

How in-faith religious education strengthens social cohesion in multicultural Australia

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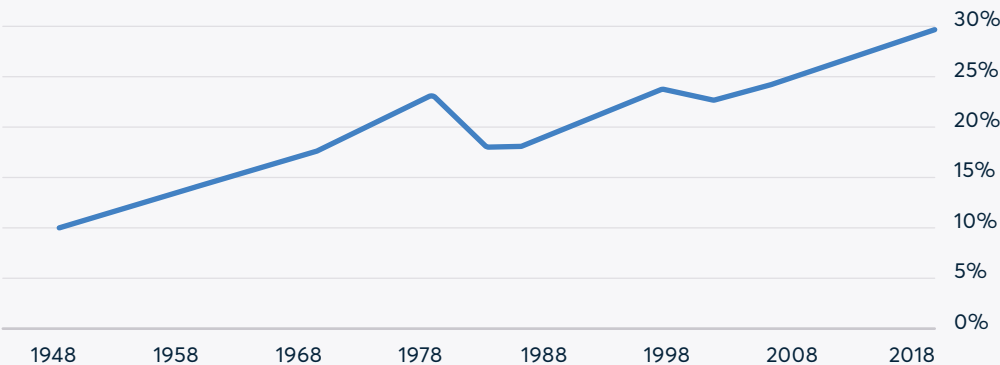
Introduction

A multicultural and multi-faith Australia

Australia's population continues to grow and change. This change is occurring through natural increase, but even more through overseas migration. In 2018, there were more than seven million migrants living in Australia with almost one in three Australian residents (29%) born overseas (ABS, 2018).

Australia's cultural diversity means we are increasingly a multi-faith society. An increasingly diverse overseas-born population is bringing about a change in Australia's religious landscape.

Percentage of overseas-born (Australia, 1948-2018)



Source: ABS, Migration Australia, 2017-18

Top five countries of birth for net overseas migrants (2018)

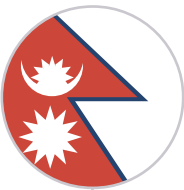
Source: ABS, Migration Australia, 2017-18



India
22%



China
18%



Nepal
8%



Phillipines
5%



Malaysia
4%

Major religions in these countries:

Source: CIA, The World Factbook, 2019



Hinduism
80%



Folk religions
22%



Hinduism
81%

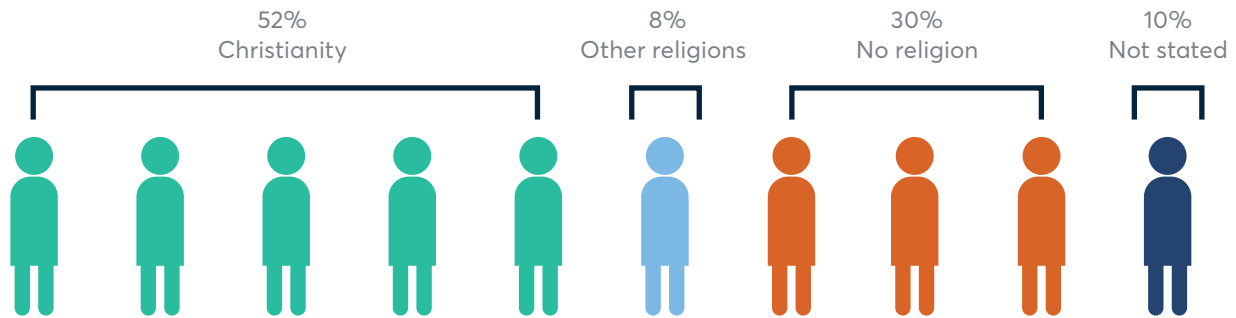


Roman Catholicism
81%



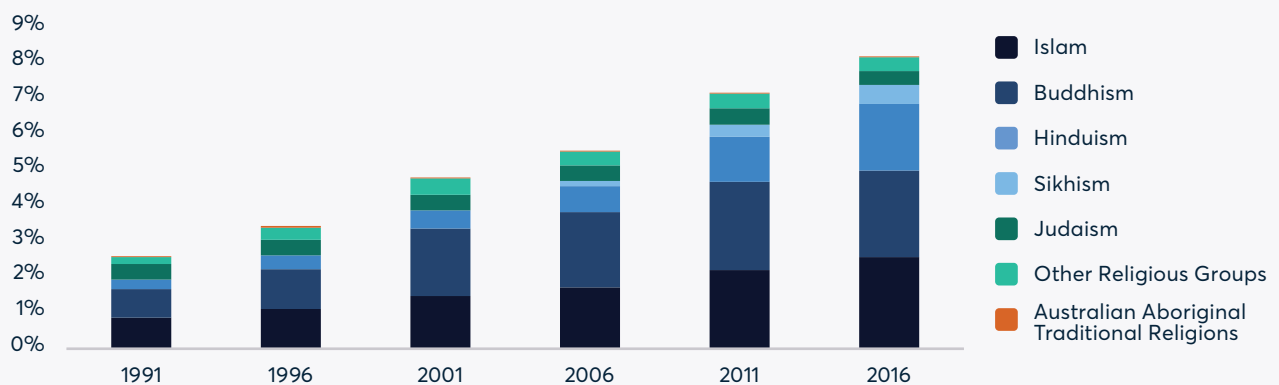
Islam
61%

Religious affiliation in Australia



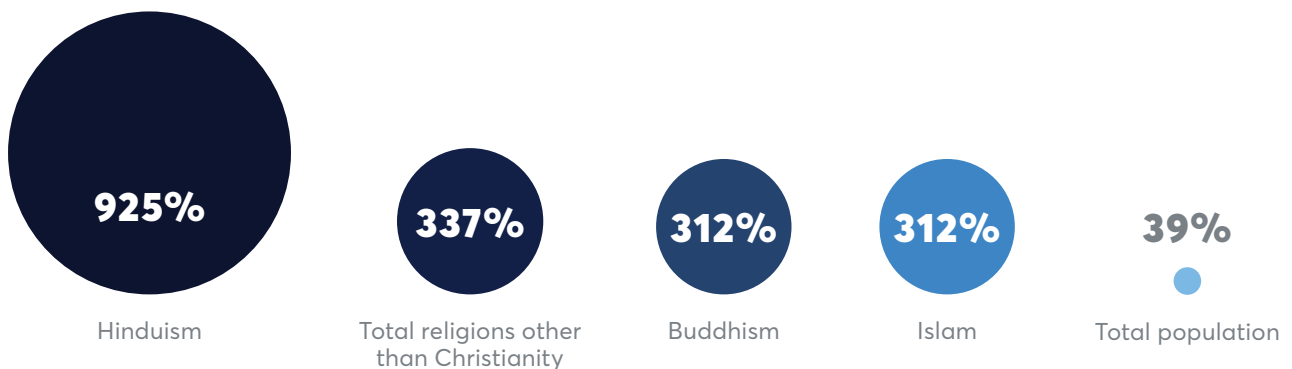
Source: ABS, Census 2016

Increase in religions other than Christianity



Source: ABS, Census 2016

Australia's growing religious diversity (increase since 1991)



Source: ABS, Census 2016

Religion and security

While secularisation has increased in both the national and international spheres, there has also been an increase in fundamentalism within religious beliefs. Events such as the fall of the Soviet Union and September 11 are reminders that religion is still a major actor in the twenty-first century.

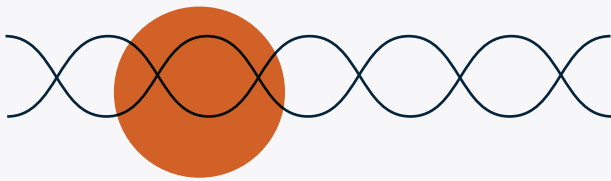
This presents new challenges for the relationship between the state and religion, and emphasizes the need to revisit the role of religious education within government schools (Gross & Rutland, 2015).

Multiculturalism: thin & thick

Multiculturalism was adopted by Australia's Whitlam and Fraser governments in the 1970's as an approach to policy that supports newcomers to maintain cultural ties with their home country (Maxwell et al, 2012). The policy aims to build social cohesion.

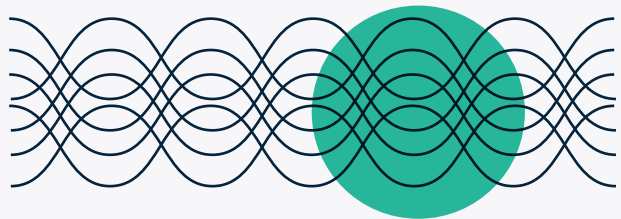
At the time, these policies focused mainly on ethnic diversity rather than religious diversity (thin multiculturalism).

Given Australia's changing religious landscape, the focus of multiculturalism needs to be broadened to include religious differences. The most effective approach to multiculturalism is one that acknowledges the unique values to each human group (thick multiculturalism). This is also important when thinking about education in schools.



Thin multiculturalism:

generalised moral discourse which ignores unique aspects of culture and religion (Walzer, 1994).



Thick multiculturalism:

acknowledges the moral, ethical and religious values which are unique to each human group (Greenberg, 2004).

Multicultural education

Within the context of a multicultural and democratic education policy, children belonging to different religious groups should have the opportunity to receive education in line with their own religion (Franken, 2017).

The goal of teaching students how to live harmoniously with others in a contemporary and diverse society is a pillar of modern education. Multicultural education is a key instrument in achieving this. Banks' model provides a framework of what multicultural education could look like in the classroom.

Banks' model for multicultural education (Banks, 1993)



Content integration

teachers use **information from a variety of cultures** and groups to illustrate concepts



Knowledge construction process

classroom **exploration of assumptions** and stereotypes of minorities



Prejudice reduction

facilitating **cross-cultural activities** for students to cultivate positive attitudes towards different religious and ethnic groups



Equity pedagogy

efforts to improve the **academic achievements** of disadvantaged groups



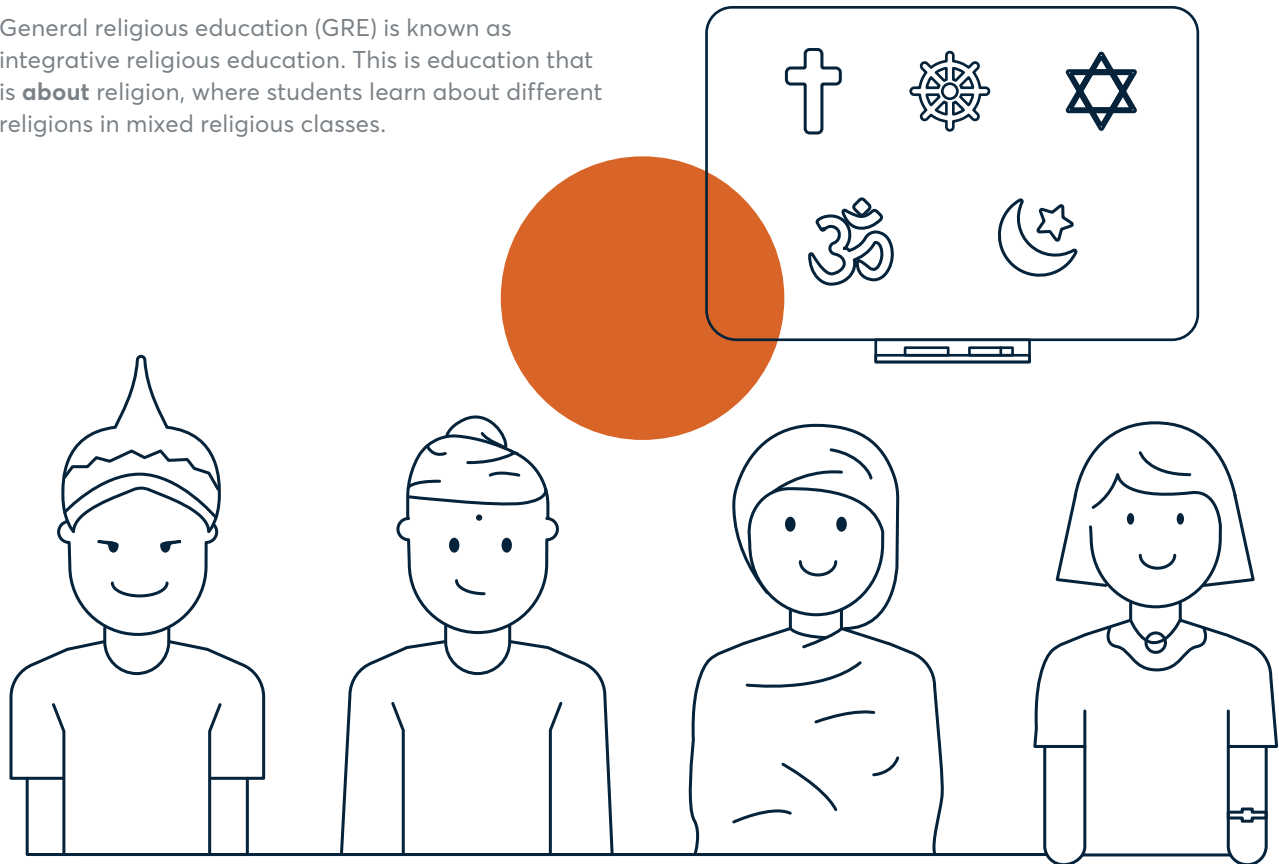
Empowering school culture and social structure

teachers have the **same expectations** of all students, regardless of religious or ethnic group

Two approaches to religious education

General religious education (GRE)

General religious education (GRE) is known as integrative religious education. This is education that is **about** religion, where students learn about different religions in mixed religious classes.



In-faith education (SRE/RI)

In-faith education is **for** religion where students have the opportunity to explore their own faith, spirituality and heritage. This type of education has different names in different states.

In QLD, TAS, NT and SA it is called Religious Instruction (RI). In NSW, WA and the ACT it is called Special Religious Education (SRE) and in VIC it is Special Religious Instruction (SRI).



The need for both SRE/RI and GRE

SRE/RI acknowledges a child's need for belief and spirituality and provides an opportunity for students to experience this.

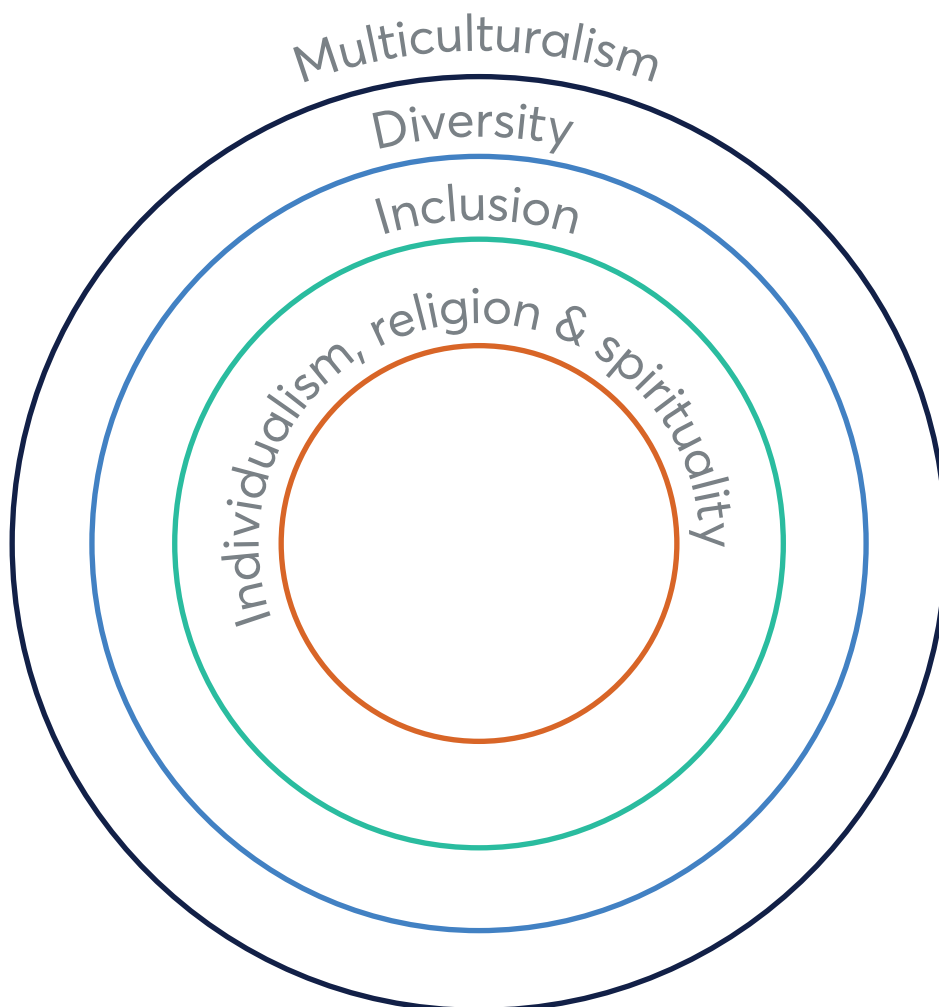
GRE cannot provide children with faith or spirituality as this would appear to promote a particular religion (Alberts, 2010). GRE can, however, promote social cohesion through teaching about other religious traditions.

A combination of both SRE/RI and GRE, therefore, can help students to cultivate an understanding of themselves and their own religion, as well as an understanding of others. This can help to multiculturalise schools.

Spirituality and establishing identity

An individual's exploration of their own spirituality through contemplation of 'the sacred' is shown to be an integral part of human psychology (Pargament, 2007). Based on this understanding, spirituality enables the individual to establish their own identity (Gross, 2009). Spirituality is what makes humans different from animals. It acknowledges that humans are diverse and that there is a need to respect human differences.

In the context of religious education, spirituality helps students understand their own identity as well as providing greater understanding of and appreciation for diversity. The exclusion of spirituality from religious education in state schools, as advocated by some supporters of integrative religious education, represents a backward step for multiculturalism.



Religious education in a multicultural environment

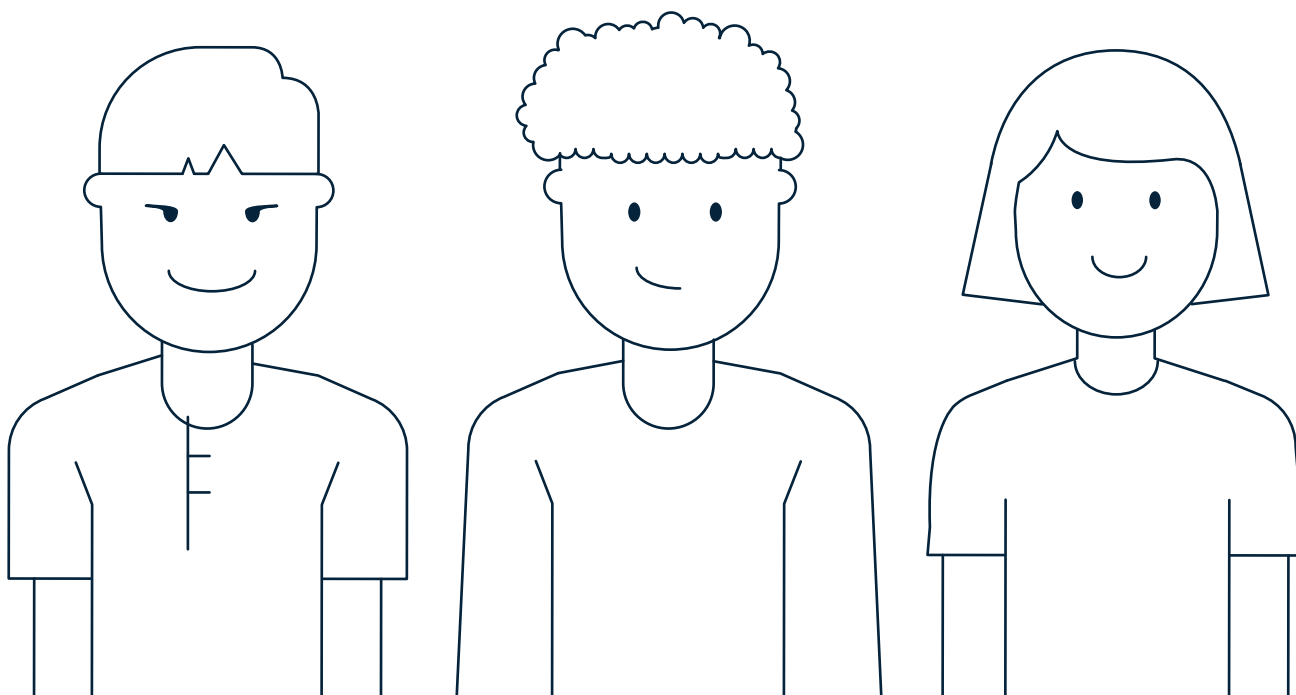
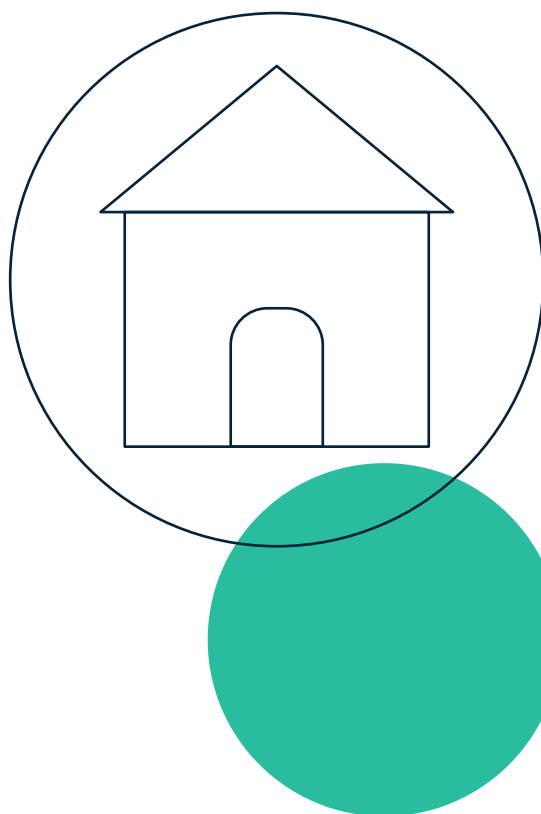
Government schools, which include students from different religious groups, provide an environment where students of different backgrounds study together. Through the use of multicultural education, GRE can help to reduce stereotyping and discrimination as students learn about other religions in an integrated environment.

Providing a safe place to explore deeper questions

Segregated religious education classes can provide a safe place for children from different religious backgrounds to discuss topics affecting their own religious group. For example, with the recent mass shooting by a white supremacist, Eco-fascist in Christchurch, New Zealand and the subsequent series of suicide bombings by Muslim extremists in Sri Lanka that killed hundreds of worshippers, together with the San Diego synagogue shooting, SRE/RI teachers could discuss the fear and concern which affected Muslim, Christian and Jewish students in Australia.

Removing in-faith education from government schools detracts from the government's multicultural aims by denying students a crucial avenue to explore their own religious identity and heritage. In a post-truth era, without a safe place to explore their own religious identity, students are exposed to 'fake news'.

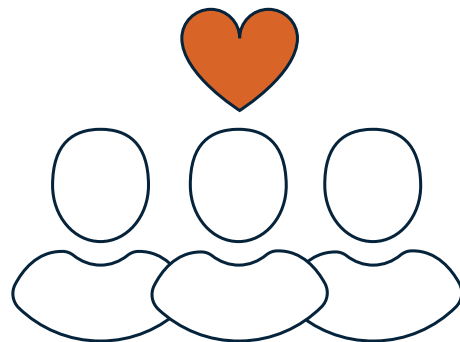
It is important, however, for both students and parents to be given the option to opt out of religious education by providing an ethics class as an alternative. These options are important for social justice and human rights.



Combining SRE/RI & GRE strengthens social cohesion

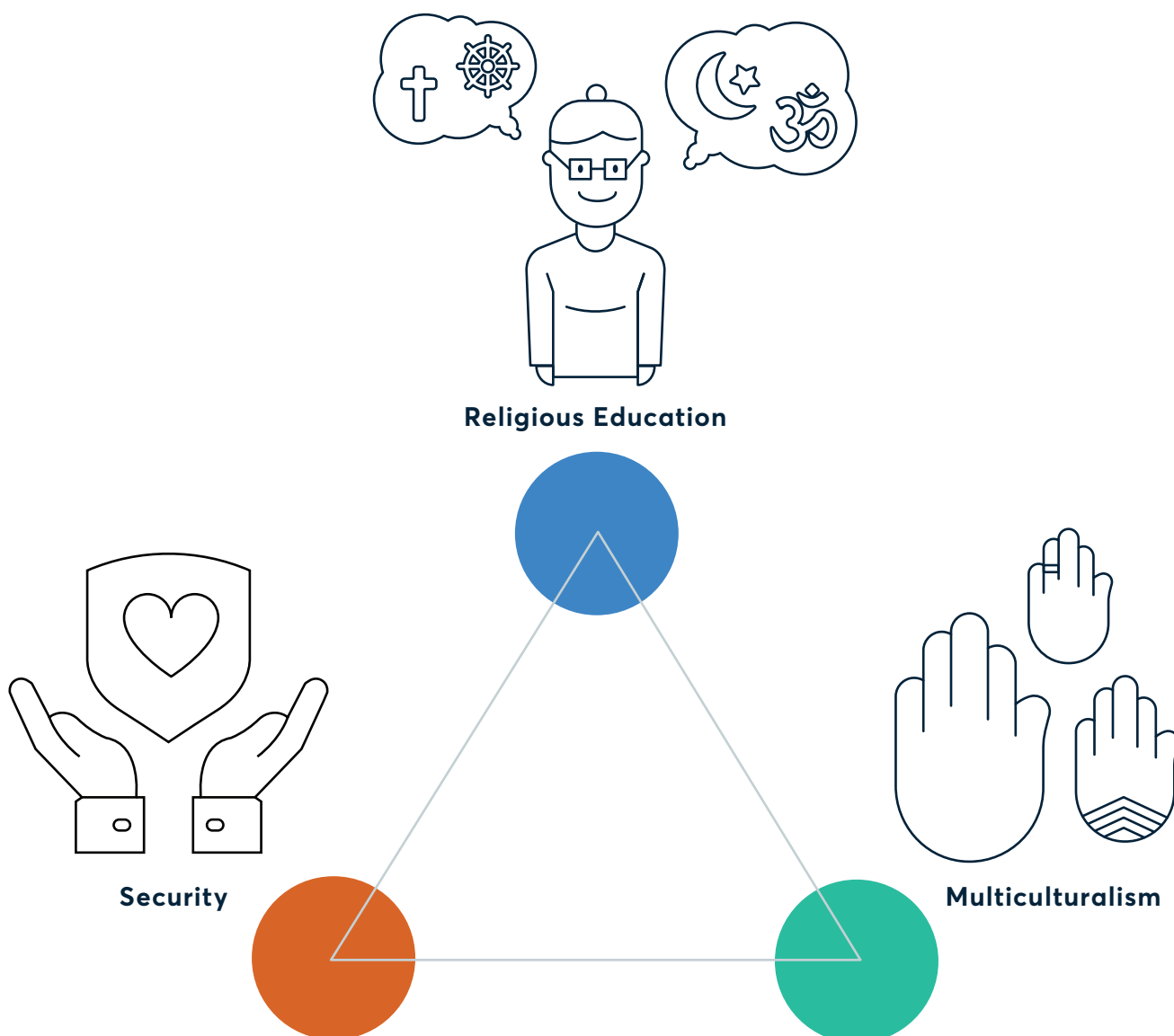
According to Schweitzer (2007) Cooperative Religious Education incorporates these two frameworks:

- ① Children have a safe place to explore their own identity and learn from a teacher of their own religion through SRE/RI. Religious education can draw on the aspects of compassion and universalism, present in all major faith traditions, to further promote peace and tolerance.
- ② Children have the opportunity to interact with children of different religious backgrounds. This promotes open dialogue between those of other cultures and religions through GRE.



In simultaneously providing students with a safe place to explore their own religious identity and a multicultural environment in which to understand others, Cooperative Religious Education in government schools provides a strong basis for thick multiculturalism.

These two types of religious education play a key role in dismantling stereotypes and strengthening social cohesion. In this way, government schools offering SRE/RI and GRE are the ideal setting for children to develop an understanding of peace and tolerance.



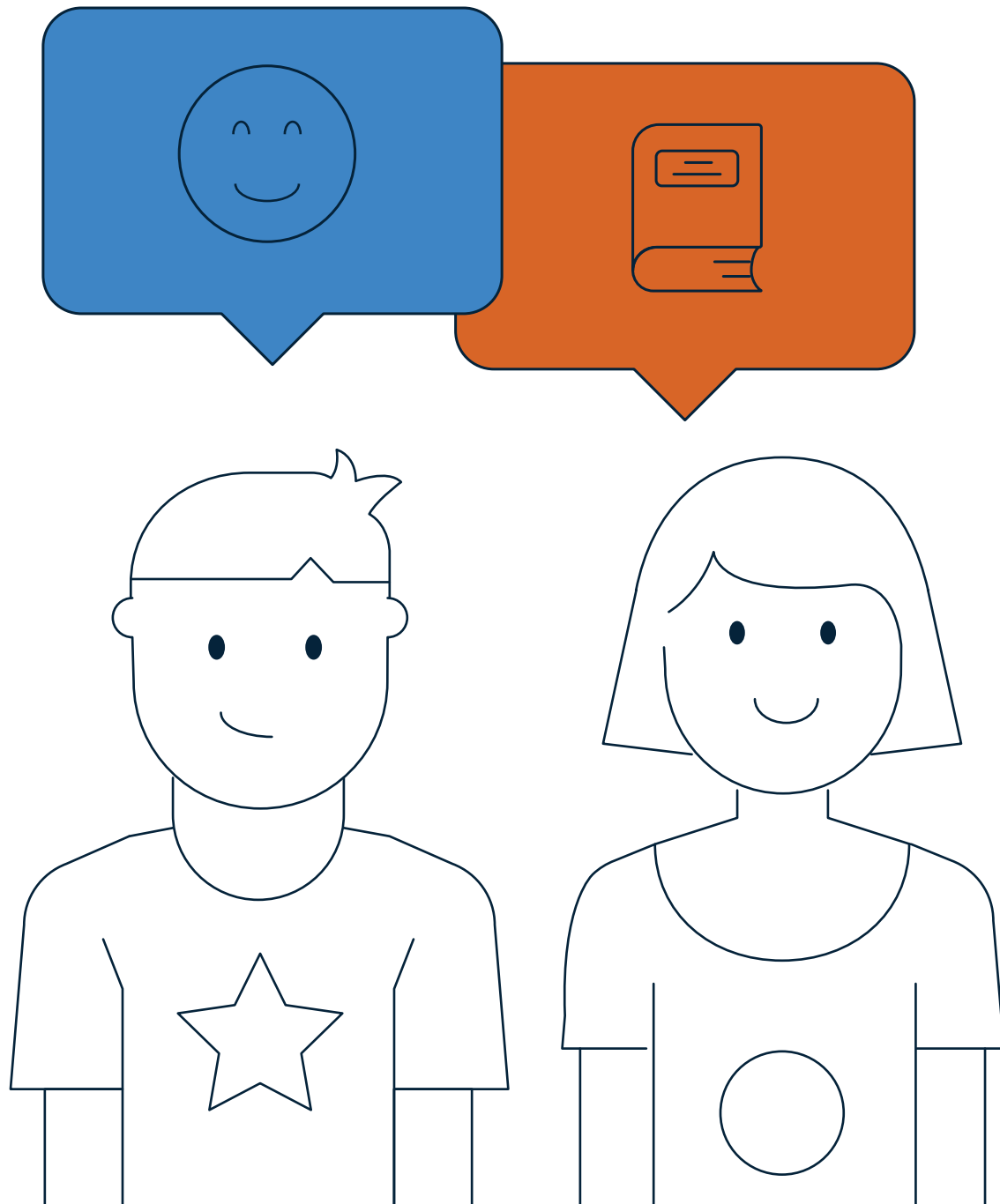
Recommended approach for SRE/RI classes

It is important that in-faith religious education should avoid taking a dogmatic approach to teaching. Instead, both teachers and students are encouraged to ask critical questions and be self-reflective (Baidhaw, 2007; Gross 2010; Gross & Rutland, 2018).

This approach can be achieved through experiential and informal teaching and learning techniques such as storytelling, role play and case method teaching (Wang, 2013; Gross & Rutland, 2017).

Students should be exposed to a variety of religious approaches to ethical dilemmas within their specific faith community (Swanson, 2010). This provides students with the opportunity to reflect on their values and beliefs in contemporary society while considering moral challenges and deep questions.

Because in-faith religious education is provided by religious education teachers from private religious schools, synagogues, churches, mosques and temples, this connects what is taught in the classroom to the wider religious community in Australia (Gross & Rutland, 2018, 2015). This further strengthens social cohesion in Australia.



Better Balanced Futures

Better Balanced Futures is an organisation involving all different faiths working together to retain religious education in schools. This organisation represents a strengthening of multi/interculturalism which can assist in the social integration of Australia's religiously diverse society. Better Balanced Futures is a grassroots, bottom-up organisation and can therefore be impactful in implementing change.

Better Balanced Futures was created as an important response to the opposition towards in-faith religious education. The fact that leading faith groups have joined the organisation and are keen to work to improve their curriculum and teaching is clear evidence of the importance and value attributed to these classes by all faith groups. The importance and support of this organisation was clearly demonstrated at the Celebration of SRE in New South Wales, which was organised and held at Parliament House in November 2018. This event was supported by leading faith groups, seen visually in the colourful dress of many of the Eastern religious groups, reflecting the multi-faith nature of Australian society.



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