Addressing Religious Diversity in Education in Indonesia

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Abstract

This article presents elementary teachers with examples of religious diversity activities for young audiences. Students will explore topics such as religious holidays and traditions, iconic characters, holy cities and pilgrimage routes, houses of worship and living values of four major religious traditions—Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism. Teaching methods emphasise on active learning and completion of distinct projects and authentic assignments to foster critical thinking as opposed to teacher-centred and standardised assessments. Evidently, students learn to critically assess religion facets and have deep-rooted foundations that are built upon tolerance, positive attitudes and valuable interaction skills by participating in active learning.

Key words: Multicultural, primary education, religious diversity

BHINNEKA TUNGGAL IKA!

This is the official national motto of Indonesia, an expression often used to embrace differences among its people. It is derived from the old Javanese language and translates as “Unity in Diversity”. Indonesia consists of various tribes; each and every one of them contributes towards enriching the diverse culture of the country. Taking pride in being a nation with cultural richness, this phrase eloquently reflects the necessity of tolerance in Indonesia.

Culture is not merely a tradition that is passed down through generations. Similarly, culture should not be hastily translated as something that is old and most likely placed in a museum, or exclusively associated with traditions and things related to it such as language, food and ethnic group among others. The UNESCO Guidelines on Intercultural Education (2006) defines culture in numerous ways. For instance, culture is viewed as:

... the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of a society or social group… (encompassing) in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs.

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Essentially, culture is at the core of both an individual and social entity’s identity. It also makes up a major component in the reconciliation of group identities within a framework of social cohesion. Culture is often referenced to as all the factors that pattern an individual’s ways of thinking, believing, feeling and acting as a member of society. Human diversity, in all its forms, deserves to be acknowledged and respected. As it is inevitable that conflict arises from these diversities, we are acutely conscious of our long and sometimes painful struggle with cultural issues. Therefore, it is an urgent call to all members of the society to demonstrate respect for differences through appropriate interpersonal skills.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

One facet of culture that plays an important role in Indonesia is religion. In the Indonesian society, as in many others, religion shapes and informs everything from language to our social habits. As a country with the biggest Muslim population, Islam emerges as the dominant influence. Although other religions, Christianity (Catholics and Protestants), Hinduism and Buddhism, are also recognised and celebrated, Islam still plays the hegemonic role.

Islamic elements are present in daily activities such as shorter school periods or longer lunch breaks for offices every Friday to accommodate the noon prayer, suggestion for food and beverage outlets to cover their window displays during the Ramadan month, followed by an extensive holiday season that is unmatched even by the Christmas holidays. In several occasions, Islam laws are upheld above the national law itself. Clearly, religious diversity can be a serious and sometimes problematic component of the nation’s social reality. However, since religion is such a sensitive issue, very often the issues are swept under the rug.

Schools are among the first few places where all of these different beliefs meet. Rationally, religious diversity must be embedded within the school curriculum if there is a need for people to learn to live together.

Islam has the advantage of being taught in the classroom setting as a result of being the religion with the most disciples. Students, with different religious backgrounds, are politely asked to continue their activities in the library or sports hall without adequate supervision or structured assignment. Ironically, this is a subtle example of religious oppression. In this case, it is the educational institutions that use their powers to exclude or deny privileges and access to people of other faiths. Similar practices are still taking place in public schools across the country, emphasising Islam with little recognition of other religions.

These activities and experiences allow students who identify with Islam to find their identity affirmed in the majority of public schools. Yet today, our classroom includes
students from many religious backgrounds and this “Islam normalcy” can cause non-
Muslims to feel just the opposite. Should not we fear that these students would feel ignored, 
marginalised, or actively discriminated in a number of ways? The disconcertment caused 
by these experiences could affect, if not threaten, their ethnic identity development, 
relationship with peers and family, and even academic outcome. Ideally, schools should 
serve as a viable point to address any disconcertment among students. Hence, the crucial 
question that teachers need to focus on is not why, but, “How can we teach religion to 
elementary students?”

MULTI-RELIGION APPROACH
It has been observed over the years that religion has become even more controversial 
than sex education. Today, students interact with a far more pluralistic society then the 
generations before them. They are faced with debates that revolve around religious issues 
which oftentimes can escalate into heated debates (a volatile set-up for violence). Could 
these conflicts be the result of an unrecognised absence or underdeveloped skill to interact 
effectively within the myriad of belief systems? Alas, we are not predisposed naturally 
with the ability of valuing individual and group differences. If faith-based intolerance 
needs to be curtailed, educators have to agree that schools are the breeding grounds for 
religious tolerance.

The writer’s previous workplace, Glory School (pseudonym), offers an elementary level 
education that spans from preschool to sixth grade. While Malaysia has vernacular, race-
based schools, Indonesia has religion-based schools with the majority adhering to Islam 
and Christianity. Glory School is a national privately owned school without any particular 
belief foundation, an oasis for parents that seek unbiased school education amidst the 
plethora of religious schools. The school is an extension of home and real life, a place 
where the goal is not acculturation but self-exploration, critical thinking and exposure 
to real-life situations, in the hope of better preparing students to deal with upcoming life 
struggles.

In Glory School, the approach to teaching religion-based subjects is through multicultural 
education. The goal of multicultural education is “to teach the knowledge, skills and 
attitudes all students need to survive and function effectively in the future” (Banks, 
2002). The outcomes expected from the students include multicultural competence, 
which comprises the development of knowledge, perception, critical thinking and 
behavior from multiple perspectives. These learning outcomes reflect an emphasis on 
understanding diversity and effective functioning in a diverse, global society (Bennett, 
2003).

“You cannot teach about religion!” was an automatic response from fellow educators 
when Glory School first embarked on this journey. Skepticism and doubt was only to 
be expected. How are we going to tackle such essential concepts for young children?
In the past, the operational concept that we had in mind was that we are going to teach about religion instead of teaching religion. That made a big difference. Schools should not show preference for any one religion, although in implicit ways, many do. Conscious attempts must be made to address religion in ways that are both fair and neutral.

**MAKING RELIGION MATTER**

As educators and lifelong learners, teachers should advocate multicultural education to encourage religious tolerance. It is essential to try to recognise and respond to the importance of religion as a cultural marker for students, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. In Glory School, discussions on faith and belief are formally introduced as a subject in third grade. By adopting a dialogic pedagogy, (Matusov, 2009) stated that this encourages a social discourse that enables students to voice their views and doubts as well as create their own meanings for reality.

Teachers here are committed to teaching the subject according to the students’ own religious experience, based on the belief that this will best engage young children’s imagination, as well as tap into their growing sense of empathy and connection with others. These teachers also have to find the right balance between realism and hope in teaching a subject that can overwhelm their young audience. The subject of religion is taught for one semester at each level within a four-year span that begins at third grade and ends at six grade. The curriculum could also be designed into a two-year course, although due to the nature of the subject, if this option is selected then it is more suitable to start at the senior level (grade 5-6).

The following sections describe how religion is taught in Glory School where religious diversity is addressed in the classroom for the benefit of the students.

**Third Grade (8-10 years old)**

Students are first presented with the subject of religion in third grade. The design of the curriculum is always based on the students. Glory School consists of mostly Muslim students followed by Christians, and a few Hindus. These religions naturally became the major religions discussed in the classroom. The topics covered are: [1] major holidays and their history, and [2] religious practices of three religions, that are, Islam, Christianity and Hinduism.

The class usually begins with an overview of the students’ religion and an observation to quickly assess their level of understanding. Although the religious curriculum is available at hand, these data gathered would clarify whether the lesson plan, teaching strategies or activities need to be adjusted. The class then progresses from this initial effort towards spending equal time on learning each faith and studying the basic history of each religious celebration.
To relate content with real-world setting, students could share their own experience. Catholic students, for example, shared their family traditions decorating Christmas tree; others narrated in detail their custom of going back home or *mudik* (similar to *balik kampung*) during Hari Raya Aidilfitri whilst another Hindu student told of her experience celebrating Nyepi (Silent Day) in Jakarta in comparison to observing it in Bali as a Hindu capital city in Indonesia.

Discussion is an effective method to ensure student participation. Children are usually very open to discussing their beliefs, prayers, places of worship, dances and values with their friends. Their discussions on their religious beliefs are usually cheerful, lighthearted and innocent. Discussion becomes a forum where students could speak openly while teachers remain in the background and allow them to express their opinions in a safe place. This dialogic approach sees the students engaging in an ongoing social process of generating meaning by themselves.

From this discussion as a starting point, teachers then share materials regarding religious celebrations in Indonesia along with their short history. Teachers could incorporate them into other subjects as well, such as reading short holiday stories during language class and creating greeting cards during art and craft lessons. On several occasions, students took the initiative upon themselves to make crafts for their friends from different faith, for example, a Christian made an Aidilfitri card for her Muslim friend.

For the next topic, the class learn about religious practices. Students watch videos about different prayers or rituals conducted by the followers of different faith. They could also comment and perform their own prayers for others. The Hindu student’s practice is always intriguing since the prayer is recited in a chant-like form, almost like singing. Usually as the sole believer in class, the Hindu student performs her ritual and enjoys being in the spotlight for once.

The class is alive during this time when students feel encouraged to share their own beliefs and practices. This subject provides a positive environment to talk about what is normally perceived as sensitive issues and often dismissed as inappropriate for discussions. It is not unusual, for instance, for students to ask questions about a lady wearing headscarve (*hijab*) or veil, or why there are no activities allowed in Bali during Silent Day.

### Fourth Grade (9-11 years old)

Having familiarised themselves with the diversity of beliefs in their earlier grade, teachers could conveniently pick up the subject and continue introducing renowned and celebrated character or icon from these four religions. Students get to know about Muhammad from Islam, Jesus from Christianity, Siddhartha Gautama from Buddhism and several gods and goddesses from Hinduism. These iconic characters are studied by reading their stories in books or comics that are easily accessible nowadays. Alternatively,
teachers could prepare a summary of these stories. Children are always eager to read about other people’s experiences, lives and struggles.

Through reading and discussions that could hone students’ language ability, samples of each belief’s societal significance could be inserted, e.g. how or why Christians are influenced by Jesus and the concept of sacrifice. As these characters underwent many life problems, the class could talk about what life was about during that time and try to imagine what it was like to “walk in someone else’s shoes”. The language used however, must be appropriate for this age level, since the content might overwhelm children.

Attaching emotions is a good idea to retain the taught knowledge within these young minds’. Students could be provided with options to express their thinking and feelings in creative ways beyond paper-and-pencil test. The students’ artistic domain can be tapped by encouraging them to retell the history in a time line format, draw or write poems to portray their emotions of the struggles, whilst their psychomotor domain could be harnessed by reenacting important point(s) of these characters in role play or skit.

**Fifth Grade (10-12 years old)**

In the third year, the majority of the children are already accustomed to faith and belief diversity. In addition, due to their increasingly developed cognitive ability, students are able to carry out more complex projects. When learning about houses of worship, teachers design lesson plans to take advantage of the religious diversity in class by extending the activities beyond the usage of books or other text materials. Teachers plan activities that would lead children to discover more about their own religious backgrounds, while simultaneously integrating the unit with other subjects such as mathematics.

In learning about houses of worship, students conduct research that involves them reading books in the library or gathering information from the web, and going on field trips. Students tour several worship houses according to their interests; they could opt to visit houses of worship according to their personal faith or others, then build a model from it. In addition to reinforcing research skills, spatial intelligence is also exercised. Students could apply mathematical concepts such as geometry and scale in real-life context, which would further strengthen their understanding. Students could also deduct that knowledge is interrelated, and as such, are not limited only in subjects like language and arts.

Students can work independently or in groups accordingly when building models of houses of worship. Furthermore, students create presentations that display pictures and explanation of particular religious places. The students’ handiwork will then be featured during an internal exhibition, where the class will invite students from other classes and explain their work to the audience. Naturally, these children are likely to be enthusiastic to showcase their creations, to the extent that they may sometimes bring related books to show or wear proper attire for praying during the exhibition.
The second topic that is studied is the pilgrimage unit, where the class will learn about the holy cities of Islam, Christianity and Hinduism around the world. Neatly incorporated with social studies, in particular geography, students would not only get to know about the related cities and countries, but also about detailed religious activities that originally took place there. For instance, students will explore the background and compulsory rituals that Muslims perform in Mecca, Hindus in Varanasi and Ganges River and Christians in Jerusalem and Vatican City.

Social studies, geography for instance, can be approached via an array of resources. For this unit alone, students have privileged access to an assortment of videos and printed materials not necessarily from the Internet. By integrating with arts, students will be able to recall the information and describe it in the form of a time line or mind map. Surprisingly, teachers have observed that students were delighted to retell the pilgrimage route using their analytical ability. They were more than happy to demonstrate their grasp of the lesson they had learned by role-playing the pilgrimage route.

Since the focus is on only three religions and the class is required to work in groups, there is a big probability that students will get to retrace different belief pilgrimage paths. Through the years, it has been observed that their acceptance or even interest in these lessons has proven that education on religious diversity has finally borne fruit.

**Sixth Grade (11-13 years old)**

Often categorised as the highest level of elementary education, the sixth grader’s frame of mind is observed as shifting from that of a child towards a young adult. Therefore, these students could critically think about more abstract issues regarding living values and its relation to religious beliefs. In complementing the strong emphasis placed by Glory School on character building, the lessons now focus on inculcating good attitude and values, specifically peace, honesty, kindness and helping others.

These values are incorporated into classroom activities and woven neatly into religious subjects by using holy books. Again, art and literature are great tools to instill these values. For example, to integrate kindness and other values, class normally starts with story reading within the identified theme followed by a discussion on plot and character attitudes. Teachers usually challenge these young minds by asking them to imagine different background settings or create alternative endings. Stories without a definitive protagonist or antagonist characteristic are chosen so that students could review the stories from different perspectives and not merely engage in right-and-wrong character story arc.

Unlike lower grade students who require mostly concrete, real life and tangible situations, the senior classes are usually able to resolve more complex problems. They can now independently identify implicit meaning, moral traits and arrive at conclusions as well.
The seniors are also more perceptive in pointing out that some questions may have different answers, or perhaps do not need to be explained or resolved.

To foster critical thinking, teachers will advance toward gray areas by giving the class thought-provoking issues that have no definite answer. For example, one question that always puzzles them is the endless controversy of “How was human created?” Science and religion have always been in dispute in regard to this issue, so it is possible that the class too will react in a similar manner. Students may conclude that not all problems have similar responses, nor can every question be always answered. Sometimes, it is okay to leave the students to ponder on an issue by themselves.

In a much lighter note and to embrace their artistic side, teachers will ask the students to respond to the story in ways they want to, for example, acting, drawing, reading poem, and singing, to name a few. There should be no definite criteria to distinguish good or bad assignments as long as the students are able to display positive and appropriate judgement in responding to the situation. It is important that students perceive kindness and helping others as a positive trait and hopefully, intend to demonstrate similar behaviors in the future.

Using holy books is necessary so that children can relate their beliefs with the stories. Having reached an agreement that kindness and helping others are positive values, students are asked to find verses in their holy books that reflect these values. Previous experience has revealed that students not only examine their own books but also show an interest in learning about other holy books. Since students read the translated version, it is common to see students alternately referring to the Bible, Quran and Veda. The students did not sit according to their faiths and they were often seen moving around the class, engaging in discussions. Identifying and comparing different prophet names is usually an eye-opener for the students when they recognise that Abraham in the Bible is the same as Ibrahim in the Quran, while Moses is actually Musa.

Apart from finding similarities in characters, students usually continue on to other essential parts of the holy book, for example, identifying verses that reflect kindness and helping others. Using these traits as key words when scanning the holy book, students will most likely notice that these behaviors are promoted across religions. After finding ten verses that imply kindness and helping others that is quite easy, then teacher could conclude the discussion by saying all faiths, as proven by the holy books, encourage humans to be kind and helpful to one another. So irrespective of one’s religious background, religions teach the same principle that essentially, humans are not so different after all. All religions tell us that each of us should do good things in life.

In this class, questions are bound to emerge that could lead into conversations and interactions with others. Discussion becomes an integral part of the class, and every other
subject. It is encouraged, and subsequently, communication skills can be developed. After all, effective communication is the key to multicultural competence. “Through interaction, we gain insight beyond our personal experiences and become more aware of the influence of our own cultures on our perspective” (Banks, 2002; Bennett, 2003). Naturally curious, these young minds get excited because they realise they are learning new things. Even after only a few weeks of exploring different aspects of multiple faiths, students tend to view other views with interest, respect and curiosity instead of contempt or fear.

SIMILAR INITIATIVES

Another success story whereby schools carry out multi-religious education are the schools in the district of Modesto, California, USA. Schools in this district embarked on a world religions course back in 2000, modeled after the First Amendment principle which states, “You can be staunch in your own personal beliefs, yet also staunch in respecting and protecting the religious liberties of other people”. This initiative which was initially challenged produced immediate results after its first year. No single act of harassment was reported against Muslim students during the academic year of 2001-2002, directly after the 9/11 incident. Today, Modesto mandates ninth grade students to complete this course as a graduation requirement. Furthermore, researchers who conducted a comprehensive study of Modesto’s world religions course found that the course increased student respect for religious diversity.

Although there has not been any research conducted in Glory School, the purpose of the subject is similar. Teachers teach about religious diversity in the hope of creating an impact in students’ religious tolerance. There is no motive to change the students’ personal beliefs, instead the subject aims to expose students to different religions without undermining the faith of each child. In fact, students end their four-year study of this curriculum with the same beliefs. More importantly, students admitted that the subject has helped broaden their views and shaped them to be more tolerant with people from other faiths and cultural aspects.

However, both Modesto’s and Glory School stories should not be taken as direct indications for other schools to rush and create their own subject on religion. Not all schools are privileged to do that, due to policy limitation or insufficient room or flexibility in the curriculum, or even time constraint. Instead, schools can consider how and what they teach when it comes to religion or religious values. Most schools can afford to offer world religion electives or improve the religious components of the social studies curriculum. Religion should be recognised as part of the student’s social identity, which needs to be explored, learnt and developed. If students are able to accept religious diversity, they may foster a broader acceptance of differences in terms of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation.
Shunnarah (2008) asserted how cultural competence would benefit teachers and educators in the following words:

As for teachers and educators, it is important to have cultural, in this case religious, awareness in order to develop sensitivity and compassion for each child. Developing cultural competence is a process of inner growth. To be as effective as possible with students, we must continuously engage in a process of self-reflection. To know others, especially diverse others, one must know the self. The growth of a culturally competent educator starts here. We must look within for a deeper understanding of who we are before we can adequately address the needs of our students.

Schools do not exist in a vacuum. It provides experiences and engagement, sometimes, painful lessons that highlight our limitations and prejudice, as a part of cultural competence developing process. By learning and engaging with students’ lives, in this case their religions, teachers and educators will be more prepared to work with them in creating meaningful lessons to be learnt.

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