

Teacher Perception of the Role of Religion in East Texas Public Schools

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ABSTRACT

The 1st Amendment prohibits the establishment of a state religion and prohibits government restriction on the free exercise of religion. First Amendment issues have a long history in public education. Administrators and teachers are challenged by federal laws and school policies directly related to the role of religion in public schools. The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' perceptions for dealing with religion in the schools and their classrooms. Results from the study indicate there is confusion, complexity, and contradictions associated with educator perceptions of how to appropriately implement federal laws and school policies on religion. By gaining an understanding of teachers' awareness of laws and policies regarding religion in schools, school administrators can avoid legal issues resulting from breach of individual rights.

The right to practice a religion, or to choose to practice no religion at all, is a right provided to every U.S. citizen through the 1st Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. However, when it comes to religion in public schools, the law may not seem so clear to everyone. Some people believe the law dictates public schools to be "religion-free" while others, including teachers and administrators, may not know what exactly *is* legally permissible. The implementation by some schools to incorporate elective Bible courses for elective credit and the ongoing political battles to pass legislation to allow students to broadcast religious views over loudspeakers or to allow teachers to criticize the theory of evolution has created even more controversy in safeguarding first amendment rights (Bathija, 2009). One Texas school district

offered a class entitled “The Bible in History and Literature,” and found itself engaged in a legal battle for allegedly proselytizing students (Gunn, 2007). In fact, in 2005 – 2006 the Texas Freedom Network (TFN), an Austin-based advocacy group supporting religious freedom, investigated the 1,031 school districts in Texas and found 22 districts to be offering Bible courses that were taught from “perspectives typical of certain conservative Protestant circles” (Chancey, 2009). While some legal cases reflect a fight by conservative right-wing citizens to include more religion in school, other cases reflect perhaps an attempt to prohibit any expression of religion. In one instance, a Utah middle school teacher had a student threaten to sue over the mere mention of a religious denomination in class (O’Neil & Loschert, 2002).

In response to such legal battles, the Supreme Court has established a series of legal tests, *per se*, over the years to determine whether an enactment or denial of religious actions at school is unconstitutional. The groundwork for these legal rulings was created when the Supreme Court ruled in *Everson v. Board of Education of Ewing Township* (1947) that the First Amendment’s Free Exercise and Establishment Clauses applied to actions of the states as well as to the actions of the federal government. The *Lemon* test rules were established in 1971 from the case of *Lemon v. Kurtzman* (1971) and to refine these rules, the U.S. Congress adopted the *Equal Access Act* (from rulings made in *Lynch v. Donnelly* in 1984). Both legislations were created to ensure that students were not being denied their religious rights. Then, in 1995, President Bill Clinton instructed the U.S. Department of Education to issue a set of guidelines pertaining to students’ religious rights, entitled *Principles on Religious Education in the Public Schools* and directed the copies to be sent to the nation’s 15,000 school superintendents (Doerr, 1998). According to President Clinton, “Nothing in the First Amendment converts our public schools into religion-free zones” (Loconte, 1996, p. 19). After two more updates, the guidelines were reissued and sent to the nation’s public school principals in 1999 (Brown & Bowling, 2003). In addition, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), a non-governmental, international interest group that fights bigotry and racism, published a guidebook called *Religion in the Public Schools* in 1992 as a reference for the general public (2006). The latest version of this guideline booklet was updated and re-released in 2006. The First Amendment Center (1999), another interest group, also published a specific guidebook for educators, *A Teacher’s Guide to Religion in Public School* and published an updated guide to religion and education entitled *Finding Common Ground* in 2007.

So, how are current school policies and public school teachers dealing with religion in the classroom? According to some, teachers have now become overly cautious about avoiding any mention of religion to the point of complete religious censorship (Wagner & Benavente-McEnery, 2008; O’Neil & Loschert, 2002; Passe & Wilcox, 2009; & Viteritti, 2007). Still others may unknowingly violate 1st Amendment law until they are challenged in court (Marshall, 2008) often, newly certified teachers may think the subject of religion is only a problem to be tackled by social studies teachers. Teachers may feel unprepared how to respond to Muslim students missing days for religious observances or refused treats from classmates because they were fasting. Are they allowed to ask them about their holiday? When other students come to class wearing Christian summer camp t-shirts depicting a bloody body of Jesus and the question, “Are you saved?” are teachers supposed to tell them the shirt was inappropriate for school? *Is it* inappropriate or are teachers violating student rights if they make such a statement? If a student comes dressed everyday in solid black clothes, metallic chains, and a necklace holding a 9 inch-tall, upside-down, bloody crucifix and shirts and a binder that said “Hail Satan,” should a teacher

tell him it is inappropriate for school? If *his* things were inappropriate, was the Christian students' clothing inappropriate, too? Just how aware *are* teachers about federal laws and district policies and how do they and their students feel about religious issues?

The purpose of this study was to answer these questions by asking a sample of Houston-area teachers about their perceptions of the role of religion in school. Themes identified from these interviews were compared to a survey of pertinent literature in an attempt to gain insight into the current role of religion in public schools. Results indicate the confusion, complexity, and even the contradictions that are associated with educator perceptions of how to appropriately exercise federal laws and school policies on religion. Only by understanding the extent of teacher awareness of laws and policies concerning religion in school can school districts and its policymakers avoid costly legal battles resulting from violations of individual rights.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to interview a variety of teachers to gain an understanding of their perceptions of the role of religion in public school. The results of this study could be used to promote professional development programs that inform teachers about current laws regarding religion and that help them better understand the legal limitations governing public school employees. The initial objective of this study was to determine what role religion plays, if any, in public school according to teacher perceptions. A second objective was to determine what role, if any, teachers thought religion *should* play in public school. As the study progressed, these objectives were expanded to include gaining a broad idea of teacher perception of laws and school policies.

Theoretical Framework

Religious Expression and History

To understand how the role of religion impacts today's schools, educators must realize how religion has impacted public education throughout the history of the U.S. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, enacted 1791, states in part that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion." This is otherwise known as the Establishment Clause, and it basically states that the government cannot dictate any particular religion for its citizens. The remaining part of the "religion clauses" of the First Amendment states "...or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." This part, referred to as the "Free Exercise Clause," gives weight to the fact that we, as citizens, are free to choose and practice our own religious beliefs.

The issue of separation between church and state when dealing with public education has been a controversial topic since the inception of the first compulsory public schools in Massachusetts in 1647, a Puritan community undertaking whose goal was to teach children to read so they could read the Christian Bible. Public school policies still predominantly reflect the religious demographics of their geographic localities; however, there can be no denial that the United States' once overwhelming Protestant Christian majority must now adjust to an ever-increasing diversity in its religious population. According to the "*American Religious*

Identification Survey (ARIS) 2008," by Trinity College, of the 54,461 American adults sampled, 76% identified themselves as Christian (a decrease from 86% in 1990), of which 50.9% were Protestant, 25.1% Catholic, 1.2% Jewish, 1.6% unidentified eastern or other non-Christian religions, 0.6% Muslim and 0.5% Buddhist (Kosmin & Keysar, 2008). In addition, 14.4% said they were either atheist, agnostic or claimed no religious preference, and 11.8% said "don't know" or they refused to answer (Brown & Bowling, 2003). The *ARIS* also indicated that the number of Americans who are non-theists or do not identify with a religious group has more than doubled between 1990 and 2008 (Gunn, 2007).

Literature Review

What *are* teacher perceptions of religion in school and how will teachers handle the increasing religious diversity in public schools? According to some, teachers will bring their religious perspectives into the class as well as their beliefs about race, ethnicity and socioeconomic background (Subedi, 2006). Some claim that the majority Christian population of educators either think religion should be avoided or, at the other extreme, believe that Christian principles and Bible scriptures should be learned in school (Sisemore, 1994). According to a 1994 graduate study survey of 38 public school teachers in Hawaii and California, 21% believed the subject of Christianity "should be avoided altogether," while 45% believed "our societal ills could be greatly reduced by learning and honoring [Christian] Bible scriptures" (Ayers & Reid, 2005 ; Kilman, 2007; & Marshall, 2003).

Some profess that our public school teachers have a great coercive influence when it comes to their perspectives of religion or even the superiority of one religion above others (Kaiser, 2003). Kaiser cautions teachers' pedagogical activities, stating "In a predominantly Christian community, several pedagogical choices and classroom circumstances could combine to send a message to students that non-Christian religions are disfavored" (p. 334). In a variation on Kaiser's words of caution, Kessler professes that teachers tread a fine line between being careful about sharing beliefs since it may be misinterpreted as proselytizing, and censoring religion to the point of "suppressing students' freedom of expressing their spirituality" (Kessler, 1998, p. 49).

In a 2004 doctoral survey of 168 public high school teachers in southwest Florida, 32.1% of the respondents classified themselves as unconfident in their knowledge of laws about religion in school and 14.3% indicated that they were unsure about the extent of their knowledge (Luke, 2004). Additionally, only 18.5% of the teachers surveyed by Luke stated that their knowledge was a result of in-service professional training offered by their school districts (p. 70). The majority of the literature and studies reviewed point to the fact that teachers are either ignorant, or confused and fearful about federal laws and district policies concerning religion (Ayers & Reid, 2005; Kilman, 2007; Marshall, 2003; McCarthy, 2009; O'Neil & Loschert, 2002; Passe & Wilcox, 2009; Wagner & Benavente- McEnery, 2008; Viteritti, 2007). In fact, even some social studies teachers are admittedly choosing to skip over their sixth-grade textbook sections on world religions. Out of fear of offending students or overstepping legal boundaries, "many teachers...prefer to gloss over, if not wholly ignore, this section of their curriculum (Black, 2003, p. 50).

Despite the number of teachers who are fearful or confused about how to deal with religion in school, some teachers and their communities are insisting that public schools should offer courses in world religions. According to Kilman, “if faith-based intolerance is ever to be confronted, some educators say schools are exactly the place religion should be addressed” (Kilman, 2007, p. 14). Teaching tolerance of other peoples’ beliefs, religion, ethnicity and culture is the most popular, compelling and convincing reason for offering classes in religion (Ayers & Reid, 2005; Loconte, 1996; O’Neil & Loschert, 2002). In addition, some claim that including religious studies within a curriculum can promote higher ethical and moral values. Although numerous school districts have decided to supplement curriculum with lessons on world religions, some have used the Supreme Court’s ruling that the study of religion as “part of a secular program of education” would not be unconstitutional, as a platform to incorporate Bible classes into public schools and further “muddy the waters” of church-state separation.

Additional controversial issues with religion in public schools are the topics of the Pledge of Allegiance and prayer. According to Baer, the original national Pledge of Allegiance, written in 1892, did not include any mention of “God” as it stated *I Pledge Allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands, one nation indivisible with liberty and justice for all* (Baer, 2007). According to Marshall (2008), the Pledge has been modified four times since then, with the last modification in 1954 incorporating the words “under God”. In 2007, the Texas Pledge of Allegiance was also amended to include the words “under God.” Although the Pledge may be viewed by many as a national tribute or patriotic validation, others believe that allowing a pledge stating “under God” during school hours is an unconstitutional violation of individual rights. Many school districts, including the ones interviewed in this study, require that students recite the Pledge unless they have submitted a letter from parents or a guardian to request permission to be excused; however, districts across the U.S. are being challenged over such school requirements. According to Viteritti (2007), “The Pledge is viewed by some not only as an unconstitutional expression of theism, but also as presumptuously monotheistic” (p. 36).

The inclusion or deletion of prayer or even a moment of silence in school has been a long-debated topic. While the Supreme Court initially ruled in 1985 that a school-mandated moment of silence is unconstitutional, the policy of the observance of a moment of silence during each school day is generally legislated by the states. One federal judge, Claude M. Hilton upheld legislation to observe a moment of silence in Virginia schools stating, “Students may think as they wish – and this thinking can be purely religious in nature or purely secular in nature. All that is required is that they sit silently. Nothing and no one is favored under the act” (Marshall, 2001, p. 6). Although numerous books, journal articles, legal proceedings and newspaper articles can be found with regard to prayer in school and students’ religious rights, no articles were found during this literature review with regard to teachers having group-led prayers during mandatory school in-service meetings. In addition, no articles were found concerning holding such meetings in religious buildings.

The bottom line concerning the role of religion in school is the fact that teachers cannot endorse religious views or practices via instruction, actions or any pedagogical activities as they are representatives of their respective states and school districts. The First Amendment Religion Clauses and subsequent legal rulings attest to this fact. While this fact seems quite simple in nature, the literature review for this study revealed that teachers are often confused or fearful of how to appropriately deal with the role of religion in the classroom. In addition, most reports

found on this topic are related to the concept of teaching religion in school, rather than the overall role of religion in the general classroom.

There were four detailed surveys found during this study concerning the role of religion in public schools; however, only two seemed relevant for use in this study: (a) Sisemore's 1994 master's study which compared teacher attitudes toward religion in school with laws and public opinion, and (b) Luke's 2004 doctoral dissertation that studied high school teachers' 1st Amendment knowledge and their opinions about religion in school. In addition, another doctoral study investigated principals' perceptions of religious practice; however, it was not referenced due to the age of the survey (Grandstaff, 1989). One final detailed study investigated school board candidates' attitudes towards the topics of creationism, school prayer and school vouchers; however, the focus of this study was teacher perception (Deckman, 2002). Although many reports were found that discussed the historical or legal aspects of the role of religion in school, there appeared to be a lack of recent research pertaining to teacher perception of the role of religion and teacher behavior in class with respect to 1st Amendment Law. Further research is recommended.

Methodology

Participants

In Fall 2009 and Spring 2010, 35 teachers from public schools in the north Houston area were asked to interview for this qualitative research project. All 35 said they were interested in interviewing; however, only 26 participated due to scheduling conflicts or hesitation to discuss the actual interview questions. Therefore, the response rate was 74%. Nineteen participants were former teacher colleagues or acquaintances; the remaining interviewees were obtained via "snowball sampling" as they were those who were solicited as co-workers of the initial participants. Seventeen participants were interviewed in person, two were interviewed over the phone, and the remaining participants choose to provide answers via email due to time constraints and scheduling conflicts. Those who responded via email were sent a confirmation email which asked them to review their answers a second time to give them a chance to edit, reword, or clarify their initial answers.

Participants included current school employees, two newly certified teachers, and former teachers who either retired or choose different careers. They ranged in age from 23 to 72 years old, inclusive; six were male and 20 were female. The north Houston area was selected as it is broadly representative of the religious demographics of the United States as a whole. According to religious demographic statistics posted on the website "*Sperling's Best Places*" at www.bestplaces.net, of the 50.3% of the north Houston area, Texas populations who claim to be religious, 95% of them claim to be Christian (18% Catholic, 77% Protestant or other Christian). The remaining population consists of approximately 1.5% Jewish, 0.05% of Eastern faiths, 1.4% Muslim, and a residual percentage of miscellaneous non-Christian faiths.

The validity of the results may or may not have been affected by participant hesitation to provide honest or detailed answers since religion is often regarded as both a personal and controversial topic. Of the interviewees, all but two participants (92%) were raised around Christian faiths; this appears to match the approximate religious demographics of north Houston, Texas. Reliability of these results, however, is not consistent because it is not believed that these

research results could be duplicated in other geographic areas unless the religious demographics were similar. For example, interviewing people in the Bellaire-area of southwest Houston, a location known to have the highest Jewish population in the Houston area, or interviewing people in areas of Houston with a higher percentage of Asians (Eastern religious beliefs), might be expected to provide different responses. Table 1 provides a description of the participants based on age, gender, current religious affiliation, grade level taught (high school, intermediate or elementary school), and the total number of years spent teaching.

We believe the results of this study were limited by both the small number of participants, and the fact that the participants were not selected randomly; they were obtained via personally knowing the participants or via personal referrals.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics

ID #	Age	Gender	Religion	Grade	Years Taught
1	28	M	Non-denominational Christian	High	3
2	30	M	Non-denominational Christian	High	4
3	25	M	Agnostic	High	2
4	23	M	Atheist	High	1
5	54	F	Catholic	High	15
6	70	F	Lutheran	Elementary	16
7	44	F	Methodist	Elementary	19
8	28	F	Catholic	High	5
9	26	F	Non-denominational Christian	Elementary	2
10	53	F	Baptist	High	7
11	52	F	Church of Christ	Intermediate	16
12	72	M	Baptist	High	16
13	31	F	Non-denominational Christian	High	8
14	27	F	Lutheran Missouri Synod	High	5
15	53	M	Agnostic	Newly	0
16	26	F	Non-denominational Christian	Intermediate	2
17	51	F	Atheist	Newly	0
18	33	F	Catholic	High	10
19	39	F	Non-denominational Christian	High	1
20	50	F	Jewish	Elementary	5
21	30	F	Lutheran	High	7
22	26	F	Non-denominational Christian	Elementary	3
23	27	F	Catholic	Elementary	5
24	70	F	Baptist	High	6
25	46	F	Muslim	High	7
26	23	F	Baptist	High	2

Findings

Religious Expression in Public School

All but one of the participants (96%) felt they were either not supposed to discuss religion or God in any way or felt fearful of any discussion of religion. Of this 96%, all but one of the interviewees gave the overwhelming impression that this was due to the fact they were either unsure of district policy or they felt that district policy forbids any mention of religion by school employees. The one exception to this was one atheist participant who adamantly believed there should be no mention of religion in school in any fashion for two reasons: 1) He is offended by any belief in God as he believes the existence of God has never been proven and 2) He believes it violates the principle of “separation of church and state” as defined by court interpretations of the 1st Amendment. Participant #25, the one Muslim participant, stated she felt

“pretty much” free to discuss religion as she “has not had any problems so far.” Additional comments made by the interviewees about religion and school were:

“I think we are *overly* cautious about not mentioning God or any possible deity.” (28-yr. old male)

“I think religion is being treated like a “cuss word” in public school.” (30-yr. old male)

“I think religion and God is a bunch of bull____. I told my parents I thought it [the Bible] was ridiculous. Garden of Eden? A talking snake? Give me a break! [chuckle]...I’m from the northeast; you would *never* have religion forced upon you [in school] up north the way you do here.” (23-yr. old male)

“I don’t think religion plays any role at all in public schools except for the fact that we are told ‘Don’t bring it up!’” (44-yr. old female)

“I believe in the separation of church and state, but I don’t believe in making it taboo to talk about religion at school. People should feel free to talk about their religions and should be taught to respect others opinions and religions, which means we *have* to talk about. If we don’t, how do we teach tolerance, acceptance and respect?” (26-yr. old female)

“I’m scared about the whole “religious thing” at school. I don’t know what I can do, and what I shouldn’t do. Why don’t the school districts teach us about how to deal with this in some of our training?” (50-yr. old female)

“I think religion should have a huge role in classes such as history and English because it plays a huge influence on our country’s history. I think it should *not* play any role in science because religion is *faith* and science is *proof*. Every year I have these precious little “Bible Belt” kids whom I don’t want to offend, but I tell them, “You are old enough and mature enough to be open-minded, listen and make your own decisions.” Every year I have kids say evolution is a lie.” (53-yr. old female)

Twenty out of 26 participants (77%) of the participants were declared Christians, two were Agnostic, two were Atheist, one was Jewish, and one was Muslim. There were no participants representing any other non-Christian faiths such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, etc. Sixteen out of 26 participants (62%) stated they were devout Christians who regularly attended church services. The Jewish and Muslim participants also stated they were “devoutly religious.” Four of the participants taught in private school before they taught in public school. Of those four, three of them stated that student behavior is improved when religion is emphasized in school (for example, the inclusion of prayer at school).

Fifteen out of 26 participants (58%) felt that teachers did not have the freedom to express their religious beliefs but students had full freedom to express their opinions on religion. One participant (#5) vehemently insisted she should have the same freedom to express religious opinions or to display apparel or décor as her students. The general consensus of these 15 participants was that both teachers and students should be allowed to casually discuss religion to promote tolerance and to teach each other about beliefs other than their own.

Pledge of Allegiance

Seventeen out of 26 participants (65%) do not believe the Pledge of Allegiance is religious in any way. The nine participants who thought the Pledge was religious in nature felt so because the words “one nation under God” are included in the Pledge. Participant #5 was “surprised but pleased” that wording including “God” was written into the Texas Pledge. Participant #4 felt offended that “God” was now included in the Pledges of Allegiance to both the United States and Texas. Most participants were not aware of the fact that the Pledge was not written by our Founding Fathers, and the words “under God” were added 62 years after the original Pledge was written. Twenty-two out of 26 participants (85%) feel that their students do not think the Pledge of Allegiance is religious at all (most seemed to feel it is rote and/or meaningless to students). Some of the participants made the following remarks regarding the Pledge of Allegiance:

“I don’t view the Pledge as religious at all. I believe that the Pledge was created by the people who began our country and should not be changed in any way. We should use this as a sign of respect for the people who have fought for the freedom we have today.” (26-yr. old female)

“I think the Pledge is religious. Even though “under God” was added in the 1950’s, most people have short memories and presume it was always there and that we must therefore keep a deity in our student’s lives. It’s a form of indoctrination. I don’t think it’s necessary. I observe it out of habit, but I no longer say the “under God” part.” (51 yr.-old female)

“I do view the Pledge as somewhat religious; mainly I believe it is a statement of our loyalty to the USA. I believe the phrase “under God” pays tribute to the fact that the Founding Fathers were Christian and came to this country for religious freedom that they believed was a God-given right.” (33-yr. old female)

“I don’t view the Pledge as either an affirmation of patriotism or religion; it is merely a historical writing. I served my time in the military; I’ve proven my patriotism. I don’t need to recite the Pledge to prove that I’m patriotic.” (30 yr.-old, male, U.S. Army veteran)

Moment of Silence

Fifteen out of 26 participants (58%) believe the “moment of silence” is religious. Of those fifteen participants, ten participants (67%) described themselves as “devoutly religious Christians” or commented that they felt they viewed the “moment of silence” as religious in nature because of their religious devotion. Of the other five participants in this group, two were atheist, one was non-denominational Christian, one was Jewish and one was agnostic. Only six out of 26 participants (23%) felt that their students thought of the “moment of silence” as religious in nature. Some teachers made comments that their students either did not know why

we observe a “moment of silence” or the students thought it was a “waste of time.” Some of the teacher comments were:

“I think the [role of religion] has definitely changed over the years and I think it has been a positive change. Twenty or more years ago students were forced to sit through a read-aloud prayer to God, but whose god were they praying to? So, the fact that we’ve moved from this to a moment of silence shows that we respect each individual’s religion.” (26-yr. old female)

“I think the moment of silence is meant to be religious, but I don’t think that kids know what-hell it stands for.” (53-yr. old male)

“The moment of silence does smack of religion, but it’s better than leading prayers in school. I use it as a time to relax, contemplate, meditate, sleep, whatever.” (51-yr. old female)

“I do not see the moment of silence as having any religious meaning. I think it is purely a moment of reflection to remind us that there are men and women risking their lives for us, and to honor those that have lost their lives. I do not think it is necessary to observe the moment of silence every day. It loses the significance and becomes mundane.” (33-yr. old female)

Religion Classes in Public School

Twenty out of 26 participants (77%) believe that religion classes should be offered for elective credit. The general consensus in support of religious electives included a belief that it would teach students about religious beliefs other than their own, and it would promote open-mindedness and tolerance for world beliefs. Antagonists to offering religious classes either stated that religion should only be taught at home or religion instructors would be unable to teach in an unbiased, objective manner. Participant #9 mentioned a fear of students being “preached to” or proselytized. It should be noted that the emphasis by the interviewees was on offering world religion classes, *not* Bible classes. Some opinions voiced by the participants:

“Why not [offer religion classes]? If the kids actually want to learn something, why stop them?” (31-yr. old female)

“We have so many denominations and faiths in our society today; I think that school districts would be fearful of lawsuits if they tried to teach religion. I think it’s better to let the parents teach any religion. Besides... [pause]...these grades for the classes the kids take are the grades that are used to get into college. I don’t think religion classes should be included in this.” (53-yr. old male)

“If students want to learn more, they why should we hold them back? But, I also think that atheistic and agnostic beliefs should be included in the curriculum. Religion is a touchy subject; therefore, more than anything, knowledge of different faiths, tolerance and acceptance should be taught.” (26 yr. old female)

“I think the majority of high school students lack the maturity to discuss religion in a factual way. I think emotions and opinions would rule. I think it would cause way more problems than it would solve.” (33 yr. old female)

“Yes, I think public schools should teach kids about world religions. Think about it....if you just leave it to the parents who barely understand their own religious doctrines and who tell their kids that their religion is superior to others when they can’t even support that opinion... [pause]...then, gee! All we end up with is a narrow-minded, prejudiced population of young adults. With ignorance comes prejudice, and with prejudice comes fear, and with fear comes discrimination and violence. Someone better enlighten these kids!” (50-yr. old female)

Religious Settings and Prayer

During the interviews, a majority of the participants revealed that they worked for districts that held at least one mandatory meeting in a religious building and/or exercised prayer during school meetings; therefore, the participants were questioned about their opinions of these school actions. Four out of 26 participants (15%) do not believe that the beginning-of-the-school-year convocation ceremony or any mandatory employee meeting should be held in a religious building or setting. Of these four participants, none of them view themselves as devoutly religious Christians. One atheist participant believes that hosting the convocation at a religious location on a paid teacher work day is in clear violation of 1st Amendment law. Most commented that the school districts probably use a church because it is a venue big enough to seat all their employees. Participant #22 stated, “I don’t think it is a big deal since this particular building seems more like an auditorium or conference center than a church, although I think there may be a cross or two standing in the corner.”

Nine out of 26 participants (35%) do not believe that group prayer should be led or allowed during the convocation or during any required school meeting. Opinions varied from thinking it violated the separation of “church and state” to finding it awkward to be subjected to a prayer led by someone not of their own faith. All except one of the participants who did *not* object to group prayer were declared Christians. The one remaining participant was Muslim. She stated, “If someone doesn’t want to participate, they don’t have to.” Some comments were:

“The convocation is started with a prayer, as is graduation, I believe. I do not feel this is appropriate. A school district should not hold a prayer of one faith over another. It would be like requiring everyone to attend and holding a lecture directed only at the women in the audience.” (33 yr. old female)

“Every single district-wide meeting we have always has a prayer at the beginning. It really doesn’t bother me either way if prayer should be allowed. I think it is powerful and amazing that my district does that”. (26-yr. old female)

“My school doesn’t do that, but I’ve heard of other schools that do. If people want to pray – let them pray! We are too uptight about the whole situation.” (39 yr. old female)

“It offends me to have to sit through it. It is always a prayer “in Jesus’ name”; there are many teachers who are not religious or who are not Christian and should not be subjected to listening to such nonsense.” (51-yr. old female)

“The prayer doesn’t bother me because I don’t pay attention – I just do my own thing.” (28-yr. old female)

“You know, I used to say the Lord’s Prayer with my team after every game. I got in trouble for it; they told me I couldn’t, but I kept on anyway.” (72-yr. old male)

Miscellaneous Findings on Religion and School Policy

One underlying and perhaps hidden theme was found during this research - the possible discrepancy between stated school policy and actual policy enacted in school. One participant forwarded a pre-holiday email that he received during December 2009 as he thought it was relevant to this research. The email from an assistant principal to the entire school staff stated, “. . . We just need to make sure we are presenting the [seasonal] information in a neutral manner as opposed to promoting a religious agenda.”

The email reflects a school policy that acknowledgement of different types of holiday observances is acceptable; however, promotion of a particular religious agenda is prohibited. At the same time this email was received, one junior high theater arts class in the same district invited parents to view their children’s performance of the play “The Best Christmas Pageant Ever,” a play based on the book by Barbara Robinson (1972), during the school day. The drama teacher sent letters home to parents to allow students to opt out of participating as an actor or actress, and those students were given the choice of either participating in stage management duties or sitting in the library while the remaining students prepared for the play; thereby singling out these students. A nearby elementary school also showed the movie in at least one known 4th grade class. A copy of the script revealed a young kid’s narration about how a poor family of misbehaving children came to be cast in a Christian nativity play. The play begins with the narrator stating, “The Herdmans were absolutely the worst kids in the history of the world. They lied and stole and smoked cigars and talked dirty and hit little kids and took the name of the Lord in vain.” As the play proceeds in describing the awful behavior of these children, the narrator says, “We figured they were headed straight for hell, by way of the state

penitentiary...until they got mixed up with the church, and my mother, and our Christmas pageant.” This play’s inference that the bad behavior of the kids was a result of their ignorance of Christianity might easily be considered to be a “promotion of a Christian agenda” that is in clear violation of school policy and possibly federal law. In a school district that is predominantly Christian, inconsistencies such as this school play or school convocation in a religious setting that includes group prayer can easily be overlooked by the majority, yet provide conflict, confusion and discomfort for others.

Table 2 provides a summary, or audit trail, of the ten themes developed from the participant responses. Columns marked with an “X” denote participant agreement with the listed theme.

Table 2

Table of Emerging Themes (explanation for emerging themes at bottom of table)

Participant #	A. Taboo to discuss religion in school	B. Views self as devout Christian	C. Students feel free to discuss religious views	D. Participant thinks Pledge is NOT religious	E. Students think Pledge is NOT religious	F. Participant views Moment of Silence as religious	G. Students view Moment of Silence as religious	H. Schools should offer classes in religion	I. Employee meetings should NOT be held in a religious setting	J. Should NOT have group prayer during school hours
1	X	X						X		
2	X			X	X					
3	X			X	X			X	X	X
4	X					X			X	X
5	X	X	X		X	X	X	X		X
6	X	X	X		X	X				
7	X	X	X	X	X	X		X		
8	X	X	X	X	X			X		
9	X	X	X	X	X	X		X		
10	X		X	X	X			X		
11	X	X	X	X	X			X		
12	X	X		X	X					
13	X			X	X			X		
14	X	X	X	X		X		X		X
15	X			X	X	X			X	X
16	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
17	X				X	X		X		X
18	X	X		X	X					X
19	X				X	X		X	X	X
20	X		X	X	X	X	X	X		X
21	X	X	X	X		X	X	X		
22	X	X		X	X	X		X		
23	X	X	X		X	X	X	X		
24	X	X	X		X	X	X	X		
25			X	X	X			X		
26	X	X	X		X			X		
Totals	26	16	15	17	22	15	6	20	4	9
%	96%	62%	58%	65%	85%	58%	23%	77%	15%	35%

Code of Emerging Themes:

- A. Participant feels it is “taboo” to discuss religion or God at school (this includes halting discussions that are initiated by or between students)
- B. Participant views himself or herself to be a devout Christian
- C. Participant feels he/she cannot express personal religious views at school, but believes that students are free to express any religious beliefs they wish
- D. Participant believes the Pledge of Allegiance is NOT religious in nature
- E. Participant feels that students do NOT think the Pledge of Allegiance is religious in nature
- F. Participant views the “moment of silence” as religious
- G. Participant feels that students view the “moment of silence” as religious
- H. Participant believes that religion classes should be offered as elective classes in public schools
- I. Participant believes that employee meetings should NOT be held in a religious setting or building
- J. Participant believes that group-led prayer should NOT be allowed during school hours

Implications and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to interview a variety of teachers to gain an understanding of their perceptions of the role of religion in public school. The results of this study could be used to promote professional development programs that inform teachers about current laws regarding religion and that help them better understand the legal limitations governing public school employees. The objectives of this study included determining teacher perceptions of both the current role of religion in school and the role they believed religion *should* play in school. As the study progressed, objectives were expanded to include gaining a very broad idea of teacher perception of laws and school policies.

Two main themes or findings emerged from the study. First, all but one participant in this study declared confusion or apprehension concerning the current role of religion in school and what they, as teachers, were or were not permitted to do. A majority of the participants gave the overwhelming impression that this was due to the fact they were either unsure of district policy or they felt that district policy forbids any mention of religion by school employees. These findings are in agreement with the reviewed literature and studies that stressed that a great amount of confusion and fear about religion in school can be linked to teacher ignorance of laws and district policies. The authors believe most participants in this research, who may or may not be representative of the majority opinion in this area, desired two things: (a) clarification of school policy on how religion can or cannot be addressed at school, and (b) freedom for both staff and students to casually converse about personal religious views to promote learning and tolerance by all. This second desire by teachers creates a very delicate legal situation since the majority Christian population of teachers may knowingly or unknowingly impose their personal beliefs on their students. Several of the teachers, in fact, voiced strong personal opinions about the role they believed religion *should* play in school. For example, participant #5 state she should be able to wear religious clothing and even decorate her room with religious paraphernalia as she believed she should be able to openly express the religious side of her persona. She showed no concern when questioned whether such actions may alienate her

students if they had religious views that differed from her own. Participant #12 admittedly prayed with his students after football games, even when forbidden to do so by his superiors, and participant #7 admittedly played religious Christmas music in class, which may or may not violate federal laws. The overwhelming majority of the participants in this study expressed a concerned and conservative restraint regarding religious expression, and it appeared that even the most opinionated of teachers were honestly unaware of the legal boundaries of their actions. It did not appear from the interviews that any maliciousness or proselytizing goals were a motivational factor in their actions. The action of some to proselytize or denigrate a particular religion was a concern discussed by Kaiser (2003), Kessler (1998), Marshall (2001) and Subedi (2006).

Teacher confusion and apprehension about the role of religion in school seemed to lead most teachers to support the idea of offering world religion classes in school – the second main theme revealed in this study. A majority of the teachers (77%) believed that world religion classes would provide a good opportunity to educate students about other's beliefs in addition to teaching concepts of tolerance, respect, morality and ethics. This opinion is mutually shared by Ayers and Reid (2005), Kilman (2007) and Marshall (2003). In addition, Douglass (2002) stated, "Knowing about the beliefs and practices of people who share this world is vital to the future. In the United States, where people of many nations, faiths, and ethnicities live together, all of us as citizens have the responsibility to learn about one another so that we can unite in positive social conduct" (p. 33).

Two of the remaining themes involving the religiosity of the Pledge of Allegiance and the moment of silence were considered to be minor themes in this study since participant opinions did not seem to interfere with school policies to observe both the Pledge of Allegiance and the moment of silence, regardless of their personal beliefs. It was interesting to note that all but one of the participants either stated or alluded to the beliefs that our Founding Fathers wrote the Pledge and that the Pledge has always included the words "under God." These historically incorrect beliefs appeared to influence a devotion to the observance of the Pledge. While many journal articles, books, news reports and legal proceedings could be found regarding the debated constitutionality of the Pledge and the moment of silence, no literature was found during this study that reported on teacher perceptions of these topics.

The last two minor themes revealed by this study concerned teacher opinion about convening mandatory teacher meetings in religious buildings and allowing group-led prayer at required meetings. Only four participants (15%) objected to meeting in a religious building, and nine participants (35%) objected to group-led prayer at meetings. Once again, no literature was found during this study that reported on teacher perceptions of these topics, and a discussion of the legal aspects of the constitutionality of these topics is beyond the scope of this study. Since 77% of the participants were declared Christians, the lack of objections to holding meetings in church buildings or conducting Christian prayers would be expected to be directly related to their majority-held religious beliefs.

Overall, it was anticipated that more participants would be outspoken Christian fundamentalists who would wish to have prayer during school hours or, like Participant #5, would insist on being able to wear religious apparel or to display religious posters or décor in classrooms. An overwhelming majority of participants seemed to simply want to feel that they could allow students to openly discuss various religious beliefs or that they could comfortably express their own religious affiliation (or lack of) without reprisal, alienation, or formal

disciplinary action. An increasing trend in conservative Christian opinion with increasing age in participants was also expected; however, this trend was not exhibited. In fact, many of the older participants seemed more likely to be neutral and open-minded in their opinions.

It is suggested that this study could have been improved by using appropriate random sampling techniques over a larger number of participants, although it might still be difficult to establish the validity of the responses given the delicate and controversial nature of the subject of religion. This research might also be greatly enhanced by polling students and comparing their responses with teacher interviews. Since the major theme emerging from this survey was the probable link between teacher ignorance of laws and district policies and their confusion and fear about religion in school, it would also be useful to examine written school policies in the districts surveyed. Overall improvements to this study could be obtained by more in depth use of both qualitative and quantitative techniques and statistical methods.

Conclusion

In conclusion, many reports were found that discussed the historical or legal aspects of the role of religion in school, there appeared to be a lack of recent qualitative and quantitative research pertaining to teacher perception of the role of religion and teacher behavior in class with respect to 1st Amendment Law. While this study offers some insight into the complexities of the current role of religion in school, further research is recommended. In a 1998 hearing by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 47 witnesses were called to testify to help determine whether or not schools were complying with federal laws and U.S. Department of Education guidelines about religion in school. During the hearings, Michelle Doyle, Secretary's Liaison to the Religious Community, Department of Education, stated, "I could not tell you what percentage [of schools] have issued guidelines. Really, because we don't have an enforcement or statistical responsibility in this; our information is truly anecdotal" (Brown & Bowling, 2003, p. 260). From the results of this study, it is not apparent that much has changed since 1998 with regard to the lack of knowledge concerning public school compliance with laws about religion. Further studies on the role of religion in school is recommended to help determine how teachers understand and exercise school policies concerning religion, and in turn, to find out how to improve teacher education and school policy.

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Formatted by Dr. Mary Alice Kritsonis, National Research and Manuscript Preparation Editor, NATIONAL FORUM JOURNALS, Houston, Texas. www.nationalforum.com