Cultural and Religious Diversity in Public Schools
A Need to Teach Tolerance and Acceptance in an
Increasingly Diverse World

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The September 11th tragedy, increases in school violence, the constant bombardment of the news media, and global populations reaching an estimated six and a half billion people, all contribute to one single growing need in this world – tolerance. There is an urgent need, nay an obligation now more than ever to educate our young people of America in the importance of respecting and understanding the beliefs, values and the cultures of others. Metzger poses a thought-provoking question:

At issue for this nation, as for much of the world is the simple, but profound question that runs through modern experience: How will we live with our deepest differences? Nowhere is the need to address this question greater than in public education. (2002, p. 18)

“Perhaps more than in any other single American institution, the public schools are places where people of all different religious faiths and those of no religious faiths come together on a regular and sustained basis” (Metzger, 2002, p.27). Yet, should religion and diversity be taught in the United States school systems? Is it even ethically possible to represent all the different worldviews and cultures that exist within our diverse nation? Given the preceding information, perhaps then, the wiser question should be not if, but how should diversity be taught.

“The framers of our Constitution were acutely aware of religious persecution and sought to prevent the United States from experiencing the serious and often bloody conflicts that had occurred in Europe” (Ornstein & Levine, 2006, p. 276). Seeking to
foster freedom and to create a fair and impartial government “The first Amendment, adopted in 1791, prohibits the establishment of a nationally sanctioned religion” (Ornstein & Levine, 2006, p. 276). Essentially the Establishment and Free Exercise clauses we put in to “prohibit America from becoming and explicitly religious nation of any kind – Christian or otherwise – while simultaneously protecting the freedom of all religious and nonreligious people” (Marshall, 2004, p. 2). However, various studies have shown:

Most statistics show that nine out of ten Americans believe in the existence of God. While these statistics do not elaborate on the nature of this God or the depth of religious identity, it is reasonable to conclude that religion in some form and to some degree is important to most Americans. (as cited in Rosenblith & Priestman, 2004, p. 366)

Here in lies the dilemma. Public schools are government institutions and are therefore protected under the First Amendment. Teachers, being government employees cannot encourage nor prevent students from their own religious expression. The United States is one of the most culturally diverse nations in the world, consisting of but not limited to such beliefs as Christianity, Roman Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, Agnostic, Buddhism, and Atheists. Americans are comprised of African Americans, Latin Americans, Europeans, Indians, and Asian – Pacific Islanders, all of which belong to a multitude of ethnicities and cultures. It would prove unjust if just one individual religion or ethnicity were promoted over another in the public schools. “Public Schools exist to serve the educational needs of Americans from all religious and nonreligious traditions and from
all different racial, ethnic, cultural, and social-economic backgrounds” (Metzger, 2002, p.29). Perry Glanzer argues the following point of view:

Att the core, prohibiting school-sponsored religious rituals demonstrates fairness to various worldviews and respects the consciences of parents and students. Non Christian parents do not want teachers leading their children in Christian prayer any more than Christian parents want their children participating in a Shinto exorcism ritual. (1998, p.3)

These deeply spiritual practices should be taught and promoted from within the home and/or the family place of worship where it can be tailored to the individual’s preferences. Public schools should not be responsible for promoting any one culture or religion over another for the simple fact that it is unfair. If a public school decides to offer a Bible study course as part of it’s curriculum then out of fairness they would also have to offer Torah, Koran, Buddhism, and Islam studies as well as any other canon study class requested by the students. Along with religious studies, public schools would also need to offer non-religious studies since a significant proportion of the population consist of nonreligious people. Nonreligious people subscribe to the same type of strong feelings other religious people feel about their beliefs however, “holding a nonreligious view is not the same thing as being uninterested, disliking or being hostile [towards] religion”, it is still a worldview and should be respected as such (Geisert & Mynga 2002, nonreligious worldview). Hiring the properly trained staff to fulfill multi-religious and nonreligious curriculum needs would be costly and inevitably time consuming. On the other hand, “we must recognize that fairness to religion requires protecting and encouraging the religious
expression of students and showing fairness to religious worldviews in curricula…

Education, after all, is primarily about ideas – including religious ideas” (Glanzer, 1998, p. 1,3).

According to the United States First Amendment “teachers and school administrators are prohibited by the Constitution from soliciting or encouraging religious activity and from discouraging activity because of religious content” (Ornstein & Levine, 2006, p. 281). On the contrary, teachers may teach about religion, the history of religion, and allow religious expression and spiritually as long as it is not disruptive. By these standards students should have a basic knowledge and understanding of at least the most common religions and cultures of our world. Unfortunately, this is not the case at all. In fact, as Devon Metzger observed in 2002:

Many Americans, opponents and proponents of school prayer alike, mistakenly believe that this means religion has been banished from the public schools entirely.

People are often not aware that teaching about religion in the public schools is perfectly consistent with constitutional principles. (2002, p.24)

Furthermore, “Since much of the policy about religion is public schools has been determined by the courts, teachers have been understandably leery of introducing religious topics in the classroom” (Marshall, 2004 p. 3). Clearly, much still needs to be done in the way of educating both teachers and parents in the ever-increasing need to provide our students with “tolerance, respect, and mutual understanding in a world of diversity” (Wolf, 2004, p.2).
Proper integration of religion, diversity and multiculturalism into public school curricula should begin with a proper education. Many educators are ill-prepared and unequipped when it comes to integrating diversity into the classroom, as it must be done intelligibly, compassionately and while remaining neutral. Metzger explains, "It is not enough to simply proclaim that more attention should be given to the topics of religion and ethics in public schools" (2002, p. 25), we also must prepare existing and future teachers to respond appropriately to cultural discrimination as well as questions and issues that may surface in the classroom, with or without support from the school itself. In the likely event a teacher has a student who’s beliefs or culture they are unfamiliar with, teacher preparation should also supply educators with the tools they will inevitably need to educate themselves about the traditions and customs of those they are going to teach. Devon Metzger makes the following critical point:

Basic knowledge about the world’s religions will not only help teachers to teach more effectively about ancient civilizations or the history of the United States, it will also help them to better understand and communicate with students and parents who may be Jehovah’s Witnesses, or Sikhs, or Muslims, or traditional Hmong. (2002, p. 26)

This calls for reform of professional education at the college level. Teacher education curricula should include classes in cultural diversity, ancient canons and writings as well as any other culturally based course. California State University’s Department of Religious Studies has done just that. They have created a course entitled “Teaching About Religion in the American Public Schools”, which is designed to prepare pre-service teachers to approach the study of religion in an academically and constitutionally
appropriate fashion” (Metzger, 2002, p. 27). Pre-service teachers are being prepared on multiple levels to respond to and integrate diversity into the classroom.

What about education reform at the public school level? What issues need to be addressed regarding multiculturalism studies and teaching practices? Metzger poses an interesting question: “Should teachers allow or encourage students to share their own religious beliefs, practices and customs?” (2002, p. 26). Here are his findings:


This means that religious expression is acceptable as long as the expression originates from the students. Yet, would it be possible for all students to benefit from deciding to exercise their religious rights by forming different factions, opening up the possibility for discrimination, intolerance and segregation? Leaving it exclusively within the student’s hands may end up negating the very freedoms that were given to them in the first place. “Throughout history religious differences have been inordinately divisive” (Geisert, Dr. P., & Mynga, Dr. F., 2002, religious pluralism). On one hand religion has the amazing power to unite communities and people, while on the other, destroy entire civilizations bringing with it violence, hate crimes, suppression and even spawning entire wars.

According to Nord and Noddings, one of the main reasons for including the study of religion and diversity in public schools is that “the conflict between different worldviews, as well as belief and unbelief exists whether we want to acknowledge it or not. Therefore,
in the interest of the public school good, it deserves structured treatment in the classroom” (as cited in Metzger, 2002, p. 370). Conversely, as Rosenblith & Priestman argue, “many parents would not want their children to question their faith” and by having classes in which culture and faith may be analyzed or discussed as part of the curriculum, the consequences may be disastrous (2004, p. 375).

On the other side of this issue, removing religion and cultural diversity from the curriculum entirely is also problematic. “Recent studies by Warren Nord of the University of North Carolina reveal a startling absence of religious references in textbooks” (Glanzer, 1998, p. 3). How can this be? Humanity as we know it is rooted in religions of all forms. The first civilizations ever recorded worshiped the sun and cosmos, while others gave praise to multiple Gods; still others found solace in just one God. They why should it be that within today’s “advanced” civilization’s public schools system we basically ignore hundreds or thousands of years of human history? There are those who “fear that teaching about religion is a smokescreen for infiltration of the education system by the ‘Religious Right’ (Marshall, 2004, p. 3). In the recent controversy over “Creationism” as observed by Rob Boston:

[Many] advocates of church and state separation are alarmed by the Religious Right’s ongoing efforts to force a sectarian perspective of origins into public school science classes. Many argue that this not only violates church-state separation, it also detracts from efforts to maintain good science education. (2005, p. 5)

The very idea that this could happen is disconcerting since the definition of science comes from the Latin word *sciere*, meaning, “to know”. Science can be analyzed and
tested, where as creationists believe the world is too complex to have come about by chance therefore, there must be an “intelligent designer” responsible for everything we understand to be real (Sprackland & George, 2006, p. 2), but how can that possibly be tested? “Absence of religion in the public school curriculum can [also] be traced to the fear of controversy and to misunderstandings of Supreme Court rulings in the 1960’s, when state-sponsored religious practice was declared unconstitutional” (as cited in Denver, Whitaker, and Byrnes, 2002, p. 1). Educators would rather avoid the political and social pressures or risking their jobs completely than delve into the precarious world surrounding the matter of religion. Yet, “ignoring religion in the public schools… constitutes a misrepresentation of history” (as cited in Denver, et al, 2001, p. 1).

In 1995 and again in 1998, the Department of Education issued guidelines describing how religion can be incorporated into a public school’s curriculum. By suggesting such courses as “the history of religion, comparative religion, the Bible (or other scripture) as literature, and the role of religion in the history of the United States and other countries” (Ornstein & Levine, 2006, p. 280). Concurrently, “children in our increasingly diverse society should [also] be learning how religious beliefs and practices are central to the lives of many people [today]” (as cited in Denver, et al, 2001, p. 1). By incorporating a separate and thorough course on Cultural Diversity within the public school curriculum beginning in elementary school and continuing on through high school, students would become well educated in the many different races, cultures, ethnicities, and religions that surround them. As a result, students would be more accepting, tolerant, and understanding individuals toward not only their peers but to
others as well. “While the line may be a difficult one to walk, as teachers, we owe it to our students to model for them how to be well-informed, thinking, and morally concerned citizens in the modern world” (Marshall, 2004, p. 3). In conclusion, Devon Metzger states:

The academic study of religion makes an indispensable contribution to historical and cultural literacy through its analysis and interpretation of the religious experiences, stories, symbols, rituals, doctrines, values, and institutions of human beings in different times and places. It is impossible to achieve an adequate understanding of human history and culture (literature, art, music, philosophy, law, ethics, politics) without knowing the role that religious beliefs, practices, and communities have played and continue to play in human life. Simply put, we learn a lot about human beings (ourselves and others) by studying other religions. (2002, p.24)
References


