

**Submission
No 187**

**INQUIRY INTO EDUCATION AMENDMENT (ETHICS
CLASSES REPEAL) BILL 2011**

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PERSONAL SUBMISSION
UPPER HOUSE MINISTERIAL INQUIRY INTO THE "ETHICS" COURSE: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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20th February 2012



LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE NO.2

EDUCATION AMENDMENT (ETHICS CLASSES REPEAL) BILL 2011

TERMS OF REFERENCE

That General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2 inquire into and report on the Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011, and in particular:

- a. the stated objectives, curriculum, implementation, effectiveness and other related matters pertaining to the current operation of 'special education in ethics' being conducted in State schools, and
- b. whether the Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010 should be repealed.

That the Committee report by 4 June 2012.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

The Hon Marie Ficarra MLC (<i>Chair</i>)	(Liberal Party)
The Hon Paul Green MLC (<i>Deputy Chair</i>)	(Christian Democratic Party)
The Hon Dr John Kaye MLC	(The Greens)
The Hon David Clarke MLC	(Liberal Party)
The Hon Sarah Mitchell MLC	(The Nationals)
The Hon Shaoquett Moselmane MLC	(Australian Labor Party)
The Hon Helen Westwood MLC	(Australian Labor Party)

I refer to the call for submissions to the Upper House Ministerial Inquiry into the Education Amendment (Ethics Classes) Repeal Bill 2011. The terms of reference for the Inquiry related to:

- a. the stated objectives, curriculum, implementation, effectiveness and other related matters pertaining to the current operation of 'special education in ethics' being conducted in State schools; and
- b. whether the Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010 should be repealed.

This is a personal submission and represents the views of the author. It does not reflect the views of the University of Technology Sydney, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia or St Andrew's Greek Orthodox College.

BACKGROUND

I was present with Fr Constantine Varipatis in March 2009 when Ms Coleen McKinnon from Social Sector Solutions approached the Greek Orthodox Church on behalf of the St James Ethics Centre. We were asked: "How do you feel about children who currently opt out from Scripture, to explore fundamental truths like justice?" Our response was that (a) this was a good idea provided that it does not replace Scripture; and (b) that the program (i.e., ethics education) is made available to all students.

We did not give the matter much thought until later that year when the Premier announced a trial of ethics classes during the time allocated for Scripture. This decision was undertaken without advice from the Director-General's Advisory Committee on Special Religious Education. The manner in which the announcement was made aroused considerable hostility and was, rightly or wrongly, perceived as a threat to Scripture in State Schools.

It seems fair to say that the extent of public opposition to the proposal was far greater than ever imagined. For a start, a petition supporting catechists' work on scripture classes, with more than 52,000 signatures - including from 37,000 Catholics throughout NSW was tabled in the NSW Parliament in July 2010 (<http://www.cathnews.com/article.aspx?aeid=22531>).

Ministerial representatives were dispatched to the Inter-Church Council on Religious Education in Schools and to the Director-General's Advisory Committee on Special Religious Education to settle any qualms as there was considerable backlash to these proposals.

It was around this stage that an evaluation of the pilot ethics classes was proposed. I believe this was an afterthought as it had not been announced at the outset.

No doubt it was envisaged that a positive evaluation would support the ethics classes and counter any opposition.

Public response was sought to the evaluation. There has been considerable hyperbole about the support for the evaluation. For instance it is claimed that “Out of 750 submission made, 730 (97%) were in support of the introduction of ethics” (Media Release, 15th November 2011).

This statement is misleading. It does not indicate overwhelming support for ethics classes. It does not take into account the quality of the submissions. It does not take into account that by November 2010, the proponents of Scripture were well-and-truly battle weary and not at all confident that their claims would be treated fairly. It conveniently overlooks the numerical superiority of the 52,000 signatures on the petition opposed to ethics classes.

Moreover this opposition has continued. The Petitions submitted to the most recent 55th Parliament in support of Scripture classes by the Rev. Nile outnumber 750:

626	08/11/2011
100	22/11/2011
358	04/05/2011
63	25/05/2011
106	13/09/2011
1445	11/10/2011

The pilot program was run in Term 2, 2010 and the first classes started in Term 1, 2011 after the NSW Education Act 1990 was amended to allow pupils who do not attend Special Religious Education classes to attend philosophical ethics classes. This is an option to supervised ‘private study’.

St James Ethics Centre is the approved provider of classes in philosophical ethics.

The ethics program is provided through Primary Ethics Ltd (ABN: 28147194349) which was established by the St James Ethics Centre in late 2010. The purpose of Primary Ethics is to develop and deliver philosophical ethics education.

A K-6 curriculum framework has been developed and instruction is currently limited to Years 5-6. The web-site for Primary Ethics declares that 210 teachers are delivering ethics classes to approximately 3100 students in 150 schools (Source: www.primaryethics.com Retrieved February 2012). It is expected that classes for Years 3-4 will be ready by Term 3, 2012.

For the most part, ethics education has co-existed within the administrative school framework created by special religious education. It is not opposed by the major religions.

STATED OBJECTIVES

The stated objectives. The stated objectives of this course are: (a) to foster a lifelong capacity to make ethical judgements; and (b) to act reasonably and responsibly. The success of achieving these aims will not be easy to establish.

There are references to over 300 hundred studies on moral education and children in the EBSCO research database and this literature has not been able to be summarised within the timeframe available for the submission to this inquiry. An initial impression is that there are few, if any, longitudinal studies of the effects of ethical or moral education on actual behaviours.

CURRICULUM

Pedagogical approach. The ethics curriculum is founded on dialogue and discussion. It endorses an inquiry-based and community of practice approach. There is no issue with this methodology. It uses key questions as a focus for instruction. There are thought-provoking questions such as:

- Why do we have rules?
- Should we tell on people who do the wrong thing?
- Why should we share?
- What does it mean to harm the environment?
- When do we have the right to be proud?
- Why be moral?
- How much should we care about the way that we and others look?
- What does it mean to be patriotic?
- How far does our moral responsibility extend?
- Killing animals for food: Is it orally right to eat animals?
- Can war ever be just?

Content of the curriculum. In addition to these ethical questions there are wide-ranging topics. At face value, many of these topics appear relevant for the respective age groups. These cover, *inter alia*:

- Friendship
- Caring for the environment
- Stereotyping: Prejudice
- Fairness
- Courage
- Making moral choices
- Diversity and tolerance
- Children's rights: Child labour
- Advertising
- Reality TV
- Homelessness
- Performance enhancing drugs in sport
- Voting - an ethical issue?
- Fatalism.

It has been argued from the outset that such topics would be of wider benefit to the general student population. This is because there is little overlap in purpose between Special Religious Education and the ethics curriculum.

This lack of overlap is seen when one places the ethics curriculum side-by-side with say the Greek Orthodox special religious education curriculum. I have used the Kindergarten program as an example.

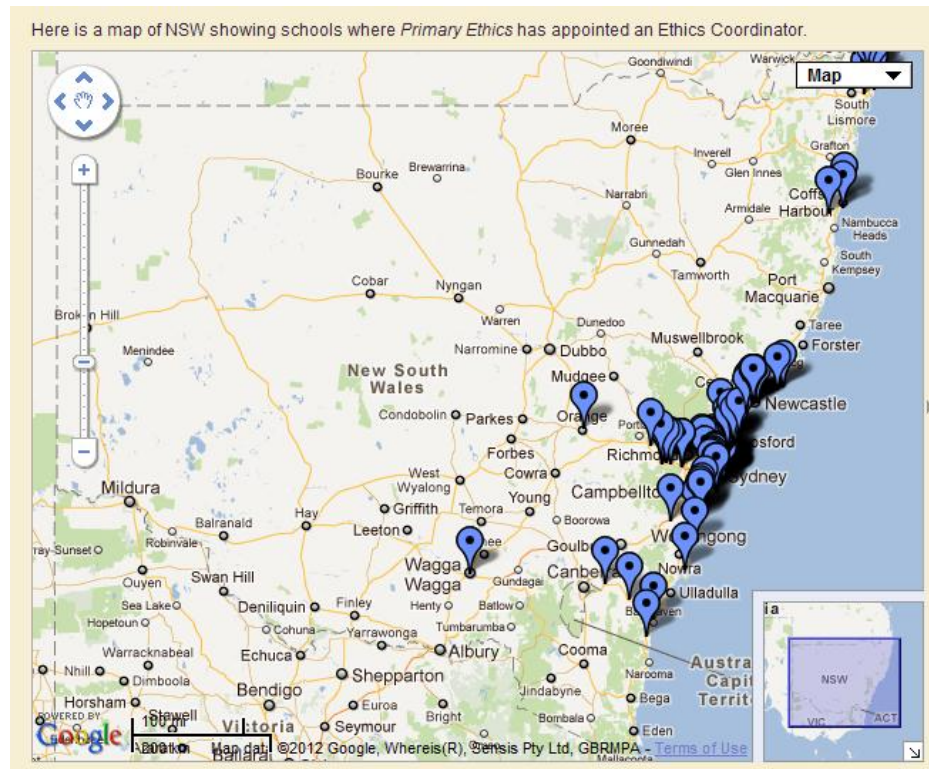
KINDERGARTEN ETHICS TOPICS	GREEK ORTHODOX KINDERGARTEN CURRICULUM THEMATIC
Thinking together Thinking together about questions that matter Putting it all together: ethical inquiry Giving and asking for reasons Needs of animals Distinguishing social conventions from morals Friendship Acting fairly Telling a secret Why do we have rules? Should we tell on people who do the wrong thing? Caring for the environment http://www.primaryethics.com.au/k6framework.html	Agiasmos in our homes Saint Philothea Do not say lies Sunday of Orthodoxy All the children of the world On Sunday we go to Church Our hymn to Panagia The Last Supper Easter My name day Adam and Eve Honour your father and mother Moses The Holy Liturgy The feast day of our Parish Do not steal The Holy Vestments The birth of St John the Baptist Sts Peter and Paul The Prosphoro Saint Panteleimon Do not be jealous Panagia God calls Samuel Our prayer before a meal David and Goliath Keep Sunday holy My grandfather The Holy Cross The Monastery Esther The Forty-Day blessing Zacchaeus The Holy Bible St Nectarios Saint Katherine The Three Wise Men http://www.pantanassamonastery.org/scripture-lessons.html

IMPLEMENTATION

An option to supervised private study. Ethics education was promoted as an option to supervised private study for those pupils who do not attend Special Religious Education.

This objective has been achieved only in around 150 of the 1612 primary schools and for around 3500 of the 430,000 primary school students in

government schools in New South Wales. Even some simple projections show that achieving this overall objective will be a major task.



<http://www.primaryethics.com.au/currentschools.html>, Retrieved February 2012

To be fair it is early days in the implementation of the program for Primary Ethics but this significant change in the Education Act was planned. It had been brewing since 2003; it was enforced through legislation; and an approved provider was appointed who was ready with a curriculum even in 2010. Naturally one might allow some leeway for its introduction in regional areas but it is the pattern of initial implementation that is of special interest.

The distribution of ethics classes shows a distinct socio-economic or socio-cultural bias. It is discriminatory to implement a program of ethics classes for a select group. There is no basis for a government to mandate ethics classes and when implemented exclude whole areas of metropolitan Sydney or 99.18% of primary school pupils.

This program should never have been allowed to be implemented on a piecemeal basis.



<http://www.primaryethics.com.au/currentschools.html>, Retrieved February 2012

EFFECTIVENESS

The Primary Ethics web-site reported: “In 2010 the Department of Education completed a thorough trial of ethics in schools. This trial involved ten schools, leading Australian academics and a high degree of community consultation.”

The results of the evaluation were ostensibly the basis for the Government’s decision to proceed with ethics classes:

Following the release of the evaluation report for public comment last month, 745 community submissions were received with 730 in favour of ethics continuing.

“The evidence has been overwhelmingly positive in support of ethics classes in NSW,” Ms Keneally said.

“The evaluation report found a high level of support for the course in school communities which participated in the trial and that has also been reflected in the response from the wider community.” (Premier of New South Wales, Press Release, 23 November 2010)

I wish to make some comments about the evaluation of the effectiveness of the ethics classes that was conducted. The terms of reference for the evaluation were directed only to the St James ethics course trial. It did not debate the most important question of interest to all parties, namely: whether ethics instruction should occur at the same time as special religious education.

The appointment of the evaluator was made internally and to this date the manner of selection and the conditions of this appointment were not made known to the Director-General's Advisory Committee on Special Religious Education. The terms of reference of the evaluation were course specific and not directed to the value of philosophical ethics education in general. The selection of the evaluator as an individual with an interest in philosophical ethics was at best puzzling and hardly inspired confidence in the outcome. Moreover, the extent of the evaluator's knowledge of Special Religious Education in New South Wales was discomfiting to some of those present at a meeting. For instance, there was a view that the sole purpose of religious education was to inculcate moral standards and ethical behaviour. The evaluator found it noticeably strange that special religious education complements the curriculum. To cap matters I had serious concerns about the educational research and evaluation qualifications of the evaluator. Problems with the evaluation were subsequently summarised in a peer-reviewed journal article in the *Australian Journal of Religious Education* (see attachment A). The final ignominy in this very sad saga is that the same evaluator has resigned from the University of South Australia and is now involved in preparing the curriculum materials for Primary Ethics.

OTHER RELATED MATERS PERTAINING TO THE CURRENT OPERATION OF 'SPECIAL EDUCATION IN ETHICS'

The role of special religious education. The introduction of ethics education misunderstood the role of special religious education in the overall personal development of the child. Special religious education is not an ideology or a philosophy or a system of rules as many might believe. It is not focused on teaching a moral code, as the lack of overlap in the curriculum above has shown.

The choice of ethics as an alternative to Scripture was founded in part on the rather quaint notion that Scripture classes are about morality and that ethics might be an acceptable quasi-religious substitute.

Once one accepts the premise that Scripture is about ethics or following religious rules it is then a short step to saying that secular ethics classes may substitute for religious education. Of course, if the original premise is incorrect then the subsequent inference is questionable.

Truth of assertions made by Primary Ethics. Before implementing ethics education it really is essential to test the truth of the following assertions made by Primary Ethics:

- philosophical ethical reflection gives students a deeper understanding of the ethical domain
- philosophical ethical reflection prevents students from forming unthinking moral opinions
- philosophical ethical reflection develops the capacity for considered moral judgment; and

- the capacity for considered moral judgment enables students to respond more thoughtfully to many of the problems and issues they will face in their lives.

(www.primaryethics.com.au/curriculum.html)

No claim is made that these outcomes have not been achieved but the evidence for these assertions is vital and was not available to the author at the time of writing.

The evaluation of the ethics trial. The evaluation of the trial was far from conclusive. It may be helpful to appoint an independent educational research organisation to (a) evaluate the Primary Ethics program and (b) to review its *raison d'être*.

Practical issues with ethics classes in New South Wales. There are some long-term issues that are also worthy of consideration.

While it might be considered well-and-good by some to introduce ethics classes, there is no indication that this is a sustainable operation. The provision of ethics education statewide basis is a major operation probably well beyond the resources of Primary Ethics.

At this point in time it is not clear whether any other providers of the ethics program will apply to be approved. The criteria for approval are not clear, whereas there are specific criteria for the major faith groups to provide special religious education. The potential for confusion is considerable.

Ethics was approved as an alternative to private study during the time allocated to special religious education but there are other conceivable education programs that might argue for a place in the time allocated for special religious education (e.g., meditation, atheism, humanism). There is no indication on how these proposals might then be considered.

There is the practical issue of still dealing with students who opt out of special religious education and also out of the ethics classes and wish to return to private study. The burden on the school remains the same. It is not clear that the practical and theoretical implications of this policy were thought through from the outset.

Finally, there is a major complementary challenge for the approved providers of special religious education to ensure that their instruction is provided statewide and that the administrative problems for schools are minimised. It is difficult for schools to manage large numbers of students who are not attending special religious education. Special religious education involves both a right and a responsibility.

CONCLUSION

With the benefit of hindsight, the proposal to introduce ethics classes was undertaken without much thought for its likely implications or consequences. There was a firm political resolve from the outset that these classes would be introduced. I have three additional concerns.

Inroads into special religious education. Ethics education, despite its best intentions, was viewed and promoted as a challenge to special religious education. There would have been no objection had these same classes been scheduled at another time.

The ethics classes make inroads into a section of schooling that has been specifically set aside for the benefit of special religious education. Historically, the *Public Instruction Act 1880* specified the charter for government schooling in New South Wales and was loosely patterned on the 1832 Irish National System. This was a system where:

“no religious instruction is given by the master” but “approved extracts from scripture are read. . .on one day in the week by the ministers of the different religions, attending. . .to instruct their respective flocks.” (Wilkinson, J., *Education in Country and City New South Wales*, Briefing Paper no. 4/08, NSW Parliamentary Library Research Service, p. 2).

For someone with a religious faith, there are as many good reasons for wanting special religious education in the curriculum as there are for the basic learning areas of English, Mathematics, Science or History. Indeed life per se is not composed of English plus Mathematics plus Science plus History etc.

Special religious education covers those aspects of the curriculum that are not covered by other subjects.

Moreover it provides freedom of choice amongst diverse faiths and even the option to make no choice. Introducing a non-religious option opens the door to other alternatives.

Accordingly it is unwise to suggest ethics is suited in any way for inclusion within the timeslot for special religious education.

Philosophical ethics as indoctrination. There is a suspicion that ethics education may involve a subtle form of indoctrination (e.g., learning to recognise good and bad moral reasoning). It is far removed from further education in the existing faith of one’s parents.

Vested interests. My imprecise observation is that there are also vested interests associated with the introduction of ethics education. These are not easily quantified.

Despite the above concerns and all the other criticisms that I have noted, this submission is not a reflection on the principles or actions of those involved but rather a critique of the context within which these developments occurred and continue to occur.

In short, there is no argument against ethics classes being provided as long as they are not held at the same time as special religious education. It is recognised that not everyone has a religious belief and that there are

people who are disenchanted with religion but that is accommodated within the current legislation. The fact that private study has not been supervised properly or made interesting or been boring is not the fault of special religious education.

Ultimately, the issue of whether ethics classes should or should not remain is for legislative and administrative specialists to consider but this does not stop one taking a position on the issue. The major denominations are more or less comfortable with the existence of ethics classes. They have concurred that ethics classes should be allowed to continue.

In August 2011 (Sydney Morning Herald) I agreed in part with this position but my view now is that the ethics classes really have no logical or educational place in the time allocated for special religious education. I believe that there may be long-term implications when secular groups are allowed to make inroads into areas of faith.

To accept ethics classes is to betray the principle of special religious education as a key component of general education. To accept ethics classes downgrades the unique position of special religious education in New South Wales. Religious faiths are not systems of moral or ethical philosophising.

At least, supervised private study respected the democratic right of every person to have a religious faith or to opt out. It ensured that those with or without a religion were not discriminated against educationally. They were not disadvantaged scholastically. The 30 minutes of private study is scarcely an educational black hole.

In short, there has been hardly any aspect of this recent introduction of the ethics classes into schools that has been worthy of merit. A cynic might say that ethics classes were not introduced ethically.

A Critical Review of an Ethics Course Trial

Eleven Methodological, Technical and Statistical Errors

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to document concerns about the validity and reliability of the findings from the study of a 10-week Ethics Course Trial conducted in New South Wales, Australia. The course was proposed as an alternative to special religious education and dealt with issues of moral philosophy. Ministerial press releases and media reports portrayed positive outcomes of the course trial but on closer inspection there are many caveats. Eleven methodological inadequacies, technical limitations and statistical overgeneralisations were documented. These provide salutary lessons for the evaluation of any religious education program.

Keywords

Religious education, ethics education, evaluation design

Introduction

The proposal to introduce ethics classes at the same time as special religious education into New South Wales (NSW, Australia) primary schools has implications for the ways in which a religious education program might be evaluated. In October 2010 the Minister for Education and Training, Verity Firth, released the *NSW Ethics Trial Final Report* (Knight, 2010). This was a report that evaluated the trial of ethics instruction in primary schools. In the Media Release the Minister for Education and Training indicated that:

The independent evaluation found high levels of engagement among students when discussing ethical issues and that it enabled them to discuss and understand the principles of ethical decision-making.

It also found that the course met the aim of introducing students to the language and nature of ethics and ethical issues. Overall it's a positive report... (Firth, 2010)

Current newspaper accounts (e.g., Bennet & Hayes, 2010) also echoed this view and indicated that the trial was

successful. Legislation has now been enacted to permit the introduction of these classes where these are requested by the community (see Education Amendment (Ethics) Bill 2010, clause 33).

As a result, members of the public were left with the impression that this program of *alter-religious* education had produced positive outcomes. The purpose of this paper is to provide a critical review of this evaluation based on an analysis of the technical, methodological and statistical aspects of the empirical study that formed the major component of the evaluation. It does not deal with the controversy associated with the introduction of ethics classes, nor with the curriculum content. Accordingly, no claim is made that this is a holistic educational critique. Some general details of this ethics course are provided for the reader who may not be familiar with the background.

The course was proposed by the Parents and Citizens' Association and promoted as an alternative for students who do not attend special religious education in State schools. Under the Education Act (1990) religious instruction of around half an hour a week in State Schools is provided by over 100 different religious faiths. This program has been in operation since 1890. Children who do not have a stated religion or whose faith is not able to provide religious instruction are supervised while they undertake other meaningful learning activities, such as reading, watching a video or private study. This was viewed as unproductive time. The proposal for an ethics course attracted considerable opposition from all faiths, many of which felt that the privilege of providing religious instruction was under threat from this secular alternative.

The curriculum for the course was founded upon ethics as a branch of philosophy or a moral philosophy content (Knight 2010, pp. 6-7; all subsequent page numbers refer to the *NSW Ethics Trial Final Report*). The lessons entailed the guided discussion of scenarios in small groups. The ethical scenarios included such situations as: "You know that the person asking you for help has often lied to you, so you

decide to lie to them". Students discuss the situation in a group and then justify their decisions (p. 9). Community volunteers were recruited to teach the classes and underwent a two-day training program. The general aim of the ethics course is to offer secular instruction on the ethical aspects of students' lives. The goals of the course were listed (pp. 8-9) as (a) introducing the language of ethics; (b) developing the potential to participate in ethical reflection and action; (c) identifying those with vested interests and exploring the consequences of ethical dilemmas; and (d) promoting an appreciation of virtues and ideals. The full details of the ethics curriculum were not released but the list of topics now proposed for these classes are: Getting Started; Fairness; Lying and Telling the Truth; Ethical Principles; Graffiti; Thinking About Animals; Intervening in Nature; Virtues and Vices; Children's Rights; Living A Good Life (Primary Ethics, 2010).

Background to the ethics trial

The ten-lesson ethics course was developed by the St James Ethics Centre and implemented as a trial across nine metropolitan primary schools and one rural primary school in Term 2, 2010. The schools were self-selected and around 530 pupils aged 9-12 years (male=253; female=224; 53=not recorded) participated in the trial. The lessons were designed to run for 45 minutes (p. 12).

An empirical study was conducted to investigate the extent to which the aims of the trial course were achieved. An intervention study based on a pre-test and post test was used. The ethics trial examined *inter alia*: (a) the ability of pupils to distinguish between ethical and non-ethical issues; (b) the attitude of approaching or avoiding discussion of ethical issues; and (c) the growth of ethical reasoning skills (p. 15).

There were three main findings of the empirical study. These covered:

- (a) *The ability to distinguish between ethical or non-ethical issues.* An example of an ethical issue included lying to a friend and an example of a non-ethical issue was the choice of a sport. The report stated that "the impact on ethics identification scores was significant at a moderate rather than a strong impact level" (p. 15);
- (b) *The willingness to approach or avoid discussion of ethical issues.* The report concluded that: "after participating in the ethics program, students evidenced enhancements in their dispositional approach scores, and reductions in their avoidance tendencies" (p. 16); and
- (c) *The development of ethical reasoning skills.* From the results of 281 pupils the report indicated that: "the only significant change found reflected the number of ethical principles cited ..." (p. 16).

Limitations in the methodology – participants and schools

The following sections list some methodological, technical and statistical limitations of the NSW Ethics Course Trial.

1. *Combining Special Religious Education and non-Special Religious Education pupils.* Contrary to expectations the trial combined Special Religious Education (SRE) and non-Special Religious Education (non-SRE) groups. Approximately 170 out of the 530 (32%), were previous special religious education pupils. No attempt was made to present the results separately for the two groups. As a consequence it was not clear whether any positive results arose from the ethics course or prior religious education.
2. *Non-participation in the trial.* The level of non-participation of pupils in the ethics classes must be a matter of substantial concern. It was stated that "... approximately one-third of non SRE students chose not to enrol in ethics...". This limits the extent to which the results from this trial may be used as a basis for application to all non-special religious education pupils.
3. *Self-selection of schools.* The schools that participated in the trial were self-selected (p. 34). This entails an inherent bias since the results will not be generalisable to other schools that did not wish to participate.
4. *Inadequate representation of schools.* The schools (Crown Street, Darlinghurst, Haberfield, Leichhardt, Randwick, Baulkham Hills North, Rozelle, Ferncourt, Hurstville and Bungendore) represented a sample of convenience. Most were in middle class areas. They were not at all representative of the demographics of the State primary schools. This sample of schools might be adequate for a pilot study but inadequate for the introduction of such a major change in State-wide curriculum and education policy.
5. *Inadequate sampling of pupils.* Official statistics indicated some 430,817 pupils in State Government primary schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009, Table 7, p. 14). This sample of 530 is hardly representative of pupils throughout the State.
6. *Course drop-outs.* No reference was made to the number of students who failed to complete the course. There was no indication of drop-out rates at different stages of the ethics trial. Even allowing for the fact that some results came in late and could not be included in the findings, at best there were only matched results for some 370 pupils (69.8%) across pre- and post-tests. There is an inherent bias in the results because it deals only with those pupils who were present for the pre-test and post-test. This means that the results provided came from a select sample.

7. *Non-standardised ethics teaching.* Although the ethics teachers were trained to deliver the program in a standardised fashion there is reference to the fact that delivery times for lessons varied. The lessons were "designed to run for 45 minutes" (p. 53) but some of the lessons took up to an hour. At a later point in the report the weekly ethics classes were said to be "... between 25 and 35 minutes in length". This inconsistency may be important because the program being trialled may not have been as homogeneous or as standardised as one might imagine. There were also some other minor indicators of non-standardisation in the program such as (a) an oblique reference to the fact that some topics might not have been taught (e.g., "... those who did teach the lesson [Graffiti] found it to work very well", p. 50) and (b) the timing of the pre- and post-tests (p. 69).

Limitations of the three questionnaires used in the trial

Pages 57-74 outlined the methodology and findings from the empirical study and constituted a substantial proportion of the final 101 page report. The views of the media and politicians echo the results of this section, which is based on three questionnaires. Accordingly the validity of these questionnaires and the reliability of these results is a key issue.

8. *Ethics Identification Questionnaire.* This questionnaire contained six items in which a pupil identified an issue as ethical or not. Some examples included: lying to your friend, what to watch on television, deciding whom to invite to a party, having shorter showers to save water, deciding which sport to play and whether it is cruel to keep animals in zoos. The report concluded that "... students improved in their ability to distinguish between ethical and non-ethical issues" (p. 70).

Already 102 out of 359 pupils were at the maximum score before the trial began (p. 69). Moreover the majority of pupils (at least 75% and as high as 83%) were reasonably able to distinguish ethical from non-ethical issues without the benefit of any intervention. Following the intensive 10-week intervention these percentages improved - as expected - (up from 75% to 82% and from 83% to 93%). For some questions, such as identifying "whether lying to your friend is wrong" 84% had already identified it correctly as an ethical issue at the pre-test and 86% at the post-test.

To its credit the report cited effect sizes and an overall effect size of .38 was cited (p. 70). This effect size is a useful measure of the statistical magnitude of difference. A low effect size is commonly considered as around 0.2, with a medium effect size around 0.5, and a high effect size as 0.8 or more. Overall, there was only a low effect of the ethics classes on the identification of ethics issues.

A composite ethical identification score was determined for each student. This assessed the ability to distinguish both the ethical and non-ethical items. Scores ranged from 0 to 5. Examination of the pre-test average (3.87) and post-test average (4.24), however, showed that there was really very little practical difference. The report tested the amount of change using statistical tests of significance but it is quite easy to document statistically significant changes with large samples. What is more important than the statistical significance nowadays is to cite the confidence level, that is, the margin of error around any statistic (for instance see Davies & Crombie, 2009). Citing the confidence limits or range of statistics might have even shown that some pre- and post-test measures had overlap.

Finally, there are concerns about the very low reliability of the ethics identification results. Reliability is essential for measurement and refers to the stability, consistency and dependability of any findings. There are various complementary approaches to assessing reliability and the ethics identification questions were evaluated using a technique called *Cronbach alpha* that is based on the internal reliability of the questions (see Cronbach & Shavelson, 2004 for a discussion of its limitations). This evaluates the homogeneity or similarity of responses when compared to the overall score and is one aspect of reliability. It is reported on a scale from 0 (not reliable) to 1 (perfectly reliable) and a reliability value of 0.70 or higher is normally required for research measures (cf. Schmitt, 1996). The reported reliability of this five-item ethics identification test was only 0.51 (p. 69). Any future evaluations should employ a much longer questionnaire with around 30 questions to maximise reliability results.

9. *Argument Approach-Avoidance Scale.* The *Measure of Argumentativeness Scale* (Infante & Rancer, 1982) was adapted by the evaluators to form an *Argument Approach-Avoidance Scale*. This was the second questionnaire used in the study. It is a 12 item questionnaire that was divided into seven items that explored a willingness to engage in ethical discussion versus five items that reflected a reluctance to engage in discussion. The items were rated on a five point scale from "Almost never true" (1) to "Almost Always True" (5).

Willingness to engage was tapped by items such as: "I feel excited when I see that a conversation I'm in is leading to a discussion in which people disagree about an ethical issue". Avoidance was tapped by items such as: "I get an unpleasant feeling when I'm about to get into a discussion of an ethical issue where people might disagree". At the outset I suspected that the comprehension difficulties of the statements in the questionnaire were well beyond the reading grade level of the participants. I took the liberty of determining

the reading grade level using a derivation of the Flesch reading method (Flesch, 1948). The reading level of the questionnaire was grade 10.6, that is, around the senior high school level and far too high for the participants in the study.

The Cronbach alpha values of .76 and .61 were also cited (p. 71) for the two sections of the *Argument Approach-Avoidance Scale*. It was claimed (p. 72) that these results were acceptable but at best these are only moderate reliabilities and not adequate for research of this importance.

Accepting the reliability values that are cited in the report means that the pre-test questionnaire has a degree of unreliability. Also the post-test questionnaire has some unreliability. Accordingly any reported difference between the pre-test and the post-test would be magnified and even more unreliable. In other words if it were theoretically possible to repeat this study with the same persons then one would not obtain the same differences. There are too many unknowns. The key point is that if the results are not shown to be stable then there is no potential confidence in any pre- post differences. There was little evidence that the results from the ethics study (let alone many other evaluations) are repeatable.

The final criticism concerns the use of attitude scales as measures. In recent years, the value of ratings that are simply added together has been questioned and an approach based on probability of responding has been adopted increasingly for ability tests and attitude questionnaires (see Lamprianou, 2008 for a technical introduction). This report assumed that the ratings 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 on the various questions could simply be added and provide a pure measure of attitude. This is a common approach in questionnaires and social research but it is fraught with difficulties. Unfortunately there are no units of approach-avoidance that can be meaningfully added (Michell, 1994).

10. *Written responses.* The final measure comprised an assessment of the potential of the participants to reflect on ethical issues. It involved news headlines and a written scenario about shark attacks at a local beach. The issue was whether the shark should be hunted and killed (p. 63). Students were asked to indicate "Yes", "No" or "I don't know" and then to justify their answers. The answers were coded for the number of relevant reasons; the number of facts cited; references to an ethical principle; reference to relevant stakeholders; reference to consequences, future generations and empathy for relevant stakeholders.

The results of the content analysis indicated limited change: "The only significant change found reflected the number of ethical principles cited ..." (p. 73). This

was the only one out of the six factors listed on pp. 63-64. An ethical principle was present in 13% of responses at the outset and in 20% at the conclusion. Notwithstanding this difference the average number of reasons increased only from 2.15 to 2.23 (p. 74). For practical reasons the results from this analysis were incomplete and only 75% of the written protocol responses were processed.

Limitations in the evaluation design

11. *Without a random sample and a control group no statements of causation or success could be made.* The trial used a simple pre-test and post-test design which is largely inadequate for educational evaluations. There was not even a control group to act as a benchmark or yardstick for the observed changes.

Conclusions

This study of the NSW Ethics Course Trial was described as a mixed-method evaluation; that is, it used a variety of qualitative (i.e., descriptive, narrative) as well as quantitative approaches. The qualitative findings involved observations in 17 ethics classes, interviews with volunteers and interviews with principals and generally reported positive satisfaction. With the benefit of hindsight, probably more emphasis should have been given to these qualitative aspects rather than to any quantitative findings. The focus of this paper, however, is on the quantitative study and the concluding comments in this paper mirror reactions to some other components of the evaluation.

The ethics trial is an evaluation in the sense that it is a systematic investigation of the merit or worth of some object (in this case the ethics program). Consequently it is important to state how the results from the different measures or observations were combined to arrive at an overall judgement (see Athanasou, 2007, Chapter 9 for an extended discussion). Basically, the evidence produced was necessary but not sufficient to say beyond doubt that the ethics course brought about the changes.

The report on the Ethics Course concluded that the impact was positive on the basis of the three results outlined previously. Some aspects of this conclusion have been challenged in the limitations outlined above. Beyond any achievement of outcomes another factor that was taken into consideration was whether it achieved the course aims. The report added: "... it can be concluded that the programme has, in a relatively short space of time, been effective in achieving a number of the course aims" (p. 17). The obverse of this conclusion, however, is the recognition that not all the aims had been achieved. Moreover it was never quite clear what evidence or what amount of evidence accumulated by the quantitative study might validate or invalidate the aims of the course as outlined by the St James Ethics Centre (for example, p. 57).

Essentially this was a descriptive study and not confirmatory. The descriptive aspect is evident in the words used about the study. For instance it was stated that the questionnaires were designed to describe: "...the extent to which the students were able to distinguish... the extent to which the students were willing to approach... the effect of the intervention..." (p. 15). Despite the media and political releases about the positive outcomes there are considerable concerns about the validity and reliability of the findings. It was not reasonable to assert that the trial was an unqualified success. There are many caveats.

Table 1 summarises the eleven limitations and their impact upon the validity and reliability of the findings.

Table 1
A summary of the methodological, technical and statistical limitations of the trial

Limitation	Validity (i.e., accuracy or truth of findings)	Reliability (i.e., repeatability of findings)
1: Combining SRE and non-SRE pupils in the ethics program	Negative	
2: The extent of non-participation in the trial (one-third)	Negative	
3: Bias through the self-selection of schools	Negative	
4: Inadequate representation of schools	Negative	
5: Inadequate sampling of pupils	Negative	
6: No allowance for course drop-outs	Negative	
7: Non-standardised ethics teaching	Negative	Negative
8: Little practical effect in Ethics Identification	Negative	Negative
9: Inadequacies of the Argument Approach-Avoidance Scale	Negative	Negative
10: Incomplete sample of written responses	Negative	
11: Without a random sample and a control group no statements of causation or success could be made.	Negative	

There are many lessons in this trial for educators wishing to conduct evaluations of religious education programs. Firstly the aims need to be specific, observable and if relevant quantifiable. The aims should be falsifiable. The decision-making rubric for combining information from various findings should be outlined from the outset. The evaluation design must go beyond a simple pre-test and post-test to include at least a control group and other alternative programs. The effects of the program vis a vis other alternative programs needs to be defined. No change in educational programs should proceed unless the effect sizes are moderate to large. Where questionnaire and survey measures are used they need to be longer and have high reliability. Attitude scales need to be treated with some caution.

On the basis of the information available it would appear that the empirical component of the trial of the ethics program in New South Wales did not produce the valid or reliable findings claimed for it. While at first glance this may appear to a parochial state issue related to the controversial introduction of ethics teaching alongside religious instruction, it goes well beyond this to the issue of how one judges the merit of affective education. There were substantive methodological issues that were not addressed by the design of the study, profound technical restrictions and statistical limitations that impair any judgement that the ethics course unquestionably achieved its aims. Each limitation had the potential to question the results obtained but acting in concert they raise substantive issues about the guidelines and conduct of any evaluation.

Notes on contributor

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