



INTER-CHURCH COMMISSION ON RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS (NSW) Inc.

Submission to Dr Sue Knight

SJEC Ethical Thinking Classes

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1. Executive Summary

The Inter-Church Commission on Religious Education in Schools (NSW) Inc. (ICCOREIS) has prepared this submission on behalf of its representative members. It represents a considered response to the St James Ethics Centre (SJEC) Pilot Ethics Lessons conducted in Term 2 2010 in ten government primary schools in New South Wales.

The submission:

1. provides an overview of the issues raised by the introduction of the SJEC lessons in direct competition with Special Religious Education (SRE), including the fact that it is discriminatory in that it denies the benefit of a significant course in ethics to children of families of any recognised faith enrolled to receive SRE classes;
2. challenges the validity of the pilot
 - 2.1 as addressing the concern which brought it to life
 - 2.2 as the sampling process in the selection of ten schools to participate in the pilot does not provide a representative cross section of NSW government schools
 - 2.3 due to the lack of transparency of the research methodology employed;
3. challenges the pedagogy of the lessons as representing just one amongst a suite of ethical theories;
4. identifies the lessons as not being value free and in fact being an example of a narrow adaptation of the philosophy of pragmatism and
5. provides recommendations for a way forward.

2. Introduction

The provision of Special Religious Education (SRE) in the state of NSW represents the largest direct involvement of the community in government schools and includes ethnic groups such as the Greek Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist faiths. In Christian SRE alone it is estimated that there are around 10,000 SRE teachers across the state in both primary and secondary schools. When the churches and cultural communities from which they come are taken into account, the support for SRE is a very significant phenomenon of this state's non-discriminatory educational policy.

SRE is widely recognised as educationally advantageous in its own right. It employs a variety of methodologies and encourages the development of a broad range of skills. It also provides students in government schools with an opportunity to meet and be exposed to people from their community who volunteer to teach them. In many schools there is a high degree of cooperation between Christian providers that uniquely demonstrates a unity of belief and passionate concern for the welfare of the students in the school. It can be argued that SRE in NSW makes a distinctive contribution to the goals of schooling in Australia and the core values of NSW Public Schools¹.

For the reasons outlined in this submission the Inter-Church Commission on Religious Education in Schools (NSW) Inc. (ICCOREIS), the peak coordinating body of Christian SRE providers (with the exception of the Anglican Archdiocese of Sydney), is not in favour of the introduction of a series of non-religious ethical thinking skills lessons in the time allocated for SRE in either primary or secondary government schools.

There are two significant reasons for the position taken by ICCOREIS. Firstly, the presence of Ethics lessons in the time allocated for SRE is in direct contravention of the Department of Education and Training's (DET) own policy as expressed in the *Implementation of Special Religious Education in Government Schools*. Secondly, the pedagogical approach used in the proposed Ethics lessons is representative of a singular approach and philosophically narrow.

¹ *Values in NSW public Schools A Ministerial Statement by Hon Andrew Refshauge MP March 2004*
<http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/student-support/student-wellbeing/values/index.php> (accessed 1/08/2010).

3. DET Policy and the Ethics Lessons

ICCOREIS has worked in a collaborative and consultative framework with representatives of the DET and the Minister for Education for over 35 years. During that time we have shared a common goal - to provide the best educational experience for all children attending government schools in NSW.

ICCOREIS acknowledges the apology of Minister Firth, conveyed to the Commission through her advisor, Mr Paul Martin, regarding the lack of consultation with any SRE stakeholders prior to the introduction of the lessons. For our part, the initiative shown by the Federation of P&C Associations in contracting the SJEC to develop lessons for those students who opt-out of SRE has raised some important issues that we are eager to address.

1. ICCOREIS is committed to student enrichment through teaching and learning about ethical thinking. It is encouraging to see that the P&C Associations are also concerned about students' capacity to think about ethical issues. Without sustained exposure to ethical decision making in developmentally appropriate ways, students can just lapse into what they feel is right, narcissism or what their peers support them in doing. However, in the pilot, the ethics lessons were presented as an alternative to religion as if SRE was just an ideology.
2. SRE, through the variety of programmes offered by its member churches, provides an authentic educational experience, within the school timetable, for participating students from Kindergarten to Year 12. The provision of SRE is explicitly supported in the provision of a regular time set aside each week, and implicitly supported in the stated policy for students opting out of SRE

Schools are to provide appropriate care and supervision at school for students not attending SRE. This may involve students in other activities such as completing homework, reading and private study. . . When insufficient teachers or accommodation are available, the school's policy on minimal supervision will operate.²

The manner in which the Ethics trial was implemented in Term 2 2010 presented to both the parents/carers and the students a conflict of choice between two educationally valid experiences. Yet the DET policy states

These activities should neither compete with SRE nor be alternative lessons in the subjects within the curriculum or other areas, such as, ethics, values, civics or general religious education.³

3. Christian SRE providers have made available their individual curricula in the public domain and there has been sustained favourable review from a wide spectrum of the community. There are denominational emphases in the curricula yet, in large measure what is taught is recognised by all Christian churches and traditions. The curriculum behind the Ethics lessons has not been publicly available or tested over time.
4. We also recognise that SRE must hold both the *telos* (the reason to live) and the *praxis* (the way to live) together. We agree with Simon Longstaff when he says,

An ethical life is not just a life of reflection – above all it is a life in which we come to act. Socrates' question was not, 'what ought one to think?' It was, 'what ought one to do?' Christ admonished us, in the Sermon on the Mount, not merely to proclaim our faith but above all to act.⁴

² Section A, point 11 <http://www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/policies/religion/implement/implement/index.htm>

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Simon Longstaff, 'Ethics and the Mission of Anglican Education', *Third Isaac Armitage Lecture, Shore School, 9 November 2007, p. 11.*

We find ourselves in substantial agreement with this statement. Another author in the Bible captured Christ's sentiment when he said, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says."⁵ We need to be constantly vigilant that the SRE curricula not only reflect the parent tradition but also provide a clear, sustained call to reflect on life and act for the good of all. When the Ethics lessons are pitted against SRE some members of the community do think that it is either *telos* or *praxis* and not both together.

5. In the provision of SRE that is educationally advantageous, well taught and popularly supported across the state, there will always be (as there has always been) parents/carers who will choose to 'opt-out' of SRE. In all cases ICCOREIS regards this as the parent/carer freely exercising their democratic right. There are a number of other programmes and activities that are offered in government schools which afford parents a similar opportunity to 'opt-out'.
6. The development of ethical thinking skills is a fundamental educational outcome that requires a partnership between the DET and the community. There are a variety of programmes, like that developed by the SJEC, all of which are designed to develop life skills. *The National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools* (2005) established a framework for values education within which many schools have consciously implemented programmes. There is no reason why the SJEC ethical thinking lessons could not also be implemented within that framework. We recognise that along with SRE these programmes teach ethical thinking which contributes to the second goal of Australian schooling: All young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens.⁶ Successful learners means they

*Are able to think deeply and logically, and obtain and evaluate evidence in a disciplined way as a result of studying fundamental disciplines.*⁷

ICCOREIS contends that the competent teaching of Christian SRE not only contributes to the development of ethical thinking skills but it also contributes significantly to that goal for successful learners (who)

*Are able to make sense of their world and think about how things have become the way they are*⁸.

It is evident that students need both ethical thinking skills and worldview exploration. These skills and opportunities are embedded in the teaching programmes of ALL Key Learning Areas (KLAs) in the government school classroom and also for those students who attend Christian SRE.

7. ICCOREIS has anecdotal evidence that there was no clarification that the 'Saint James Ethics Centre' did not indicate a Christian organisation, and some parents were misled by the name into thinking the lessons were based on long established ethical principles consistent with historic Christian faith.

⁵ James 1:22.

⁶ Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, p. 8.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

4. Overview of the Submission Process

ICCOREIS found that obtaining information from the DET and the St James Ethics Centre (SJEC), in order to make effective comments on the lessons and the pilot, posed a persistent challenge prior to, during and after the SJEC Ethics Pilot conducted in Term 2, 2010. The reasons and background to this ongoing challenge are as follows:

1. After repeated requests, DET representatives provided no terms of reference other than the dot point in the minutes of the meeting of the Director General's Consultative Committee on SRE of 4th May 2010 -

The evaluation is focussed on the effectiveness of the course and the arrangements for its delivery

This brief statement does not provide opportunity to critique the processes involved in the implementation of the lessons, the validity of the sample represented by self-nominating schools and the contravention of DET policy (i.e. *Implementation of Special Religious Education Policy*) in order to conduct the Ethics trial.

2. At no point since the trial was announced in November 2009 have the foundational curriculum documents supporting a series of Ethics lessons been made available by SJEC.
3. The topics for the 10 weeks of lessons were sourced from the SJEC letter to parents, which were described in the briefest of detail. These were supplemented by facilitator's notes for two lessons which were accessed by searching the SJEC website.
4. Prior to the commencement of the pilot in Term 2 misleading information was provided about how the Ethics classes would be formed during the time allocated for SRE. For example, the letter used to notify parents about the lessons and to inform their choice included the SJEC letterhead NOT the DET letterhead.
5. Prior to and during the conduct of the pilot in Term 2, there was a lack of communication with SRE providers to discuss the impact of the SJEC pilot on the local provision of SRE. This significantly impacted on the resources needed and hence caused considerable financial loss on the part of some providers.
6. Following the trial ICCOREIS holds a deep concern that the focus of the evaluation may not address whether the Ethics pilot was effective in terms of the objective of engaging the non-SRE cohort. This is particularly pertinent as ICCOREIS has not been given access to information from the evaluator which might allay this concern.

5. Arguments Presented in the St James Ethics Centre Proposal

ICCOREIS is concerned that some children don't get the advantage an educationally sound SRE programme delivers. ICCOREIS acknowledges the fundamental principle of parental choice in the participation of their children in SRE classes. The commitment and good will of all approved providers of SRE is evidenced by the allocation of resources, both human and financial, to provide SRE in most government primary schools across NSW each week of the school year.

ICCOREIS would contest most strongly that the percentage of children who are not enrolled in an SRE class is anywhere near the 25% of students quoted in the SJEC submission. We have been actively surveying our members and anecdotally we consider the figure in fact to be only around 15% and even lower in many of the schools across NSW. Without the means to validate either figure, as the DET is unable to provide accurate data, the numbers that opt-out of SRE cannot be used to justify the proposal. ICCOREIS acknowledges that even 15% should be regarded as a significant number of students who opt-out of SRE. We are committed to working with all approved providers and government schools to ensure SRE is available to all students according to their parent/carer's wishes.

The SJEC has proposed that lessons in critical thinking skills as a complement to SRE will provide a solution to the 'problem' of the number of children in non-SRE. This 'solution' works to the disadvantage of all students. It is discriminatory in that it denies the benefit of a significant course in ethics to children of families of any recognised faith enrolled to receive SRE.

The majority of schools across the state have SRE classes functioning relatively smoothly. To extrapolate the negative experience of a few schools and make it a state-wide problem is to do an injustice to the communities who provide literally thousands of volunteers.

Where there are problems it is often because the DET's own guidelines are not being followed. ICCOREIS members frequently bring to our attention cases where schools fail to work within or even acknowledge the DET's own Implementation Policy for SRE.

6. Observations on the SJEC Lessons

Without access to the supporting documentation that gives the curriculum rationale and with severely limited access to the lessons and the facilitator's notes, ICCOREIS has been disadvantaged in its attempt to make credible comment on the Ethics lessons.

Since the SJEC's letter to parents and the facilitator's guide for the lessons on Fairness and Lying were the only information available to ICCOREIS prior to making this submission, the following observations are provisional.

1. The facilitator's guides to the two lessons make no mention of any didactic component. It is a highly questionable assumption that Fairness and Lying are either commonly understood or intrinsic to human nature, especially children. While we recognise that the role of the adult leader is as a facilitator to help clarify the ideas and values a child has, other subjects in the curriculum require significant teacher input. It is unimaginable that students could understand complex ethical issues without significant teacher input and exposure to both historical and cultural solutions.
2. It is widely recognised that the effective teaching of ethics has cognitive, volitional and emotional frames of reference. The facilitator's guides focus on helping children to gain a limited cognitive awareness of how they understand Fairness and Lying. There is nothing apparent in the guides, however, that motivates children, if it benefits them, to choose unfairness rather than fairness in real life. Likewise, there is nothing intrinsic in peer pressure, however rationally it may be defended, for children to choose not to lie if it benefits them immediately or long term.
3. The history of ethical teaching would suggest that stories (meta-narratives) and meeting people with narrative based and personal convictions assist students with strong emotional responses that propel them towards agreeing or disagreeing. This in turn leads to adults who are decision makers and not just pontificators. The facilitator's guides include no overarching stories and nothing about people with strong convictions. This is contrary to the best thinking on moral formation.

... Man is in his actions and practices, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal. He is not essentially, but becomes through his story, a teller of stories that aspire to truth. But the key question for men is not about their own authorship; I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?' We enter human society, that is, with one or more imputed characters - roles into which have been drafted - and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed. It is through hearing stories about wicked stepmothers, lost children, good but misguided kings, wolves that suckle twin boys, youngest sons who receive no inheritance but must make their own way in the world and eldest ones who waste their inheritance on riotous living and go into exile to live with the swine, that children learn or mislearn both what a child and what a parent is, what the cast of characters may be in the drama into which they have been born and what the ways of the world are. Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words. Hence there is no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resource.⁹

4. A typology of Values Education approaches includes not just Values Clarification, but also, at least, Action Learning, Analysis, Moral Development and Inculcation. Calling the series of lessons

⁹ Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 216.

an 'Ethics' course is at best ambiguous when in fact it is only about values clarification. It is imaginable that seeing only the name, undiscerning parents/carers would consider that their children were being taught something similar to the ethical principles they held to. There is nothing in the lessons to suggest this is the case. It is also imperative that all values education approaches need to be culturally sensitive.

5. There is nothing in the facilitator's notes for the two lessons that lead children to making actual ethical decisions in the course of *real life*. Apparently "Kohlberg was aware of the disconnection between people's ability to think about moral actions and their propensity to do so when under pressure. However, he was unable to integrate these two different forms of moral decision making."¹⁰ The lessons on Fairness and Lying beg the question: just because a child can identify "the relevant interests and points of view" in an ethical issue, does it mean that at any time s/he will act on it for the good of society? Children need more than peer pressure to be encouraged to act in responsible ways for the benefit of society.
6. If the two lessons on Fairness and Lying are typical, then the format of the lessons is exclusively peer to peer and there is no place for an experienced, wise adult to challenge the conclusions reached. There is an inherent weakness in this model in that if peer acceptance is the only measure of what is right, then the conclusions reached will not necessarily be ethical from the point of view of the wider society.
7. If the lessons on Fairness and Lying are typical, then there is no discussion of the past, present and future 'tenses' involved in decision making. Students need guidance to explore how they have reached their opinion on an ethical issue. This usually involves asking questions about the influence of their context, the beliefs of significant people and the nature of human beings. Then students need to understand what they wish to do in relation to moral theories that have been applied to complex situations. Lastly, unless the students actually raise the idea, there is nothing about the future impacts of their decisions, and especially the idea they might make a choice because of some higher ideal like sacrifice or love.
8. With the limited information available about the scope and sequence of the lessons, ICCOREIS concludes that the lessons are really about clarifying the students' critical thinking skills. However, as far as we can see, these skills are not directly taught in a way that encourages students to personally appropriate them, making them a part of the praxis that they take into life beyond the lessons. Like Maths and Science, which also use critical thinking skills, there are fundamental ideas in ethical decision-making that are beyond students to develop or initially understand. At some point, students need to be taught the consequences of ideas.

¹⁰ Thomas Smith, *Teaching Ethics and Mature Christian Thinking in Christian Schools*, p. ??

7. Ethics as a 'Complement' to SRE

The aim of the SJEC lessons appears to be to introduce the students to talking about ethics and reflecting on the values they hold. The focus is upon process not content. By utilising some agreed values common to our Western tradition and avoiding any reference to the influence of religious tradition, the lessons circumvent the ideological issues that compound all ethical discussion in the context of Australian society in the 21st century.

Associate Professor Cam, the author of the lessons, is the President of the Philosophy in Schools Association of NSW.¹¹ The Philosophy in Schools movement in Australia represents a specialised branch of a philosophic tradition

*What was once called Philosophy for Children has now grown into a sub-discipline of philosophy with its own history, traditions, and pedagogy, and incorporates what is variously called collaborative, inquiry-based learning through philosophy, philosophical inquiry in the classroom, reflective education and, generally, philosophy in schools as well as related methodologies which incorporate Socratic teaching.*¹²

In turn, Philosophy for Children grew out of the Values Clarification approach that emerged from America in the 1970s. Matthew Lipman, the founder of Philosophy for Children, the parent of Philosophy in Schools, describes its origins

*In the late 1960s, I was a full professor of philosophy at Columbia University, in New York. I thought that my undergraduate students were lacking in reasoning and judgment, but that it was too late to improve their thinking significantly. I thought (and I was almost alone in this opinion at that time) that it needed to be done in childhood. There should be courses for children in Critical Thinking when the children were eleven or twelve years of age. But to make the subject "user-friendly", the text would have to be written in the form of a novel—a novel about children discovering logic. But this too seemed to me too narrow. The novel should be about children discovering philosophy. So I wrote Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery (the title a pun on Aristotle) ... I left Columbia and set up The Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children [IAPC], as part of Montclair State University. After a few years, I wrote a book dealing solely with Ethics—a sequel to Harry called Lisa, for slightly older children. More and more books were written, each for a different age level, and with its own instructional manual ... In addition to requiring very unique textbooks (philosophical novels for children), Philosophy for Children has a unique pedagogy, in that students at every level begin by reading an episode aloud, raising questions about it, and then discussing the questions. It is this methodology, involving mutual criticism and scrupulously careful voicing of opinions and judgment, which educators recognize as an educational approach that prepares children to become citizens in a democracy.*¹³

Dr Lipman himself says that Philosophy for Children (P4C) is heavily dependent on American pragmatism and a sociocultural theory in cognitive development

Philosophy for Children (P4C) didn't just emerge out of nowhere. It built upon the recommendations of John Dewey and the Russian educator, Lev Vygotsky, who emphasized the necessity to teach for thinking, not just for memorizing. It is not enough for children merely to remember what has been said to them: they must examine and analyse that material. Just as thinking is the processing of what children learn about the world through their senses, so they must think about what they learn in school.

¹¹ <http://www.fapsa.org.au/associations/nsw> (Accessed 29/7/10). Dr Sue Knight is the Chairperson of the South Australian Association for Philosophy in the Classroom (<http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/staff/Homepage.asp?Name=sue.knight> (Accessed 29/7/10).

¹² What is Philosophy in Schools? <http://www.fapsa.org.au/about-us#philosophy-in-schools> (accessed 29/7/10)

¹³ <http://www.buf.no/en/read/txt/?page=sn-lip> (Accessed 27/7/10).

*Memorizing is a relatively low-level thinking skill; children must be taught concept-formation, judgment, reasoning, etc.*¹⁴

John Dewey's total rejection of Christian faith is well documented. In its place, he proposed a theory of mental evolution heavily dependent on Darwin's theory of biological evolution. Teachers are not instructors but 'facilitators' guiding students through problems they pose to try out various pragmatic solutions to discover what works for them. Postmodern philosophers, like Richard Rorty, who describes himself as a neo-pragmatist said in an interview

*I think that if there's anything distinctive it's the thoroughgoing secularism of Dewey and Whitman, which is described in my book. There's no God, no reality, no nothing that takes precedence over the consensus of a free people. What I like about Dewey and pragmatism is the anti-metaphysical claim that there's no court of appeal higher than a democratic consensus.*¹⁵

We recognise that teaching ethics and critical thinking is good pedagogy, but for both the SJEC lessons and SRE, value neutrality, in respect of the ultimate meta-narratives and the consequent presuppositions that give them their framework, is impossible.

While the SJEC has proposed making the ethics lessons developed in the future available to providers of SRE, a fundamental conflict between the philosophic naturalism that underpins the SJEC lessons and the theism of Christian SRE providers renders them substantially incompatible and ultimately misleading.

The lessons in ethical thinking, as most likely a component of the Philosophy in Schools curriculum, are **not a 'complement' to SRE**, as advocated in the SJEC proposal, in the sense that they are antithetical to both the Christian faith and all faiths that have a "higher court of appeal".

Given that all pedagogy is indebted to epistemological presuppositions, **all students**, not just those who opt-out of SRE, need a complementary exposure to belief systems, both religious and non-religious. This is the foundational reasoning behind the proposal for the development of General Religious Education (GRE) as a **real complement** to SRE in the recommendations of the Rawlinson Report (1980) in NSW government schools. The potential of this truly complementary relationship is yet to be fully realised in public education in NSW. With an effective operation of GRE students will be encouraged to understand their culture and heritage, make informed decisions about how to live morally and be able to talk about their choices without threat or vilification. Studies of both systems, the religious and the non-religious, do more than just contribute to moral education. At a deep level they refine the self-defining map of reality, enabling students to negotiate challenges to personal meaning and purpose.

¹⁴ <http://www.bufo.no/en/read/txt/?page=sn-lip> (Accessed 29/7/10)

¹⁵ <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/unbound/bookauth/ba980423.htm> (Accessed 30/0/10)

8. Recommendations

When it is acknowledged that

1. Across the state, where SRE is offered, it accounts for over 85% of children (OR those who opt-out represent around 15% of the 430,817 primary students listed in ABS figures¹⁶).
2. In some parts of the state, the number of children whose parents/carers are opting-out is growing but in secondary schools SRE is growing as more providers are committed to providing teachers.
3. In most schools the Principals work within the *Implementation of Religious Education Policy* and this is demonstrated by the productive and harmonious relationship with providers in their schools.
4. In the implementation of the SJEC trial in Term 2 2010, not all children who had opted-out of SRE chose to opt-in to the lessons on ethical thinking - that means there were still children who required supervision in a non-SRE/non-Ethics cohort. The provision of Ethics lessons has not solved the problem of providing for all the students opting out. School organisation is only marginally better off.
5. The provision of SRE and the further development of its true complement GRE is essential for the development of a NSW society characterised by tolerance and understanding.
6. All students need courses in ethics and values education in the wider curriculum.
7. Multiculturalism essentially means multi-faith in many schools, and a combination of faith providers, including the Christian faith providers, are deserving of full support, not the kind of undermining that was experienced as a result of the trial.

ICCOREIS asks the Minister and the Department of Education and Training to

1. Become more proactive in upholding and promoting the *Implementation of Special Religious Education Policy*.
2. Acknowledge and strengthen the role of the *Director General's Consultative Committee on SRE* and engage with its broadly representative membership in a collaborative and fully consultative manner.
3. Encourage religious providers to engage in research aimed at developing and improving their delivery of SRE.
4. Explore and develop best practice models in the organisation and management of both non-SRE and SRE.
5. Ensure that parental choice in matters of SRE or non-SRE enrolment is properly informed. For example, in communications with parents/carers it must be clear that the Ethics course is non-religious and, as presently structured, does not teach ethics *per se*.
6. Strengthen the teaching of ethics and GRE within the NSW curriculum through the subjects offered by the Board of Studies.
7. Develop suggestions and recommendations for government schools regarding the interpretation of the meaning of "completing homework, reading and private study", as activities for non-SRE students.
8. Continue to work with all stakeholders on the place of SRE in Government schools so that the increasing multicultural nature of our society is recognised and celebrated through attention to the foundational stories and corresponding faith and practice evident in our society.

¹⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 4221.0 – Schools, Australia, 2009
<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/4221.02009?OpenDocument> (accessed 1 August 2010).