Optimal conditions for learning among experienced and inexperienced Special Religion Education [SRE] teachers: s.p.a.c.e.

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Paper to be presented at the Annual International Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education, November 29- December 3, 1998,

Adelaide, South Australia.

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ABSTRACT

Experienced (*n* = 6) and inexperienced (*n* = 6) Special Religion Education (SRE) teachers were interviewed regarding what helped/hindered them to learn how to implement a new SRE curriculum. As hypothesised, both groups provided statements that could be interpreted as evidence that they inherently needed their learning to be [s]elf-affirming, [p]ersonally meaningful, [a]ctive, [c]ollaborative, and [e]mpowering. When the s.p.a.c.e. conditions (Harrison,1998a;Holliday,1994) were present, learning was enhanced. Given their difference in professional development, though, there was a significant contrast between the two groups. Inexperienced SRE teachers stressed that when self-affirmation, collaboration, and empowerment were absent, their learning was inhibited. Experienced SRE teachers were less inclined to lament the absence of these conditions of learning.

Introduction

Does research in education count? Research in education DOES count, even though some would argue it does not. Even though many significant educational advances have had their births in intuitive thinking, it has been through the process of testing hypotheses that most of

the significant advances in our understanding of educational issues has received acceptance; firstly within the academic community, and then in the wider educational community, before becoming part of the community's general understanding.

Research within the Special Religion Education (SRE) context is also important. At the same time schools have been under observation generally as workplaces (e.g., Fullan,1993; Holliday, 1994; Holliday,1997), there has also been increased interest in issues and methods in curriculum design in the teaching of religious education (e.g.Moore,1991). This has been particularly so within Roman Catholic universities, colleges, and schools. There has been less interest in government schools as the workplaces of SRE teachers.

Moore (1991) has isolated five different uses of the word "curriculum". This paper uses that term to refer to the way a particular subject is planned and developed across a number of year levels. This is often called "a vertical curriculum" (Moore,1991:12). In commenting on designing a religion education curriculum, Moore has stressed the importance of both a clear and detailed analysis of the context in which the curriculum is to operate, and, a "clear understanding of the principles which will inform the curriculum design" (p12). Therefore what teachers have to say about the context in which they operate, and how they see themselves operating within that context as they implement a new curriculum, is important.

Within Protestant religion education one on-going problem for the producers of SRE material is that there is a paucity of systematic research undertaken in relation to the implementing of new curriculum materials, so that most information about what is happening is coming from more vocal teachers who are sufficiently confident to air beliefs and concerns at workshops (G. Maple, personal communication, May 1998).

The s.p.a.c.e. Conditions of Learning

The question: "How do we best teach so that our students best learn?" is one that underpins all educational sectors, including the Christian religion education context. One teaching/learning framework for exploring this question is The S.P.A.C.E. Teaching/Learning Cycle (Harrison, in press). This cycle begins with the specification of an outcome to be learned (the learning outcome) and ends with an evaluation of how well it has been learned (the learned outcome).

At the centre and core of the cycle there is a step involving five conditions that we claim are necessary during actual learning (the learning process). We are proposing that an optimum is achieved when learning is [s]elf-affirming, [p]ersonally meaningful, [a]ctive, [c]ollaborative, and [e]mpowering (Harrison,1998b; Holliday, 1994). These five conditions focus on the learner and they are conveniently, and appropriately, summarised by the acronym s.p.a.c.e. They are believed to be inherent needs for learning (Harrison,1998b) and operate synergetically (Harrison,1998a; Holliday,1994). That is, one condition will help learning, two, three, and four conditions are better again, and all five conditions are best of all.

Although Harrison and Holliday are still exploring the s.p.a.c.e. conditions, their characteristics, occurrence and usefulness, a current, brief description follows.

The *self-affirmation* condition must be activated because learners *need* to have a <u>positive view</u> of themselves as learners. This condition helps to achieve the learning outcome by engendering within learners the self-confidence to pursue a learning outcome. The focus of this condition is *emotional*. The facilitator gives constructive, perhaps corrective, feedback to the effect that learners are good at learning. Alternatively or additionally, learners can provide their own positive feedback.

The *personal meaning* condition must be activated because learners *need* to think about the learning outcome in a way that makes sense to them. This condition helps to achieve the learning outcome by getting learners to engage with it in an abstract, but ultimately unique way. Here the focus is *intellectual*. The facilitator helps learners to work with their own and others' opinions and ideas, retaining or discarding, or blending these as meaning is achieved.

The *action* condition must be activated because learners *need* to do in order to learn. This condition helps to achieve the learning outcome by getting learners to engage directly, tangibly and actively with it. The focus of this condition is *physical*. At their initiative or at the facilitator's urging, learners use their bodies and other physical resources to make real what is being learned.

The *collaboration* condition must be activated because learners *need* connectedness and communication. This condition helps to achieve the learning outcome by getting learners to co-operate with relevant others during learning. Here the focus is *social*. The facilitator ensures that learners do not struggle in a learning vacuum. For their part, learners need to recognise when to collaborate with others and when to work alone.

The *empowerment* condition must be activated because learners *need* to be able to shape the learning process. This condition promotes learning by giving learners a sense of ownership, autonomy, control, and self-direction while pursuing the learning outcome. The focus of this condition is *motivational*. The facilitator grants learners appropriate power over their own learning. Alternatively, they must seek empowerment themselves through the facilitator.

The conditions as needs for adult learning

There have been several studies confirming the importance of the s.p.a.c.e. conditions (Harrison,1998a,1998b; Harrison & Holliday, in progress; Holliday & Harrison, in progress). These studies have offered empirical evidence that the conditions are indeed inherent needs for learning among adults.

Adult learners appear to need all five conditions, although the need for different conditions varies depending on individual population characteristics. For instance, Harrison (1998a) found that inexperienced teacher-trainees, as newcomers to teaching, emphasised the need for reassurance (the self-affirmation condition), whereas teacher-trainers, experienced educators, emphasised the need for teacher-trainees in general, to make sense of what they are learning (the personal meaning condition). Although analysis of a similar study with Swedish and Australian teacher-trainees has not been finalised, one preliminary finding indicates that all the conditions are needed in varying degrees, especially the need for self-affirmation (Holliday & Harrison, in progress).

To further test the s.p.a.c.e. conditions, Harrison and Holliday are currently developing The s.p.a.c.e. Learning Conditions Questionnaire. That questionnaire will enable further testing of the s.p.a.c.e. conditions within the larger S.P.A.C.E. framework. It will be used with the general adult population. It is expected that, regardless of the adult population, responses to the questionnaire will again show that the conditions are inherent needs for learning. Nevertheless, it is also expected that there will be variations in response, depending on the particular group. For example, individuals classified as extraverts could be expected to emphasise the need for collaboration over individuals classified as introverts. Prison inmates, on the other hand, may well lament the lack of empowerment given the forced nature of their daily living arrangements.

Secular and SRE Teachers - Similarities and Differences

Volunteer teachers form the backbone of the large contingent of SRE teachers who teach the 400,000 children who are taught in NSW schools each week (F. Whitlam, personal communication, November, 1996). Although accurate figures of SRE teachers, classes and children across Australia are difficult to come by, various Christian denominations do have figures that suggest the numbers may be as high as 80% of the primary children in the NSW public sector education.

There are many similarities between full-time secular primary teachers and their SRE counterparts, although there are also critical differences. Perhaps one trait both groups have in common is some sense of the need to be involved in formally teaching the young. Consequently, both groups of teachers must spend time in preparing lessons. However, although secular teachers have many lessons to prepare, the SRE teacher usually has a very small number, with often one lesson repeated at several schools.

Ultimately, though, it is perhaps the issue of formal teacher training and experience that most distinguishes secular teachers from SRE teachers, although this is not always the case. Formal teacher training and experience is aimed at giving teachers an understanding of theories that are research-based and the practices that flow on as a consequence. Even so, SRE teachers, like many secular teachers, often have a wealth of informal teaching experiences in the home or with small groups. Anecdotal evidence suggests that positive experiences in such situations may be a catalyst for volunteering for SRE teaching.

The training/experience factor is very closely linked to the payment factor. Secular teachers are always paid for their skill and services. However, whereas most SRE teachers receive no monetary remuneration, some SRE teachers *are* being paid because they are religion education consultants employed by denominational groups or because they are in other employment that attracts payment (e.g., ministers, pastors, youth workers).

In addition, even though SRE teachers may have some kind of "conferred" authority, when they walk into the classroom they are still visitors, even within schools that actively encourage students to treat them particularly well. However, some schools do not welcome visitors, so that many SRE teachers find themselves facing badly behaved classes with neither back-up knowledge nor "legitimate" authority.

As can be seen, SRE teachers are a distinctive group among the people who provide educational services to children because of their lack of formal training and experience, remuneration and "legitimate" authority. Although comparatively little research has been done concerning the professional needs of SRE teachers, we know that secular teachers express a need for all five s.p.a.c.e. conditions (Holliday,1994).

Therefore, despite their distinctiveness, we would also expect SRE teachers to articulate a need for all five s.p.a.c.e. conditions, when learning new teaching tasks. Indeed, these five conditions should be inherent needs for learning irrespective of the particular teaching context, group or sub-group of teachers (Harrison,1998b). SRE teachers in particular have been learners in the past even though they may have lacked formal training and/or experience in educational settings. In remembering their own learning they could be expected to intuitively want their learning to be self-affirming, personally meaningful, active, collaborative, and empowered. They may even have been intuitively aware of these needs in the past for either themselves as learners, or for their pupils, as they have taught others, albeit informally (e.g., their own children, cubs, Sunday School).

We know too, that professional development plays a role in how the s.p.a.c.e. conditions are emphasised (Harrison,1998b). Therefore we would expect that experienced and inexperienced SRE teachers might emphasise different conditions because of their difference in professional development (especially years in the job). Moreover, a lack of experience might reflect in the need to focus on the things that hinder learning, while a relative wealth of experience might have the opposite effect and reflect a focus on what helps learning. When tackling new teaching tasks, inexperienced SRE teachers might overemphasise the lack or absence of all five s.p.a.c.e. learning conditions when reflecting on what has made their job more difficult. In contrast, experienced SRE teachers might stress that, when the five learning conditions have been present, their learning on the job has been enhanced.

This Study

This study was designed to test the foregoing expectations. A group of inexperienced SRE teachers and a group of experienced SRE teachers were asked what helped and what hindered them as they learned to implement a new SRE curriculum. The particular curriculum (CONNECT,1996) had been developed by the education arm of the Sydney Diocese of the Anglican Church in Australia, as a result of educational research. CONNECT (1996) is used widely by many Protestant teachers across metropolitan Sydney, as well as in other Australian states and New Zealand. The curriculum design builds on concepts with three levels of two years' duration. Stages of development are emphasised as opposed to ages. Lesson plans vary according to content and accommodate children's varying learning styles.

Interviews were content analysed for evidence of the s.p.a.c.e. conditions. It was hypothesised firstly that, in reflecting on the learning that was necessary to implement this new curriculum, SRE teachers would express the same inherent need for the s.p.a.c.e. conditions as the secular teachers of previous studies.

It was hypothesised secondly that degree of SRE teaching experience would influence the specific expression of these needs. That is, inexperienced SRE teachers would emphasise different needs from their more experienced SRE counterparts because of the differences between the two groups in terms of professional development. For example, inexperienced SRE teachers were expected to stress that they were not sufficiently reassured that they could actually do the job (self-affirmation was lacking and this hindered learning), that they were somewhat confused about their new teaching task (personal meaning was lacking and this hindered learning), that they lacked the opportunity to experiment with the new SRE curriculum (action was lacking and this hindered learning), that they couldn't network with others as much as they would have liked (collaboration was lacking and this hindered learning), and that they didn't have sufficient control over how they could implement the curriculum (empowerment was lacking and this hindered learning). In contrast, experienced SRE teachers were expected to be more positive and to emphasise how self-affirmation, personal meaning, action, collaboration, and empowerment were all present to promote implementation of the new SRE curriculum.

Method

Participants

A small pool of SRE teachers was available in the Macarthur Region of Sydney. Teaching experience was defined in number of years. SRE teachers who had less than three years on the job were classified as inexperienced. SRE teachers who had more than three years' experience were assigned to the experienced group. In each group there were four females,

one male Anglican minister, and one Baptist pastor. The experienced group was approximately 13.5 years older than the inexperienced group. The combined years of teaching for the experienced group was 86 years [Range:7-21 years; Mean:14.3 years], whereas the inexperienced group had taught a total of 13 years [Range:1-3 years; Mean: 2.2 years].

Procedure

At least a week before the interviews, each participant was given a sheet of questions to stimulate thinking about SRE. They were encouraged to use these questions as a springboard for their subsequent interviews. During the interview, some restricted their comments to what they had written the week before, whereas others went on to elaborate on their earlier reflections. Participants were encouraged to share anything to do with SRE teaching and/or the new CONNECT curriculum, but particularly why they taught SRE, and what things helped and hindered as they learned to implement the new CONNECT material.

Results and Discussion

Interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim. Participants were then given a copy of their own interview for proof-reading and minor alterations. The interviews were then content analysed for evidence of the s.p.a.c.e. conditions of learning. A condition could be present, meaning that the participant said in his or her own words that the condition was needed and that when it had been there in the past it had promoted learning *(What helps learning?)*. Or the condition could be lacking, meaning that the participant had said that it had not been present and that learning had therefore been inhibited *(What hinders learning?)*.

A record was made of the number of times each condition was emphasised, whether by its presence or relative absence. The condition may have been mentioned (1) individually (separately), (2) in combination with one, two, or three other conditions (partial combination), and (3) in combination with the four other conditions (total combination). The frequencies in these three categories were then tallied so that a record was made of (4) the total number of times each condition was evidenced in every interview, and this figure was further subdivided to indicate whether the condition was seen as being present (and helping learning), or absent (and hindering learning).

Frequencies in this fourth category were analysed in five separate 2 x 2 chi square tests, one for each of the s.p.a.c.e. conditions of learning. For each analysis, *professional development* (experienced SRE teachers versus inexperienced SRE teachers) served as one variable and *what helped/hindered learning* (learning condition present versus learning condition absent) served as the other variable. The results are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Interview Reflections on What Helped/Hindered
Special Religion Education Teachers Learning to Implement a New Curriculum.**

	Learning Condition									
	Self-Affirmation		Personal Meaning		Action		Collaboration		Empowerment	
	Pres.	Abs.	Pres.	Abs.	Pres.	Abs.	Pres.	Abs.	Pres.	Abs.
Professional Development										
Experienced SRE	100%		100%		100%		100%		100%	
Teachers (n=6)	58	2	71	3	91	18	42	3	32	6
	54	*6*	*69*	*5*	*92*	*17*	*37*	*8*	*28*	*10*
Inexperienced SRE	100%		100%		100%		100%		100%	
Teachers (n=6)	45	9	73	7	88	15	38	15	28	15
	49	*5*	*74*	*5*	*87*	*16*	*43*	*10*	*32*	*11*
	$c^2_{(1, N=12)} =$ 5.8, $p<.05$		$c^2_{(1, N=12)} =$ 1.4, $p>.05$		$c^2_{(1, N=12)} =$ 0.2, $p >.05$		$c^2_{(1, N=12)} =$ 7.6, $p<.01$		$c^2_{(1, N=12)} = 3.81$	

In Table 1, there are three rows of data for both experienced and inexperienced SRE
teachers learning to implement a new curriculum. The first row, which has a percentage
figure scanning both "present" and "absent" columns for each condition, represents the
percentage of participants who expressed the need for each condition, regardless of
whether that condition was present or not. The second and third rows are organised under
two columns. One column is labelled "Pres." to indicate that the particular condition was

mentioned as being present and this helped learning. The other column is labelled "Abs." to indicate that the particular condition was mentioned as being absent and this hindered learning. With these labelled columns in mind, the second row shows the observed frequencies for each condition, and the third row (in *italics*) shows the frequencies that would have been expected according to the chi square procedure. The third row indicates the percentages of participants in each group who actually mentioned the particular condition of learning, in terms of it being present and helping learning and /or being absent and hindering learning. The chi square values are reported at the bottom of Table 1.

The results are largely supportive of the two hypotheses**.**

Firstly, as expected, *every* SRE teacher, whether inexperienced or experienced, mentioned every s.p.a.c.e. condition as being necessary for learning to implement the new SRE curriculum. Note the 100% consensus for all five conditions in Table 1.

Secondly, as expected, the two groups emphasised different learning conditions, although the pattern was not as complete as had been expected. It had been hypothesised that, because of their lesser professional development, the inexperienced SRE teachers would be *more inclined* to lament the absence of all the s.p.a.c.e. learning conditions. In fact, they it was only self-affirmation, collaboration, and empowerment that they lamented more than the experienced SRE teachers.

Specifically, the inexperienced group mentioned that when self-affirmation was lacking, then learning was inhibited almost *1.7 times* more often than would have been expected according to the chi square statistic; whereas the experienced group expressed this lament only *0.3 times* what could have been expected. The inexperienced group said that collaboration was absent and learning was hindered approximately *1.5 times* more often than expected, compared to *0.4 times* what could be expected by the experienced group. For empowerment, the effect was marginally significant*.* Inexperienced SRE teachers were concerned about its absence *1.3 times* more often than expected, and their experienced counterparts only had this concern expressed *0.6 times* what could be expected.

In addition, it is noteworthy that the proportion of times the s.p.a.c.e. conditions were said to be present and helpful for learning far exceeded the proportion of times that they were mentioned as absent and hindering learning. The two groups made very similar numbers of comments about the need for, and presence of, all conditions. However, it was the absence of the conditions that distinguished the two SRE groups. The differences can be seen in the results which come from focusing more closely on this effect. To do this, allcomments were added across both groups for each condition, whether present or absent. The percentage for each condition was then calculated to show what proportion of the total comments concerned the absence of each learning condition: self-affirmation [9.6%], personal meaning [6,5%], action [16.3%], collaboration [18.3%], and empowerment [25.9%]. This means that at least 74% all comments about each condition concerned the need for, and presence of a particular condition in learning to implement the CONNECT curriculum.

Conclusion

Summary of findings

This study is important because it offers further empirical evidence for the validity of the s.p.a.c.e. conditions of learning. The five conditions were routinely mentioned in the interviews analysed concerning what helped/hindered learning for SRE teachers. With no prior prompting concerning the conditions, both inexperienced and experienced SRE teachers equally expressed the need for learning to be self-affirming, personally meaningful,

active, collaborative, and empowered. Such consensus amongst naïve participants suggests that the s.p.a.c.e. conditions are, indeed, inherent needs for learning.

Despite this overall agreement, however, the two groups emphasised different conditions; in particular when these were absent and learning was then hindered. Compared to the experienced group, inexperienced SRE teachers were significantly

more inclined to say that when they did not have a positive view of themselves as learners (self-affirmation), when they lacked sufficient connection, communication, and co-operation with others (collaboration), and when they did not have sufficient control over their own learning (empowerment), then they simply did not manage to implement the new CONNECT curriculum as well as they would have wanted to.

It is not that this group lacked these conditions for optimising learning per se. Like their experienced counterparts, they very decidedly expressed the need for the conditions, and acknowledged the benefits of their presence. However, what the inexperienced group was stressing was the hindering effect of even a small deficiency. The perceived lack of self-affirmation, collaboration and empowerment comprised, at most, less than one third of the comments that the inexperienced SRE teachers made about each of the three significant conditions. This concern is disproportionate in comparison with the presence of conditions that helped learning: comments about how the conditions of learning helped the implementation of the new curriculum were voluminous but statistically non-significant; whereas the comments about the absence of self-affirmation, collaboration and empowerment were sufficient to enable the chi square statistic to show a statistically significant difference between the inexperienced group and their more experienced counterparts.

These findings have implications, firstly for all SRE teachers, and secondly, but more particularly, for inexperienced SRE teachers.

Implications for all SRE teachers

Clearly when they are learning on the job, all SRE teachers *need* their learning to be self-affirmed, personally meaningful, active, collaborative, and empowering. Translating these findings into practices that will help to tailor training of both experienced and inexperienced SRE teachers through ways that satisfy each of the five needs so that optimal learning may occur, will take time, money and effort. The consequence will hopefully be that all SRE teachers will stay on the job longer. It also may be that inexperienced SRE teachers will stay on the job long enough to become experienced SRE teachers. Yet, even if that does not happen, the whole experience should be more rewarding.

At this point in time, anecdotal evidence suggests that there is a high turn-over among all SRE teachers, particularly the newer ones, presumably because of the particular difficulties of their job. Despite having many of their inherent needs actually met as they learn on the job, the reality is that job aspects separate them from secular teachers are constantly there as factors that can make it difficult to keep on - their volunteer status, lack of professional training and payment, and conferred authority.

There are several approaches that SRE teachers can make, probably simultaneously, to improve their learning on the job.

Firstly, SRE teachers themselves need to be alerted to the fact that these needs that they experience for self-affirmation, personal meaning, action, collaboration, and empowerment in learning, should be recognised and subsequently satisfied. The primary course of action

might be for SRE teachers to look to each other to satisfy these needs. Forming a local, perhaps interdenominational group if one does not already exist may be helpful in regard to approaching schools to increase communication and co-operation.

Secondly, at least one person in the local church should know that SRE teachers who go into schools have specific needs for learning. It may well be that other congregational members may not be available to teach in schools themselves, but may be able to help with (collaboration): encouragement (self-affirmation), interpretation of CONNECT materials (personal meaning), handwork preparation (action), and adapting the material for greater flexibility in the classroom (empowerment).

Thirdly, the planners, developers and promoters of CONNECT within the Anglican Youth and Education Division (AYE), which is the education arm of the Sydney Diocese of the Anglican Church of Australia, should particularly be aware of these findings. It is their responsibility to make the various CONNECT consultants aware of this study, so that (a) all SRE teachers using CONNECT can be made aware of these needs and be encouraged to articulate them and actively look to having them satisfied, and (b) they can ensure that in-service courses are themselves self-affirming, personally meaningful, active, collaborative and empowering for local SRE teachers who avail themselves of such courses. The same responsibility falls to the other major Christian denominations.

The problem of lone SRE teachers is particularly relevant. In the country or in areas where there is not a concern for, and/or a concerted effort to reach as many classes as possible, there may be SRE teachers, both experienced and inexperienced, who are virtually working alone. The NSW Scouting Association has "lone scouters"; scouters who are linked through the Branch Headquarters. Contact can be made by mail, telephone, email and other electronic sources. Branch leaders can offer their expertise and support and encourage the scouter as s/he works through specific badges. Scouters with similar interests can link with other lone scouters many miles away, perhaps meeting at Area or Branch jamborees. This model may have applications for use with isolated SRE teachers.

This response to isolated scouters could be used as a model by the Anglican Youth and Education Division to support lone SRE teachers who are using the CONNECT material (or any similar Christian education material). A questionnaire distributed through suppliers of curriculum material, such as CONNECT, could be used to identify some of these people so that their learning can be as self-affirmed, personally meaningful, active, collaborative and empowering as possible under difficult circumstances. A register of such people could enable them to `discover' and contact each other. That would be even better if it could be done across denominational boundaries, especially out in the country where townships are scattered.

Implications for inexperienced SRE teachers in particular

The effects identified in this study are crucial for how new SRE teachers need to (and should) be supported as they learn.

In particular, inexperienced SRE teachers need sufficient reassurance and validation (self-affirmation) as beginners on the job. Inexperienced SRE teachers can help themselves by recalling past experiences when they were able to learn something that took time to learn to do well, like playing an instrument, doing mathematics, driving, crochet, or painting. All the people who are involved in the support of SRE teachers (collaboration) can help further activate this condition by reminding the new learner of past successful learning experiences (e.g. raising their own children; having a successful career) and express the confidence that

they will be able to handle the new material and/or situation as s/he has in other situations. Where available, the role of other more experienced SRE teachers can be crucial in this.

New SRE teachers also need sufficient collaboration to tackle new teaching tasks. The support and encouragement of other SRE teachers is a critical component of this condition that is *social* by nature. One strategy would be the "helper model" in which new SRE teachers go into a classroom with a more experienced SRE teacher for some period. Many of the SRE teachers in this study had been involved with that model, although many said the period was insufficient. Many ministers are presumed to know how to teach SRE, but three of the four ministers in this study said they were ill-prepared to teach SRE.

Initially the new person just observes, then helps with handwork and supervision. Later they might teach part of the story, help with the prayer or teach a song. This model is used in some Roman Catholic schools in the United States of America (Brennan,1995), with the experienced teacher called a "buddy teacher". Seeing several teachers in action at different times with different kinds of lessons would give a more rounded view of what is possible. Talking after the lesson is also important for learning. Such "helping" times vary from one lesson to six months or more. Some people chose to always help, although none of the SREs in this sample did that. Personality and availability of teachers may affect whether such time is sufficient for any individual.

The helper model which many SRE teachers mentioned as very beneficial, is an active method, and particularly valuable; especially where the time and teaching style suits the needs of the learner. If such opportunities are limited, then the opportunity for talking over lessons before and/or afterwards can also help, and becomes even more crucial for the support of the teacher concerned.

Finally, inexperienced SRE teachers need sufficient empowerment. They may see they don't have sufficient control over how they implement curriculum materials because of in-school factors, like lack of board space, days not available because of camps and sporting events, lack of audio equipment and the problem of transporting their own equipment, together with other aids, truncated lesson times, insufficient desks for children or access to basic equipment such as scissors. Some of these issues and other wider issues, are also a problem for casual teachers.

Casual teachers, even with their training, professional status and remuneration, often see themselves as very different from their permanent, full-time counterparts. In many ways their experiences can be a lot like those of SRE teachers despite the differences. Bourke (1993) in a study of casual teachers in NSW found that 71% of his 130 respondents saw that the NSW Department saw them as `employees rather than professionals', `just a number', or `with total disregard'. These figures are enlightening, given the qualifications that are necessary and that they are being paid the accepted rate. Of these 130 respondents 91% saw they had less status within the Department, 80% saw they had less access to the Department's resources, and 87% saw they were less likely to be included in in-service courses. The obverse of those work conditions is the sense of obligation. It is noteworthy that, despite a perceived lack of professional conditions by these casual teachers, 85% still felt the same degree of responsibility towards the Department, even though only 33% saw they had "legitimacy" as a teacher within the Department. Given SRE teachers are often an even more tenuous situation, it is remarkable that they persist week after week; and even more remarkable that they have expressed so many positive comments overall.

Future directions

This paper has broken new ground in the field of educational research. Following Harrison (1998b), this study has further validated the s.p.a.c.e. conditions as inherent needs in adult learners. In addition, this study provides timely research within the under-researched field of how SRE teachers learn to implement a new curriculum in NSW government primary schools.

However, it is the work in progress that may well prove to be of most significance for the Special Religion Education field. We are aware of the spiritual component of the work SRE teachers do. Indeed, the interviews we have analysed are also heavily impregnated with spiritual comments, even though we did not focus on these for the present study. We strongly suspect that this spiritual dimension may be extremely important for all SRE teachers as they learn on the job. Consequently, we are in the process of coding interview comments as showing the conditions as present and helping learning or absent and hindering it, in a 'secular' way (i.e., based in a natural world view) or 'spiritual' way (i.e., based in a supernatural, Christian world view). We anticipate that the results will be even more relevant in terms of how SRE teachers are trained and supported. Initial data patterns suggest that, when SRE teachers are learning, they need their learning to be both spiritually and secularly self-affirming, personally meaningful, active, collaborative and empowering.

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