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Interfaith Understanding in Public Schools: A Model for Building Stronger Ties of Understanding Between People

Jan Hansen¹

I was once in a century-and-a-half-old church north of Toronto, built large enough so that everyone living in the area could fit into its worship space. The community at the time was tied together with common understandings and the church was a central institution that held it all together. Showing people that there was a space for them was a way of showing them that they were valued. There were, of course, exceptions. People would have been excluded because they were from a different denomination or cultural group, or because their behaviour was not condoned. But for the most part the church was a unifying force.

Today our society is increasingly fragmented, with seemingly more forces pulling us apart than pulling us together. This is a function both of increases in diversity and of changes in technology that allow us to find likeminded people at a distance and avoid contact with the people around us. It is becoming easier to interact only with people who are like oneself, whether ethnically, religiously, financially, or otherwise. Not knowing people who are different can create fear. When that happens, the divisions between us become more solid and dangerous.

The public school has become one of the primary institutions that hold society together by giving us common experiences. It is crucial in our fragmented society that public schools are places where most of us have the opportunity to build relationships of some depth with people who are different from ourselves.

In the late 1980s in Ontario, the way that schools were allowed to structure that relationship changed. A court ruled that one religion must not be given a position of primacy over other religions in the public school system. Many Christians still mourn what they see as the loss of religion from schools, and schools are still coming to terms with the fact that this is not what the rule change was calling for. The rule change² was written not to exclude religion from schools, but to include *all* religion in schools. It opened up the doors to developing interfaith understanding in one of the largest institutions that our society has. What happened was that Christians lost their position of dominance and their ability to drown out other voices. This change gave us the capacity to deepen the learning that happens in schools by giving our children opportunities to hear the voices of people with experiences different from their own.

Sadly, it was an opportunity that was squandered for many years, both because the rules were misinterpreted and because educators were afraid. Educators are often frightened to engage in conversations about religion because we don't want to show our own ignorance of different faiths, and because we don't want to say the wrong things and make people angry.

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² Laid out in Policy/Program Memorandum 108 (January 12, 1989).

It has taken a long time for us to begin to explore the power of talking about faith in schools. Almost fifteen years after the rule change, the Director of Education of the Peel District School Board, one of the largest school boards in Ontario, sent out a letter to his school administrators pushing the revolutionary idea that incorporating religion into the school community is a way of improving the effectiveness of learning in the schools. He wrote, "I strongly believe that schools need to address the whole child – and faith is part of the lives of many of our students. If we celebrate nothing, we fail to accurately reflect the lives of many of the families we serve."³ By failing to recognize the faith life of students, schools were not allowing them to feel fully welcome and at home in the learning community.

Shortly after that letter was sent to school administrators in Peel, I was working in a school where change had been resisted and Christianity still dominated. I remember sitting in the school gym watching a young Sikh boy sing about the baby Jesus at a Christmas carol assembly, knowing that nothing was being done to show that boy that his faith was also valued. It broke my heart to see that that little boy could be devalued when school should be helping all children to see the value in themselves and one another. I was tired of seeing opportunities lost.

At the next day's assembly (we were singing carols all week), I spoke to the school about some of my family's Christmas traditions, which come from Denmark and are different from the dominant practices in Canada. I spoke about gathering as a family on Christmas Eve, the lit candles on the tree, and singing carols while walking around the tree. I told them that even when we celebrate the same festival, we don't always celebrate in the same way. Then I encouraged them to share their own family traditions, not just for those who celebrate Christmas, but for those who would be celebrating Kwanzaa, Diwali, Eid, Hanukkah, and other festivals. I told them that they were the experts in what happens in their family, and school is the perfect place to share what is important to them so that the rest of us have an opportunity to learn and understand. It felt odd to be delving deeper into a Christian experience to issue an invitation to broaden the conversation, but I wanted to give them an example of how it can be done and this was my opportunity.

The wonder of it all is that we need do very little to foster understanding of people of different faiths. We just need to open the door to respectful dialogue. In younger grades this may mean bringing in parents who can share a little of their family's experiences and practices. As children get older they can express for themselves what it is that they do. Because different families of the same faith will have different practices, children from the same religion will have different things to share. When we give people an opportunity to share something that is meaningful to them, we show them that they are valued and we also understand them just a little bit better. The purpose of bringing recognition of faith into the school is not to tell people what to believe, but to learn about one another. As in all interfaith sharing, the goal is not to change other people, but to learn about them and support them to be the best at what they already are.

Sharing like this does not need to be a big event. As things happen throughout the year, they can naturally become part of conversations. Many teachers begin a week by asking what happened on the weekend, or what their students are looking forward to. When a child has been absent from school for a religious festival, it may fit into the conversation to ask

³ Jim Grieve, Director of Education, Peel District School Board, letter to principals and vice-principals re Celebrating all faiths and cultures in our schools, November 7, 2003.

them to share what they did. Children who are fasting may appreciate the chance to explain the experience.

Two things are critical to this sharing. First, an environment of respect must be created in the classroom. No one will want to share if they feel that what they say will be used against them. Second, students should be given the option of not sharing. A learning space is most effective when it is a safe space.

Parents who feel that faith is being excluded from their children's school life should feel empowered to talk about it with their child's teachers. Ask that your children be accepted in their entirety. School is not there to teach your child what to believe, but it is there to break down barriers of ignorance between people.

Your next step, as one who is interested in interfaith dialogue, is to reread what I have written and forget that I am talking about schools. The same ideas can be applied to interfaith conversations in any setting. We are trying to understand one another, not convert one another. The conversation must take place with respect, and an understanding that what we say will not be used against us. We speak from our own experience, not for the entire faith. The conversation does not need to be part of a large event, but can be a series of smaller conversations as we ask the people around us about their experiences. Admittedly, it may be a little harder to start these conversations in the outside world. We may need to seek out opportunities to talk with people who are different from ourselves, to break through the barriers of convenience, habit, and technology that fragment society. Once we have broken through the barriers that we have created, all we need to do is act like children (or, rather, as we expect our children to act).

There was a strength in community a hundred and fifty years ago which was centred around the church. Today we have institutions, like schools, that share the same sorts of strengths. We can also build on that strength in our everyday life. We all become stronger, as individuals and in community, when we show that we value one another and seek to understand one another better.