

World Religions and

Sofia Udner

As is the case in many states, Arizona lacks adequate funds for the teaching of social studies in the middle school, so teachers with specialties in other fields of study are often called upon. Last fall, our principal informed several of us seventh grade teachers that we would be teaching the social studies curriculum. “I teach seventh grade math,” I thought to myself, “How am I going to be able to teach seventh grade social studies?” Dividing up the sections was easy – until we came to the taboo section: world religions. After some grueling debate, the team decided that I was the most qualified candidate to teach this section, only because I have a very diverse religious and cultural background. (I was born in Nairobi, Kenya, to a Muslim Pakistani father and a Christian Finnish mother.) I was apprehensive because the topic of religion is very controversial. Indeed, I was surprised that it was in the district’s curriculum at all. I imagined parents calling up to ask questions like, “Why are you teaching my child religion?”

Preparation

The Scottsdale District’s curriculum states that students will compare and contrast “the world’s five great religions”: Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Students are to examine the origins, founders, main beliefs, and customs of each religion. Religious conflicts, as well as current events issues, are to be explored. This seemed a tall order to fill. I started reading materials for the course, but I also considered who I would be teaching.



AP Photo/Nick Ut

Members of the Valley Hindu Temple celebrate the Hindu New Year 2058 (on November 16, 2001) in the Northridge section of Los Angeles. The event, also known as the festival of lights, features prayers of peace.

My class consisted of twenty-nine students of varying ethnic and national background, including seventeen Americans of Northern European and one of East Indian background, one Native American, eight Hispanics, one Iraqi, and one Chinese. The class met for forty-five minutes each day. A preservice teacher from Ottawa College joined the adventure.

At the outset, I decided that, throughout the year, I would gather data about what sense my students were making of the curriculum: I would write in a journal (my preservice teacher also kept a journal), interview students, and analyze their work. For example, I coded the data according to four categories: (1) Lacking Previous Knowledge; (2) New Ways of Thinking; (3) Making Connections; and (4) Openness/Awareness. At the conclusion of the course, I reviewed these data to see what changes had occurred in my students. In this article, I would like to describe some of the process of learning that went on, and to highlight some of the interesting moments for the students, and for the teachers, as we learned together about world religions.

The Adventure Begins

The first thing I had to do was find out where my students were coming from. What did they already know (or think they knew) about the topic? What background did they have? I gave my students a questionnaire, asking them to describe each of the world’s five great religions. The results of the survey did not surprise me. Most students knew a lot about the current practice of Christianity. Many gave details like, “I know a lot because it is my religion and I go to church every Sunday.” As for Judaism, their statements were less precise: “They have a fun game called dreidel” and “They are originally from Israel.” When it came to Buddhism, Hinduism, or Islam, most students simply responded, “I don’t know anything about this.” However, one student had an extensive amount of insight about Hinduism and another about Islam; each came from a family that practiced that religion. As I had expected, students who practice a particular religion had some previous knowledge of its main aspects, but if a religion was not their own, they did not seem to have much awareness of it.

Personal Tolerance

Sudden Tragedy

Students had taken notes from hearing lectures, watching videos, and viewing things that I brought to class, like some Hindu holy books, *saris*, and pictures of a Hindu wedding. They considered the course material to be important in the lives of “other people,” but not really relevant to their own lives. There wasn’t much discussion during class. Up until September 11, 2001, we had spent six weeks discussing the main ideas of Hinduism and Buddhism. The terrorist attacks that occurred on that date gave a strange and solemn backdrop to the whole course.

I tried to present the events of that day from an objective point of view, but my students heard the media putting the blame for the actions on “fundamentalist Muslims.” This was very confusing for my students, as they had no basis on which to separate “fundamentalist Muslims” from “Muslims in general.” The confusion became a springboard to serious inquiry about Islam and the complex questions that arose from the tragedy. Islam was our next religion to study.

My classroom became a forum where students could talk about the things they heard and saw on television and what they were feeling. Within three weeks, my students could articulate the difference between the teachings of Islam and the political use of religion in the rhetoric of Osama bin Laden, the militant Saudi exile who was said to be behind the attacks. We also broadened the focus of our study so that we investigated how racism and stereotypes were affecting our own community. We read in the newspaper how some people (in various places in the United States including, unfortunately, our own community) were harassed and abused because of their ethnic or religious background.



AP Photo/Eyal Warshavsky

Jewish man blows the *Shofar*, a traditional Jewish ritual instrument during a prayer meeting at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem.

Toward Understanding

The social studies curriculum helped my students develop new ways of thinking, as exemplified by the following quotes, which are from students’ statements made in class, in interviews with me or the preservice teacher, or in students’ journals:

- ▶ At first I thought that every Muslim hated the United States and now I know better.
- ▶ After what happened on 9-11, I was afraid of Muslim people but now I know that they are a peaceful people.

▶ I didn’t understand why they would do that. I thought we were the victims and they [Muslims] were all the bad guys but I learned that it’s not like that. What’s that word we learned? (Teacher): Fundamentalists? Yeah! They [fundamentalist Muslims] are not like most Muslims. Muslims are just like everyone else.

▶ The Americans that are Muslims, who look different, are mistreated now. I feel bad for all those people. I feel mad when people judge others badly just

based on their religion.

- ▶ I don’t agree with racism because it’s what’s on the inside that counts.

Initially, a couple of students expressed a general fear of Muslim people. We discussed the few incidents, presented in the news, of Muslim people being killed and mosques being vandalized. There were even incidents where people were attacked because they were wearing turbans, whether they were Muslim or not. Fear and hatred were probably present in the people responsible for these crimes.

An Incident

While I did not hear any of my students make angry or prejudicial statements, we got an unwelcome reminder that racist attitudes were present in our community. One student, whose parents had immigrated from Iraq (Fatima, I'll call her), found a paper in her backpack, placed there during the bus ride home by an unknown student, several days after 9-11. It simply stated, "You are all killers!" Fatima confided the incident to me, her world religions teacher. I alerted the principal about the incident, but we had no luck finding the perpetrator. (This event was kept confidential between the student and adult staff.)

This incident got me thinking. I decided that my class was an opportunity for me to help others see Fatima for who she really was. I felt that the more friends she made, the less of a target she'd be. So I invited Fatima to teach a portion of the lesson about Islam, and she agreed. She brought in her Koran, prayer beads, prayer mat, and some Iraqi food. She described her own experience of Islam, the holidays, rules for living, and forms of worship. She talked about Iraq and her travels to the Middle East.

The students loved her presentation of writing the Arabic alphabet. After class, students asked her, "Can you write my name in Arabic?" She said, "Of course." Suddenly, her homework assignment, given by the students, was to write all of their names in Arabic. When she passed them out, students attempted to write their names in Arabic. They carried those pieces of paper to their other classes and shared them with their peers. Suddenly, Fatima had made some new friends and seemed less anxious.

Would Fatima have come to me if we weren't studying world religions? I believe that my class, and the way I was teaching about

world religions, created a safe place for Fatima. It opened a forum for her to present her religion and culture from her point of view, which helped dispel stereotypes, and gave all of my students a more accurate picture of their world.

Making Connections

A few days after these events, and to the astonishment of his classmates, a boy suddenly started talking about his Hindu background. He shared experiences and events from his own religion and culture of origin. He brought items to class for an improvised show and tell. He was visibly proud, both of these belongings and of his background. His peers showered him with questions and comments.

After these student presentations, there was a mood in the class that I guess I'll describe as a feeling of pride. The awareness of real diversity in our midst somehow brought home the importance of what we were doing and who we were. Our study was not just an academic exercise.

Students began noticing things in their own community that related to different religions and different cultures. They began asking questions and making comments about these observations in class and in their journals.

- ▶ (In class discussion.) One student noticed a new Hindu temple being built as he rode with his mother down a suburban street. I asked him how he knew it was Hindu, and he said, "Oh, because it had a big sign that said it, and I remembered the Hindu symbol, *Aum*. It was on [the sign] too."
- ▶ Another student had seen the crescent moon in the sky. He asked me if that meant that Ramadan had started. Fatima said, "Yes, we started fasting." The students had tons of questions for her. For example, "What's it like not to eat at lunch?" and "Aren't you hungry?"
- ▶ (From a journal.) "I saw a lady at Minitown wearing a sari trimmed with gold. So I said to her after the skirts that she had a beautiful sari on and she said, Well thank you, how did you know it was a sari? I said, I learned it by my social studies teacher Ms. Udner."

Joyful Discovery

Increasingly, students made connections between what they had learned in class and what they were seeing in their own community and learning about from the TV news and newspapers. Admittedly, we did not have time for an in-depth



Muslim believers pray at Mecca, capital of the *Hejaz* in Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of the prophet Mohammed and the holiest site of Islam. At its center is the great Mosque enclosing the *Kaaba*, a sanctuary made of stone.

study of any one religion or culture. Most of my students gained only a basic knowledge about most of the topics we discussed during the semester. Their statements were occasionally juvenile, but they indicated that the students “caught” at least some of the specifics taught in class. Just as important, I believe that there was a sense of joyful discovery among my students. They felt proud that they had a “real Hindu” and a “real Muslim” in their class. Toward the end of the class, they were beginning to display increasing openness and awareness of the world around them, as described in their journals:

- ▶ I will have more respect now that I understand more.
- ▶ My world view has changed, I've seen different parts of the world that I might never see in real life and I found out that the world is much bigger than I thought.
- ▶ I've learned not to pre-judge someone.
- ▶ If people were making fun of them [people from a different culture], I would stick up for them because I understand things more about others.
- ▶ Before I learned of all these things [religions] I just thought there was [only] two different religions... Thanks for teaching me [otherwise]!

This last statement was an honest admission of the student's previous misconception: that there were only two religions in the world. But there are five major world religions, each with a treasury of history, customs, and teachings. What an amazing discovery for this student to have made about his world.

Teachers and Learning

While I empower my students with cultural and religious tolerance, it seems to me that many teachers are not ready to embrace such an approach. I have experienced racism and stereotyping aimed at me by colleagues. These teachers are the very ones who will help mold our students into the adult citizens of the future. If teachers are against an open-minded approach to the teaching of other cultures and religions, then what will happen to the seeds of tolerance and understanding that teachers like myself have planted?

Parents seemed to be very supportive regarding the curriculum that I was teaching. One parent even stated that “I am glad that my child is learning about different religions, because I never did.”

The reflections of my preservice teacher point to the broader perspective, “Increased knowledge also tends to increase toler-

ance and respect for almost all areas of the human experience.” Many teachers and students have a limited exposure to cultures other than their own, a situation that has been called “ethnic encapsulation.”¹ I feel that there is a need for teachers, as well as youth, to enjoy learning about other cultures and religions. Sometimes there is a lot we can learn right in our own communities, even from our own students.² If we could open ourselves to learning about these interesting differences, it might make our world a friendlier place to live.³ 📖

Notes

1. James A. Banks, *Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives* (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1988).
2. For other articles related to ethnic and religious tolerance in America since September-11, see the series, “Dealing with Tragedy in the Classroom: What NCSS Members are Doing,” which appears occasionally in issues of the NCSS newsletter *The Social Studies Professional* (Nov/Dec, 2001; Mar/Apr 2002; May/June 2002; and). See also the October and November/December 2001 issues of *Social Education* and subsequent letters to the editor. Many of these items are available online at www.socialstudies.org.
3. I would like to thank professor Carl Alzen, in the Department of World Religions at Central Arizona College, and Desiree Custodio of Supai Middle School, my preservice teacher.

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Early Tolerance

In 1568, in the tiny country of Transylvania, King John Sigismund proclaimed an edict of religious tolerance. After hosting an open forum that lasted ten days—in which clerics from the different religions debated one another—Sigismund decided that there would be no official state religion in Transylvania (not Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist, or Unitarian). Rather, citizens could choose where and how they wished to worship and could not harass anyone else for his or her spiritual practice. This law of religious freedom was unheard of in Europe at the time, coming more than 200 years before such laws were established in England. Although Sigismund's edict was ignored by Austro-Hungarian rulers, the tradition of religious tolerance is upheld by many citizens and churches in Romania to this day.