

Toward Educator Dispositions That Welcome Religious Diversity and Freedom

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Now that South Carolina is an official National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) state, her teacher educators are critically examining ways to craft their institutions' conceptual frameworks so that they include desired knowledge, skills and dispositions that candidates will truly need (and that NCATE will find worthy). At the recent South Carolina Association of Teacher Educators (SCATE) fall conference, professors from all over the Palmetto state spent two days thinking about the implications of requiring and assessing desired professional dispositions. Just what is a disposition? What are the legal implications of requiring that all candidates have certain dispositions? What educator dispositions are truly desirable and why? And, how in the world are programs going to provide reliable evidence that the candidates have these desired dispositions? The conversations were wide open as experts, such as Arthur Costa, helped the gathered grapple with the particulars of this high stakes NCATE requirement. In various concurrent sessions state teacher educators also advocated that candidates should develop dispositions of tolerance toward people from diverse cultural backgrounds. We (the authors) have continued to reflect on this need for a "respect for cultural diversity" and are questioning whether teacher education programs need to help candidates develop a similar disposition that would enable them to respect religious others in our increasingly diverse country and world.

For years John Goodlad (2004) has advocated that American public schools should reclaim as its aim the preparation of students for active participation in our representative democracy. Instead of seeing schools as exclusively job training sites or college preparation centers, public schools would do well to first of all ensure that every student is able to engage in meaningful civic action and debate. Democracies depend on an enlightened citizenry who can critically analyze policies and politicians and who can share their moral and political perspectives within the public square. This public square has always been and still is a highly diverse religious arena. As Robert Wuthnow reveals in his seminal *America and the Challenge of Religious Diversity* (2005), the very founding of America was fraught with debates related to religious diversity and freedom. After all, our very first and long-enduring amendment to the American Constitution addresses head-on these compelling religious concerns that were at the heart of our formation.

As our First Amendment evolved, America would no longer honor established state religions. This First Amendment made it clear that Unitarians or Anglicans could no longer have special state support. Diverse religious communities would finally have a more even playing field within this new democracy. In addition, the First Amendment helped ensure that the state could not unduly interfere with the free exercise of religion. With all of this thoughtful deliberation it seems our earliest civic leaders wanted us to embrace and protect religious

freedom. To do this, though, we as citizens need to know about the First Amendment and the religions and religious freedoms that it seeks to protect yet fewer of us do.

Now more than ever, America is a highly diverse religious nation (Eck, 2001; Wuthnow, 2005). Yet, this diversity is causing some problems. Wuthnow's Religion and Diversity Survey (2005) revealed some indicators of intolerance toward this religious diversity. For example, when respondents in telephone interviews were asked to apply various negative and positive words to the Muslim religion (among several other world religions), forty-seven percent perceived Muslims to be fanatical. Forty percent found them violent, fifty-seven percent found them closed-minded, and forty-four percent found them strange. Furthermore, Wuthnow's research suggests that many Americans lack basic religious literacy that may be a factor that contributes to the religious intolerance that he documented. Although ninety-five percent of all respondents were somewhat familiar with the basic teachings of Christianity, only fifty-two percent were familiar with Judaism; thirty-three percent with Islam; twenty-one percent with Hinduism and twenty-nine percent with Buddhism. Other scholars in the area of religion and schooling believe Americans lack sufficient religious literacy as well although they do not offer the reliable data that Wuthnow's recent survey research now provides (Eck, 2001; Nash, 2005; Noddings, 1993, 2005; Nord, 1995, 1998).

Perhaps we as teacher educators could help future citizens develop literacy about and respect for this increasing religious diversity within the nation by first developing it within ourselves and within our education candidates and then by developing curricula and instruction that will help public and private high school students appreciate America's religious freedom and the diversity it affords. Concerned educators throughout the grade levels and content areas could work in concert to welcome this religious diversity and find a place for it to be appreciated within America's schools – public and private. If we do not, who will? After all, individual religious communities have a full time charge of helping their members develop a firm grounding within their own traditions. Parents often lack the resources or time to help their children develop a respect for religious diversity. Public schools currently give some curricular focus to religious diversity and literacy within history, geography and English classes, but a review of the national standards that give shape to state standards which influence local curricula provide little guidance or incentive for encouraging religious literacy or dispositions of tolerance toward the religious other. State or private colleges, of course, have the right to encourage religious literacy through religious studies courses as these educational institutions have less burden in protecting the captive and young audience that is of First Amendment concern within the public schools. Yet, at a research university within South Carolina, only one small English education program requires that candidates take a world religions or religious studies course. NCATE requires that certain general education competencies are addressed, but NCATE does not currently require a religious literacy competency for education candidates who will help shape the future – and highly religiously diverse – generation.

Recently, education candidates in a South Carolina university completed an informal in-class survey "Religion, Schools and the Court." The survey was distributed in three sections of a Principles of American Education course to one hundred undergraduate students. The survey served as a "pre-test" to determine students' knowledge of religious "do's" and "don't" in South Carolina's public schools based on federal courts' interpretations of First Amendment rights, even though some of the students may have reviewed these court cases in previous classes. The survey consisted of six questions related to religion, schools and the courts. Students were given approximately one minute per question to respond with "allowed" or "prohibited." The items

were purposely open-ended to encourage students to wrestle with the complexities of the issues. They were also allowed to share their reasoning for their decisions. The items and percentages of responses for the “allowed” and “prohibited” options are listed in the table below:

Questions on <i>Religion, Schools and the Court</i> Survey	Allowed %	Prohibited %
1. A teacher may come into the classroom and say “Let’s bow our heads for a moment of silent prayer.	17	83
2. A teacher may post a copy of the Ten Commandments on the wall of her or his classroom.	37	59
3. Science teachers must give equal treatment to teaching creationism as well as evolution.	49	51
4. Students may meet for religious purposes during non-instructional time.	96	4
5. Religion may be discussed as part of the content of a history class.	96	4
6. Coaches and teachers may participate in a student-led prayer.	87	13

This informal survey provides some indication about the religious literacy level of teacher candidates emerging as professional civic leaders in South Carolina and beyond. Fortunately, most respondents did realize that students could meet for religious purposes during non-instructional time since they knew from previous discussions that First Amendment rights relate to what the state can or cannot do – not what individuals can do. Students can meet for religious purposes during non-instructional time, but state employees cannot as they are employed by the state during non-instructional time. The teacher candidates also realized that religion could be discussed as part of the content during history classes. More candidates, however, had problems with items related to prayer in school. Seventeen percent believed that a teacher could require a moment of prayer, but this is not the case. Legally, the teacher can only call for a moment of silence not for a moment of silent prayer. Interestingly, some candidates who did understand the legality of the action used inappropriate reasoning or cases to support it. For example, one candidate thought it was illegal based on the *West Virginia Board of Education vs. Barnette* case (1943) in which the supreme court decided that it was unconstitutional to require students to recite the pledge of allegiance. Two candidates thought it was related to the *Engel vs. Vitale* case. Although this was a case related to a prayer issue, it involved the New York State Board of Regents’ decision to compose an official prayer to be recited each morning in public school classrooms. The moment of silence versus the moment of prayer was the subject of later cases including *Wallace vs. Jaffree* (1985). Another candidate incorrectly explained that the call for prayer should be a moment of silence for those who “do not believe in prayer.” Actually, advocates of the moment of silence hoped it would provide an opportunity for students to pray if they so chose. The responses to the sixth item on the survey revealed that eighty-seven percent of the teacher candidates thought it was okay for teachers and coaches to participate in student-led prayer. Candidates may have witnessed this in their respective schools, but such activity is prohibited. The No Child Left Behind Act clarifies this issue in section 9524 (2003). It states that teachers and other public school officials may not lead their classes in prayer, devotional readings from the Bible, or other religious activities. Further, school officials (i.e.

coaches) may not attempt to persuade or compel students to participate in prayer or other religious activities. Such conduct is “attributable to the State” and thus violates the Establishment clause. Of more concern was the misunderstanding among thirty-eight percent of the candidates who thought that it was legal for a teacher to post a copy of the Ten Commandments on his or her classroom wall. Several candidates volunteered their appropriate reasoning for the illegality of the action. For example, three noted that it was a violation of the establishment clause within the First Amendment. It privileges, in other words, Christian and Jewish traditions. Other candidates, in contrast, thought it was okay to post the commandments as long as the teacher did not make students look at them. Another volunteered that it was okay if all students within the class agreed that it was okay to post the commandments. Regrettably and finally, the second item, related to science teachers giving equal treatment to creationism and to evolution, caused the most confusion among candidates. Forty-nine percent believed science teachers MUST give the theory of creationism just as much time and focus as the theory of evolution. Almost half of the respondents in a Southern research university misunderstood First Amendment rights and responsibilities related to this practice and lacked basic literacy about federal court cases that tested the First Amendment’s directives on religious establishment and freedom. Some candidates shared their reasons for their faulty assumptions. One felt that religious freedom would be violated if creationism were not allowed equal billing with evolution. Teaching both would be only fair and neutral. Another thought it was fine to teach creationism alongside evolution in a science class because science teachers could be expected to be non-biased. One candidate, who realized that teaching creationism in science class was illegal, thought it was illegal because of the Scopes trial in Tennessee. Misunderstandings such as these could be addressed with deliberate curricular emphases in required education courses such as foundational education courses. More awareness of separation of church and state issues could possibly help foster candidate dispositions that respect religious diversity.

Although the data discussed above are from an informal class survey, some of the responses give cause for questioning just how literate our education candidates (and future civic leaders) are when it comes to issues of religious freedom and establishment that affect policies and practices within public schools. The survey items do not address, however, the degree to which the candidates possess basic background knowledge about other religions, and they certainly do not help us assess their current dispositions about religious diversity. But they do point to a lack of basic civic information about one dimension of religious literacy in America – First Amendment rights and responsibilities related to religious freedom. Perhaps a future survey that is more reliable and valid could be constructed for a much larger teacher candidate pool. It could include, for example, some items that Wuthnow used in his massive survey to ascertain the degree of religious literacy within the American public. In addition, it could contain more items that are specifically related to First Amendment rights that pertain to religion and public schooling. For example, students could respond to statements that address several separation of church and state issues. Is it legal for public school students to offer prayers at graduation or endorse religion within a school speech? Is it okay for students to express religious beliefs in class assignments and discussions? Constitutionally, can schools offer religion courses, religious studies curricula or Carnegie credit for religious courses? Can students be freely exempted from classes for religious reasons or for participation in religious practices beyond the school or for a religious holiday?

One wonders if teacher candidates have the religious literacy necessary to meaningfully analyze and provide a reasoned perspective on the recent proposed religious education policy in

the school district of Greenville, South Carolina. Could they – as highly-qualified candidates and civic leaders – critique Greenville School District’s proposal to offer Carnegie credit for religious courses offered off-campus by teachers who are not necessarily certified to teach and who are employed by a group called Christian Learning Centers of Greenville County? (Barnette, 2007) Our brief assessment of the proposal reminds us that quite a bit of religious literacy is needed just to appreciate the issues at stake in this new development.

Basically, the Greenville County school board preliminarily voted to allow students who opt to leave campus under the “released time initiative” an opportunity to receive one Carnegie credit for the religious courses taken off campus. For us this policy proposal raises a few Constitutional concerns. It is because of the Constitutional right of free exercise that the Supreme Court first granted the right for released time for religious instruction. The 1952 decision *Zorach vs. Clauston* argued that while public schools cannot pay for religious instruction, they can offer students who wish to “suspend their instruction” an opportunity to go off campus for one class period to worship or participate in religious study. In short, this decision focused solely on providing students access and opportunity to obtain religious instruction elsewhere if they saw fit. This decision was reinforced in the 1995 Federal Guidelines for Religious Expression in Schools (reauthorized in 1998). These guidelines permit released time as long as the school does not reward or punish a student for leaving and as long as the school does not mandate it. Like the *Zorach* decision, the federal guidelines deal only with access and opportunity. In contrast, the South Carolina proposal adopted by the Greenville County School Board may go a step or two further. By agreeing to give students a Carnegie credit for participation in off-campus religious classes, the school board may have over stepped its Constitutional bounds of offering access and opportunity and stepped into the realm of official endorsement of whatever the Christian Learning Centers of Greenville County (or other external credit-granting program) plans to offer. This seems a bit troubling for several reasons. First of all, First Amendment issues put the two “religion clauses” at odds with one another. If the school enforces the establishment clause, many argue their free exercise is being limited. On the other hand, if free exercise is granted, secularists claim that the schools have violated the establishment clause. In this Greenville case however, religious expression (that is free exercise) is honored through the released time program and at the same time because access and opportunity are the only concerns, there is no breach of establishment. Yet, the proposal may have gone a step too far. First, granting a Carnegie credit permits the state to have a say in the quality of the religious classes. This could lead to an excessive entanglement between the state and the religious entity – Christian Learning Centers of Greenville. If the state does have some say in the quality of the external program or courses then it is likely that the course or program or qualifications of the teachers may fail to pass muster and then the state runs the risk of appearing to be or actually being preferential to a given religion—Christianity--in this Greenville case. In addition, unless the state is willing to grant released time for atheists, agnostics, and humanists, then the state could be in violation of the establishment clause by preferring religion to non-religion. Second, there does not appear to be any precedent for this South Carolina state policy. The Supreme Court and the federal government have only made allowances for released time, not for public school Carnegie credits for unsupervised, unaccredited released time courses. Finally, a legal scholar, Princeton University law professor Kent Greenawalt, argues in *Does God Belong in Public Schools* (2005) that if the only reason to support an enactment or a policy is religious then it cannot be regarded as legal. Considering the overwhelmingly influential Christian base in South Carolina, a reasonable person might ask, what reason other than the promotion of religion

can be offered for granting a Carnegie credit for a religion course taught off-campus without curricular oversight and by teachers who are not required to have appropriate certification and who are employed by Christian Learning Centers of Greenville County? Just this brief analysis illumines that quite a bit of religious literacy is needed by educational and civic leaders when it comes to addressing local, state and national issues related to religious freedom and diversity within America.

Perhaps teacher educators could suggest ways to use the NCATE mandate related to identifying, encouraging and assessing desired professional dispositions to explore how programs can help foster in our candidates sufficient religious literacy and respect for religious others. NCATE may have given teacher educators another fine opportunity to make a difference as we help future educators appreciate our country's religious freedom and diversity that is protected within our enduring and first constitutional amendment.

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