

Religious Prejudices and Inter-relationships among Students: A School Mental Health Program

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Introduction

Religion has become an important factor in education for various reasons. Incorporating religion in education is necessary in today's context as it would not only reduce the religiously motivated hate crimes, but also helps to make students more tolerant towards differences of others. It will also help them to become more accepting, respecting and appreciating towards the views, ideas, beliefs, values, perception and attitudes of others. School is a mini society where students from different religious and cultural backgrounds come to study at the same place. Schools usually become the first place where a child encounters diversity as students from different religion, race, culture, gender, caste, class, and ethnic group learn together in the same class. So, it becomes more important to incorporate/respect values of acknowledging and accepting diversity in students. It has become a need of present time to make the students learn to celebrate diversity without being judgmental about it. It also ensures inclusion of each and every child in the class as students from less familiar backgrounds or from the underprivileged section feels included, respected and appreciated in the class. It will reap dual benefits as it also provides opportunity to students from privileged sections or students from the majority section of the society to know and learn about others different from them, about their culture, tradition, customs, rituals etc. Some students learn these values on their own in the classroom or in their families, but school portraying these values ensures making of an egalitarian society by establishing home-school continuity by reinforcing the same values again. In today's era of mass media and technological advancements students sometimes also come across such content on various platforms which propagate certain types of thought process in them that might affect them or others adversely by making them more intolerant towards differences. Here school can act a change initiating agent by establishing discontinuity in their thought process and actual reality practiced in school. According to Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory, students learn largely by observing others, so it becomes important for teachers as

well to portray such values in the classroom which respects diversity. This program will provide opportunities to all the students to share the unique features about themselves, about their cultures, about their religion with each other in the class. Religious literacy ensures over all development of students by making them active, aware, informed and contributing members of the society. Children are like wet clay; they can be molded in any form during their childhood. We can expose students to various cultural and religious activities, so that they can be familiar with diversities prevailing in society. The foundation laid during this crucial stage of their development will help them throughout their lives as they will encounter different types of people later in their life as well. So, they need to know how to deal with it, acknowledge it, accept it and appreciate it. The constitution of our country is also based on the values of socialism, secularism, equality and democracy. These values are of prime importance to the nation as they are highlighted in the preamble as well. The National Policy on Education also focuses on furthering these values in students as one of the goals of education. So, it becomes the responsibility of a school being a secular institution to provide education free from any religious biases and prejudices.

Rationale

The rationale of the program is to make the students understand the concept of unity in diversity. India is a diverse country where every individual has a right to follow, practice and preach any religion of their choice. The constitution of India declares it as a secular country where all the religions live and prosper together in harmony. School is also a mini version of society in which we live, learn and develop together. In school as well one can see lots of diversity as well.

I personally have chosen this topic as when I went into various classes in the school, students asked me about my religious background on the basis of my name. One of my fellow student-teachers was also asked about *sindhur*. I noticed that students have certain religious prejudices which I thought needed to be addressed.

Besides the above rationale of the program, I came across the behavior of students while preparing them for a play to be conducted in class according to plan. None of the girl was initially ready to take up the role of a Muslim which was quite weird. This behavior of students was guided by their religious prejudices and biases. In the class as well, I have noticed few students sitting alone and they were not mixing up in the class as the majority of the class belongs to a particular religious background that is Hinduism. So, it became more necessary to implement the program in the class to make the students more sensitive to this issue and make them able to challenge their own biases and prejudices.

I have taken class VII-D for conducting this mental health program as I personally noticed this issue in their class during my substitution.

School context

School- Government School in Delhi

The school where I implemented my mental health program is a government school in Delhi. Students from nearby residences and locations come to this school. In the school a picture of goddess Saraswati is put up just beside the entrance of the room of the principal. In a few of the classes pictures of Hindu goddesses and gods were also there which is quite weird as government schools are secular institutions. The school is situated in residential areas as a result all the festivals and celebrations are organized just near the school building which disturbs the classes a lot. Mostly the families believing in Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism live in the locality nearby school. So, students with diverse religious backgrounds study in that school.

Class

I have chosen class VII for conducting the mental health program. There are 40 girls in the class. I have taken a few substitution periods in this class where students asked religion-based questions from me and my peers as introductory questions. They have not asked us any questions related to our qualifications instead questions related to our religious beliefs were asked. They also try to guess our religions from our names and attire. In this class, students asked these questions from me as well, so I have chosen this class to conduct a mental health program. Students in the class are of 11 -12 years of age.

Preparations

For conducting the mental health program, I have taken permission from their class teacher.

Also, for conducting the program I have also taken a few substitution periods in that class. For which I have also requested the time table in charge.

Number of hours required

To conduct this program, I have taken 3-4 classes for preparation and for final execution 4 classes will be taken either in zero periods or in substitution periods. Actual execution program will be done in 160 minutes.

Process

This program will be conducted in 4 sessions of 40 minutes each.

Class- VII

Number of students- 40

Time duration- 4 sessions of 40 minutes each (in total 160 minutes)

Session-1

This will be an introductory section in which students will be asked the following questions to know their opinion and past experiences. Students will be allowed to give as many responses as they want to facilitate a healthy discussion in the class.

1. What are the different symbols that you attach to a particular religion that is to Hindu, Sikh, Muslims, Christianity etc?

For this an activity will be conducted in the class in which various things like bangles, Sindhur, cap, orange cloth, green cloth, karha, kangha etc. will be distributed in the class. And students will be asked to identify to which religion they associate these things to. This will help to understand how early students start associating symbols to various religions.

1. About how many religions you are familiar with?
2. Which qualities, features or symbols will help you to identify that the person belongs to a particular religion?
3. What are the qualities that you see in different religions?
4. What markers or symbols help you to identify that a particular woman is married or not?
5. How many of your friends are from the same religious belief as you do?
6. How many of your friends are from different religions?

This session will help to know the understanding of students about different religions and diversity.

Session-2

In this session, students will be divided into various groups of four students in each group with diverse members randomly by counting the numbers from 1 to 10. Students with the same number will be grouped together. All one's in a one group, similarly, two's in another group etc. They will be asked to work in those groups for the second session. This ensured interaction of students with other students of class as well other than their own friends by establishing more diverse groups. After the formation of groups, students will be asked to redesign the national flag the way they want it to be by working in the groups with each other. For which 20 minutes will be provided to them. Before this activity, the teacher will discuss the three colors of the national flag with the students and what they symbolize to stimulate their interest in the activity and establish a purpose for it, then the activity is conducted in the class.

After, the activity each group will be asked to briefly summarize the idea or concept about the flag they have designed.

After this, the teacher will conclude the class by narrating a small story in the class of a father teaching his children about the importance of unity by giving the example of sticks that a single stick can be broken into two pieces very easily, but when all the sticks are together it is very difficult to break them.

This will help the students to create a classroom culture in which differences among each other are accepted and diversity is celebrated. Along with this, students will understand the importance and implication of unity in daily life as well.

Session-3

In this session, a play will be conducted in the class for which few students will be selected and will be made practice before (during free or substitute periods) for the play.

Preparation- For the play few students were chosen from the class randomly and one differently able student was also included to ensure inclusion of all in class. They were made to prepare for the play in three periods which were their free periods without disturbing their education in class before executing the play. They prepared for the play in the science lab

where I assisted them. I have also taken permission from the science teacher for this.

The theme of the play will be on 'unity in diversity' in which one student will play a role of stone while other students will come to make Hindu idol out of it, then other person of Islam religion will come and carve the idol into form of praying Muslim devotee. Then, students playing the role of Sikh and Christian will come and do the same. After this, because the stone is carved into different forms, persons belonging to different religions will fight over it. Then, one person will come and carve the stone into a person holding a stick representing Mahatma Gandhi and that person will make others understand what they are doing and make them realize the importance of unity in diversity. At the end, they will attach a national flag to the stick. And will sing a song, "*hind desh ke nivasi, sabhi jan ek hain, rang roop vesh, bhasha chahe anek hain*".

After this play, the teacher will ask the students what they have understood from the play. Discussion with the students will be conducted in the class. They will also be told why acknowledging and accepting diversity is important. Teachers will also tell them about the importance of discussing this topic by relating it to present day context and experiences of minorities in the country. Views and opinions of students will also be welcomed in the class to make them learn better.

Session-4

This will be a last session which will be a concluding session in which students will be asked about their experience and learning in the previous sessions. They will be asked to share their experiences and those will be discussed in the class. A video relating to religious harmony will also be shown to students on a laptop with speakers. The video will be shown row-wise to students in three groups and other groups were asked to think about their learning from the session while remaining students are watching the video. Teacher will also share her own personal thinking and experiences in the class about her own friends from different religious and cultural backgrounds and how they have added positive values in life to each other by exchanging various ideas, beliefs with each other and how it has made her more open to new experiences in life. Students will be asked about their learning from the video.

(**Video** - Holi Mubarak by Divya Prakash Dubey - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xcw88nd9t3Y>)

At last, students will be asked to make at least one friend from another religion and try to know and appreciate various traditions, customs and festivals they practice.

Follow up:

After one week, the teacher will visit the class and ask students about whether they have made new friends, what they have learnt from them. They will also be asked to share their experiences with others and try to implement these good leanings in every sphere of their life by accepting and appreciating the differences that exist among us.

Report

I have executed the mental health program successfully in the class. Both students and I have learnt a lot from it. I was a bit worried initially to touch this topic as it is a very sensitive topic so I was very cautious during the implementation of the plan that I may not show any biases in the class. I am writing a detailed report on execution of my mental health program and the results of it.

Challenges

Initially students were not able to understand the purpose of activity and why we are doing this as they are not very familiar with such discussion and activities regularly in their class. But after discussing the purpose of it with them and being told about various tasks which will be conducted in the class they slowly started involving.

In the first and the introductory session students were a bit hesitant in giving the required responses to the questions asked in the class and being part of discussion, although, they enjoyed the activity of identifying symbols. But slowly they started initiating things and taking part in discussion without prompting. Then, they enthusiastically enjoyed and learnt through activities in further sessions. Also, during sessions it was quite difficult to involve all the students in the discussion as some of the students try to overpower others, so I started asking questions from others as well, while students were asked to listen to their opinion patiently and then respond.

For the play which is to be conducted in session three, no one was ready to play the role of Muslim. When asked about the reason for it they did not have any answer. Then I told them Muslims are like us, they are also human beings and are no different from us and it is not bad to play a role of Muslim in a play. After persuasion, one girl agreed to play the role. During the

session, one girl was not at all interested in the sessions. She did not participate in any discussion, refused to watch the video and also refused to make friends. When asked about the reason for it she said friends are of no use and they can't be trusted. She also fought with other girl by passing comments and calling her "Mulli". For which I initially tried and put lots of effort to talk to her and involve her in the class. I also tried to talk to her personally but nothing came out of it. She was very disturbing in the class then at last for fighting in the class and passing such comments I scolded her and asked her not to repeat this in future as it is not good and is unacceptable. This episode made me realize how early the perceptions in students about various things are formed. After the session, I asked her fellow mates to talk to her and guide her. They also tried to talk to her in their own way (informal way as friends try to correct each other) these were the challenges I faced during the implementation of the program.

Perspective

My mental health program was more focused on making the students challenge their own biases and prejudices and accepting differences and respecting each other. All the students were involved in the sessions except one student. After a few days, I asked them whether they have tried to make new friends from other religions or not, majority of them said yes which was really motivating for me. They also discussed the culture of other religions in the class. Although there was no drastic change or they did not have long stories and things to tell, but at least they tried and many of them have actually made new friends. Some of them also discussed their old friends as well.

All the sessions were conducted effectively in the class despite of a few challenges. Students loved the play and worked very well in groups helping and assisting the others.

Students' feedback and interaction

Students participated in activities and learnt from it while enjoying it. They were also ready and wanted to conduct more such plans. They also tried to make new friends from other religions. They were responsive during the discussions. By the end all the students were happy with the activity. They were also taught through activities, not to judge others and accept the view of others. It is equally important to listen, accept and respect the ideas of others openly which are contradicting their own ideas.

Session-wise analysis and learning

Session 1 - In this session students were initially a bit hesitant to share their views, experience and opinion. In the activity, they were asked to identify the articles and symbols to which religion do they attach them to. They were easily able to identify them. They were only able to tell about four religions that is Sikh, Muslim, Hindu and Christianity. They know nothing about Buddhism and Jainism. They talked about sindur, bangles and bindi as well. There were also some overlaps in the association of symbols to more than one religion.

This helped me to analyze and understand how strong religious beliefs they hold and how early these beliefs are formed. Also, this provided basic introductory knowledge about students.

Session 2 - In this session students participated really well in the activity of flag making. They learnt and cooperated with each other in the groups. Each group excelled, they did better than expected. They also loved the story narrated at the end and listened to it curiously. They enjoyed interacting with each other and working in teams.

Session 3 - In this session students performed very well in the play. They were so excited that they also brought dupattas and flags of their own. Other students who were audience to the play also seemed interested in the play and they appreciated the efforts of their peers. The differently able student also enjoyed to be part of the play as she rarely gets a chance to participate in such activities as told by her. She has a

problem in her legs. All the students participated in the discussion as well which was conducted after the play.

Session 4 - In this concluding session, video was shown in the class to the students and their learning and experiences from the sessions was discussed one student also told that mother of her Muslim friend treats her like her own daughter without discriminating her on the basis of her different religion. All in all, it was an amazing experience different from regular course studies for students. They enjoyed it, so did I.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to say that it was a learning experience for both students as well as for me. Students actively participated in activities conducted in the class. They learnt empathy and respecting the views of each other as well. It helps to create a class room culture in which religious and other diversity is respected. I felt that these activities helped the students to look beyond their beliefs and helped in promoting respectful curiosity among them. They somehow learnt to respect and accept the different religious and cultural backgrounds which are a necessary part of the education system as India is a secular country. It is much needed for overall development of students to make them active, wise and contributing members of the society.

Resources and references :

- Holi Mubarak* by Divya Prakash Dubey - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xcw88nd9t3Y>
- Secular practices for schools, civil society magazine*- <https://www.civilsocietyonline.com/column/back-to-school/secular-practices-for-schools/>
- Religion in education*- <https://www.hastac.org/blogs/emmamclaughlin22/2015/03/25/religion-education>
- Teaching tolerance? Diversity, equity and justice*- <https://www.tolerance.org/topics/religion>
- Religious diversity in classrooms- <https://www.tolerance.org/professional-development/religious-diversity-in-the-classroom>
- Religious diversity in classrooms*

Resources

- Bangles, Sindur, Cap, Orange Cloth, Green Cloth, Karha, Kangha etc--- For session 1
- Flags, Dupattas- green, orange and white etc---For session 3.