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Ensuring Legal Boundaries With Religiosity in Public Schools

Abstract

With varying sources recognizing significant religious shifts in recent years and years to come, teachers are faced with the task of developing curricula that include religious discussions more than ever before (Banks & Banks, 2004). At the same time, in our increasingly multicultural world, we are teaching to a more religiously diverse student population than ever before.

This paper will articulate an investigation that is two-fold: first, the authors will gauge how educators employed at public K – 12 schools engage their students in discussions and activities pertaining to religion while upholding all legal and constitutional guidelines, and second, to relate what Teacher Education Programs (TEPS) may/may not be doing to prepare pre-service teachers for designing curriculum with the increasing religious shifts in mind.

Ensuring Legal Boundaries With Religiosity in Public Schools

Gillian Stewart-Wells and Malcolm Patterson

Summary: With varying sources recognizing significant religious shifts in recent years and years to come, teachers are faced with the task of developing curricula that include religious discussions more than ever before (Banks & Banks, 2004). At the same time, in our increasingly multicultural world, we are teaching to a more religiously diverse student population than ever before.

This paper will articulate an investigation that is two-fold: first, the authors will gauge how educators employed at public K – 12 schools engage their students in discussions and activities pertaining to religion while upholding all legal and constitutional guidelines, and second, to relate what Teacher Education Programs (TEPS) may/may not be doing to prepare pre-service teachers for designing curriculum with the increasing religious shifts in mind.

The focus of the paper will be the methodologies that have been developed and field-tested by the researchers to engage teachers in dialogue about their practices pertaining to religiosity in relation to the curriculum's ideological frame of reference. In addition, connections will be made between educators' knowledge and regard of the law and the preparation of teachers on legalities of religion within TEPs.

The following paper was first presented at the American Education Research Association's (AERA) Annual Meeting in Montreal Canada in April, 2005.

A first year teacher at a New England Public Elementary School enjoys teaching her third grade students immensely. She especially appreciates the rich diversity in her students who are of many different racial, ethnic, religious and socio-economic backgrounds. While this novice teacher knows her administrators would not allow her to "minister" to her students about her Christian faith, she admits to "accidentally" leaving

on her Christian music in her classroom as students return each day from recess, lunch and other activities outside of her class. She hopes that students will ask her about the meaning of the words they hear.

Introduction

Islam is one of the fastest, if not the fastest, growing religions in the world; Catholicism will soon eclipse Protestantism in membership numbers in the United States. With varying sources (Banks & Banks, 2004; Greenawalt, 2005) recognizing significant religious shifts in recent years and years to come, teachers are faced more than ever before with the task of developing curricula that include religious discussions (Banks & Banks, 2004). At the same time, in our increasingly multicultural world, we are teaching to a more religiously diverse student population than ever before.

Although the American perspective generally respects the "separation of church and state," this does not mean that discussions of religion in public schools are non-existent. On the contrary, while restrictions remain, a massive move toward social justice curriculum in American classrooms calls for an increase in religious dialogue (e.g., Banks, 1997; Gollnick and Chinn, 2002; Greenawalt, 2005; Redman, 2003).

Yet, despite strong public opinion regarding religious discussions in K – 12 schools, research is lacking on how educators can develop responsible curriculum involving many different theologies while not compromising teachers' own religious beliefs. At the same time, a look at curriculum within Teacher Education Programs (TEPs) at Christian colleges and universities reveals that many contain little specific instruction about adhering to legal guidelines pertaining to topics of religion in public schools.

Purpose of Study

This paper articulates an investigation that is two-fold: first, how educators employed at public K – 12 schools engage their students in discussions and activities pertaining to religion while upholding all legal and constitutional guidelines, and second, what TEPs find most appropriate to include when preparing pre-service teachers for designing curriculum with the increasing religious shifts in mind.

At the core of this research is the knowledge that educators are “agents of change” (Freire, 1993) and, therefore, should proceed cautiously with discussions pertaining to religion lest the teachers cross the line of legality and infringe upon their students’ rights outlined in the First Amendment of the federal Constitution. According to Gollnick and Chinn (2003), “(O)ne’s religion has considerable impact on how one functions on a day-to-day basis...educators should not underestimate the influence” of religious discussions in schools (p. 233). The third grade novice teacher described in italics earlier is viewed as a person of authority by her pupils, and her actions undoubtedly have a significant impact on those who enter her classroom. At the same time, TEPs, with the myriad of detailed information dispensed within them, may not be emphasizing the responsibility a public school teacher has when conveying information pertaining to religious issues in their own classrooms.

Background of Study

The background of this investigation articulates how teachers are adhering to the four primary sources of law that determine religious rights in public schools: “1) the First Amendment of the federal Constitution; 2) state constitutions; 3) the state laws that are developing in response to the failure of the federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act; and 4) the federal 1984 Equal Access Act” (Stronks and Stronks, 1999, p. 71-72). In addition, specific queries were developed using B. Becker’s guidelines for religious discussions in public schools:

“(T)he school may sponsor the study of religion, but may not sponsor the practice of religion; (T)he school may expose students to all religious views, but may not impose any particular views; (T)he school’s approach to religion is one of instruction, not one of indoctrination; (T)he function of the school is to educate about all religions, not convert to any one religion; (T)he

school should seek to inform the student about various beliefs, but should not seek to conform him or her to any one belief” (Gollnick and Chinn, 2003, p.232).

The authors of this paper then contextualized these combined guidelines within religious ideologies that inform public K – 12 school curricula and teaching practices. Ideology is defined here as “the production and representation of ideas, values, and beliefs and the manner in which they are expressed and lived out by both individuals and groups” (McLaren, 1998, p. 180). We hope to share how teachers in public schools are discussing different religions within legal guidelines and connecting these discussions (and related activities) to their students’ worldviews. In addition, connections will be sought between educators’ knowledge and regard of the law and the preparation of teachers on legalities of religion within TEPs.

Lastly, it is essential to clarify what we mean exactly when we are making queries about religiosity in public schools. We consider it in the broadest sense: any curriculum designed that is religious in nature, any questions that might arise within a class regarding religion, as well as impromptu conversations between students and teachers during on-school, instructional and non-instructional time. In other words, our queries on religion in public schools reflect any and all references to religion by and with an educator when the teacher is in his/her professional capacity as an educator/role model?

Methodology & Data Sources

To make connections between what teachers are practicing in terms of religiosity and the law in their classrooms and what TEPs are conveying, the authors of this paper have implemented a critical action research process of engagement.

First, a 17 question True/False survey, containing questions ranging from what topics might be discussed and /or addressed in the classroom to what is considered appropriate attire for teachers to wear, (Appendix One) was given to 50 K – 12 teachers currently teaching in Massachusetts public schools (Table One). Educators included 17 males and 33 females; 32 were public elementary school teachers, 4 instructed in public middle schools and 14 taught in a variety of disciplines within public high schools; ten were in their first year

of teaching, 22 had taught between 2 – 5 years, 13 public school teachers had 6 – 10 years of experience in the classroom and 5 had 11 or more years of teaching experience. All 50 respondents were teaching in Boston area public schools at the time the surveys were distributed and collected. Twenty-nine of the respondents were enrolled in one or more courses at Gordon College in Wenham, Massachusetts, a suburb north of Boston, and were asked to voluntarily take the survey in order to participate in a group discussion on the issue of religion in public schools; the other 21 respondents were contacted through networking with the students enrolled in the Gordon College courses. All surveys were distributed and collected over the course of two semesters and one summer session at Gordon College.

TABLE ONE		
In-service Teacher Respondents for 17-question Survey		
N=50		
Gender	Educational Level Taught	Years of Teaching Experience
Male = 17	K-5 = 32	0-1 = 10
Female = 33	6-8 = 4	2-5 = 22
	9-12 = 14	6-10 = 13
		11+ = 5

The purpose of the survey initially was to ascertain what the public K – 12 school teachers’ beliefs were in order to better prepare pre-service/in-service teachers for their own classrooms. The survey was found to be an ineffective instrument in that questions were too broad and subjective. For example, Question 2 on the survey stated “Students may talk about religious issues to an audience of their peers in school. True/False?” On follow-up discussions within the TEP at our college, respondents differed on their views of the word “audience.” How they interpreted certain words within the survey affected their responses. However, while the survey ultimately proved impractical, patterns emerged in conversations with the respondents that led the authors of this paper to develop supplemental questions and case studies. These case studies delved more deeply into the questions on the survey which were either most frequently answered incorrectly or which led to the most insightful follow-up discussions. For example, respondents were intrigued to know that “Students may publicize religious activities/meetings using school resources” (Survey Question #11) to the extent that other school organizations or clubs

could publicize their activities/meetings using school resources. A majority of the respondents revealed that they assumed all references to religion must be kept out of schools entirely. See Appendix Two for the follow-up case study questions.

From our original 50 respondents, we queried 30 educators during two audio-taped case study discussions (Table Two).

TABLE TWO		
In-service Teacher Respondents Case Study Questions		
N=30		
Gender	Educational Level Taught	Years of Teaching Experience
Male = 12	K-5 = 22	0-1 = 6
Female = 18	6-8 = 2	2-5 = 14
	9-12 = 6	6-10 = 8
		11+ = 2

Second, from information gathered from the audio-taped sessions, four anecdotal surveys were developed and distributed to four separate populations: 1) pre-service teachers within Christian TEPs, 2) in-service public school educators, 3) TEP Faculty within Christian colleges and universities and 4) TEP Department Chairs at Christian colleges and universities (see Appendices Three – Six). The respondent populations were divided into these four subgroups in order to determine any significant differences among how these groups perceived their roles to be in presenting religious information. Thus, pre-service teachers with little or no experience in the public K – 12 classrooms were compared to in-service teachers who had 1 – 15 years experience educating public K -12 students .

The 11 respondents to the pre-service journal questionnaire (Appendix Three) were all enrolled in a semester-long multicultural course required within Gordon College’s undergraduate TEP. The journal entry assignment was optional and, of the 14 students enrolled in the course, 11 completed the journal entry. Students were made aware that, although anonymous, their entries would be used as part of a larger study culminating in this paper. Similarly, the in-service teacher paragraph response sheet was presented to 11 students enrolled in a semester -long graduate curricu-

lum course as an optional assignment; all 11 completed and returned the paragraph response sheet (Appendix Four). Graduate student respondents were all graduates of Christian undergraduate TEPs: five were all alumni of one east coast institution; four were graduates of three different Christian institutions in the Midwest; and two students were graduates of the same Christian college on the west coast. The graduate students were also informed that their identities would remain unknown but that they might be quoted as part of a larger study.

The pre-service and in-service respondents' answers were analyzed to determine if a significant correlation existed as to how well each teacher was aware of the legal guidelines of religious discussions and/or practices in public schools and how much s/he recalled from her/his TEP instruction. Age and years of teaching experience were also evaluated for patterns within the in-service teacher pool.

TABLE THREE		
Pre-service Teacher Respondents Responses to Journal Assignment (Appendix 3)		
N=11		
Respondent	Gender	# of Education courses Completed
1	M	2
2	F	2
3	F	2
4	M	1
5	F	2
6	F	1
7	F	5
8	M	5
9	M	2
10	F	10
11	F	9

TABLE FOUR					
In-service Teacher Respondents Paragraph Responses (Appendix 4)					
N=11					
Respondent	Gender	Age*	Under-graduate TEP	Years of Teaching	Teaching Level
1	F	3	1	15	1
2	F	1	1	3	1
3	F	3	1	9	3
4	M	1	2	3	2
5	F	1	2	2	1
6	F	2	1	1	3
7	F	2	1	7	3
8	F	1	3	2	1
9	M	2	2	2	1
10	F	3	3	3	1
11	F	3	2	10	1

*
Age: 1 = 22-25, 2 = 26-35, 3 = 36-45

**
Undergraduate TEP: 1 = an east coast college, 2 = one of three different Christian colleges located in the Midwest, 3 = a west coast Christian college

Level: 1 = Elementary School, 2 = Middle School, 3 = High School

Perceptions on how well teacher educators are preparing their pre- and in-service teachers were sought from both teacher educators themselves as well as TEP department chairs from Christian TEPs. Of the 55 surveys sent to department chairs within 42 separate TEPs, completed surveys were returned by 15 TEP department chairs representing 12 separate programs. Subsequently, surveys were sent to 22 individual teacher educators from within the same 12 TEPs with a return of eight surveys representing six separate TEPs. To make comparisons, the 15 responding chairpersons and 8 faculty members from 12 Christian TEPs were queried about successful application tools used within their programs to inform their pre-service teachers about their rights and responsibilities in terms of the legal guidelines for religious discussions, activities, curriculum, etc. in public schools.

Results

The Results Section will be divided into four areas: Pre-service Teachers, In-service Teachers, Teacher Education Department Chairpersons and Teacher Education Department Faculty.

Pre-service Teachers

How well prepared do you feel to handle issues, discussions, activities, etc. of a religious nature as a teacher in a public K – 12 school? What coursework and assignments in your TEP have informed you of the legal parameters regarding religion in public K – 12 schools?

Of the 11 respondents to the survey, five pre-service teachers believed they knew little about what their responsibilities were in terms of discussing issues and ideas pertaining to religion in public schools, three felt somewhat confident and three felt very confident (see Table Five).

TABLE FIVE		
Pre-service Teacher Responses Concerning “Comfort Level” When Discussing Religion in Public K-12 Schools		
N=11		
Respondent	Gender	Comfort Level*
1	M	2
2	F	3
3	F	2
4	M	1
5	F	2
6	F	1
7	F	3
8	M	1
9	M	1
10	F	3
11	F	1

* 1 = No confidence in understanding of the legal issues pertaining to discussion of religion in public schools,

2 = Somewhat confident,

3 = Very confident

Pre-service teachers who did not feel comfortable cited strong worries over what they may and may not say and/or do in terms of engaging students in religious

themes and discussions when they have their own classrooms: “While I do not know what the specific regulations are regarding religion, I know they are limiting and are created to form an environment which is probably mostly secular in nature and generally tries to avoid such issues... As for specifics, mechanics and more, I have no idea,” Respondent Four stated. Respondent Eleven believed it was her responsibility to be informed on this issue: “I need to study more about it because that is my job!”

Respondent Six initiated her own research in this area before answering the survey question. Citing Harvey Cox, a professor at Harvard’s Divinity School, the pre-service respondent wrote, “How do you talk about religion in a pluralistic society with a strong Christian and a strong secularist tradition without being biased towards one religion?” She continued quoting Cox, “To teach religion and the ethical significance of religious traditions and pretend that it doesn’t have emotional, spiritual, and symbolic elements, is to falsify it. It’s simplifying unduly what traditions are about.” Adding her own thoughts to these words, she summarized, “Now he’s talking about teaching religion at a secular school... where’s the line between religion and education? Nobody quite knows where the line of separation between church and state or education and indoctrination is, which I have to agree is difficult.”

Lastly, one pre-service teacher (Respondent Eight) who lacked confidence in his understanding of religious discussions within public schools noted a specific example which he saw occasionally in his fieldwork: “The line is not made very clear to teachers in regard to laws, such as the banning of cross jewelry not being enforced in schools. Where is the line drawn? As I begin to teach, I hope I’ll find out.”

Of the respondents who felt somewhat to very qualified to speak about religion in a lawful way within schools, one pre-service teacher (Respondent One) noted a specific assignment within a course that helped him to understand his rights and responsibilities: “I believe that in my Methods class we read and discussed an article that was specifically geared toward the topic of legal parameters in public schools.” Another respondent (Respondent Three) emphasized her own experience when addressing “separation of church and state” anxieties: “...the use of common sense, along with a good understanding of separation of church and state

issues, should guide me as I negotiate the ‘minefield’ of public school political correctness.”

Students who felt confident with their awareness, for the most part, stated their knowledge clearly: “I feel adequately prepared to handle religious issues, discussions and activities. As a teacher, I cannot promote church events or religious activities, but I can inform kids in a neutral way if they ask,” noted Respondent Five.

Yet, other replies from those who claim confidence reflected less understanding of the legal issues pertaining to handling religious issues, discussions and activities: “I think the trickiest issues regarding the law, after discussing this topic in class, are who initiates these discussions and where can the discussions take place. I am prepared and not about to worry if I were to begin teaching in the public schools tomorrow,” (Respondent Two). Another respondent’s Christian views were reflected in the following statement: “I think the separation of church and state must have to do with how incredibly secular the world is today. It is kind of sad and disheartening to consider where this nation used to be just a couple of hundred years ago and where it is now,” (Respondent Ten).

In-service Teachers

Question One:

Do you or have you ever engaged public school students in discussions and/or activities pertaining to religion? (Circle One) Yes No

If yes: In several sentences, please describe “how” you engage your students in discussions and/or activities pertaining to religion while upholding all legal guidelines.

If no: In several sentences, please explain “why not.”

Of the 11 respondents to the survey, three in-service teachers answered “yes” to Question #1 and eight answered “no” to the same query (See Table Six). Of those who answered “no,” three (Respondents Two, Six and Eleven) related they felt uncomfortable introducing themes of religious content or nature into their curriculum. Respondent Two stated, “I fear that my personal bias will shine through.” Two of the respondents who answered “no” to Question #1 believed that they were

not allowed to introduce religion into their classrooms via schools’ curricula or spontaneous conversation, etc. One of the in-service teachers who answered “no” to Question #1 (Respondent Six) claimed that there had not been a reason to bring religion into the curriculum: “I haven’t found it appropriate at the second grade level except for brief conversations about holidays.” Two who responded with the answer of “no” to Question #1 gave no reason (Respondents Nine and Ten).

Of the three who answered “yes” to Question #1, one (Respondent Four) believed she was required to integrate religious discussions into her curriculum: “I generally explain that people of different faiths have different traditions because that is what my department chair and principal have requested.” The other two who answered “yes” to Question #1 noted more personal reasons for their inclusion of religion within the curriculum: “My discussions have been more one on one, usually with the student who shares my faith rather than the whole class” (Respondent Five). The last respondent (Respondent Nine) noted a personal, yet neutral, stance: “Usually, my short discussions are student-initiated. Students will sometimes ask me what church I go to, if I’m a Christian, etc. Otherwise, it’s instructional in nature...Christians’ believe ‘x,y,z.”

Question Two: *In what ways did your undergraduate TEP prepare you for understanding what can and can not be done in regards to religion in a public K – 12 classroom?*

Towards Question #2 on the survey, the following responses revealed how well in-service teachers felt their TEPs prepared them for understanding what could and could not be done in regard to religion within public schools.

- “I feel very uninformed of the parameters of discussing religion in a public school setting” (Respondent One).
- “I learned all I know about legal issues after becoming a teacher, not in a TEP,” (Respondent Three).
- “I don’t feel I am prepared at the moment. My undergraduate work was awhile ago” (Respondent Eight).
- “I learned more in the public school setting than in any particular course or assignment” (Respondent Five).
- “I was not prepared in my undergraduate program

at all! Legal guidelines were mentioned in one of my graduate courses” (Respondent Ten).

- A total of four in-service teachers recalled religious protocol presented in their graduate education courses but not in their undergraduate TEPS: “In my last semester in graduate school, we discussed (legal issues regarding religion) in a teaching strategies class...I think,” (Respondent Seven). Another in-service respondent, Respondent Two, concurred: “Discussions in Schools in Society (title of the course) helped me to better understand the parameters of what can be said and what needs to be kept outside of the classroom.”

Question Three: On a scale of 1 -5 (1 being ‘the least comfortable’ and 5 being ‘the most comfortable’) how comfortable do you feel your understanding is of what you may or may not do, legally, in regards to engaging students in activities or discussions surrounding ‘religion’ in a public K – 12 classroom?

In regard to Question #3 on the survey, three in-service teachers gave a “least comfortable” response: “1”, four respondents gave a “2”, two educators gave a “3” and two in-service teachers gave a “4”. None of the respondents selected “5” for “most comfortable” status (See Table Six).

Age and Years of Experience appear to affect how comfortable in-service teachers felt engaging their K – 12 public school students in conversations about religion, within or outside of the curriculum. Those who wrote a “1” or a “2” to Question #3 (Respondents Two, Four, Five, Six, Eight, Nine and Ten) have been teaching three years or fewer; and all but one were 35 years of age or younger (Respondent Ten). Of the two respondents who wrote a “3” to Question #3 (Respondents One and Eleven), both were in the 36 – 45 age range: one with ten years teaching experience (Respondent Eleven) and the other with 15 years in the field (Respondent One). Of the two in-service teachers who gave a “4” response to Question #3, one was in the 36 – 45 years of age category and had been teaching for nine years (Respondent Three) and the other was in the 26 – 35 age bracket with seven years of service (Respondent Seven).

TABLE SIX						
In-service Teacher Responses to Question #3						
N=11						
Re- spon- dent	Gen- der	Age*	Years of Teach- ing	Teach- ing Level**	Includes Reli- gious Discus- sion***	Com- fort Level 1-5***
1	F	3	15	1	Yes	3
2	F	1	3	1	No	1
3	F	3	9	3	Yes	4
4	M	1	3	2	No	1
5	F	1	2	1	No	2
6	F	2	1	3	No	2
7	F	2	7	3	No	4
8	F	1	2	1	Yes	2
9	M	2	2	1	No	2
10	F	3	3	1	No	1
11	F	3	10	1	No	3

* Age: 1 = 22-25, 2 = 26-35, 3 = 36-45

** Level: 1 = Elementary School, 2 = Middle School, 3 = High School

*** Includes discussions of religion in and/or outside the context of classroom curriculum

**** Comfort Level = On a scale of 1-5 (1 = ‘the least comfortable’ and 5 = ‘the most comfortable’)

Faculty of Teacher Education Programs

Question One: In what ways have you informed pre and in-service teachers in your courses about how to remain within legal boundaries when discussing topics of religion or when religious issues arise in public K-12 classrooms?

Of the eight teacher education faculty respondents, all indicated that they were actively engaged in teaching activities designed to prepare future public school teachers to handle religious topics or discussions while remaining within legal boundaries. Six of the eight respondents (Respondents One through Five and Seven) identified at least one specific course in their respective

programs that addressed this topic and all included class discussion as a major strategy. Two of the three respondents (Respondents One and Three) who employed guest speakers included a Christian lawyer as one of these. Two respondents (Respondents One and Two) identified a specific text dedicated to the topic of religion in public schools (see Table Seven). Relating her experience as a recently retired public school teacher in Louisiana, Respondent Eight noted:

“There were several law suits in my area pertaining to religion in the school. However, most of us in my school and parish (name) continued to say a prayer before lunch. Many times our principal would call for a moment of silence to allow kids to pray for a particular cause. My discussions with my students is based on my experiences . . . we emphasize character . . . being good . . . the Golden Rule. Many times the little children . . . would begin talking about God and his love for us and I wouldn’t have to say a thing.”

TABLE SEVEN						
Responses to TEP Faculty Question One						
N=8						
Re-spondent	Identified Course	Course Text	Resource Books	Class Discussion	Guest	Christian Lawyer
1	x	x	x	x	x	x
2	x	x		x		
3	x			x	x	x
4	x		x	x		
5	x			x	x	
6				x		
7	x			x		
8				x		

Question Two: *Here at Gordon [College], our preparation of Christian students for dealing with this issue is not explicit; rather we leave it to faculty (all of whom are Christians) to weave this into their course discussions. How intentional or explicit are your TEP strategies? How so?*

Six of the eight respondents (Respondents One through Five and Seven) maintained that their TEP was explicit in the preparation of students for dealing with religious topics or discussions in the public

school setting. Further, these six respondents identified a specific course or courses in which this topic was addressed and provided examples of some of the specific instructional strategies employed. The exceptions were Respondents Six and Eight. Respondent Six, while suggesting that his TEP took a more integrally philosophical approach to this topic, stated: *“we assume that individual instructors will make use of appropriate opportunities to inform the students.”* Drawing upon her public school experience, Respondent Eight stated: *“I am not explicit about things that are no-nos . . . just general.”*

Question Three: *As part of this survey, we would like to obtain data from former students, who are now in-service public school teachers, regarding their experience with this topic and their relative comfort doing so. Would you be willing to forward a very brief questionnaire to 2-3 of your former students?*

Yes
No

Of the eight respondents, five (Respondents One, Three, Five, Seven, and Eight) agreed to forward questionnaires to former students while the remaining three declined.

Chairpersons of Teacher Education Programs :

Question One: *In preparing Christian pre-service teachers for secular K-12 schools, does your teacher preparation program prepare students to engage in religious topics and/or issues while remaining within legal boundaries?*

All 15 respondents answered yes to question one. While seven respondents (Respondents One, Six, Ten, Eleven, Thirteen, Fourteen and Fifteen) provided a simple “Yes” or “Yes we do” response, four other respondents provided additional elaboration by citing specific courses and strategies (Respondents Two, Three, Seven, and Twelve). One such respondent (Respondent Two), for example, replied: *“Yes, in Education 200 Introduction to the Principles of Teaching . . .”* while another respondent (Respondent Seven) offered: *“Yes, we do this in several courses. In one course, a Christian lawyer come[s] in as a guest speaker to discuss legal issues.”* The remaining four respondents (Respondents Four, Five, Eight, and Nine) indicated that their insti-

tutions maintained a more diffuse or integrated approach to the topic without citing specific courses or strategies. Of this group, one respondent (Respondent Nine) stated: *“Yes. We believe in the integration of faith and learning. In all of our classes, faith is integrated into subject matter.”* Similarly, another respondent (Respondent Four) offered: *“We certainly discuss these issues in all of our classes.”*

Question Two: *If yes, what strategies have you found most effective (successful) for informing students of existing legal issues and parameters for engaging the topic of religion within public K-12 schools?*

In response to question two, all 15 respondents highlighted instructional strategies that, in their opinion, proved most effective or successful. Six respondents cited non-specific readings and discussions by students within their classes (Respondents One, Four, Five, Seven, Eight, Ten and Eleven). An additional three respondents (Respondents Two, Three and Fourteen) cited specific books or published papers such as the Stronks & Stronks (1999) *Christian Teachers in Public Schools*. Five respondents (Respondents Four, Five, Six, Twelve and Fifteen) indicated that they routinely engaged guest speakers while three of the five (Respondents Four, Six and Twelve) specifically cited a Christian attorney as being among their invited speakers. One respondent (Respondent Thirteen) offered the following as her/his overall TEP strategy: *“We ask students to structure learning environments and to write lesson plans as though they were teaching in Christian schools. Students may then need to take out the “God” language, but the structure would remain a “Christian” learning environment or a “Christian” lesson plan.”*

Question Three: *Please provide the names and contact information of 2-3 of your education faculty whom we may contact directly for follow-up data collection.*

As a means of data triangulation, directors of TEPs were requested to provide the names of 3-4 teaching faculty for receipt of a follow-up questionnaire. Of the 15 respondents, 12 (Respondents Three through Fourteen) provided names and contact information for 22 faculty members. The remaining three (Respondents One, Two and Fifteen) made no response to this item on the questionnaire.

Limitations

While this study is intended to be an investigation of pre-service teachers', in-service teachers', TEP faculty members' and TEP department heads' views on their preparedness in terms of discussing religion and issues pertaining to religion within public K – 12 schools while remaining within all legal boundaries, the study is limited in its scope and generalizability. Only 11 pre-service teachers from a single Christian institution were queried; additionally, 11 in-service teachers, eight TEP faculty members and 15 TEP department chairpersons representing only 12 separate TEPs limit the scope of the findings. We do not presume that all of the respondents and the institutions from which they are connected are representative of all in the field of education.

In addition, while 55 surveys were initially distributed to 42 separate TEPs, only 23 surveys were returned. It could be assumed that institutions that are more likely to integrate information regarding the legalities of religion would also be more likely to submit their completed surveys, whereas, TEPs where little is being done would not respond at all. Therefore we cannot conclude, based solely on the surveys returned, that all Christian TEPs include information regarding religion within its core curriculum.

A third obstacle to this study was in defining what we mean exactly when we are making queries about religion in public schools. We consider it in the broadest sense: any curriculum designed that is religious in nature, any questions that might arise within a class regarding religion, as well as impromptu conversations between students and teachers during on-school, instructional and non-instructional time. In other words, our queries on religion in public schools reflect any and all references to religion by and with an educator when the teacher is in his/her professional capacity as an educator/role model?

Discussion

The most effective Teacher Education Programs (TEPs) are ones that continuously work on improving their programs, staying up to date with current trends, and encouraging teacher educators to remain passionate in their fields (Cruickshank, 1986; Malenka, 1998; Reynolds, 1992; Stewart-Wells, 1999; Wong and Wong,

1991). TEPs should also be educating future teachers to be strong in content knowledge, to be committed in the field in which they will be teaching, and to nurture pre-service teachers' love for students (Cruickshank, 1986; Malenka, 1998; Reynolds, 1992; Stewart-Wells, 1999; Wong and Wong, 1991). In addition, TEPs within Christian colleges and universities are responsible for instructing their Christian pre-service teachers to become educators in religious as well as secular K – 12 schools. In that, it becomes a responsibility to ensure that pre-service teachers are given as much guidance as possible to discuss religious issues and incorporate religious topics within the curriculum while, at the same, staying within all legal parameters. It is our hope that teacher educators in TEPS and K – 12 teachers, while constructing their own curriculum, will begin to view the broad perspective of all students' religious backgrounds within their classrooms.

This study was embarked upon following a 17 Question Survey that queried pre-service and in-service teachers' beliefs about what is and is not legally acceptable regarding religion in public K – 12 schools. While the survey ultimately proved impractical, patterns emerged in conversations with the respondents which led the authors of this paper to develop supplemental questions and case studies. These case studies delved more deeply into the questions on the survey which were either most frequently answered incorrectly or which led to the most insightful follow-up discussions.

Thus, this study was intended to be an investigation of two primary questions: first, how educators employed at public K – 12 schools engage their students in discussions and activities pertaining to religion while upholding all legal and constitutional guidelines, and second, to relate what TEPs find most appropriate when preparing pre-service teachers for designing curriculum with the increasing religious shifts in mind. We gathered, deconstructed and compared four different populations' views on their preparedness relative to discussing religion and issues pertaining to religion within public K – 12 schools while remaining within all legal boundaries. Each of the four groups was asked different questions regarding their understanding of and involvement in religious instruction within secular schools. Pre-service and in-service public K – 12 teachers were asked to express their understanding of what they may or may not do, legally, in terms of religious conversation or curriculum as well

as their perceptions' of how well their TEPs prepared them with this knowledge; while TEP faculty and TEP department heads were asked to share effective strategies for conveying the legalities of covering religion in general within public schools.

Of the pre-service teachers, five of the 11 respondents did not feel prepared to engage their K – 12 students in discussions or curriculum pertaining to religion. All expressed concern over not having enough knowledge in this area. Of the remaining six pre-service teachers, three believed they were somewhat prepared based on prior knowledge and/or common sense. Three felt very prepared for properly and legally engaging students in discussions and/or curriculum about religion. Yet, only one of these three students (and the only one out of all 11 pre-service teachers) noted a specific class and assignment from his TEP that had informed him of the legal parameters of religion in the secular schools.

Similarly, in-service teachers recalled little or no information given within their undergraduate Christian TEPs. Although most respondents received their bachelors degrees within the last ten years, it is possible that time has affected memory. Still, the fact remains that seven of the 11 in-service teachers did not feel comfortable including religion within their curriculum; and they cited feeling uninformed, unprepared and unequipped as reasons for avoiding the topic of religion altogether.

Age and Years of Experience appear to affect how comfortable in-service teachers felt engaging their K – 12 public school students in conversations about religion, within or outside of the curriculum (the four educators who responded with a “3” or a “4” out of “5” to having a stronger sense of comfort in engaging students in discussions pertaining to religion had the four highest experience levels of the 11 in-service teachers; three of the four were in the higher age range as well). The probable reason for the notably higher comfort level is likely the most obvious: with time and experience teachers are guided towards a level of comfort in terms of developing curriculum pertaining to religion. Yet, of these four in-service educators none participated in religious conversations outside of the course content; while two had integrated some type of religious curriculum within their classrooms, the other two had not. In addition, of the four in-service teachers who responded as having a higher comfort

level, none recalled any undergraduate assignments or coursework that informed them about the legal parameters of discussing religion in schools.

While all 15 respondent TEP chairpersons affirmed that their programs addressed the issue of religiosity in the public schools, there appears to be no uniform programmatic response by Christian TEPs. Only four respondents explicitly identified courses within their respective programs where direct instruction was identified. Another four respondents alluded to a more generalized, non-specific, integrative strategy for addressing the issue. The remaining seven supplied no elaboration of their “yes” responses. From this array of responses, it would appear that while all responding program leaders acknowledged the need for focus on this issue, there existed a wide assortment of specific programmatic responses. These responses also appear to be aligned with the particular institutional theology and philosophical values. Respondents with identified courses appear to hold the belief that the laws that require a separation of church & state within public schools are an obstacle that must be understood in order to be accommodated (overcome) within the Christian teacher’s personal witness to faith: “Students may then need to take out the God language but the structure would remain a Christian learning environment or a Christian lesson plan” (Respondent Thirteen). In contrast, other TEP leaders espousing a more non-specific and integrated approach, appear to be philosophically aligned with the spirit (intent) of the separation doctrine and theologically aligned with the belief that one’s Christian faith is best witnessed through acts of care, nurture and kindness as opposed to direct verbal testimonies: “We believe in the integration of faith and learning. In all of our classes, faith is integrated into subject matter” (Respondent Nine).

While limited in number (only eight respondents), data received from TEP faculty appears to reinforce the data provided by TEP chairpersons. Programmatic responses to religiosity in the public schools reflected varying degrees of explicitness as well as theological and philosophical diversity. While all eight respondents indicated some form of active engagement of students in the topic, only two indicated direct textbook teaching while three others indicated that the topic was generally handled as one topic within a more generalized course. The most common strategy identified by these respondents was the use of guest speak-

ers with two specifically citing the use of a Christian lawyer. One instructor with extensive public school experience shared her experience in which the law had minimal impact on the actions of teachers and administrators who continued to endorse prayer in school with no apparent legal consequences: “There were several law suits in my area pertaining to religion in the school. However, most of us in my school. . . continued to say a prayer before lunch. Many times our principal would call for a moment of silence to allow our kids to pray for a particular cause” (Respondent 8). In contrast, yet another TEP instructor stated, “I believe in the separation of church and state. I would not want a Buddhist teacher to proselytize my child” (Respondent 5).

In light of data gathered in this research, the effectiveness of the current strategies employed by some Christian TEPs is questionable and should be reevaluated. While all TEP chairpersons and faculty surveyed affirmed that their respective programs did, in fact, prepare their pre-service teachers to engage students in curriculum and discussions pertaining to religion, data gathered from pre-service teachers revealed that five of the 11 surveyed felt unprepared to engage students in curriculum or discussions. Additionally, in-service teachers only became more comfortable with age and teaching experience.

Need for and Significance of Study

Partly due to the fact that terms such as “separation of church and state” and “evolution versus Intelligent Design” are frequently heard in American conversations about education of late, the current movement toward a socially just curriculum requires teachers to bring topics of religion into their classrooms (e.g., Banks, 1997; Gollnick and Chinn, 2003; Greenawalt, 2005; Redman, 2003). In addition, recent political discussions nationwide regarding Faith Based Initiatives are concerning Christians and non-Christians alike that public schools may somehow cross the legal line when involving religion (in classroom discussions, guided curriculum, religious attire of students and/or teachers, moral education, etc.) in public schools. In spite of the current climate involving religiosity in schools, little research has been conducted to determine the ideological frame from which teachers are presenting religious curriculum and other religious information to their students. Is the approach conducted in a safe

and effective manner that the law demands? Likewise, what are the most effective strategies used within TEPs that best present the legalities of this issue to their pre-service and in-service teachers. The question then becomes: Is there more that TEPs can be doing to inform teachers about their legal responsibilities?

Recommendations for Further Study

An obvious initial recommendation for further study is to attempt to answer the question posed at the close of the previous section: Is there, in fact, more that TEPs can be doing to inform teachers about their legal responsibilities? We believe there is, yet what is/are the most effective avenue(s) to prepare pre- and in-service teachers for service in public schools?

Appendices

APPENDIX ONE

Legal Issues of Religion in Public Schools Survey

Please answer True or False to the following questions.

1. Students may pray in school. T F
2. Students may talk about religious issues to an audience of their peers in school. T F
3. Schools may ban certain religious activities/speech. T F
4. Teachers may encourage religious activities. T F
5. Teachers must discourage religious activities. T F
6. Students may express their religious beliefs in their homework or other school projects. T F
7. Students may distribute religious materials at schools. T F
8. Schools may actively teach civic values and virtues. T F
9. Students may wear religious symbols/messages. T F
10. Teachers may wear religious symbols/messages. T F
11. Students may publicize religious activities/meetings using school resources (i.e., public address system, bulletin boards, school newspaper, etc.) T F
12. Teachers may discuss religious holidays in their classrooms. T F
13. Teachers instructing in subjects not related to World Religions may initiate discussions about Christianity with their

students. T F

14. Teachers may be faculty sponsors at a student-led Bible study. T F

15. Schools may have religious books in the library. T F

16. Teachers may invite a pastor/priest to speak in class. T F

17. Students may read a Bible silently in class. T F

APPENDIX TWO

Case Studies

1. Katie Sullivan, a first year teacher at Park Land Public Elementary School, enjoyed teaching her third grade students immensely. She especially appreciated the rich diversity in her students who were of many different racial, ethnic, religious and socio-economic backgrounds. While Katie knew her administrators would not allow her to minister to her students about her Christian faith, she would “accidentally” leave her Christian music on in her classroom following recess each day in the hope that students would ask her about the words and their meaning.

Follow-up Discussion Points:

- Discuss Katie’s decision to leave the music on in her classroom. Do you agree, disagree, why/why not? What are the moral, ethical and legal ramifications of her action?
- Does your opinion of Katie’s choice change if she were of Jewish, Muslim, or any faith other than your own?

2. After ten years as principal at Roosevelt Public High School, John Leonard was known to teachers and students alike as a caring and fair administrator. A life-long Christian, he believed that the Lord worked in him on a daily basis. One afternoon, Kevin, the Junior Class President, knocked on Mr. Leonard’s door and asked to speak with him confidentially. Mr. Leonard knew Kevin well and immediately saw the distress on the teen’s face as he took his seat in the administrator’s office. “Mr. Leonard,” he began, “I’ve been keeping a secret from my family and friends, and I can’t hold it in anymore. I think I’m gay.” Mr. Leonard confidently leaned into Kevin and declared, “God loves you, Kevin.”

- If you were in Mr. Leonard’s place, how might you have responded to Kevin’s announcement?
- What are Mr. Leonard’s primary goals, both as an administrator and as a Christian, in this situation?
- Are there any conflicts between these two roles? If so, what are they?
- What should be Mr. Leonard’s primary responsibility regarding Kevin?

graduate) prepare you for understanding what can and can not be done in regards to religion in a public K-12 classroom?

3. On a scale of 1 – 5 (1 being ‘the least comfortable’ and 5 being ‘the most comfortable’) how comfortable do you feel your understanding is of what you may or may not do, legally, in regards to engaging students in activities or discussions surrounding ‘religion’ in a public K-12 classroom?

APPENDIX THREE

Journal Assignment

In a paragraph or two below, please respond to the following questions.

“How well prepared do you feel to handle issues, discussions, activities, etc. of a religious nature as a teacher in a public K – 12 school? What coursework and assignments in your TEP have informed you of the legal parameters regarding religion in public K – 12 schools?”

Statistical Info :

Education Level:

Currently pursuing BA/BS in (subject area) _____

Teaching Goal (circle one): Elementary

Secondary(subject) _____

of education courses completed: _____

Gender _____

APPENDIX FOUR

Please respond to the following questions.

1. “Do you or have you ever engaged public school students in discussions and/or activities pertaining to religion? (Circle one) Yes No

If no: In several sentences, please explain “Why not.”

If yes: In several sentences, please describe “How” you engage your students in discussions and activities pertaining to religion while upholding all legal guidelines?”

2. In what ways did your TEP (undergraduate and/or

APPENDIX FIVE

In a paragraph or two below, please respond to the following question.

” In what ways have you informed pre and in-service teachers in your courses about remaining within legal boundaries when discussing topics of religion and/or when religious issues arise in the public K-12 classrooms?”

Statistical Information:

Years teaching within a TEP _____

Education experience (circle all that apply):

Bachelors

Masters

PhD/EdD

other _____

APPENDIX SIX

Please respond to the following questions.

1. In preparing Christian pre-service teachers for secular K-12 schools, does your teacher preparation program prepare students to engage in religious topics and/or issues while remaining within legal boundaries? (Circle) Yes No

2. If yes, what strategies have you found most effective (successful) for informing students of existing legal issues and parameters for engaging the topic of religion within public K-12 schools?

3. Please provide the names and contact information of 2-3 of your education faculty whom we may contact directly for follow-up data gathering.

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