaders, counsellors and experienced SRE teachers. The list does not claim to be exhaustive of all possible sensitive issues, nor does it suggest that all these issues will be sensitive to all students. It is important that SRE teachers are aware of these potential sensitive issues to ensure that when their teaching intersects with one of these issues they have already thought through their response prior to the lesson. This is a key aspect of lesson preparation as SRE teachers consider how they will deal with each of these issues sensitively in an age-appropriate way.

The list is divided into three categories¹⁰:

1. Personal behaviour
2. Traumatic events
3. Cultural issues.

2.1 Personal behaviour

If an SRE teacher is concerned that a student is involved in criminal activity, drug or alcohol use or self-harm this must be communicated to the principal or his/her delegate. In addition, if a student discloses self-harm in themselves or others, it is advised that classroom discussion of this topic is sensitively closed down due to potential distress or risk of contagion.

If discussions or disclosures regarding sexual behaviour including pornography, sexting and social media take place during an SRE lesson, the SRE teacher should organise a confidential discussion with a school representative to ensure that the student is receiving the support they require.

2.2 Traumatic issues

If a student discloses any of the following it is important that this information is communicated to school staff as soon as possible for investigation:

- Bullying
- Emotional or psychological abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Suicidal ideation.

¹⁰ These categories are generic definitions to provide a structure for this discussion; they are not labels to be used when dealing with students.

SRE teachers need to be aware of the identity of the person within the school that they should report to. In addition, SRE teachers must behave sensitively within the classroom. They need to be aware of the social dynamics of the classroom to ensure that bullying behaviour is not being exacerbated. For example, mocking a student's response by others. In addition, SRE teachers must avoid discussions of abuse and suicide due to the risk of triggering emotional distress, and in the case of suicide, due to the risks of contagion.

SRE teachers must be mindful of raising topics which may trigger distressing memories for students. It is important to be mindful of the deep grief associated with death, separation and divorce, and suffering that some students may be experiencing. These are not always distant theological topics but may be deeply personal for students. SRE teachers must take care when discussion turns to these issues. In discussions regarding theological concepts such as heaven and hell care must be taken to approach these topics with age-appropriate sensitivity and SRE teachers should avoid manipulative use of language which cause undue fear or anxiety for students.

2.3 Other issues

Our sexuality is a core aspect of our identity and the topic is a point of controversy that is deeply personal and often political. Therefore, discussions related to sexuality and gender issues require extreme sensitivity, even when asked from an academic or theoretical perspective. Any response from the Anglican Christian SRE teacher should be given under the assumption that the question is personal.

If a student's comments or behaviours cause concern with regards to their mental health, a confidential discussion with a school representative is recommended to ensure that the student is receiving the support they require. If the Anglican Christian SRE teacher is aware of a student within the classroom with a mental health concern, lessons need to be modified to accommodate this student.

Older students are often interested in discussions about cults, exorcisms, Satan and other religious issues. Caution is required in these discussions. In younger classrooms caution is required in any discussions where Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny or other household myths are brought up. SRE is not the place for the Anglican Christian SRE teachers to inform students that characters such as Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny are fictional.

In conclusion, all teaching is a relational event where teachers and students can develop strong relationships with each other. It is impossible for any teacher to be cognisant of every student's personal situation. It is therefore essential that Anglican Christian SRE teachers always teach in a sensitive manner as if there is someone going through an issue at that time. They need to take into consideration the possibility of the presence of students who have been impacted by the issue and the potential impact of comments and opinions expressed by the SRE teacher and other students. Their response to any questions or actions around a potentially sensitive issue should be made on the understanding that it could trigger a negative response from a student. This is the case irrespective of the way in which the question is asked; that is, even when a question is asked from an objective, theological or academic standpoint.

3. RECOGNISING SIGNS OF DISTRESS

It is important for Anglican Christian SRE teachers to be able to identify signs of distress that may be indicators of triggers for students. They need to know (i) when a student is showing early signals of distress so that they can respond appropriately; and (ii) what to do when a student is exhibiting signs of distress.

3.1 Early signs of distress

Early signs of distress are usually highlighted by a change from a student's normal behaviour and presentation. Some signs that may indicate that a student is becoming distressed include:

- **Becoming withdrawn.** This could include physical withdrawal such as asking to leave the room or putting headphones in; or emotional withdrawal such as going quiet, withdrawing eye contact, lowering their head and body posture.
- **Becoming agitated or aggressive.** This could include behaviours such as their voice getting louder, body position become more alert, face flushed, sweating, language and tone becoming more confrontational or sarcastic.
- **Becoming emotional.** This could include flushed face, withdrawing eye contact, quivering chin, shaking, dizziness, or tears.

3.2 Steps for dealing with a student who is exhibiting signs of distress

If an Anglican Christian SRE teacher suspects that a student may be becoming distressed, some helpful responses would include:

- Not drawing attention to the student or their reaction.
- Shifting the class' attention away from the student.
- Changing the tone and focus of the discussion.
- Giving the student some time to calm down and regather. They may require some 'time out' to process strong emotions, a toilet break or lie down in the sick bay can be helpful. Each school will have its own protocols for allowing students to leave a classroom which should be followed.
- If/when appropriate, approach the student in a quiet and compassionate manner, and determine if they would like any assistance, such as a tissue or drink of water.
- If the student is highly distressed and the SRE teacher is concerned for the safety of the class or the student, s/he must follow the school's protocols for accessing immediate classroom assistance. It is therefore important that SRE teachers are aware of the protocols of the school. The SRE teacher must communicate the concern to the school principal or their delegate at the end of the lesson so that appropriate support can be provided to the student.
- If a student leaves a classroom without permission, follow the school's procedures for notifying school staff. The school has a Duty of Care to ensure the safety and whereabouts of students at all times.
- At the end of the lesson or the start of the next lesson, it may be appropriate for the SRE teacher to quietly ask the student how they are feeling, in order to communicate his/her concern and compassion for them, and allow for a rebuilding of relationship, if required.

3.3 Identifying trigger points in SRE lessons

Each lesson in the authorised Anglican Christian SRE curricula identifies the obvious possible trigger points and indicates areas where care may need to be taken.

3.4 Working with students who are experiencing distress

Anglican Christian SRE teachers should approach students experiencing distress with compassion and understanding. However, they are not counsellors and need to know the protocols for helping students who are experiencing distress. These should be communicated to Anglican Christian SRE teachers at the school's beginning of year SRE briefing session. Information that they need to be aware of are:

- What member of the school staff should they inform (class teacher, counsellor, deputy principal, principal)?
- At what level does an issue need to be passed on?
- What information do they need to pass on?
- What is the process for passing on information (make an appointment for a meeting, email, other method)?

In addition to being aware of school protocols for dealing with students who are experiencing distress or are at risk of significant harm, Anglican Christian SRE teachers must also follow the protocols described in the Anglican Diocese of Sydney Safe Ministry Training.

Anglican Christian SRE teachers should inform the principal of any suspicion or belief that a child or young person is at risk of significant harm. SRE teachers who are paid in ministry or hold a 'ministry management position' should request that they make a joint report to the Child Protection Helpline with the principal. An independent report direct to the Child Protection Helpline can be made if the principal decides not to report the matter themselves. When raising the matter with the principal, SRE teachers should note the:

- Name of the individual child involved and their school grade
- Time and place
- Grounds for forming the belief that abuse has occurred.

3.5 Confidentiality

Anglican Christian SRE teachers do not have a confidential relationship with their students. Students need to be aware that when they share sensitive information with their SRE teacher that this information may be passed onto school authorities or FACS. An awareness of this means that students can make an informed decision about what they choose to share with their SRE teacher, and there can be no perception of a break of trust.

4. CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

It is important that Anglican Christian SRE teachers work with students to create a safe and supportive classroom environment. The classroom environment is comprised of:

1. The classroom *emotional* climate which is the extent to which teachers promote positive emotions and make students feel comfortable.
2. The classroom *instructional* climate which is the extent to which teachers implement lessons that promote higher-order thinking.
3. The classroom *organisational* climate which is the extent to which teachers structure students' time effectively.

When these three aspects of classroom climate are well developed there is greater engagement in learning and better conduct amongst students.¹¹ Such an environment enables SRE teachers to create a non-judgmental space for students to explore and understand their responses and attitudes to sensitive issues. To create such an environment SRE teachers should develop:

- An awareness and sensitivity to students' needs
- Warm, friendly and respectful teacher-student relationships
- Regard for students' perspectives
- Engaging lessons that encourage higher-order thinking
- Positive disciplinary practices that clearly define behavioural expectations including accepting what others say without judgement or criticism, and the importance of respecting others' feelings and privacy.

In addition, Anglican Christian SRE teachers should do the following to sustain an appropriate teaching and learning environment:

- Developing strategies such as the One Step Removed Strategy where teachers use fictitious case studies that allow students to explore a range of sensitive issues without confrontation or personal threat, are helpful in creating a supportive environment.
- Presenting accurate factual information and correcting misinformation in a way that is appropriate to the student's age, needs and cultural background. The challenge in presenting factual information is that teachers "need to make subjective judgments about what constitutes the "facts" and what is not relevant, important or accurate".¹²
- Presenting issues in a way that is sympathetic to the range of community cultural values and attitudes represented in the classroom.
- Providing appropriate invitations for students to express and discuss their fears or anxieties without coercing or demanding students to publicly share their opinions.
- When appropriate, encouraging students to research additional information, various viewpoints on an issue and alternative solutions. Emphasising that points of view are opinions, not facts.
- Using conditional language such as "... might happen" or "... could happen" when exploring possible outcomes of case studies or moral dilemmas. However, care must be taken when using simplistic moral dilemmas, because reality is often more "complex, dirty and frequently involving an element of guilt on all sides"¹³ than moral dilemmas and case studies may suggest. It is therefore helpful when appropriate to use real, rather than created, stories.

¹¹ Brackett MA, Reyes MR, Rivers SE, et al. (2011) Classroom emotional climate, teacher affiliation, and student conduct. *Journal of Classroom Interaction* 46: 27-36.

¹² Oulton C, Day V, Dillon J, et al. (2004) Controversial issues: Teachers' attitudes and practices in the context of citizenship education. *Oxford Review of Education* 30: 489-507.

¹³ Ibid. p. 492

- Using protective interrupting (i.e. interrupting a student to protect the student from saying too much) to evade students discussing sensitive or private information that is not appropriate in the classroom setting.
- Closing a lesson in a positive way by summarising the discussion and helping students to bring their learning to some kind of resolution.
- Carefully planning the flow of a lesson to ensure that there is time for appropriately closing the lesson and where necessary debriefing from the discussion.

The importance of caring relationships in the classroom cannot be underestimated. While SRE teachers only have a limited time with their students each week, they do have the opportunity to develop supportive relationships with their students for two reasons. Firstly, while SRE teachers do have a set of content to cover, because their content is not governed by the Board of Studies they can spend the necessary time on developing positive supportive environments without being concerned about not completing the content. Secondly, when well taught, the nature of the subject lends itself to thoughtful discussion, exploration and increasing insight of issues. This puts SRE teachers in an excellent position to support students and to know when to seek help for them.

6.1 Responding to questions and comments

SRE lessons provide an excellent opportunity for students to explore issues that are relevant to them in a non-threatening and supporting environment. Well taught SRE can provide students with a safe space to identify and evaluate both what they believe, and the grounds and implications of these beliefs, thus developing their ability to think for themselves. However, class discussions have the potential to move well-planned lessons to unexpected places. It is therefore important that Anglican Christian SRE teachers prepare for this event. They need to consider how they will respond to questions and comments of a sensitive nature.

Committed impartiality¹⁴ provides a helpful model for an SRE teacher as they consider how to respond to questions and comments. The language provides a double-barrelled ethical guideline. First, SRE teachers are encouraged to express their own opinions when they consider it would be helpful to the lesson and age-appropriate. Second, SRE teachers encourage the comparison of views, respect for alternative points of view, and even tolerate dissent in the class.

This allows the SRE teacher to answer with conviction while still allowing space for disagreement in a context of mutual respect. Using this technique, a response should be prefaced with “I believe the Bible says ...”; “As a Christian I believe that ...” This is different from saying “I believe ...”, which may express conviction and a personal value but not necessarily a biblical perspective. Equally it is unhelpful to use absolute statements by saying “The Bible says ...”, where the veracity of the statement is subject to debate.

The following are suggestions of how to ensure that students’ questions and comments are dealt with in an age appropriate and sensitive way.

- Preparing students well prior to the discussion through direct instruction and giving them material to read or watch.
- Giving students roles to play in a discussion.
- Finding ways to encourage as many students as possible to have a say.

¹⁴ adapted from a discussion by Brian V. Hill, *Teaching Secondary Social Studies in a Multicultural Society*, 1994, pp.130-134

- Starting the discussion with a great question and then stepping back and allowing students to share their ideas.
- Stepping in when appropriate to guide or redirect the discussion.¹⁵

6.2 Using the curriculum and Bible in an age appropriate and sensitive way

The teaching and learning in the Anglican Christian SRE classroom is first and foremost an educational activity. All teaching and learning activities are devised to help students develop understanding in the beliefs and tenets of the Christian faith. It is essential that Anglican Christian SRE teachers do not use their power to manipulate or coerce students into a statement of belief. Students should not be forced to make statements they do not believe, to pray or to sing songs that declare a commitment. Respect for the integrity of SRE students means that non-participation is always an option for students.

Anglican Christian SRE teachers are required to use the authorised SRE curricula of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney. All Anglican Christian SRE teachers must have their own copy of the teacher's manual for the lesson being taught. The curriculum has been carefully developed to ensure that concepts and themes are taught in an age-appropriate and sensitive way. It is important that Anglican Christian SRE teachers identify aspects of the lessons that may cause distress to their students, and plan accordingly. The lesson content can be contextualised to the needs of the students providing the changes maintain the messages and learning outcomes of the lesson as outlined in the teacher's manual.

In particular, Anglican Christian SRE teachers must abide by the following guidelines:

1. Anglican Christian SRE teachers can only use the authorised curriculum resources designed for the appropriate year group. Where the class includes multiple grades in one group, the curriculum must be appropriate for the youngest student.
2. Anglican Christian SRE teachers must only use multimedia that has been approved by the Anglican Youthworks SRE Office. This means that SRE teachers are not able to show any movies with a rating beyond the legal age of the students, or any material that might be reasonably perceived to cause distress or offence.
3. Anglican Christian SRE teachers must not use sensitive, suggestive or explicit examples from personal experience or other third parties, including examples from the media, which might be reasonably considered inappropriate.
4. In accordance with Anglican Diocese of Sydney Safe Ministry Training, Anglican Christian SRE teachers must not engage in any conversation that could be misconstrued as grooming. Individual conversations should always be conducted in an open, publicly accessible, and transparent space.
5. The Anglican Christian SRE teacher can choose not to use a lesson if they feel it is inappropriate for their context or they are unable to deliver the lesson appropriately. When deciding to use a lesson, SRE teachers need to take into consideration the age and developmental maturity of the students, as well as the individual needs of the students.

¹⁵ Hess D. (2002) Discussion controversial public issues in secondary social studies classrooms: Learning from skilled teachers. *Theory and Research in Social Education* 30: 10-41.

6. The Bible deals with the best and worst of humanity. When discussing issues, it is important that Anglican Christian SRE teachers approach these topics with sensitivity to students' age, interest and experience.
7. Anglican Christian SRE teachers must choose their language carefully. It is important that they do not include everybody in the class in making faith statements. It is appropriate to make clear statements about the Christian faith and to describe practices of the Christian churches so that students can learn. Guidelines for using language include:
 - Language and concepts must be appropriate for students' stage of development.
 - Explain or rephrase religious concepts in words that are more clearly understood by students.
 - Use language such as "Many Christians believe..." or "The Bible says..." to ensure that students are not expected to own a statement.
 - Use language that allows students the freedom to consider belief statements and accept them if they wish.
 - Belief-type statements are those which require an element of faith to be accepted as true; for example, "There is life after death". These statements should be owned by the SRE teacher by saying things such as "Christians believe that there is life after death" or "As a Christian I believe that there is life after death".

6.3 Dealing with sensitive questions

At times, a sensitive topic arises from a student's question, and the most appropriate response is to move away from the topic. In those cases, the Anglican Christian SRE teacher needs to have some responses or strategies that they can implement to quickly move the lesson on. Some options include:

Redirect

By redirecting a student's question with a statement such as "That's not what we are talking about this week", the SRE teacher is able to deflect the question and continue on with the lesson. This strategy is helpful for questions that are off-topic or not genuine. It is also helpful for when the question is not appropriate for the age level of the students. The SRE teacher must then consciously redirect back to the lesson by saying something like: "The question we're thinking about is..." or "the important point is..."

Defer

There are times when students ask questions that should be addressed but not at that moment. This might be because the discussion might derail the current lesson, or the question needs time and great consideration before an answer is provided. The SRE teacher may say something like: "That's a really important question, but we don't have time to talk about it properly now" and then propose a time for answering it. If an SRE teacher commits to answering a question, it is important that they follow up on that commitment.

Possibilities for deferral include:

- **The end of the lesson**
Appropriate if the question can be answered within a few minutes. Some SRE teachers deliberately leave some time at the end of their lessons to respond to off-topic questions.
- **The next lesson**
Appropriate for questions or topics that require more thought, or time scheduled into the lesson. It is always appropriate for an SRE teacher to say “I don’t know the answer to that” and do some research or ask someone else, such as their minister, before the next lesson.
- **After the lesson or at recess/lunch**
Some topics that are raised by students are of particular interest for an individual, but do not need to be discussed with the entire class. At times, it can be appropriate to discuss a topic after a lesson with a student. In these times, the conversation must be held in a public and visible place, during school time, preferably with a witness (such as a friend), and completely above reproach. Issues that could be construed as grooming must never be discussed in private.
- **Church or youth group**
Other topics are not appropriate in an SRE environment, and a student should be directed to a local church or youth group to explore it further. In that case, the SRE teacher should first find out if the student has a family connection to a church and encourage them to go there. If the student has no connection, the SRE teacher may wish to provide them the contact details of one or a couple of appropriate ministries.

Research

For motivated students, there is great value in helping them research the answers to their questions between classes. This generates biblical literacy, and the confidence that Christian truth can be researched and tested against the Bible. Most students would need support and direction for such research.

6.4 Theological differences

Students will periodically ask questions about the theological distinctives of a particular denomination. These questions need to be answered with grace and sensitivity recognising the diverse range of students represented in the classroom. It may be appropriate for Anglican Christian SRE teachers to express their personal beliefs and reasons for holding their view, but this should be done acknowledging that other views exist.

REFERENCES

- Brackett MA, Reyes MR, Rivers SE, et al. (2011) Classroom emotional climate, teacher affiliation, and student conduct. *Journal of Classroom Interaction* 46: 27-36.
- Hess D. (2002) Discussion controversial public issues in secondary social studies classrooms: Learning from skilled teachers. *Theory and Research in Social Education* 30: 10-41.
- Keep Them Safe. (2013) *Policy Definition of Significant Harm* Available at:
http://www.dpc.nsw.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/83733/10_KTS_FACT_SHEET_-_PREAMBLE_TO_POLICY_DEFINATION_OF_SIG_HARM.pdf.

NSW Department of Education and Communities. (2015) The Wellbeing Framework for Schools. NSW: NSW Government Available at:

https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/wellbeing/about/16531_Wellbeing-Framework-for-schools_Accessible.pdf

Oulton C, Day V, Dillon J, et al. (2004) Controversial issues: Teachers' attitudes and practices in the context of citizenship education. *Oxford Review of Education* 30: 489-507.

NSW Department of Education and Communities. (2019) Controversial Issues in Schools Policy NSW: NSW Government Available at:

<https://education.nsw.gov.au/policy-library/policies/controversial-issues-in-schools>

NSW Department of Education and Communities. (2017) Controversial Issues in Schools - Procedures. NSW: NSW Government Available at:

<https://education.nsw.gov.au/policy-library/associated-documents/controversial-procedures.pdf>

Hill B, *Teaching Secondary Social Studies in a Multicultural Society*, 1994, pp.130-134