

Editorial

I will begin this Editorial by sharing a conversation I had with my five-year-old daughter at the end of her first year of school. During a typical conversation about the day's events, she made a 'factual' remark about things that God had done. As she was previously not a believer in God, I asked her how she came to decide that He was real. She replied: 'Because school said he was real and my school only tells me the truth.'

I found my daughter's comment to be deeply challenging. Like so many parents, I hope that my child will judiciously examine religious beliefs and practices and decide if and how it fits in her life. I did not, however, think that her belief in God would stem from the faith she has in the veracity of her school. Obviously this is just the start of what will no doubt be an ever-changing conversation she has with herself about God and religion, but what struck me about her comment was not that her opinion had changed, but rather the reason for the change – because school only tells the truth.

A debate about the inclusion of Special Religious Instruction (SRI) in public schools simmers away and every now then it surfaces with renewed vigour. It is not my intention to reiterate the well-argued pros and cons of having SRI in schools, but rather use this platform to examine parents' capacity to inform the SRI debate and contribute to the decision-making in their schools.

Based on its interpretation of the Education and Training Reform Act 2006 (Section 2.2.11), the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) says that schools 'must arrange for the provision of SRI where an accredited and approved instructor is available' (DEECD, 2011). The main provider of approved religious instructors in Victoria is ACCESS Ministries. ACCESS Ministries is 'an inter-denominational body, which provides Christian Education and Chaplaincy in State Schools in Victoria, under the provision of the 2006 Education and Training Reform Act' (ACCESS Ministries, 2012). According to the Australian Education Union, ACCESS Ministries deliver 97% of the SRI in primary schools for which they are funded approximately half a million dollars annually from the State government (Australian Education Union, 2011). The CEO of ACCESS Ministries made clear its agenda in her speech at the Evangelical Fellowship in the Anglican Communion (EFAC) National Conference in which she said: 'In

Australia we have a God-given open door to children and young people with the Gospel, our federal and state governments allow us to take the Christian faith into our schools and share it. We need to go and make disciples' (Paddison, 2008).

The opinions of the DEECD and organizations that provide SRI are fairly well heard and understood, but it is more difficult to locate the opinions of parents. This, in part, might be due to the DEECD actively discouraging attempts by schools to garner parent opinion. Upon discovery that Hawthorn West Primary School Council had plans to survey their parents, the DEECD warned them not to do so because it would be seen as provocative. In addition, they 'sent schools in the Eastern Region a suggested statement for their newsletters, urging school councils not to seek parents' views on the subject' (Bachelard, 2011). This restriction leaves little scope for individual school autonomy on the matter, and shuts down open discussion with parents. One researcher, however, recently conducted a small poll in NSW and found that '69 percent of parents and professional educators would prefer a general, comparative study of different religious and non-religious traditions rather than the current segregated RI' (Byrne, in press). This result suggests, at the very least, that the subject warrants more attention.

Where and when do parents get to have their say? Both legislation and DEECD policy state clearly that 'attendance at SRI is not to be compulsory for any student whose parents desire that he or she be excused from attending' (DEECD, 2011). This provision in the Act safeguards parents' control over their children's religious instruction by allowing them to decide whether they participate or withdraw from the



class. For many parents, however, this can be a significant and troubling decision.

It could be argued that based on the history of religious education in schools, there is now a culture of acceptance whereby parents agree to SRI whether they like it or not. Consequently, some parents might believe that by removing their child from SRI they are alienating them from the rest of the class and may be anxious not to be perceived by the school as oppositional or trouble makers. This decision is also required at a time when children and parents are first entering the school system and trying to navigate its unfamiliar territory. Even though parents have a choice, for some it is a choice between a rock and a hard place. They have to ask themselves whether they potentially cause distress for their child or put up with religious instruction even though it is in opposition to their family's beliefs. According to the findings of Byrne (in press), this might be a decision faced by a majority of parents. As a community perhaps we need to ask ourselves: Is it fair to ask parents to choose between their religious beliefs and their desire to conform with the system their child is about to enter? Does the current system tilt the scales in favour of mass conformity for SRI? Does the delivery of this decision strip parents of their power?

If schools are mandated to offer SRI, then perhaps greater transparency about the alternative choices for parents might help weaken the cultural norm or expectation that they should comply with the status quo. A line at the bottom of the SRI permission form says: 'NOTE: You may withdraw your child from classes at any time by notifying the school principal in writing.' This means that parents have to 'opt out' of SRI classes, but if the form had the choice of SRI or an alternative class, then parents could choose which one they want to 'opt in' to. A system which requires parents to opt into a program of their choice appears more equitable when compared with a system that requires them to opt out of a program without knowing what the alternative is. This is one way of making the system more transparent and shifting the power of religious decision-making from the school back to parents. Given that the choice of religious participation is a profoundly personal one, and that we live in a secular society with a secular government, would it be more appropriate to move the balance of power back to parents in this matter?

These questions, and more, are particularly important to consider when thinking about children in out-of-home care. Whose decision is it when a child is not living with his or her parents? Is it a decision for the State, the parents, or the foster carers to make? If the agency caring for the children on the State's behalf is christian-based, does this have a subtle – or not so subtle – bearing on the decision?

The policy of enforced SRI in public schools is perceived by some – and voiced most ardently by the Humanist Society of Victoria and a parent-run lobby group called Fairness in Religions in Schools (FIRIS) – as not just unfair, but discriminatory. Not only do they believe it is unfair for a parent to be burdened with the decision in its current

form, but they think it is an act of discrimination for a student to have to withdraw from their class based on their religious beliefs (FIRIS, 2011). Three parents have moved beyond thinking of ways of making the current system more equitable and have lodged a case with the Victorian and Civil Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) calling for a review of the matter in the context of the Equal Opportunity Act 2010. VCAT's decision is pending.

It will be interesting to see what decision VCAT makes and what the subsequent actions of the department, the religious institutions and the lobby groups will be. In the meantime let's move on to the content of this issue.

This issue of *Children Australia* includes a number of articles that we hope you will find informative and thought-provoking. We begin with a practice commentary by Katy Curtis from the Child and Mental Health Service (CAMHS) in Bendigo. Katy reports on the development of a collaborative inter-agency service provider model that has been established in Bendigo and surrounding districts. In an effort to moderate some of the challenges faced by clients and workers in rural and regional areas, local agencies have developed an inter-agency network model, aimed at strengthening practitioner education, effective inter-agency collaboration and clinical assessment and treatment for children and young people with a mental illness.

Andrea Nolan, Jennifer Cartmel and Kym Macfarlane have provided a paper entitled 'Thinking about Practice in Integrated Children's Services: Considering Transdisciplinarity'. Their study is an investigation of the opinions held by health, community and education professionals about the use of transdisciplinary practice in the workplace. They found that participants have some concern about 'professional identity, feeling valued, role confusion and the boundaries imposed by funding regulations', but on the whole participants believed that working in a transdisciplinary way can be useful.

In their article "Permanency Planning Concepts," Jennifer Osmond and Clare Tilbury examine carers, parents and child protection workers' opinions of permanency planning. The emphasis placed on different elements of permanency planning differed between the groups. Practitioners 'tended to focus on placement arrangements, carers focused on relationships and security, and parents were concerned about the quality of care their children received'. The authors believe these distinctions, or focal points, are important to reflect on during permanency planning decision-making processes to ensure that quality participatory practice is being offered.

Gloria Lee, Marcus Thomeer, Christopher Lopata, Audrey Schiavo, Audrey Smerbeck, Martin Volker, Rachael Smith and Joshua Mirwis have investigated the coping strategies used by children with high-functioning autism spectrum disorders when faced with a social stressor. In their paper "Coping Strategies and Perceived Coping Effectiveness for Social Stressors among Children with FASDs: A Brief Report", the authors categorize participants' reports of

coping strategies into one of three groups: (1) strategies used frequently and viewed as effective, (2) strategies not used frequently and not perceived as effective, and (3) strategies used frequently but not perceived as effective. While the authors acknowledge the need for further research, they indicate that the results of their study point towards an increased capacity of children with HFASDs to use and find effective concrete, behaviourally oriented coping strategies, compared with coping strategies that involve emotionality, imagination and perspective taking.

The fifth paper, 'Advising the Alien: Investigating Young Children's Learning of Dog Safety Messages' by Sue Nichols, Kirrilly Thompson and Sarah Blunden, evaluates the effectiveness of a dog safety program with first-year primary school children. Using an interesting data collection tool, they found some improvement in children's knowledge of dog safety after participation in the Delta Dog Safety Program. They found both short- and long-term gains in children's retention of the safety messages; however, they identified that further gains could be made with children's internalization of recommended actions.

The final contribution to this issue is a book review written by Jim Luthy, President of the Care Leavers Australia Network. Jim shares his thoughts about the book *Surviving care: Achieving justice and healing for the Forgotten Australians*, edited by Richard Hil and Elizabeth Branigan. Jim has a number of positive things to say about this book, and makes particular reference to the authors' ability to combine their academic strengths with their personal experiences of

growing up in care. Jim recommends this text as a worthwhile resource for health professionals.

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