

ROLE OF TEACHERS' PROFESSIONALISM IN CREATING DIVERSITY AWARENESS AMONG THE SCHOOL GOING STUDENTS: BANGLADESH PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The current paper brings forward the concept of religious diversity primarily for two reasons. First, this paper proposes a brief overview of religious diversity in order to promote understanding on what diversity is and why. Thus, in this paper, an attempt is made to illuminate the concept of diversity in general and represent pro-active pluralistic interpretations from the perspective of religious diversity in particular. Second, this highlighting of religious diversity, in this current study, suggests the probable effective role of teachers' professionalism in creating diversity awareness in the tender minds of the school-going students in Bangladesh. This, in particular, enables the researchers to clarify the issue in a best possible way so that they can suggest some effective teaching strategies for teachers' professionalism with regard to religious diversity. Thus, in order to deal with the current problem, considerable attention has been given to the necessity of the education of religious diversity in schools toward promoting interreligious harmony in a pluralistic society like Bangladesh.

Key Words: diversity awareness; secularization; teachers' professionalism; multiculturalism; institutional deconfessionalization; assimilative tendency;

1. Introduction

From a socio-historical perspective it is assumed that religion appears to be an important element within nearly all human societies that has become the hallmark of a cultural system in course of a long period of time (Little and Little, 2014). In her book *From Civil to Political Religion* as M. Cristi has referenced Robert N. Bellah (1927-2013): "Culture is the key to revolution; religion is the key to culture" (Cristi, 2001). Therefore, religiosity, as well as religion still remains central within human culture almost all over the world. This phenomenon, as an important aspect of culture, motivates human action by beliefs and values (McGuire, 1997). Religious teachings present their values not only through moral education and spiritual purification but also through sharing the experiences of working together. This kind of shared experience, for Durkheim, produces social unity (McGuire, 1997). Thus understood, this dynamic approach of religious teachings generates mutual trust and respect among different religious groups in the society. Roughly speaking this interpretation of socio-religious reality suggests us that in order to promote interfaith understanding and establish religious harmony, primary and secondary schools should be given more importance as the concrete grounds from where children can get the social learning of harmony and cohesion. These basic units of the educational systems are, indeed, the crucial steps toward building a harmonious society of losing peace and common prosperity. Notably, schools rank the vital position in the society where students of different backgrounds come and make bonds of integrity in their own ways. At the same time, teachers from different religious and educational backgrounds can help the students to strengthen their bond through mutual understanding and diversity awareness. Indeed, in our opinion, the crossroads of

education and religion can offer a privileged ground to a unique study process of secularization and religious diversity in moderate society like Bangladesh. Thus, understanding the role, which both schools and teachers can play, is to socialize the students with civic sense, values and identities that could be more effective in creating diversity awareness among them. This is one of the major objectives of the current study that tends to explore the real feature of a multicultural society like Bangladesh where people of different faiths are found to deal with their commitment to the values of diversity. In this particular case, we shall briefly examine the strand of religions that stand for pluralism and can play a vital role in creating diversity awareness among the students of different faiths through teachers' professionalism. However, the current study mainly focuses on the appeal of religious pluralism and the pro-active pluralistic approaches of religions that can be helpful for teachers' professionalism in creating diversity awareness among the school going students in Bangladesh.

2. Understanding Diversity and its Positive Implication

To begin with, it is necessary to review the concept of diversity for the adequate understanding of its positive implications in various cultural areas. Diversity is considered as the most sanctified social term. Diversity and complexity of a cultural phenomenon of a particular society is related to an assimilative tendency. This assimilative tendency of diversity will be considered here in order to understand how diversity actually works as a positive implication toward ensuring the peaceful and harmonious co-existence of people in a multicultural society. Before proceeding any further, it is important to define diversity in greater detail. To begin with, diversity has various definitions from different aspects and thus, it cannot be easily defined. The term often refers to the great form of distinctions that exist between persons and groups, although the ambiguities of these distinctions entail an exhaustive list of attributes. The concept of diversity shows, in the most general sense, appreciation of acceptance and respect. This approach of diversity creates a ground of general understanding that each individual is unique, and thereby helps people recognize their individual differences. This point of view seems to be fundamental to this concept. Kathy Castania (n.d.), a lead facilitator of diversity projects in the USA, addresses this point: "Diversity is differences among people with respect to age, class, ethnicity, gender, physical and mental ability, race, sexual orientation, spiritual practice, and other human differences" (p.2). It is important to note that Castania has pointed out the modes of diversity. In accordance with Castania, modes are mentioned here as general features of diversity. It may be argued that identifying such common features of diversity can help analyze and evaluate the existing modes of diversity in different societies. Castania's view in terms of the features of diversity corresponds to Wellner conceptualization of diversity. In his book *The Concept of Diversity*, Washington (2008), with special reference to Wellner, interprets diversity and conceptualizes it as illustrating a multitude of individual differences and similarities that exist among people. It is therefore crucial that for Wellner, diversity can enclose many different human characteristics such as race, age, creed, national origin, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation (p. 3).

Diversity actually brings together individuals from distinct backgrounds that possess necessary skills that stimulate institutional competitiveness and growth (Velasco et al., 2016). The benefit of diversity can be seen in diverse areas such as school, college, university, office and other organizations. Thus, it may be argued that by identifying and considering these definitions and explanations, we acknowledge only a few of the various attributes associated with diversity. In a more general sense, these attributes may vary from environment to environment such as academia, or other workplaces. It is, therefore, important to address this point from different perspectives. As human beings in a society or nation should live as members of a family irrespective of their race, religion, caste, language or gender, it is necessary that they should live in harmony with other beings, both animals and plants. In other words, as Dominic views, this universe is a big concert or symphony, a harmony of diverse notes. In his opinion, all creations actually play their own role in concordance, but man tries to play belligerent notes-stands against the rhythmic flow of the system. With a view to presenting a clear configuration of beauty in diversity, K.V. Dominic (2010) addresses this point in his excellent poem "Multicultural Harmony":

Multiplicity and diversity
 essence of universe
 From atom to the heavens
 multiculturalism reigns
 This unity in diversity
 makes beauty of universe (p.15).

This poem characterizes multiculturalism as a harmonious combination of diverse cultural elements that are further suggested as the essence of the universe. Indeed, unity, in the matrix of diversity, presented by Dominic (2010), appears in his poem as the beauty of this universe so quite differently. Notably, this symphony serves the sole purpose of highlighting the multiplicity and diversity as the basis of unity of a society. In fact, the scope of diversity, as per Dominic's observation, marks the degree to what extent the implication of diversity zooms. Thus, in order to consider the scope and significance of diversity awareness we should think of this issue in the matrix of various cultural areas of a particular society.

3. Concept of Diversity and its Awareness among the Teachers and School-going Students

In multicultural societies, schools are usually found to become a central place for fostering the awareness of religious diversity. Indeed, schools can play all vital roles in calling attention to the importance of diversity education (Lefebvre, 2016). Children are trained in schools to learn how to become good citizens and behave accordingly in a pluralistic society (Bindewald, et al., 2017). It can help to bridge the gap between the private and public spheres in a society (Arino, 2019). It is evident that the crossroads of education and religion are a privileged ground to study the process of secularization, institutional deconfessionalization i.e. the removal of the influence of religion and control of religious diversity in liberal societies. This social process can help teachers' professionalism play a role in socializing students in civic values, identities, and beliefs, although considerable controversy surrounds this relation (Arino, 2019). In this point we focus on the importance of the study of religious diversity toward creating diversity awareness among students and teachers and introduce guidelines and strategies so that they understand the value of religious and spiritual diversity. This will enable us to create a picture about how a country like Bangladesh should deal with religious diversity in the education system. Here it should be mentioned that all teachers may not agree about how diverse religious beliefs and practices should be addressed and handled. There is, however, a different case, which cannot be neglected. Students can feel safe and are better able to learn when issues of diversity are handled with sensitivity.

As per expert opinions, nowadays schools are made up of diverse groups of students including those from a variety of religious backgrounds. Thus, schools may be suggested to employ a range of strategies and resources in teaching religion with a view to creating awareness of religious diversity (Whittaker, 2009). However, it is necessary to mention that especially educators must make it sure that the way they teach is unbiased and neutral so that no religion is intentionally promoted or tarnished. Now, we must give some effective propositions in order to consider public education on religious diversity in schools to be beneficial for the sustainable development of a country like Bangladesh. At this point it is necessary to stress the following aspects.

3.1. Incorporating Religion-based Content into the Curriculum

First to be considered is the fact that if religion based content in terms of religious diversity is incorporated into the school curriculum the best possible way of teaching communal harmony may be ensured. If we look into the US policy regarding the same issue, many state standards are found to have included instruction about religion as part of social studies, literature, and fine arts curricula (Whittaker, 2009). The same standard could be maintained with primary and secondary school education curriculum in Bangladesh. In that case, the study of various religions can be incorporated into other subject areas as well. For instance, science, physical education, and health teachers can train up the students on different religious dietary regulations while Math teachers can use the architecture of the various houses of worship as examples of geometrical models. This may be a fact that new challenges for teachers' professionalism in creating diversity awareness among the school going students will succeed in stimulating the scope of interreligious tolerance toward creating a country of sustainable communal harmony in future. This, as per our opinion, is one of the preconditions of the sustainable development of a country. In addition, this should be the case with teachers, whose collaboration with other professionals may lead to the goals we expect to see in Bangladesh with greater capacity.

3.2. Holidays and Religious Symbols

As far as religious holidays and symbols are concerned, the study of religious holidays and symbols can meet the purpose of the current issue through the school curriculum. However, the attempt will be helpful, if for no other reason, for the purpose connected with the current problem of this paper. Nevertheless, from the

social implication point of view, it is suggested that when studying holidays and displaying religious symbols, teachers should make sure that these are used for a variety of groups, are employed as teaching aids and for academic purposes, and are temporary (Whittaker, 2009). Initially, teachers should clearly mark the academic and social goals for including holidays in the educational program, determine which holidays will be studied, and plan how they will be presented properly. As part of these activities, educators can include lessons that address religious and social meaning of various holidays. One inclusive way to study holidays is to organize them across a range of religions and around usual themes. Other common themes for holiday celebrations might concentrate on the family, life cycle, liberation, cooperation, fasting, seasons, harvests, and planting. Educators can use these themes to refer to holidays and school wide activities in an inclusive manner. It also is important that holidays be studied in no stereotypical and factual manners so that none of the students' religious backgrounds and rituals are excluded or portrayed as exotic (Myers, 2002). Role-playing and other activities should be avoided if they are interpreted as a means of stereotyping a group or violating or trivializing the sanctified nature of rituals. Therefore, it is necessary for educators to research and solicit information from families and religious leaders to realize the authentic and different ways that religious groups celebrate holidays (Haynes, 2005).

3.3. Using Children's Literature

Inasmuch as we pass in review over some expert opinions it appears that contents about the similarities and distinctions between a variety of religious and spiritual traditions can play a vital role toward increasing the intimacy of the relationship between the students of different faiths (Green et al., 2005). Needless to say, it necessitates the incorporation of children's and young adult literatures into the school curriculum that convey religious diversity and help students promote their understanding on unity in diversity and beauty in diversity. Unity in diversity or beauty in diversity awareness here is seen as a genuine outcome and a more optimistic one that can help students emphasize their communal ties in order to work together for social integration in future. However, it is necessary to say that as books sometimes can present inaccurate and biased information and inadvertently reinforce negative stereotypes; teachers should be more careful in selecting appropriate books and use them to foster mutual understanding and respect about religious beliefs. Thus, teachers should carefully review them to identify whether the contents and illustrations are factually true and correct, as well as presented in a respectful, non-stereotypical manner (Green et al., 2005). As there is a vital role for teachers in creating diversity awareness among the students with a view to building a nation of communal harmony they must be concerned about their proper duties toward the students. In this respect, an incentive to the teachers may come from Nelson Mandela (1918-2013). In his book *The Magic of Mandela: Twenty Years of Democracy* Michelle Wright (2015) quotes Mandela as saying, "Children of today are the leaders of tomorrow and education is a very important weapon to prepare children for their future roles as leaders of the community" (p.21). Thus, fundamentally and ultimately, teachers' roles can be an important factor shaping children's healthy personality with a strong sense of communal harmony and patriotism so that, as future leaders, they can translate Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's (1920-1975) dream of *Golden Bengal* into reality. Even though his concept of *Golden Bengal* is termed as speculative it has much appeal to our new generation. It is difficult, though not impossible, to touch the dream which originated through a genuine experience of Bangabandhu and which was fostered until he breathed his last. Thus, teachers' professionalism can play a principal role to stimulate the spirit of communal harmony in the tender minds of the new generations toward building a sustainable *Sonar Bangla*.

4. Understanding Teachers' Opinions regarding Diversity Awareness

As a theoretical expression, we have thus far discussed the importance and necessity of the issue for a societal change in Bangladesh through teachers' professionalism and school going students. Let us now examine the attitude of school teachers toward the problem and consider it from the perspective of their opinions. However, in order to illuminate teachers' understanding of religious diversity and the necessity to grow diversity awareness among the school going students toward creating a healthy generation in building a nation of communal harmony, we visited some schools of Dhaka city and asked the respondents a questionnaire (See Appendix 1 and 2). The following generalizations are made on the basis of their opinions and suggestions:

1. In order to make the students able to better understand the values of peace and tolerance, a teacher can play a major role in the classroom by sharing his/her personal experiences, moral stories, moral teachings of different historical and religious leaders. In that case, teachers suggest an education that

should be planned and guided by the values of peace and tolerance so that the students can realize the necessity to live in harmony with all existence.

2. With a view to upholding the values of peace and harmony, the students need more involvement in group works and group assignments as a core part of their curricular activities that can help them develop a host of skill in the maintenance of peace and harmony in their classrooms, in particular, and at the schools, in general. As some teachers, for example, have shared their views with the researchers, students can select their class captains by voting system, which can help them understand the value of peace, harmony, human rights, democracy and, at its very core, tolerance. At the same time, according to them, they can understand the importance of respecting and appreciating the culture of others. This is how, as they conclude, a bond of unity can grow among the school students.
3. As schools have a very diverse student body, it may be a great scope for the students to increase diversity awareness among them. In most cases the interviewees are found to have acknowledged the diversity of their student population in the schools, and need proper lessons to make them better understand the importance of promoting diversity awareness. They have assumed that if the students are provided with proper training on the issue they will find a spontaneous pathway how to respect and love people of different faiths. Here, the teachers, whom the researcher met, have good intention in making the students understand that beauty actually lies in diversity.
4. Teachers have almost the same opinion in terms of the significance of promoting communal harmony. As per their opinion, it is very important to promote non-communal feeling among students because they are living in a multicultural and pluralistic society. Thus, they should learn how to recognize and respect the variety among the multiplicity in religions. If they get proper teaching regarding the issue at the school level, they will not be misguided in future.
5. According to the interviewees, as unity and beauty lie in diversity, students should learn to give priority not only to their own choice but also other's choice. They should also learn to respect the opinion of others. This should be taught to them in the classroom by teachers and at home by parents, relatives and elders.
6. It is summarized from some opinions that in order to get better performance from students in the classroom, a teacher should present the lesson or topic in a more attractive way so that it can draw their attention properly and make them more interested and enthusiastic to learn more from the classroom.
7. Finally, through discussions with the teachers there emerged a common point. As they have pointed out, to protect and promote cultural diversity, an immediate and necessary initiative should be taken so that this subject is included in school curriculum. Proper training should be provided for both teachers and parents so that they can give their children appropriate early training and guidelines.

Conclusion and Recommendations

To conclude, due to immense cultural diversity and multiplicity in the religions of Bangladesh, people of this country seem to hold more friendly, liberal and tolerant attitudes toward each other's belief systems, values, norms, languages, rituals, modes of worship, festivals and all other components that are related to their religions as well as culture. Thus, as per the findings of this research paper, in order to circulate and expand this cosmopolitan and benevolent approach among the people of different faiths, it is necessary to train the students at the very early stage of life while their minds remain resilient, tender and juvenile. However, addressing religious diversity in schools is an aspect of educational policies and practices that is constantly changing, and new programs, strategies, techniques, litigation, and legislation regarding such issues are evolving. Educators can engage in a variety of professional development activities to learn more about fostering religious diversity. They can study journal articles and books such as those in this article's reference list and view Web sites that offer information and resources addressing issues of religious diversity.

As the findings recommend, proper teachings and trainings are needed to be introduced in pre-schools, primary schools, *maktabs*, *madradas* and all other government and non-government educational institutions so that students i.e., our young citizens can get the opportunity to acquire accurate knowledge and

experience peace and harmony through religious and cultural diversity. As today's schools are serving students from a variety of religious backgrounds, teachers may expose their students to cultural diversity toward making a society of communal harmony. In this regard, alongside teacher professionalism, all other professionalisms should come forward with new proposals to drive our society to new gains i.e., peace, harmony and prosperity. However, this research may help and impress future researchers to provide more guidelines and strategies over the issue.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire

1. How can you help students learn more about the values of peace and tolerance?
2. How can children vow to work together to uphold the values of peace and harmony?
3. Do you think that students can learn equal respect through diversity awareness?
4. How important is it to create diversity awareness among the students towards promoting non-communal feelings?
5. How can you make them understand the idea of “unity and beauty in diversity”?

Appendix 2 Respondents details

Respondents	Place of Interviewing	Date and Time	Occupation
1. Ummea Kulsum	Viqarrunnesa Noon School, Dhanmondi Branch	October 28, 2019, 11 am	Teacher, Viqarrunnesa Noon School, Dhanmondi Branch, Dhaka
2. Rumana Chowdhury	Viqarrunnesa Noon School, Dhanmondi Branch	October 28, 2019, 12.30 pm	Teacher, Viqarrunnesa Noon School, Dhanmondi Branch, Dhaka
3. Kakoli Rahman	YWCA School, Mohammadpur Branch	November 03, 2019, 2.30 pm	Teacher, YWCA School, Mohammadpur Branch, Dhaka
4. Mrs. Dina Roy	YWCA School, Mohammadpur Branch	November 03, 2019, 3.10 pm	Teacher, YWCA School, Mohammadpur Branch, Dhaka
5. Tahmina Sultana Rini	Dhaka University Campus	November 06, 2019, 11 am	Teacher, Insight International School, Dhaka
6. Nazmun Nahar Munia	Dhaka University Campus	November 06, 2019, 11.30 am	Teacher, Cosmo School & College, Dhaka