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Emphasis on diversity of religious views in social studies: A national survey of social studies teachers

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ABSTRACT

Based on a national social studies survey that included over 10,000 respondents from 44 states, this study examined the emphasis on diversity of religious view (EDRV) in public school P-12 social studies classrooms. This article addresses the following research questions: (1) how do teachers of different subjects (economics, history, and civics) or courses (e.g., U.S. history and world history) compare in their relative EDRV; and (2) what is the association—if any—between the relative importance of cultivating critical thinking/decision-making skills as a primary purpose for teaching social studies and EDRV? Teachers of different social studies subject areas differed ($F [6, 499] = 13.83, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.13$), on their relative EDRV. There was also a positive relationship ($F [4, 10,072] = 115.83, p < 0.001$) between teachers who believe that the primary purpose for teaching social studies is the cultivation of critical thinking/decision-making skills and the frequency with which they emphasize diversity of religious views (EDRV). The article discusses these findings and their implications on teacher education.

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Introduction

Would the Civil Rights Movement in America have been the same if Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was only an activist and not a minister? Similarly, religion was a primary inspiration and guiding force for Mahatma Gandhi. According to Nanda (2013),

It was inevitable that Gandhi's role as a political leader should loom larger in public imagination, but the mainspring of his life lay in religion, not in politics... "What I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years," he wrote in his autobiography, "is to see God face to face." His deepest strivings were spiritual, but unlike many of his countrymen with such aspirations, he did not retire to a cave in the Himalayas to meditate on the Absolute; he carried his cave, as he once said, within him. For him truth was not something to be discovered in the privacy of one's personal life; it had to be upheld in the challenging contexts of social and political life.

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Like Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi's achievements in India cannot be fully understood without knowing how he applied his religious beliefs to political struggles. Taken more generally, can we fully understand history, culture, global conflicts and connections, social movements and political principles, humanitarian efforts, economic values, and ethical dilemmas, without an understanding of religion and religious diversity?

In far too many countries throughout the world, there are significant limits on freedom of religion. According to former Secretary of State Clinton, "Even some countries that are making progress on expanding political freedom are frozen in place when it comes to religious freedom. So when it comes to this human right, this key feature of stable, secure, peaceful societies, the world is sliding backwards" (Allam, 2012). Schooling is one important tool that can be used to stem this slide backwards, to cultivate religious understanding, and to advance the cause of religious tolerance.

Carter (1994) persuasively argues in his book *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* that the serious treatment of religion is all too often marginalized in the public square. His notion has since been supported by the recent scholarly work of Rosenblith and Bailey (2007, 2008), Nord (2010), and Nash (2011). In addition, Prothero (2007) and Rosenblith and Bailey (2008) claim that Americans have relatively low levels of religious literacy. In fact, a 2010 survey released by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found large numbers of Americans are uninformed about the tenets, practices, history and leading figures on major faith traditions, including their own (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2010).

In the United States, the treatment or lack of treatment of religion in public schools plays a significant role in how much students and future citizens understand and appreciate religious diversity. With respect to addressing religion in the public schools, its treatment could be better. For example, Nord (2010) argues the curricular treatment of religion in American schools and universities is superficial and woefully inadequate, claiming, "...most students acquire their high school diplomas and college degrees having learned next to nothing about religion" (p. 82). Moreover, based on data from a national survey of Pre-K-12 social studies teachers—the same data used for the current article—approximately seven out of ten social studies teachers reported to emphasize diversity of religious views only occasionally (one or two times a month) or less. Even more telling, a third of social studies teachers reported to rarely or never do so (Hartwick, Hawkins, & Schroeder, 2013). The situation is especially grim at the early childhood and elementary levels, where the typical social studies teacher (based on the overall mean) reported to rarely (2–3 times a year) emphasize diversity of religious views. While the situation is a bit better at the middle school and high school levels, where the average social studies teacher reported to emphasize diversity of religious views occasionally (2–3 times a month) (Hartwick et al., 2013), this is still woefully inadequate.

According to the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) 1994 position statement on religion, "...the study about religions should be an essential part of the social studies curriculum" (p. 202). Knowledge of culture and promoting cultural understanding and acceptance are central aims of social studies. Religion, along with gender, race, ethnicity, social class, language, ability, and sexual orientation, etc., is an integral dimension of culture (Banks, 2008). In public schools, social studies is arguably the primary subject areas responsible for cultivating an understanding of religious diversity, but where in the social studies are students at least getting some attention to religious topics and religious diversity? Does it differ across the various social studies sub-disciplines or courses? And, if one of the primary purposes of social studies is to cultivate critical thinking/decision-making skills, is there a relationship between teachers' goals of cultivating critical thinking/decision-making skills and attention to religious issues?

Literature review

The literature review will attempt to lay the foundation for the importance and relevance of these questions to the current study. The review begins with a brief overview of legal issues involved with teaching about religion in the schools. This is followed by a discussion of a few examples of how religion is treated in classrooms and how teaching about religion is consistent with constructivist and multicultural learning theories. Next, there is a discussion of the national standards and why one would think that emphasis on religious diversity might be more or less emphasized in different social studies disciplines and courses. Finally, there is an explanation of the potential relationship between fostering critical thinking/decision-making skills and emphasizing religious diversity in social studies.

Legal issues and the courts

The treatment of religion in public schools is tricky. The Establishment Clause of the United States (U.S.) Constitution prohibits public schools from advocating for a particular religion or even for a religious worldview, and at the same time, the Free Exercise Clause prohibits the government from interfering with students' reasonable expression of their beliefs.

The U.S. Supreme Court has called for neutrality with respect to the treatment of religion in the public schools. In *Everson v. Board of Education* (1947), the Court determined that public schools are not to privilege one religion over another, and are not to privilege religion generally over non-religion. This decision was reaffirmed in *Epperson v. Arkansas* (1968), by Justice Fortas, who wrote: "The First Amendment mandates governmental neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and non-religion" (p. 89). In *Lemon v. Kurtzman* (1971) the Court established a three-part test regarding religion and

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