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# Religion in Schools? The Importance of Recognizing the Impact of Religious Experiences

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Communicative competence is arguably one of the most important characteristics of being human. Communication skills are innately human (Chomsky, 1968; Pinker, 2007). Throughout history, our reverence for language and communication is portrayed in stories such as the Tower of Babel in Genesis of the Bible, *Clouds* (Aristophanes, 1968) and *Apology* (Plato, 399, B.C.). Starting as young children we learn to negotiate language to communicate our needs and desires. Over time, our linguistic skills become refined and our experiences begin to shape how we communicate (Sapir, 1921; Whorf, 1956). Various input (i.e., external information) stimulates our thinking and guides our communication. According to Chaudron (1985), we encounter *input* and *intake* during communication. He posits a distinction between the two stating that presenting a certain linguistic form to someone does not qualify it as intake. Intake is “what goes in,” while input is “what is available for going in.” In other words, the individual determines what information to focus on and apply to various situations. In some cases, and for many reasons, the influence of our environment limits our acceptance of various inputs and narrows our ability to value many perspectives (Geertz, 1983). For this reason, it is important in society to nurture all forms of communication and underlying perspectives that create those forms of communication.

The ability to communicate and use language in many ways and with people from many different ways of life is a necessity in our world today. One

place where many diverse people come together is in the education system. The literature is filled with educational studies discussing communication between languages (i.e., multilingual studies, Delpit, 1995), cultures (i.e., multicultural studies, Banks, 1984), classes (i.e., SES studies, Heath, 1983), and genders (i.e., boy/girl studies, Tyre, 2008). However, often overlooked is the influence of religious practices on language use and behavior in classrooms. This paper argues that the significance of understanding the religious practices of students in schools is equally as important as knowing the students' native language(s), for example. Framed by principles of interfaith and interreligious dialogue, the paper highlights a few examples of language use and behavior at the intersection of religion and education. The author argues that using the religious beliefs of students as strengths of their identity might eliminate some of the misunderstandings in the classroom and help establish an environment of mutual acceptance that might also be beneficial outside the school environment. It is not possible within the scope of this paper to discuss all of the complexities of faith based influences with regard to education. Additionally, there are differences between the terms interfaith and interreligious, and both terms are used in this paper. Distinctions between the two terms are made according to the scholars cited in the paper and their use of each term and concept. Lastly, the author acknowledges that there are students that would not claim to be a member of any individual faith and some students that claim to be spiritual with other designations.

### **The Company We Keep**

Our ability to access information from all over the world, through the advances of technology and increased ease of transportation, provides us with opportunities to understand our world better. These opportunities have not only led to a better understanding or interconnectedness of peoples, but to conflict and judgment based on varied interpretations. For example, reading about the way others live without the knowledge of the context or reasons for their situations might lead to an appreciation of different ways of living, but also might lead to condemnation of others. Some of the contact between peoples of different cultures is voluntary, but one place that contact is not voluntary is in our educational system. This environment of forced contact is the perfect place to nurture the diversity present. Educators have an opportunity to foster communication among people creating mutual respect and understanding. Educators also must acknowledge that the values one holds and the behavior one exhibits might be, at least partially, influenced by religious beliefs. According to Nord (2010), religion cannot be separated out of a person's culture and identity. Thus, religious influences must be considered.

Language also cannot be separated from one's culture and identity. Furthermore, scholars state that language is a product of the social process (Levi-Strauss, 1968; Piaget, 1959; Saussure, 1966; Vygotsky, 1978). Saussure's (1966) statement, "Language is a social fact," described how society and language work

together (p. 6). He said that language defines society's limits and boundaries and lets individuals say what they want within those confines. Additionally, Vygotsky (1978) affirmed that learning is a social endeavor and being social requires communication. Communication is not only the act of creating speech, but requires attentive and non-judgmental listening (Mvumbi, 2010). According to Delpit (1995), listening with bias creates "the silenced dialogue" that refers to the way that people might negatively react to others perspectives (p. 23). This 'silencing' marginalizes and discounts the validity of certain viewpoints. Whether social interactions influence communication (Sapir, 1921; Whorf, 1956) or vice versa (Saussure, 1966), active listening is important for effective and respectful communication.

### **A Thousand Fibers Connect Us**

According to Groome (1998), "the classic Catholic Christian position on nature/nurture, autonomy/socialization would be to hold the two in balance, that our social context exerts considerable influence" (p. 178). Beyond the historical debate about whether personal qualities or environmental qualities shape our language development and relationships, recent research confirms that both hold sway. Previously constrained by the belief that the brain was only guided by genetics, views about learning, relationships, and health were limited. However, about 40 years ago, neuroscientists began to view the brain as a social organ (Siegel, 2011b). Exploration of brain activity regarding social interactions and

relationships proved the interconnectedness between our biochemistry and environment. These studies of interconnectedness revealed that it is innate for humans to seek out relationships for an entire lifetime (Cozolino, 2013). Our brain is shaped by the relationships we have, and the converse is also true. Because the brain is wired for social interaction and language, relationships are “the key to opening a closed mind and rebuilding neural networks” (Cozolino, 2013, p.40).

According to Siegel (2011a), relationships are a shared communication process. He stated, “The mind is embodied ... and relational, not a product created in isolation.” Relationships include the communication an individual has with other entities in the world, especially other people. This is the social nature of the “embodied and relational process that regulates the flow of energy and information” (Siegel, 2011a). Relationships enrich our human experiences and shape how we share information. These relationships are not only the outcome we seek through social endeavors, but what effects the way we approach participation in discourse with others. However, the lack of positive relationships might minimize the desire to understand the context and intricacies of the dialogue partly because it takes time and effort to know how to interpret someone’s language use. Furthermore, research shows that the relationships we build in life further our understandings and willingness to negotiate issues that arise (Brief, Umphress, Dietz, Burrows, Butz, & Scholten, 2005). Until the foundation of

understanding is established, communication has the possibility of any manner of interpretations; accurate to the speakers' intent or not.

Throughout an individual's life, many relationships are established that influence individual thoughts and actions whether consciously or unconsciously and ultimately impact our perceptions of the world. Sociologists such as Emile Durkheim claimed that an individual's identity is shaped by his social context (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010) and therefore would influence how the individual interacts and builds relationships with people outside of his context. Further, studies found that by creating shared knowledge and common rituals, people established relationships, thereby developing more productive interactions (Geertz, 1973). Simply said, religion describes and shapes the social order (Geertz, 1973). Shaping occurs through a fusion of practiced rituals and interactions between men. Men come together in religion for a common purpose with shared beliefs. Shared beliefs and knowledge become important for interactions.

According to Gopnik, Meltzoff, & Kuhl (1999), language is learned best from in-person contact. In schools, face to face learning boosts academic achievement and bridges disconnects that may occur between teachers and students due to language or cultural differences (Rao, 2005). The personal contact of the teacher is said to impact everything from specific language use to general motivation for learning (Joseph & Strain, 2004; Lindfors, 1991; Smith, 1988).

“Kids don’t learn from people they don’t like” (Pierson, 2013). In addition, Vygotsky (1978) was known for his socio-cultural approach to cognitive development, which stressed the social interactions involved in learning from teachers and peers. These widely accepted theories of social learning explain, in part, the importance of building solid and positive relationships in schools that promote positive interactions and communication with others. Using the principles of interfaith dialogue is one way of promoting learning and mutual harmony.

### **Thou Shall Converse**

Historically, leaders from Muslim, Christian, Hindi, Buddhist, Jewish, and Catholic faiths have urged for humanity to live in harmony and respect and have advocated for peaceful interactions. For instance, Gandhi began building his legacy of peace through exploration of religious beliefs and traditions and by promoting the application of peaceful methods of communication to bring social and political change (Abbott, 2010). He created communities for people of different backgrounds and beliefs to come together and collaborate. He also regularly dialogued with people from various belief systems and parts of the world and encouraged those around him to do the same. Pope John Paul II also advocated for peaceful interactions between people associated with different religions. Using the teachings of the *Nostra Aetate*, the declaration on the relations of the Church to non-Christian religions, he indirectly professed



principles of interreligious dialogue (Fitzgerald, 2005). The declaration stated, “[T]he Church, therefore, urges its sons and daughters to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions” (Second Vatican Council, 1965, para 6). The declaration aligned with Pope John Paul II’s upbringing and stood as a highly influential document in his papacy.

In recent years, the occurrence of interfaith dialogue events sponsored by different religions is more frequent. For example, the University of Portland (2013) hosted an interfaith event that included the Dalai Lama, Reverend William Beauchamp, Grandmother Agnes Baker Pilgrim, Imam Muhammad A. Najieb, and Rabbi Michael Z. Cahana. These leaders of different faiths spoke about the benefits of interfaith dialogue with urgency. His Holiness emphasized the importance of compassion within the dialogue. He stated that compassion can only be achieved by an awareness of different ways of life existing harmoniously together creating a respect for one another. In the words of Grandmother Agnes, “we are all in this leaky canoe together” and must respect each other so the whole canoe doesn’t sink (May 9, 2013, Interfaith Event, UP). To develop a world-view where people can coexist, all people must contribute to a culture of peace. A culture of peace occurs through dialogue.

The differences between religions are often the focus of discussion, yet, it is helpful also to recognize the similarities. In addition, recognition of heterogeneity within each religion is mandatory. An interreligious dialogue

approach provides a structure for these complexities. “Interreligious dialogue is a challenging process by which adherents of differing religious traditions encounter each other as equals to break down the walls of division” (Fults, 2013, para 1). The objective of interreligious dialogue is peace and harmony, allowing all participants the freedom to practice their faith according to their personal beliefs without coercion of conversion. These goals involve learning through respectful dialogue, a peaceful co-existence where individual and group differences are considered strengths and respectful listening leads to understanding and empowerment. Religious beliefs and conviction are naturally non-negotiable, therefore, interreligious dialogue requires an understanding that disagreements may occur and an ability to be comfortable with a lack of consensus. Further, *Nostra Aetate* “pleads with all to forget the past, and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding; for the benefit of all, let them together preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values” (Second Vatican Council, 1965, para 8).

A review of the literature about interfaith dialogue finds that each person entering into dialogue must a) establish mutual trust, b) be free to listen and learn, c) respect the integrity of all religions, and d) have a positive, open attitude to build relationships (Mvumbi, 2010; Patel, 2013; Pedersen, 2004; United Religions Initiative, 2004). In other words, trust is what opens our minds and unites us creating the opportunity for dialogue. Without the act of listening freely as

foundation for learning, trust can break down perpetuating stereotypes or offending through misinterpreted of language use. Entering dialogue with an attitude that affirms the idea that all religions promote peaceful values and practices and have resources in their traditions that promote inclusion, eliminates barriers to deeply connecting with people of different faiths, thus promoting interfaith dialogue. These guiding principles are fundamental to interfaith dialogue allowing people to then move to identify areas of collaboration instead of division. Swidler (1984) added that the process is most effective when people begin with knowing oneself profoundly. After one knows oneself, one might begin to know others and build meaningful relationships as well as develop individual viewpoints of other religious beliefs (Mvumbi, 2010).

Patel (2013), interfaith dialogue advocate, suggested that educators would benefit from knowledge of different practices of at least the students in attendance in their schools. For example, “school principals in inner city Minneapolis would do well to know something about the faith practices of the Somali Muslims, Hmong Shamanists, and Native Americans in the area” (p. 43). He further explained that interfaith leaders know that “positive relations between those who orient around religion differently do not require leaving religion aside” (Patel, 2013, p.42). Principles of interfaith dialogue would serve educators well in the classroom especially when approaching contentious topics associated with religious underpinnings.

### **Standing at the Crossroads**

In the United States, the Constitution's First Amendment about the separation of church and state has led (or in some cases, misled) many to believe that the text condemns any cross over between religious and public organizations. Often, interpretations of the constitution are extreme and unyielding when applied to the educational system. On the one hand, those against acknowledgment of student religious practices and/or discussion of religion in schools stated concern about possible altering of religious convictions by those not affiliated with the specific religion (Shaffer & Verrastro, 2005). In addition, some teachers do not want to be responsible for discussing religion or teaching a topic without the proper qualification (Anti-Defamation League, 2002). Further, the prohibition of any reference to religious practices literally upholds the U. S. Constitution, which affords citizens the freedom of religion and affords citizens the right not to be influenced by other religions in public school. On the other hand, ignoring the religious background of a student might undermine their identity, devalue their beliefs, and have a detrimental effect on social cohesion (Woodhead & Catto, 2009). Additionally, "[P]olicies that suppress potential inter-religious dialogue in schools cannot be pedagogically justified because they deprive learners of the opportunity in teaching-learning situations to hone the dialogical skills required for life in a religiously pluralistic society once they leave school" (Abdool, Potgieter, van der Walt & Wolhuter, 2007, p. 553). Because of this on-going

debate, educators seldom delve into the issues regarding faith when negotiating communication with diverse groups and consequently miss opportunities.

All components of culture (i.e., language, ethnicity, religion, etc.) influence how students perceive information and learn. Many of the same multifaceted arguments about the recognition of how a students' culture influences their learning also apply to recognizing different religions present in the classroom and the influence on learning. Such arguments as a) multicultural education will erode the current educational canon (Davila, 2015), b) being *color-blind* allows people to view all students as the same and ensures equality (Mazzocco, Cooper, & Flint, 2012), and c) children should use English only in schools (Roosevelt, 1907) so they may have better opportunities for success in the *real* world, prefer ignoring specific aspects of individual culture in favor of viewing all students as the same in the name of equity. These same arguments are put forth in an effort to ignore the religious practices that students bring into the classroom as well as religious observances and traditions in schools.

However, some argue that multicultural education enriches not only the homogenous groups privileged by race and class, but also the sterilized curriculum by presenting various perspectives and ways of life (Banks & Banks, 1995; Sleeter, 1991). Further, bilingualism in the classroom is advantageous not only to language development, but also many aspects of learning (Petitto, Katerelos, Levy, Gauna, et al., 2001). These issues are more complex than the

scope of this paper can address. However, there are parallels between arguments about acknowledging how a student's religion effects their engagement in school and acknowledging how a student's ethnicity (or other aspect of culture) might affect their engagement in school. Additionally, there is much support in the literature for teachers and school staff to celebrate all aspects of a student's identity (Banks and Banks, 1995; Nieto & Bode, 2008). According to Putnam (2015), there is evidence that a religious affiliation improves educational development. He explained that participating in religious practices influences moral formation which guides students' study habits, viewpoints regarding various educational topics, and increased attendance in higher education among other things. According to Hilliard (1974), it may be challenging "to deal with racism and other prejudice, it is impossible to approach problems realistically and ignore these matters" (p. 43).

Teaching religion is not the same as respecting the fact that religion plays a role in how people view the world and how we learn. This paper does not address the teaching of religion, but the importance knowing about students' lives on many levels to help them learn. As with the conversations regarding race, dialogue about faith is controversial and often unproductive. However, in both secular and non-secular classrooms, discourse regarding the underpinnings of language use must include religious factors. "[C]onflict due to religious differences among learners can be both productive and creative, and can afford

teachers with excellent pedagogical opportunities” (Abdool, Potgieter, van der Walt & Wolhuter, 2007, p. 554). The harmony created by positive interreligious and intercultural dialogue is critical for educators as well as all people in all fields of practice in our society. Creating a shared vision of peace through relationships built by dialogue is a path to a harmonious world.

### **The Twain Shall Meet**

According to Rizvi & Lingard (2010), educational systems are an outgrowth of societal beliefs and needs. In other words, religious conflict that occurs in society also occur in schools. This paper offers examples of three prominent types of conflict that arise at the intersection of religion and education: a) policy, b) language, and c) interpretation. Examples of the clash between religious practices and school policies are well documented throughout the world. For instance, in France, a girl was denied the right to wear her Muslim clothing, the *Jibab*, in school (Kelland, 2004). Similarly, religious symbols such as Muslim headscarves, Jewish skullcaps, Sikh turbans, and large Christian crosses being worn in schools were ban in 2004 by the French Parliament (Bitterman, 2010). Another case in New York involved accusations that Bedford Elementary schools were promoting specific religions (PR Newswire, 2000). The case was not proven, however, AJ Congress issued a statement, “there should be religious neutrality in the classroom, not support of any religion, and not ignorance about religion” that changed how *religion* was discussed in schools.

There are also many clashes due to language use. Association with faith communities and religious belief systems effect the language an individual chooses to use. For example, references to “myths,” or “made up stories” during creationism units or phrases used such as “inshallah,” “thank God,” “bless you,” “this is my calling,” or “I was meant to do this” are often spoken without consciousness and reveal possible religious implications of a higher power. Conceivably, someone who uses phrases such as these might be labeled “religious” resulting in dissonance. As with the labels of learning disorders, labels involving religious stereotyping might be lovingly or hatefully applied, but usually subordinates one label to another (Diaz, 1999). For example, being called a *Jew*, *Muslim*, or *Christian* in different contexts and in different times of history are considered with varying connotative implications. When words or phrases such as these are uttered in the classroom, discussions around traditional religious practices can serve as unbiased teachable moments. Yet, often explanations of such practices are left unexamined.

Religious identities also influence how topics are interpreted or perceived by peers and how individuals accept or distance themselves from these topics. Corriveau, Harris, & Chen (2015) found that experience in a faith based community has an impact on children’s categorization of novel figures. Specifically, children with religious education found characters in biblical stories to be real people as opposed to children without religious backgrounds who found



characters to be fictional. Additionally, when asked to predict what will happen or resolve conflict in literacy texts, students might offer different ideas based on their religious experiences providing additional learning opportunities.

Illustrations such as the above affirm the importance of dialogue. Looking again at interfaith dialogue principles gives insight into possible ways to resolve disagreements. For instance, opposing parties encountering each other as equals with an open attitude, may pursue tactics of negotiation and respect instead of law suits and restrictive policies. Under the premise of interfaith dialogue, it is not plausible to expect the other party to change. It is also not expected that consensus will always result. However, it is reasonable to believe that through open dialogue, better outcomes are conceivable.

### **Implications for a Peaceful Dominion**

From politicians to astronauts, many would agree that education is the key to success. Irrespective of how an individual defines success or how education is obtained, it is important to have the knowledge, necessary skills, and understandings to accomplish one's goals. It is through education that our ability to communicate worldwide might be shaped by our awareness of others, respect for others, and compassion for others. The knowledge that is learned through our educational system is heavily biased toward linguistic modes of instruction, exemplifying the importance of language use and dialogue skills (Gardner, 1991). Therefore, educators should take responsibility for fostering not only ways of

communicating, but also an attitude of awareness and appreciation of diverse peoples and ways of life.

Dialogue comes in many forms. Spontaneous discussion that facilitates explanation of unknown experiences or opposing viewpoints are both likely and beneficial in schools. In addition, a more formal method of dialogue might aid with more complex concepts. While there are many ways to incorporate interfaith dialogue principles and consideration for religious influences, below are a few ideas focused on language and instruction.

One obvious consideration for dialogue concerns language use. When educators use unbiased and respectful language to affirm the strengths of all students and create an environment for sharing through discussion, students not only become aware of other perspectives, but also their own beliefs and understandings. These are both principles of interfaith dialogue (Mvumbi, 2010; Swidler, 1984). By fostering discussions about why students think and feel certain ways, students can learn to dialogue respectfully and even build empathy for others (Arwood & Young, 2000). The ways we choose to use words and construct messages makes a difference. In the classroom it is important to use positive language that supports a safe learning environment and encourages productivity. Too often, teachers rush through the day using commands that convey negative connotations. Negative language often leads to misinterpretations, anxiety, marginalization (Delpit, 1995) or even defamation of beliefs. However, language

that explains through nurturing words, even in disagreement, creates an atmosphere of learning that is productive. Providing opportunities to discuss multiple perspectives encourages appreciation and acknowledges students for the strengths they bring into the classroom. Davila (2015) affirms children also need books that offer views into diverse ways and reflect experiences of the students; whether the focus is race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation. They need time to discuss these diverse views (Dallavis, 2011).

From commonly used procedures during math instruction to character studies in multicultural novels, teachers should empower students to dialogue. For example, in a discussion during math about how problems can be solved differently, students can share their thinking throughout the process. Not only might students solve problems differently, they also might view math differently based on religious affiliations (Johnson, 2016). Students benefit from learning and sharing the process with others, building relationships, and recognizing that people may do things differently. This model might be used in all manner of discussions. Another approach to dialogue in the classroom is through the use of the jurisprudential inquiry instructional model (Joyce, Weil, & Calhoun, 2009). In this model, students study social problems dealing with public policy. Using inquiry regarding religious issues, for example, allows students to explore the events leading to the issues, the values and underlying assumptions of the stakeholders, and the language used to resolve the issues. Again, religious

affiliation might determine how students view these issues. The model helps students develop understandings of multiple perspectives and resolutions that might benefit all involved. The conceptual goal of the model is to explore societies where people differ in views and priorities and to dialogue with one another to negotiate differences. Lastly, use of Socratic dialogue or Socratic circles benefits classroom communities. Socrates sought truth and to expose contradictions in life (Kern, 2011). He developed a method of first finding inadequacies of one's opinion and then teaching one to think about all aspects of the opinion by talking through many scenarios. Multiple perspectives can be presented and questioned in a systematic and objective way, ultimately bringing about awareness. As students think through different views and talk through underlying motivations, they develop an understanding of how others think and feel. The models here use principles of interfaith dialogue to cultivate a more harmonious worldview.

### **Moving Forward**

In summary, there is a need in schools to recognize the importance of religious practices in students' lives and to support dialogue about different ways of life. Certainly, the complexity of dialogue about topics that are potentially conflicting deter many educators. Moreover, it might be difficult to negotiate various underlying beliefs that affect language use and behavior. However, dialogue about aspects of students' identity that influence learning is no less

important than discussing content topics. The reality of this work is challenging and educators must be supported in efforts to bring about mutual understandings and respect for others.

According to the Second Vatican Council (1965), “[T]he Church disapproves of, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against people or harassment of them because of their race, color, condition of life, or religion” (para 17). Additionally, Goosen (2008) stressed promoting good relationships among all nations through dialogue, regardless of culture, language, or religious practice. The principles of Interreligious Dialogue guide communication leading to understanding in the classroom and help develop knowledgeable and empathetic citizens. Because we all live differently and value different things, it is vital to our global society to set aside the assumptions that one way of life is the right way and we should respect others beliefs and practices.

The aim of this paper was to highlight the role of religion on language use and behavior. Going beyond the differences in language or the difference in other aspects of culture such as socioeconomic status or ethnicity, researchers should investigate how religion influences language use and behavior in the classroom. The author contends that there are too many instances where education and religious experiences intersect and discussion about religious influence on the learning process is denied. Educators have an obligation to not only mediate the conflict, but also negotiate varying issues in their classrooms. They also have an

obligation to help students become aware of how different people make sense of the world.

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