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“We don't talk about that here”: Teachers, Religion, Public Elementary Schools and the Embodiment of Silence, a Binational United States and Israel Study

Abstract

Globally religious diversity is on the rise yet the place of religion in public schools is often heatedly debated. This study examined the experiences of fifth graders in regards to religion in public schools in the United States and Israel. The juxtaposition of diverse countries and school settings opens the dialogue to examine how children and their teachers perceive the impact of religion while in school. The findings suggest that the impact of minority status, school curriculum, and the political and geographical contexts of schools impact the ways that religion is conceptualized in public elementary schools. In addition, the uniquenesses between religions and teacher views concerning the place of religion in public schools should be explored further.

Key Words: Religion, Public Elementary Schools, Religious Diversity, Religious Minorities

Dr. Tina Keller
Messiah College

Dr. Amy Camardese
Westminster College

Dr. Randa Abbas
Arab Academic College
Western Galilee College

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Introduction

Across the globe eight in ten people identify with a religious group (Pew Research Group, 2012). Yet even with the reality that religion is a part of many peoples' lives topics of religion can be considered taboo in the public elementary school setting. In this research study we posed the question, How does a child's public school educational experience impact their religious views or practices? This research examined the experiences of fifth graders and their teachers at a variety of public schools in the United States and Israel. While the United States is the most religiously diverse nation in the world (Eck, 2002), Israel, has state sanctioned religion of Judaism yet still has over 20% of its population confessing other religions (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2011). In addition, public schools in Israel are organized along religious lines. Our purpose was not to explicitly compare Israel and the United States, rather we felt that the juxtaposition of these countries, school systems, religions, and student perspectives would enrich our discussion. Our goal was not to generalize these findings, but to initially examine these contextual relationships.

This study is situated in the international reality that religious diversity and subsequent minority status impacts how schools, teachers, and children negotiate religious identities in the public school context (Dupper, Forrest-Bank, & Lowry-Carusillo, 2015). This is vital in our

increasingly global society. Eck (2000) discussed this as a challenge of both learning how to articulate one's own views regarding their religious faith while at the same time becoming a member of an "intricately interdependent world" (p. 24). The findings suggest that schools that embrace the religious identities of students are more likely to have classrooms where students are comfortable sharing diverse religious perspectives. Yet, the intricate differences between religions, nations, communities, and schools impact the ways that children experience religious diversity in school settings.

Review of the Literature

Children and Religious or Spiritual Beliefs

Often children are dismissed as unable or uninterested in discussing religious or spiritual ideas (Norton, 2012). However, researchers in the field have found that young children are often eager and willing to discuss religious and spiritual topics in the classroom (Coles, 1990; Hay & Nye, 1998). Children as young as kindergartners were found to have the ability to "engage in authentic and civil discussions about beliefs" (Mardell and Abo-Zens, 2010, p.16). Hilder (2012) echoed these findings when she recalled in her own life how she, a Christian, and her Jewish friend discussed religion in spite of their teacher's reprimands. While children of all religious persuasions are in theory welcomed in public schools, yet in reality religious identity is often ignored, silenced, repressed, or forbidden (White, 2009). Children are innately interested in understanding and questioning the world around them which includes the desire to understand broader, often spiritual meanings to life (Coles, 1990; Hay & Nye, 1998; Norton, 2014).

Eaude (2009) noted that children wish to know, "Who am I?, Where do I fit in?, Why am I here?" (p. 189). These questions fit into the conversation regarding the mental health and emotional wellbeing of children in search for connectedness and meaning. Adults are an

important piece in this process. In contrast, when teachers forbid these conversations, as Van Brummelen, Koole, & Franklin (2004) described as the current situation of education, children are educated in a spiritual void.

Teachers and Religious or Spiritual Beliefs

Research concerning teacher religiosity and spirituality is an emerging field in educational research as it takes into account the interconnectedness of the personhood of the teachers in the operation of classrooms (Hartwick, 2012). Several researchers have sought to understand the impact of a teacher's own personal religious or spiritual beliefs upon their teaching practice (Baurain, 2012; Bekerman & Horenczyk, 2004; Hartwick, 2012; Palmer, 2003). Baurain (2012) argued that a teacher's religious beliefs should be included in understanding how the person impacts teaching practice. Bekerman and Horenczyk's (2004) study in Israel found that Jewish teachers in a nonreligious bilingual school felt the need to emphasize their teaching of Jewish religious traditions as a means of reinforcing their student's Jewish identity when faced with a bicultural classroom (p.395). Palmer (2003) encouraged teachers to teach their students in "heart and soul" as a means to allow children to bring their authentic, diverse spiritual selves into the classroom.

While often teacher education programs provide instruction in multicultural education highlight differences such as race, class, gender, and language, religion is often either omitted, or only briefly mentioned (Subedi 2006; White, 2009). In White's (2009) review of the literature over the past two decades surrounding teacher identities religious beliefs and how these beliefs impact their teaching, she only found a limited number of articles that addressed this idea. Hartwick (2012) encouraged deeper research into the idea of "spiritual cognition" the

relationships between a teacher's inner spiritual life and the daily decisions or judgments and actions of teaching.

In addition, there are limited studies on the experiences of teachers professing minority religions. At the same time non-religious, or atheist teachers have experienced discrimination and may feel "helpless to alter the Christian-dominant culture of our public schools" (Anderson, Mathys, & Cook, 2014, p.511). Several studies have also found that teachers often hold inaccurate, generalized, or prejudiced views concerning the religions of their students (Aown, 2011; Guo, 2012; Mastrilli, and Sardo-Brown, 2002; Ribak-Rosenthal and Kane, 1999; McDonough and Hoodfar, 2005). Guo (2012) uses the term "religious illiteracy" to describe the limited knowledge and experiences that many teachers have in regards to different religions. As a result, many teachers simply revert to stereotypes and previous beliefs. This culminated in religious discrimination which Guo proposed "...derives in part from religious illiteracy" (Guo, 2012, p.18). In particular, teachers have been found to harbor fear of Muslims, considering Islam a threatening and violent religion (McDonough and Hoodfar, 2005). Others studies found that while teachers expressed a simplistic sense of religious sensitivity towards their Muslim students, the teachers lacked even a rudimentary knowledge of the faith and were unable to explain how they would integrate religious diversity into their teaching (Mastrilli, and Sardo-Brown, 2002). Aown (2011) concluded that religious illiteracy can lead to increased discrimination and prejudiced viewpoints of students of faith.

Religion in American Schools

Religion is woven into the fabric of the establishment of the United States (Neusner, 2003). The majority of the population professes a religious affiliation with 73% Christian compared to 10% professing no religion and 2 percent are Jewish and less than 1 percent are

Buddhist, just over 0.5 percent Muslim or Hindu (Pew Research, 2007). However along with this religious tradition is also the belief of the importance of the separation between Church and state.

A myriad of court cases in the United States make it clear that religion cannot be taught as a belief on public school campuses (Cantwell v. Connecticut (1940), Everson v. Board of Education of Ewing Township (1947), McCollum v. Board of Education (1948), Engel v. Vitale (1962) Lee v. Weisman (1992), Santa Fe Independent School District v. Doe (2000)). Because of the separation between church and state, U.S. teachers are often confused about the do's and don'ts of teaching about religion in schools (Passe, J., & Willox, L., 2009; Lewy, S., & Betty, S., 2007). As a result, religion is often neglected in the schools. The reality is that the Supreme Court has only ruled unconstitutional devotional religious teaching. Instruction in religion is actually encouraged as long as school districts do not promote or endorse a particular religion. States must remain neutral on issues of religion (Feinberg, W., 2014). However, because school calendars in the U.S. are created based on Christian holidays, a holiday curriculum becomes the norm (Parker, 2003).

What does the law say regarding teaching about religion in public schools? Schools cannot promote any religion as being "best". Teachers cannot promote or express their own religion. Students can freely practice religion but it is not okay for schools to sponsor or promote a specific religion. Once a school district permits community meetings to occur on school property, religious groups must not be discriminated against (Feinberg, 2014; McCarthy, 2009). School districts need to create clear policies and follow legal principles in order to avoid controversies regarding religion (Haynes, C., 2011). Teachers are not permitted to lead devotionals, distribute religious materials, reference religion in instruction, wear proselytizing

clothing, or avoid teaching components of the curriculum for religious purposes. It is permissible to teach the Bible for historical or literary perspective instruction (Haynes, C., 2011). Because the topic of religion in schools is briefly addressed in teacher preparation programs, by the time teachers are practitioners, this information has unfortunately been forgotten.

The controversy, litigation, and general sense of taboo surrounding religion in public schools creates a tension for teachers. Teachers feel the pressure to occupy the space between not encouraging, at the same time as not discouraging religion in schools (Paige, 2003). Therefore, schools and teachers often walk a fine line between protecting students' rights to express their religious beliefs and promoting a particular religion. As a result, many states have discontinued teaching religion altogether (Hartwick, Hawkins, & Schroeder, 2013). Or, states and classroom teachers provide curriculum and instruction on religion that only provides "... a thumbnail sketch of each world faith that creates more stereotypes than useful understandings. Another flawed method limits historical coverage to a period thousands of years ago, leaving the impression that religions are quaint artifacts of bygone eras" (Douglass, 2002, p.33-34). This practice has led to U.S. students lacking knowledge about world religions.

Without a curriculum that includes world religions, U.S. students have deficits in awareness of other cultures and a realistic worldview (McCarthy, 2009). To neglect teaching religion is like failing to provide students with material they need to revise their own conceptions (Feinberg, 2014). At the same time, schools are already religiously diverse and this diversity in religions often creates climates of suspicion and Xenophobia (Eck, 2000). For example, 2004 to 2012 religiously motivated hate crimes has increased three fold with one in five perpetrators under the age of 18 (US. Department of Justice, 2014). Students must learn more about the religions and beliefs of individuals around the world, as well as their own classmates.

According to Passe, J., & Willox, L. (2009), it is often the case that people who share the same religion live in the same geographic area which leads to some minorities becoming the majority in local school districts. Under these circumstances, dominant religious practices can be mitigated and the religious customs of the minority are integrated in schools. Religion, food, dress, language, arts, and everyday customs of behavior are the essence or characteristics of a culture and are often difficult to separate from one another.

In the United States, Dupper, Forrest-Bank, and Lowry-Carusillo (2015) found that students with religions deemed in the minority experienced bullying, hate crimes, and microaggressions surrounding their faith with peers as well as teachers acting as perpetrators. Students shared that they felt "... an unspoken assumption that everyone is Christian and will readily participate in Christian clubs and celebrate Christian holidays (p.4). Students identified several precursors for discrimination which included the build up to Christmas, media coverage of perceived religious related events, school curriculum or religious apparel or symbols. The historical ramifications of Christian privilege in schools in the United States is well documented (Blumenfeld, 2006) having various forms and functions of Christian privilege, one of which, "involves the notion that one does not have to educate oneself—to become familiar with the religious beliefs and customs of other religious communities" (p.205).

Religion in Israeli Schools

Similar to the United States, Israel is also a diverse country on many levels; ethnically, culturally, linguistically, economically, and religiously. However, at the same time, Israel is the only country in the world with a Jewish majority of 74.5% (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2011). The establishment of Israel in 1948 created an environment where Jewish people from around the world immigrated to Israel. For example, the influx of Jewish immigrants from the former

Soviet Union adds to the linguistic and cultural diversity of those counted in the Jewish population. In addition, there are citizens of Israel in both the Ultra-orthodox and Arab populations with members questioning the very authority of the Israeli state (Wolff & Breit, 2012, p.4). Yet at the same time, the country of Israel has a state sanctioned religion of Judaism.

In addition to the diversity of the Jewish citizens, approximately 25% of the population is Muslim, Druze or Christian (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Many Arab families can trace their ancestry to the region well before the establishment of Israel. Many Israeli Arabs face systematic bias and oppression for their faith and ethnicity. This contributes decreased political and educational opportunities (Ghanem, 1998). The Arab, Druze and Jewish communities in Israel in many cases live in “isolated areas and participate in segregated educational systems”(Berkman, 2002, p.260). This geographic isolation is coupled with economic inequalities and historical, systematic subordination (Smootha, 1998). In Israel, the idea of religious identity is more multifaceted with many Arabs in Israel finding their identity in four aspects, citizenship, nationality, ethnicity, and religion (Arar, 2012).

These conflicts and inequalities are thus reflected in the structure of the Israeli educational system which is divided into four separate educational entities; Non Religious Jewish, Arabic, National Religious Jewish and Orthodox Jewish, all housed under the Ministry of Education (Sprinzsak, Segev, Bar, & Levi-Mazlum, 2001). Each system provides education in different languages of instruction, a range of government mandated and/or religious curriculums, funding inequalities, and diverse teacher education programs. When Arab schools are compared to Jewish schools, there are still discrepancies in terms of drop-outs, facilities, special services, attendance rates and achievement (Rouhana, 1997; Wolff & Breit, 2012).

According to Gross (2003), the Israeli State Religious education system is based on a

combination of teaching secular studies with traditional Jewish religious education. This modern education teaches basic skills designed to equip students with information needed to function as citizens and the ability to lead productive lives. The desire to provide an educational system that is uniform and equal may have a detrimental effect on religious minorities. The Israeli State education system begins with pre-school and continues through higher education institutions.

Cultural expectations with regard to education from minority groups in Israel, specifically Arab adolescents, indicate a gradual increase in the number of Arab females attending institutions of higher education and entering the workforce (Azaiza, F., & Ben-Ari, A.T., 1998). Completing a formal education helps Arab adolescents develop and enhance their feelings of self-worth. The relationship between culture and ethnicity in minority groups may have profound implications for adolescent feelings of self-worth.

A study by Fisherman, (2011) looked at the socialization factors (parents, teachers, or peers) that most influenced adolescents with regard to religion. The study found that adolescent males and females were most likely influenced by their parents. Surprisingly, teachers often had a remarkable influence on faith identity for males. Teacher influence on faith identity is an area that should not be overlooked.

Methodology

Research Question

As three teacher educators of faith (two Christian and one Druze) we were interested in understanding the relationships between religion, teachers, and students public elementary schools. Our binational research project examined the following research questions.

- How do fifth graders and teachers experience religion in public schools in the United States and Israel?

- Does being a religious minority impact one's religious views or practice in public school classrooms?

Theoretical Framework

Drawing upon feminist standpoint theory (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004; Harding, 2004) of voice and silence conceptualized within the constructs of power in the public school setting we seek to understand the phenomena surrounding our research questions. While we have utilized empirical data, we choose to understand this data within an objective construct. We understand experiences of religion in public school are socially based and constructed within the larger political landscapes of schools, communities, and country. We are aware of our own standpoints as researchers, each of us coming from our own socialized experience. We do not resist these differing lenses, instead view our unique positionality as a vital component to how we understand and experienced our research.

The idea of silence and voice was central in our interpretation of the data. Researchers have examined silence in a variety of contexts (Asher, 2007; Bell, Özbilgin, Beauregard, and Sürgevil, 2011; Morrison and Milliken, 2000; Pinder and Harlos, 2001). Morrison and Milliken (2000) argued that organizations create environments where contextual factors acuminate resulting in employees remaining silent even when faced with serious concerns or problems. This organizational silence robs the company of its ability to benefit from a diverse pluralistic knowledges held by employees that “feel that their opinions are not valued” (p.707). In their research, Morrison and Milliken (2000) found that a “climate of silence” exists when “the dominant response within an organization will be silence rather than voice” (p.708). They

conclude that one of the most difficult aspects to employee silence is that it, by the very nature, is hidden from plain sight. While everyone may subconsciously or privately acknowledge the silence, people feel unable to speak up against it. In this way individuals expressed a *acquiescent silence* (Pinder & Harlos, 2001) feeling unable to voice their opinions. Pinder and Harlos (2001) encouraged the rejection of a simplistic understanding of silence preferring more nuanced views of silence. For example, Jones (2010) noted, “silence may be a rational response to their (dominant) peers’ lack of ability to hear and understand” (p.60). As researchers we have been cognizant of the fact that we do not wish to privilege voice over silence (Li, 2010) nor do we wish to view all silences as similar. However, we have found that the metaphor of silence to be a useful multifaceted theory in making sense of our data.

Method

To guide our research, we developed a survey that was administered to fifth grade students in the United States and Israel. The survey was developed by the researchers after consulting with professors of religion and investigating research journals on the topic of religion in schools. Once the survey was developed, it was examined and approved by a panel of religion and education professors of Jewish, Druze, and Muslim faiths at Northern Israel College (pseudonym) and revised with their feedback (See Appendix A). The survey was translated into Hebrew and Arabic and then given to Jewish and Arabic professors to translate back into English to validate the accuracy of the translation.

The survey focused on three aspects of religious practice (prayer, scriptures, holidays) and asked students to identify their practice in their family, individual and school contexts. In addition, students were asked about their experience with their religion and the religion of others in public schools. Questions measuring religious tolerance were also included. Classroom

teachers were also interviewed using semi structured interview questions (See Appendix B). The survey was approved by the Israeli Education System.

A mixed method was employed to provide converging lines of inquiry. Semi-structured interviews of teachers provided insight on human perceptions and interactions. Survey results were analyzed using a chi square test for homogeneity of proportions to examine the relationships between schools, nationality, religion, gender and minority status.

Participants

For our study in the United States, we researched public schools in the Western Pennsylvania, Eastern Ohio region. We surveyed 89 fifth graders from two school locations, rural and urban. We chose our test sites to reflect a variety of religious backgrounds; some schools with a variety of religions represented, others with a more religiously segregated population. It should be noted that several school districts were approached to be part of the study and when the topic of the study, survey and interview questions were shared with administrators, they declined to participate. For our study in Israel, we researched the Arab and Non Religious Jewish Schools in the Upper Galilee region of Israel. We surveyed 126 fifth graders from three schools named the Jewish School (64 students), Arab School (39 students), and Druze School (23 students). These schools represent a range of locations and religious affiliations with, rural and urban, Arab, Muslim, Druze, Christian and Jewish students. We also surveyed and interviewed teachers from these schools.

Results

Differences by Country

One interesting dynamic of this study was the way that fifth graders in the United States conceptualized their religious label or category compared to the responses of children in Israel.

In the United States religious categories can be blurred (Kosmin & Navarro-Rivera, 2008) This was evident in the self reporting of religious affiliation. Nine percent of American students identified as not having a religion and 16% self-identified as Other. In contrast in Israel, 100% of the students chose a religious category. Whereas in comparison 61.8% of students in the United States were practicing their religion at school via prayer. Prayer as spirituality not necessarily tied to a religion. Coles (1990) found a similar relationship in his study of the spiritual life of children and discovered that with many children their spirituality was not equated with their religion or religious identification.

A chi square test for homogeneity of proportions was performed to examine the relation between nationality and feeling comfortable talking about their religion in school. The relation between these variables was significant $\chi^2(1, N=209)=7.43, p=.006$. American students (72%) felt comfortable talking about their religion at school compared to Israeli children (53%). Results also show that responses of Israeli children were significantly different than expected distribution of responses ($p=.000$) with 77 % preferring classmates to share the same religion. Results also show that responses of American children were significantly different than expected ($p=.000$) with a smaller 23% expressing a desire for classmates to share the same religion. The data in this study suggest the U.S. policy of separation of church and state may have an influence on the acceptance or non-acceptance of other religious perspectives in the public schools. Public school curriculum neither promotes or negates a religious perspective thereby supporting the theory that students do not have the belief that everyone must have the same religion as they do. However, Young (2009) stated that the norms and values of the predominant culture infiltrate society and set expectations for what is typically accepted.

There was also a significant difference when children were asked if they wished that everyone at their school shared their religion. Due to the differences in the national climates of the public schools in the United States and Israel, student responses for this question may simply reflect the public policy in their country.

Table One- Nationality

NATIONALITY CATEGORY	AMERICAN	ISRAELI
	YES	YES
I wish everyone at school had the same religion as me	22.7%	77.1%
I feel comfortable talking about my religion at school	71.9%	53.3%
I learn about other religions at school	22.5%	60.6%
In my classroom, we discuss my religion	3.4%	81.0%
My friends at school read the same sacred scriptures as I do	44.3%	62.2%
I pray at school	61.8%	15.6%
I learn about sacred scriptures at school	3.4%	80.8%
I pray	94.4%	46.8%
I pray at home	89.9%	43.2%
My family celebrated religious holidays at home	98.9%	74.1%

Differences by School

When considering the five schools in this study, (American Rural, American Urban, Jewish, Arab, Druze) there were similarities between the responses of American Rural and American Urban. These American experiences were also similar to children and teachers attending the Jewish School in Israel. There were similarities when considering the Arab and Druze Schools. However, there were more pronounced differences between the American and Jewish Schools when compared to the Arab and Druze Schools in Israel.

Table Two – School

SCHOOL CATEGORY	AMERICAN RURAL	ARAB	DRUZE	JEWISH	AMERICAN URBAN
	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
I wish everyone at school had the same religion as me	38.5%	94.9%	90.9%	59.6%	20.0%
I feel comfortable talking about my religion at school	76.9%	30.8%	70.8%	61.4%	71.1%
I read sacred scriptures more than my peers	69.2%	30.8%	75.0%	68.8%	54.6%
I pray	100.0%	53.8%	33.3%	47.6%	93.4%
I pray at home	100.0%	53.8%	47.8%	34.9%	88.2%
My family celebrated religious holidays at home	92.3%	86.8%	65.2%	69.1%	100.0%
I like to go to my place of worship	75.0%	92.3%	17.4%	70.2%	70.7%
I learn about sacred scriptures at school	15.4%	86.5%	87.5%	75.0%	1.3%
I can talk about sacred scriptures at school	84.6%	33.3%	54.2%	63.1%	50.0%

I pray at school	46.2%	7.7%	12.5%	21.5%	64.5%
I learn about other religions int school	38.5%	82.1%	60.9%	47.7%	19.7%
In my classroom, we discuss my religion	0.0%	92.3%	95.7%	68.8%	3.9%
My friends at school read the same sacred scriptures as I do	30.8%	44.7%	91.7%	61.5%	46.7%

A chi square test for homogeneity of proportions was performed to examine the relation between school (American Rural, American Urban, Jewish, Arab, Druze) and being afraid that people won't like me if I talk about my religion at school. The relation between these variables was significant $\chi^2 (4, N=209)=11.75, p=.019$. Jewish School students (25%) responded they are afraid that people won't like me if I talk about my religion at school compared to 8.3% of the U.S. rural school students.

Significant results were also found between Arab School students (94%) and Druze School students (90.9%) as compared to U.S. urban school (20%) and U.S. rural (38.5%) when students were asked if they wished everyone at school had the same religion as me $\chi^2 (4, N=206)=75.163, p=.000$.

A third significant result was found among school and feeling comfortable talking about their religion in school. The relation between these variables was significant $\chi^2 (4, N=209)=20.617, p=.000$. U.S. rural (76.9%) and U.S. urban (71.1%), Jewish (61.4%) and Druze (70.8%) as compared to Arab schools (30.8%).

Interviews and surveys of teachers from the U.S. indicated that all of the teachers avoided discussion of religious topics. U. S. teachers believed that because of the separation between church and state, it is not permissible to teach or talk about religion in public schools. As one of

the teachers mentioned when asked how diversity of religious beliefs in her class is addressed, “Religious discussions occur when a book or text makes a religious reference or includes a religious topic (i.e. heaven vs. hell). Not much detail is given and discussions are surface level.” One teacher described feeling “conflicted on this topic. I do believe that religion should be discussed in school, but not a teacher’s personal beliefs. Just what the basis of each religion is- maybe as part of teaching tolerance.” Yet this teacher later shared that she did not feel “necessarily able to address religious beliefs in the classroom.” This feeling that religion should be discussed in theory, but did not occur in practice was echoed by all of the American teachers.

A teacher at the Jewish school commented that students never discussed religion at her school. While the majority of her students were Jewish, there were also Christian and Muslim students attending the school. She recalled, “It doesn't affect us very much really. It is sufficient to say that by 5th grade it is just part of the culture. It’s acceptance.” While she did note that individual students celebrated Christmas or Ramadan, to her, religion was not a part of the discussion in elementary school.

In contrast, a teacher at the Arab school in Israel explained that the religions of her students were a frequent topic of conversation. She noted that religious leaders from the faiths represented in her building were invited to come to school and teach the students about their religion. She referred us to the displays in their school lobby which showed a variety of religious symbols such as a Christmas tree. She also reported that when seemingly religious conflicts arose in the classroom she reminded the children that “God created us and made us...we are unique. Don’t talk to him (a classmate) like that.” She further explained, “God loves us...God wants us to respect each other and to me more gentle to each other.” In this way, this teacher

focused upon the monotheistic traditions of the three religions represented in her student body diverting attention from differences.

A teacher at the Druze school in Israel described the differences in the religious backgrounds of her students as impacting many aspects of their education. She said, "It is really interesting to see how mentality and religious backgrounds do affect everyone. The way they think, the way they behave on a daily basis, the way they perceive the smallest ads on TV. Everything is seen differently due to (religious) background." While all of the students in this school were members of the Druze religion, they came from a spectrum of degrees of varying religiosity.

The children in this study confirmed the reflections of their teachers. For American students, only 3 out of 86 American children indicated that they discussed religion in schools. In the Jewish school 44 students responded yes with 20 responding no in comparison to the Druze school with 22 yes, to only one no, and in the Arab school with 36 yes and 3 no. These results show that fifth grade students were keenly aware of the silences as well as inclusions of topics of religion in school discussions.

Differences by Religion

When the data was disaggregated by religion, 30% of Muslim children said they felt comfortable talking about their own religion in school while 70% of Catholic children expressed feeling comfortable talking about their religion in their school. A chi square test for homogeneity of proportions was performed to examine the relation between religion and feeling comfortable talking about their religion in school. The relation between these variables (Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Druze, Muslim, None, Other) was significant $\chi^2(6, N=209)=16.341, p=.012$.

The differences among respondents when answering the statement, I wish everyone at school had the same religion as me was interesting. Catholic student responses were 15.8% and Protestant student responses were 50%. Druze students (86.7%), Jewish students (86.7%) and Muslim students (95.7%) may be related to the configuration of school systems in the U.S. and Israel. The relation between these variables was significant $\chi^2(6, N=206)=87.366, p=.000$.

Another interesting finding was in relation to the survey statement, I learn about sacred scriptures at school. The relation between these variables was significant $\chi^2(6, N=215)=27.334, p=.000$. Protestant (8.3%) and Catholic students (3.5%) are reflective of the teacher interview data which indicated teachers do not teach about various religions because they are unsure about what is and what is not permitted in the standards and curriculum. The same determination could be made about the responses to the statement, In my classroom, we discuss my religion. Whereas, Druze students (76.7%), Jewish students (86.8%) and Muslim students (87%) overwhelmingly reported a comfort with learning about sacred scriptures. This again may be related to the difference in curriculum between the two countries.

Table Three – Religion

RELIGION CATEGORY	CATHOLIC	PROTESTANT	DRUZE	JEWISH	MUSLIM	NONE	OTHER
	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
I have to hide my religion at school	7.0%	18.2%	32.8%	2.6%	8.7%	9.0%	0.0%
I feel comfortable talking about my religion at school	70.2%	58.3%	60.7%	62.5%	30.4%	44.4%	86.7%
I wish everyone at school had the same religion as me	15.8%	50.0%	86.7%	54.8%	95.7%	0.0%	33.3%
I learn about sacred scriptures at school	3.5%	8.3%	76.7%	86.8%	87.0%	11.1%	6.7%
My friends at school read the same sacred scriptures as I do	54.4%	50.0%	66.1%	59.0%	50.0%	11.1%	35.7%
My religious holidays are celebrated at school	57.9%	58.3%	51.7%	73.3%	90.9%	33.3%	80.0%

I learn about other religions at school	19.3%	50.0%	57.4%	46.2%	95.7%	11.1%	0.0%
In my classroom, we discuss my religion	1.8%	16.7%	86.9%	69.2%	95.7%	0.0%	0.0%
I pray at school	61.4%	75.0%	12.9%	25.6%	4.3%	22.2%	66.7%
I pray at home	87.7%	83.3%	38.3%	36.8%	69.6%	66.7%	100.0%
My family celebrated religious holidays at home	94.6%	91.7%	71.7%	80.6%	81.8%	100.0%	100.0%
I like to go to my place of worship	82.5%	75.0%	41.7%	96.9%	87.0%	12.5%	64.3%
I pray	91.2%	83.3%	32.3%	60.5%	72.7%	77.8%	66.5%
I read sacred scriptures more than my peers	47.4%	66.7%	58.1%	68.4%	43.5%	0.0%	73.3%

According to Parker (2003), schools often promote diversity (minority status) through the lens of citizenship education. Discussions about fairness, respect, and responsibility are often embedded in the social studies curriculum yet conversations about cultural and religious diversity are excluded. Milner (2003) indicates that pre-service teachers often resist topics that are diverse and different than their (pre-service teachers) background. 30.4% of Muslim students expressed that they felt comfortable talking about their religion at schools. (see table 4). This is similar to 30.8% of children at the Arab school also expressing comfort in discussing their religion at school. We hypothesize that this data may be linked to the political and cultural implications of living as a religious minority in Israel. In Israel, the Arab school functioned as a haven for three religious minority groups with a shared Arab identity. There were no Jewish students enrolled at this school. Teachers in this school expressed that their common Arab identity was a way to unify diverse religions and in an unspoken way as resistance to the normative Jewish spaces.

This was a space that was not evident in the Jewish school. When children were asked to respond to the statement, I am afraid that people will not like me if I talk about my religion at

school, 30 students responded yes, and 183 students responded no. However it was interesting that the thirty students were mostly clustered in the Jewish School (16) and the larger American public school (10) where the dominant religion of the school was that represented by the majority population.

Out of the five schools in the study, teachers from the schools that most represented the dominant religion of the country (Christianity in the United States and Judaism in Israel) described infrequent occasions to discuss religion, or were also the most reluctant to discuss topics of religion at school. In contrast, the Arab and Druze Schools, which represented minority religions in Israel, described in more detail how religion was discussed at school. U.S. teachers all self reported as Christian. Some using words such as “strong Christian” indicating that they attended Christian Colleges and frequently attended church. However they were unsure how to have conversations about religion, even Christianity, with their students. This uncertainty was even more pronounced when discussing students of diverse religious backgrounds. One comment a U.S. teacher made when asked to think about a time when students discussed or talked about religion;

“The student that I had that was Hindi, was painted with Henna for some type of religious ceremony and then again in observance for a religious holiday. While it was quite beautiful, it was also a distraction in the classroom as many students equated the henna to being like “tattoos” and felt that it wasn’t right that she was able to wear the markings when they were against dress code.”

This comment illustrates the dominant religious beliefs (Christian) and the lack of understanding of cultures other than our own.

Discussion

We recognize that given the cultural, national, and religious differences of the children, teachers, and schools in this study direct comparisons are difficult to make. Rather than to generalize our findings, we seek to understand a phenomenon from a variety of perspectives. As the results are discussed in this section, we wish to emphasize the differences in public schools in Israel and United States make it difficult to generate definitive conclusions. The authors found several significant findings but also wish to share information that raises additional queries about teaching religion in public schools. In addition, as this was a small scale study with limited sample sizes we urge researchers to consider these topics on a larger scale. In this section of results we will discuss the findings from teacher interviews as well as student surveys. Data was also analyzed to determine if there were differences based upon gender and minority status, however no significant differences were determined.

The topic of researching religion and public elementary schools

In our early phases of the study, we were warned by multiple individuals concerning the controversial nature of our research in that we were primarily discussing religion connected to public schools and children. The second caution was that our study was situated in the political climates of both the United States and Israel. Several American schools did not wish to be a part of the study. Principals were initially receptive to the idea of a participating in a research study until they discovered that the topic was religion. American teachers were not overly enthused about participating in a study about religion and public schools and preferred to answer interview questions via email rather than face to face. We did not face this issue in requesting participating schools in Israel.

The topic of religion has a tendency to raise responses that evoke strong emotions. One researcher was accosted by a person at a national conference when discussing this topic. Matters of religion (faith) can be deeply rooted in personal beliefs of right and wrong and personal identity. This realization made us wonder, if we, as researchers felt this strain how much more pressure might classroom teachers feel? We questioned if teachers were even supported enough to consider these issues without critique from administration, parents, or community? In the vacuum of leadership, or even the smallest thread of guidance, we were not then surprised to discover that teachers often mediated this silence by often avoiding the topic entirely.

As the world's population is religiously diverse, and becoming even more so, classroom teachers need support in addressing these realities. The historical, sociopolitical and spiritual realities surrounding the topic of religion in public schools highlights the inherent complexities of a religiously diverse world. In the United States, students do possess the right to express their religious beliefs at school. However, American classroom teachers struggle in finding their place and for worry their stance on discussions about religion in the classroom may result in reprimands from the school administration or families. The teachers in this study also expressed a reluctance to include topics of religion into the curriculum. Therefore, quite often the default position of classroom teachers is one that discourages conversation about religion and results in children believing that any religious or spiritual topic is taboo. Students are asked to leave their beliefs at the door.

In Israel, religion is openly acknowledged as there are four separate educational entities each focusing upon the education of a particular group, often based on the religious category of the student. In this way, education is segregated based upon nationality and degree of religiosity. Yet, our findings suggest that students in Israel, especially minority students, feel less

comfortable discussing religion in schools. The political and often hostile environment towards religious minorities on a national level even in the face of school initiatives towards inclusivity impact children.

The findings from the study reveal that there are pressing concerns regarding the place of religion in public schools in both Israel and the United States. The teachers as well as the ten year-old children surveyed expressed their concerns in regards to religion in public schools. However, the pervasive tactic of teachers and children when faced with topics of religion was silence. There were three ways that silence was employed; Religious Identity as a Silencer of Others, Silence as Protection, and Silence of Religion in the School Curriculum.

Religious Identity as a Silencer of Others

The first theme emerging from the data was the ways that the religious identity of those in the majority functioned to silence all other religions. As both the United States and Israel have defined national dominant religions of between 70-75% of the population professing these majority religions the religious expression/identity of children was silenced in schools where the majority of the school was of the dominant state religion. Teachers and students alike in schools with dominant religions (both American Schools and the Jewish School) expressed that religion was not a topic of conversation, nor was it a part of their education. For example, there was a large difference in how children responded affirmatively to the statement "I learn about other religions at school." Children indicated yes at the American Rural School (38%) American Urban (19%) Jewish (47%) Arab (82%) and Druze (60%).

The silencing of minoritized religions created missed opportunities for understanding. Instead, silence maintained the system of marginalization. In this way, silence functioned to make the discussion of religion even more taboo and uncomfortable as students have been told

that the topic is off limits. It promoted the severing of home and school especially for religious minority students. However, interestingly enough, while participants indicated that religion was not often explicitly discussed, the power associated with being a member of the dominant religious group was evident. In this way the silence associated with religion and religious identity further affirms the normative nature of the dominant religion.

Silence as Protection

In both countries, though the educational systems and structures are quite different, it is only those students of the majority that can “leave their religion at the door.” Religious minorities do not have that option. Religious minorities in the United States and in Israel face similar, yet unique challenges.

In Israel some minority students and some teachers hide their religion in schools. Druze students (32.8%) reported they have to hide their religion at school; this statistic could be due to a facet of the Druze faith that promotes secrecy about the tenets of the Druze religion.

The silences surrounding religion also functioned as protection for teachers as well. For example, for one teacher at the Arab school site, which educated the most religiously diverse student body, declined to reveal her own religious identity both in the interview, and to her students. Instead she focused upon the commonalities of the three religions (Muslim, Christian, Druze) represented in her school. She said, “My beliefs are that we have the same God for all of the religions. That’s what I always say to my students. At the end, we believe in God, although we have prophets...each religion has to respect each prophet.” While she may have been

protecting herself, her silence appeared to function as a protection for presenting herself as more relatable to all of her students.

In another way, American teachers explained that they felt uncomfortable talking about religious issues in class, and worried that their conversation about religion might cross the line between the separation between church and state. Therefore, as a default, teachers remained silent regarding the religions of their students, or religious topics.

The silencing of religion in the school curriculum

This culture of silencing of religious identity as well as the silencing of learning about other religions creates a climate of religious illiteracy and a severing of the religious identity of students. A Jewish teacher surveyed indicated that the school calendar was based on Jewish holidays (as mandated); minority students would of course have those holidays off of school but also miss school for the holidays of their observed religion. The same teacher shared that the observed holidays of religious minority students would be mentioned in the classroom. Survey data collected indicates that when asked if they feel comfortable talking about my religion at school, 70.2% of Catholics, 58.3% of Protestants, 60.7% of Druze, 62.5% of Jewish, 30.4% of Muslim, 44.4% claiming no religious affiliation, and 86.7% of Other said **yes**. With the exceptions of the Muslim students, it appears that the majority of respondents are comfortable talking about religion in schools. Are we missing an opportunity to employ the school curriculum to promote healthy discussions, share factual information, and encourage diverse perspectives?

The Israeli Arab School had a curriculum that included classes on Jewish, Muslim, and Christian religions. All students at this school were minorities; the principal had a firm belief in the importance of teaching and recognizing all religions. His leadership had a unifying outcome

on the students and staff. Perhaps, acceptance and understanding of others is a positive result of exposing students to a variety of religions. Survey data indicated that Druze (86.9%), Jewish (69.2%), and Muslim (95.7) students discussed their religion in class. Only 1.8% of Catholic and 16.7% of Protestant students indicated that religion was discussed in their classrooms. It appears that the U.S. students are not learning about religions in their classrooms.

From teacher interviews, it was overwhelmingly reported they silenced their own religious identity because they did not wish to influence students with regard to their own personal beliefs. A Druze teacher reflected upon how she brought in topics of religion into the classroom even when it was not a required part of the curriculum. She said, "I bring it to class (religious topics, holiday in particular) You know. They should know that these things exist, it's general information. Sure it's not in my book, my curriculum, but I think they should know. So, I explain it." She further explained her motives behind teaching about religion that "I just want to enrich them...that's the role of teachers, to expose them."

Conclusion

How do teachers of faith navigate these uncharted waters? How can teachers break the silences that surround religion and the religious identity of students? As teacher educators how do we model this for our students?

We concur with Guo (2012), "Teacher education in today's immigration context must be re-conceptualized to address what it means to teach in multilingual, multicultural, and multi-religious schools" (p. 16). And as stated by Elshtain (2002), "I am struck daily by how bringing religion *in* opens everything *up*; it is a wonderful liberation!" (p. 200). By contextually analyzing the relationships between U.S. and Israeli public schools and religion, we have

concluded that further research could be directed in discovering if the support of a teacher may serve to mitigate the cultural and religious inequalities of minority students in the classroom. Teachers tend to avoid teaching about religion because they are unsure of what is and is not permitted to be taught. The predominant religion of a country sets expectations for what is usually accepted culturally.

The silencing of minoritized religions created missed opportunities for understanding. Instead, silence maintained the system of marginalization. This culture of silencing of religious identity as well as the silencing of learning about other religions creates a climate of religious illiteracy and a severing of the religious identity of students.

We concur with Mardell and Abo-Zens (2010) who urged educators to create classrooms where there are safe spaces for children to discuss and explore spirituality and difference. At an early age, children learn that only their non-religious self is welcomed in school, and their religious or spiritual self must remain at home or in the community. Or, children feel ashamed and isolated when their religious beliefs, or differing understandings of spirituality or atheism are in the minority. While children of all religious persuasions are in theory welcomed in public schools, yet in reality religious identity is often ignored, silenced, repressed, or forbidden.

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Appendix 1- Religion in Public Schools: A Binational Study

Student Survey

Research Question:

How does a child's public school educational experience impact their religious views or practices?

1. Gender: Male Female

2. Age:

3. Religious Identity:

Catholic Protestant Druze Jewish Muslim None Other

Sacred Scriptures- Think about the Holy Book your religion uses (Koran,Bible, Torah, Druze?)

4. I read sacred scriptures more than my peers.

YES NO

5. My family reads sacred scriptures.

YES NO

6. My friends at school read the same sacred scriptures as I do.

YES NO

7. I learn about sacred scriptures at school.

YES NO

8. I can talk about sacred scriptures at school.

YES NO

9. I listen to my friends talking about sacred scriptures.

YES NO

Prayer – Think about the way your religion prays.

10. I pray.

YES NO

11. I pray at home.

YES NO

12. I pray at school.

YES NO

13. I think everyone should pray in the same way that I do.

YES NO

14. I can talk about prayer at school.

YES NO

Holidays-Think about the holidays your religion celebrates (Chanukkah, Purim,Rosh

Hashanah, Christmas, Easter, Ramadan, Eid Al-Fitr, Druze)

15. My family celebrates religious holidays at home.

YES NO

16. My religious holidays are talked about at school.

YES NO

17. My religious holidays are celebrated at school.

YES NO

18. I think everyone should celebrate the same religious holidays as me.

YES NO

19. I like to go to my place of worship.

YES NO

School

20. I have friends at school who have a different religion than me.

YES NO

21. I feel comfortable talking about my religion at school.

YES NO

22. I wish everyone at school had the same religion as me.

YES NO

23. I have to hide my religion at school.

YES NO

24. My friends at school know what religion I belong to.

YES NO

25. I never talk about my religion at school.

YES NO

26. I am afraid that people won't like me if I talk about my religion at school.

YES NO

27. I learn about other religions at school.

YES NO

28. In my classroom, we discuss my religion.

YES NO

Appendix 2 - Religion in Public Schools: A Binational Study

Teacher Interview Questions

Interview questions for teachers.

- 1. Tell me about your educational experience.**
- 2. What religion do you profess?**
- 3. Do you have students in your classroom who have different religious backgrounds?**
- 4. How do you address the diversity of religious beliefs in your classroom?**
- 5. Do students talk about their religion in school?**
- 6. Can you talk about a time when student discussed or talked about religion in school?**
- 7. Tell me about your personal practices related to reading a Holy Book, prayer, celebrating holidays, and worship.**
- 8. During your teaching, how frequently do you teach or discuss religion?**
- 9. Do your students know what your religious beliefs are?**
- 10. Do you think teachers should teach or talk about religion in school?**
- 11. Do you notice a difference between boys and girls in the way they share their religious views in class?**
- 12. Have you had discussions with parents regarding religious views discussed in class? If so, please explain.**

