

Educators' Perceptions on Religious Expression and Spirituality in  
Western Wisconsin Public Schools: An Exploratory Study

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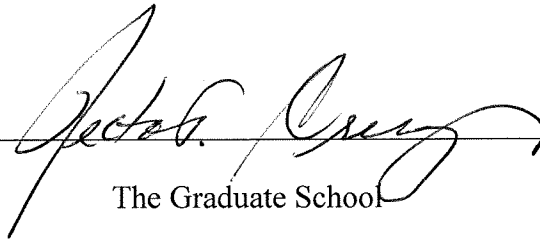
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ABSTRACT

Western Wisconsin public school educators were surveyed about their professional educational training, school climate for expression of religious and spiritual beliefs, and legal and ethical issues for public school practices. The study of religious expression and spirituality in American public schools has been limited. This exploratory study examined the history of religion and the laws that govern its practice in American public schools. Additional examination and opposing viewpoints on goals of educational practices in other countries is discussed. Frequencies, percentages, and means were computed for survey questions. Educators were supportive of the idea that religion and spirituality should be studied and knowledge about religion and spirituality should be attained. But there was more resistance and hesitation or confusion when it came to students expressing their beliefs. Educators had some understanding of legal and ethical laws. There was an opinion that religion and spirituality were important, but implementing them in public school practice was not as clear.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

It was December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2007, one day before winter break at Parker High School in Janesville, Wisconsin. A young teenager named Christopher Campbell made this provocative interpretation while holding the Bible for an English Honors Class assignment: "*This book has halted the intellectual advancement of humankind for centuries. But now I am free from its grasp, so I am free to do this. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word became kindling.* (At this point, Campbell starts to tear the pages.) *This book is not holy. It was written by a bunch of old, smelly Mesopotamians with sand in their [expletive]. Now, will anyone come up here with me to testify, and kick Jesus out of your heart?* (No response from the students.) *Well, I guess I'm surrounded by a bunch of superstitious, simpleminded ignoramuses.*" (Ardiente, 2008, p. 8-9). The local television station reported the incident and the punishment of the Mr. Campbell; which was a suspension. (Schultz, 2007). They quoted another student's father, Paul Jacobsen as saying of Chris: "This boy has done something that is unbalanced, violent in my opinion. He tore that Bible apart as an effigy for Christians. This was not some kind of a demonstration about free speech, this was in my opinion the words of a sociopath." (*Ibid*, 2007, ¶18).

Are people who have some sort of spiritual belief extremely ignorant and suffocating the free will of thought or are those who rip pages from holy books violent and sociopaths to keep our children away from? This issue is especially daunting when it takes place in our American public schools. Administrators and teachers are daily tip-toeing a line where neutrality is the appropriate response to belief or more specifically religious and spiritual beliefs and practices. What then is the appropriate and neutral response toward Chris or Mr. Jacobsen?

The researcher will discuss later the different ways that public school educators can respond to the previous provocative situation, but now the central tenets of the case, which are

religious and spiritual belief, must be discussed. The issue of religious and spiritual belief has been around for some time; well before Mr. Campbell and Mr. Jacobsen's argument over free speech and will continue on well after the two of them are gone. Civilizations have creation myths about many different topics: earth, man, and floods that revolve around the theme of how and sometimes why things were created. In this case, it is these religious and spiritual beliefs that are the collective way they relate to each other and the world around them. Penelope Farmer (1978), states it more poetically: "Because to tell how the world began, how we came by fire—and food—and death—even to hazard guesses on how it might all end—is in a sense to recreate it for ourselves; so to make ourselves less lonely perhaps, and so counter a little the remoteness and indifference of the stars." (p.3).

The goal of creation myths are to explain. Whether it is how the Earth was formed or Man, many different religions are all trying to arrive at an acceptable conclusion (Farmer, 1978). For example the Maori creation myth has a character named Tane who is looking for a wife to bear children. Eventually he forms a woman from sand and then marries her and soon she grants him a human child. With so many different religious beliefs, understanding and refining personal beliefs or faiths is a process of self-discovery.

America was founded on religious freedom; the freedom to believe as each individual sees fit. It is this freedom that gives Mr. Campbell the opportunity to rip apart the Christian Bible in front of his classmates. From the First Amendment of our constitution these specific freedoms are established and rooted into the fabric of our country. It states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..." (Haynes, 2001). To understand the importance of this Amendment, Carter (1993 p.106) explained that "religion is the first subject of the First Amendment." Therefore it is relevant to note that other

equally important topics such as freedom of speech and press, the right to peaceably assemble, and to petition grievances against the government are stated as well in the same clause. Our Bill of Rights includes the right to establish a system of beliefs that is founded in the freedom of our decision(s) and not that of government persuasion or rule.

In America we also have the law of the separation of church and state. One does not have to look hard to see how important religion is in the United States of America. In fact according to the American Religious Identification Study (ARIS) 2008, seventy-six percent of American adults identify themselves as Christian, which is an estimated 173,402,000 people and just under four percent identify from other religions, which is an estimated 8,796,000 people (Kosmin & Keysar, 2009). Each political election cycle talks of winning a specific religious group or there are legal fights in courts over school prayer, the mention of God in the Pledge of Allegiance, or the creationism vs. evolution debate. The majority of Americans have strong beliefs about some faith and its personal practice.

Such belief has created strong debate which forces its way into many facets of our society. For instance, intelligent design and creationism are being included in public school science classrooms across the country with some saying little science backing the beliefs (Nelson, 2009). The reaction of scientists, who are against teaching intelligent design and creationism, is one of disrespect for those who value this teaching. Carter (1993) states, “But there is a message in this miasma, and the message is that people who take their religion seriously, who rely on their understanding of God for motive force in their public and political personalities—well, they’re scary people” (p. 24).

This emotional and ethical dilemma plays out amidst the youth in American public schools. As the role of the school has been expanding to teach students about character, wellness,

and even parenting, it is the educators who are left to wonder what is acceptable to say and teach according to the letter of the law. During this confusion, it can be a difficult task for an educator to know how to act and to know what is acceptable for the way students can act in regards to their personal and spiritual growth. An educator may tend to err on the side of caution and avoid the whole complexity of the issue.

However in this complexity lies an inherent beauty: the ability and freedom to relate those things considered to be spiritual with the secular. Anderson (2004) reminds us that America is a land that has both the secular and religious which presents legitimate challenges for public school educators when attempting to accommodate both. Schools are not religious institutions; it is not the responsibility of a school to promote one religious viewpoint or another. Nor is it the job of a school to discriminate or suppress one viewpoint or another. Instead schools, in essence, are communities that occur inside buildings where students enter with all of their derived thoughts and beliefs and are taught by teachers who also enter with all of their derived thoughts and beliefs.

This complex negotiation between thoughts and beliefs can be governed by codes or laws, whether religious, spiritual, or secular. It is by each of these regulations human beings embrace a way of living. However, there are institutional laws that clearly define what is acceptable in schools, in terms of spirituality, and what is not acceptable. Indeed though, there is no law that clearly defines what spirituality is exactly.

Defining spirituality and religion as different, yet similar, is a confusing task for even those who are experts in the field. One way to differentiate the two terms is stating that religion is exercised through a social medium and spirituality tends to be more individual or internal (Pargament, cited in Briggs & Rayle, 2005). Since there is confusion in defining spirituality,

educators, who may not have had in-depth training in religious or spiritual matters, may struggle when navigating these murky waters. In fact, Mayes (2001) made the case that we do a poor job of training teachers to negotiate matters of their own and their students' faith. He further contended that if we teach future teachers how to deal with spiritual matters in public schools personally, legally, and academically, then the educational system would be more prepared to handle the difficulty of this convoluted topic.

### *Rationale for the Study*

There is a growing debate to include religion and spirituality in ways that are both relevant and respectful into the public school system. One need not look any further than a National Education Association (NEA) article, *Navigating Religion in the Classroom*, to see that the issue of religion and our public schools is not going to go away (O'Neil & Loschert, 2002). In fact, according to the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, the word spirituality is mentioned in sections that deal with counseling and diversity or multicultural issues (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2009). Therefore if the standards that are used to accredit a portion of educators address spirituality, then it would behoove the educational community to make sure that an emphasis is developed to ensure proper respect and response to all in that community who value the pursuit of those things considered religious and spiritual.

### *Statement of the Problem*

Public schools currently lack a clear avenue and direction for the expression of the spiritual aspects of students' and educators' lives. As well, educators are unable or unsure of how to discuss spiritual matters with students and other faculty without some sort of fear of being reprimanded. This unknown comes from the lack and/or clarity of knowledge about what is

legally acceptable in regards to spiritual matters in public schools. This leads one to critically examine the training methods of future educators, the school climate for expression of beliefs, and legal and ethical issues in regards to religious and spiritual matters.

### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study is to assess the perceptions of public school educators in regards to:

1. Their professional educational training in religious expression and spirituality
2. The role spirituality has in the lives of their students
3. Personal religion and/or spirituality and its role in their life and professional practice
4. Understanding of the laws within the public school setting that govern religious and spiritual issues

Data was collected in Spring of 2009 through the use of an online survey entitled: “An Assessment of Training, School Climate, and Legal/Ethical Issues Related to Spirituality and Religion: In Western Wisconsin Public Schools” at participating western Wisconsin public schools.

### *Research Questions*

Question #1: Do educators perceive their educational training as being sufficient in preparing them, both with knowledge and confidence, for issues involving spirituality and religion; legally and practically in the work place?

Question #2: Do public school educators perceive public schools as being an accepting place for students to explore their own personal spiritual and religious beliefs?

Question #3: Do public school educators feel that an accepting climate is present for the expression of spiritual and religious beliefs?

Question #4: Do public school educators believe that it is possible for staff and students, to discuss spiritual and religious matters in schools without violating any legal or ethical laws?

*Definition of Terms*

*Church.* The word Church, when capitalized, refers to established religions in America and not any one church from any particular denomination. It is a general term to refer to things that are or have dwelling in religion such as prayer or worship music.

*Religion.* Religion as defined through dictionary.com as “a specific fundamental set of beliefs and practices generally agreed upon by a number of persons or sects.” The important distinction between religion and spirituality is that a religion has a set of beliefs where anyone can be spiritual without believing in a set of rules or traditions. For the purposes of this study the definition for religion will be taken from Sheridan, Wilmer, and Atcheson (1994): “an organized and structured set of beliefs and practices shared by a community that is related to spirituality”.

*Spirituality.* Spirituality has many different and contrasting definitions. It seems there are different definitions of what spirituality refers to in the literature, however; many believe it to have some sort of mystical almost otherworldly sense. The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs defines it as “a sense of a relationship with or belief in a higher power or entity greater than oneself that involves a search for wholeness and harmony” (CACREP, 2009, p. 62). In some cases there is a comprehensive list of themes: “infusion and drawing out of spirit in one’s life”, both an “active and passive process”, “unique to all persons”, “moves the individual towards knowledge, love, meaning, hope, transcendence, connectedness and compassion” (Burke, 1998 as cited in Miller, 1999) However it is interesting to note experts that from the above themes do not agree on one singular definition (Miller, 1999).

Still another possible definition is offered as “giving personal and cultural meaning to life, part of a belief or value system providing personal identity and capable of reducing conflict and encouraging harmony.” (Allen & Coy, 2004). For the purposes of this study the definition taken from Sheridan, M. J., Wilmer, C. M., and Atcheson, L. (1994) will be used for spirituality: “the human search for meaning, purpose and connection with self, others, the universe, and ultimate reality, however one understands it. This may or may not be expressed through religious forms or institutions.”

*State.* The word State, when capitalized, refers to those things that are not considered to have any dealings in those things labeled religious, mystical, or spiritual; one might say they are secular or worldly.

#### *Assumptions of the Study*

- Public school educators graduated from an accredited training program that adheres to state and federal guidelines.
- The sample will be representative of the Western Wisconsin public school community.
- The sample population will answer all questions with sincere thought and honesty.
- Public school educators have had little training in areas of religion and spirituality.

#### *Limitations of the Study*

- Public school educators may not have had any experiences involving spirituality and religion in their school.
- The survey was sent electronically to one contact person at each school and then forwarded it on, which limited the total participation of staff.
- The generalizability of the study may be limited due to only a small sub-section of Western Wisconsin educators responding.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

Reasonable and thorough attempts to find research in the literature of scientific studies that address religion and spirituality were conducted. Hall, Dixon, and Mauzey (2004) have concluded that the study of religion and spirituality specifically for a client's personal beliefs is important in the mental health counseling arena. As well, Sheridan, Wilmer, and Atcheson (1994) conducted an exploratory study in regards to religion and spirituality in the social work academic area. These two examples provide a foundation for the current study, since there was no research found that focused on showing the importance of religion and spirituality in American public schools. This may be due to the controversy of projected research studies or the regulated framework of current American laws.

This chapter will discuss more in depth the laws and court case decisions that are a guiding force in America and more specifically in the American public school system. The goal of this review is to create a collection of the laws for current educators to use to help make informed decisions in their practice. Additionally, there will be further discussion how other countries deal with this issue of religion and spirituality in their schools. Finally, a discussion will occur on how educators are currently handling the reality of religion and spirituality in public schools and in their professional training.

### *Separation of Church and State and Other Court Cases*

When looking at laws that govern our religious and spiritual life, one in particular stands above the rest: the Separation of Church and State. When did the Church separate from the State and what are the laws and guidelines that govern the process of separation of Church and State. Again Carter (1993) mentions that religion was the first subject of the First Amendment and it is important to remember that the budding colonies known as America were claiming independence

from a Church run State; being England (Haas, 1994). The history of America's independence is rich and long, but for the purposes of this study it is important to understand that the inspiration for this amendment results from erecting a "wall" of separation (*Ibid, 1994*). Carter (1993) reminds us that the fundamental idea of this legislation is to protect the Church from the State. The effects were that America then became a country of "religious pluralism" where the government could not interfere with religious matters.

Somehow in the understanding of the concept the two seemed to have switched roles, instead protecting the State from the Church as noticed by areas of school prayer, God in the Pledge of Allegiance, and public displays of the Ten Commandments. Or could an argument be made that the State is merely prohibiting the establishment of one particular religion over another as is evidenced by the laws and case interpretations. To better understand and make judgments an exploration of the laws and court cases must be undertaken.

The first and most influential law is the First Amendment that allows for freedom to have and practice a personal religion. The First Amendment is broken into two clauses, the Establishment Clause, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion" and the Free Exercise Clause, "or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..." (Greenawalt, 2005; Haynes, 2001). The implication then for any religious person, including public school educators, is that he/she has the freedom to pursue religion in America; though the First Amendment does not make the distinction between religion and spirituality it can reasonably be assumed that those who are free to pursue a religious lifestyle can also pursue a spiritual lifestyle as protected by it.

This pursuit is the essence of the Free Exercise Clause. At the core of this clause there is an implied duality in meaning with one that states clearly about a particular religion, the right to hold a personal belief and the other, an avenue to profess such a belief; though not many agree

on the exact interpretation (Schotten 1998). Schotten continues, “The most remarkable truth about religion in the Constitution was that freedom, and not God, was both its inspiration and its rationale” (p.13). What seems a relatively simple and straightforward clause about freedom, after further review, grows more and more convoluted with each subsequent court and Congressional decision.

Before we discuss some of the cases that impacted the Free Exercise Clause, it should be noted that Congress and the Courts have not clearly defined what is meant by the term religion (Brownstein, 2006), which results in some legal ambiguity. This is quite the contrast when we look at the definitions for this study when it comes to religion: “an organized and structured set of beliefs and practices shared by a community that is related to spirituality” (Sheridan, Wilmer, and Atcheson, 1994). With the United States being, “the most religiously diverse society on Earth and, among developed countries, the most religious” (Haynes, 2001, p. 7), it may behoove the Courts to revisit the issue as with other First Amendment topics such as speech, press and assembly, which have clear definitions (Brownstein, 2006). Brownstein refers to specific case law that the courts have used to help define religion, but warrants that the definition lacks consensus (for the list of case law see p. 68).

The first case that had an impact on the definition of the free exercise of religion was *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette* (1943), which held that students, who are of Jehovah Witness faith, did not have to participate in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance (Greenawalt, 2005). This decision was important for granting students the right to not participate in activities that would violate their personal religious beliefs.

It seems that 1963 was a defining, historical period for the changing scope of the free exercise clause (Schotten, 1998). Two Supreme Court cases and *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, the former

determined that government had to allow people special work privileges even if demands did not directly prevent someone from practicing their religion and the latter that government must allow families the right to deny public education on the grounds of religious liberty (Greenawalt, 2005). As Schotten (1998) notes, "for the first time, the Supreme Court held that religious beliefs exempted a person, as a matter of right, from a valid criminal law." (p. 14)

Looking closer at the Establishment Clause we see a contrary, yet still in tandem, practice that states government or State cannot establish a particular religion. Levy (2004), details that the "Establishment Clause separates government and religion so that we can maintain civility between believers and unbelievers as well as the several hundred denominations, sects, and cults...sharing the commitment to liberty and equality that cements us together." That is the essence of the clause, to take away barriers to unity that may result from religion, while keeping in mind that each person's religion cannot be taken from them.

But what does it mean to establish a religion. There are two legal case studies that will illustrate just how difficult the interpretation of establishment can be. The first, *Everson v. Board of Education* (1947) which the Supreme Court ruled five to four that those who attended parochial schools would not be able to receive government funds for transportation reimbursement (Greenawalt, 2005). This ruling helped to define establishment in terms of the government not favoring a particular religion. In Justice Black's critical opinion he states:

Neither a state nor the Federal Government...can pass laws which aid one religion, aid all religions, or prefer one religion over another. No tax in any amount, large or small, can be levied to support any religious activities or institutions, whatever they may be called, or whatever form they may adopt to teach or practice religion...[T]he clause...was intended to erect "a wall of separation" between church and state. (p. 18)

However in *Zorach v. Clauson* (1952), the Supreme Court ruled that it was okay for students to take time off from school to attend religious based functions (Greenawalt, 2005; Haas, 1994). What was called “released time” made a clear distinction that religion was not being taught or practiced on school grounds therefore it was considered to uphold the Establishment Clause. After examining these two cases it is reasonable to assume that establishment, under the First amendment, has an intended meaning in public schools to prevent or protect students, on school grounds, from being forced to participate in a specific religious class, while not preventing that student from taking the class outside of school grounds.

In 1962, the case of *Engel v. Vitale*, came to the Supreme Court and again they were faced again with deciding if the federal government may have overstepped their bounds and unbeknownstly sponsored a specific religion (Haas, 1994). Briefly, the case was about if a New York school could start the day with a voluntary prayer, which the Court ruled, six to one, was not allowed. Justice Black and Douglas wrote opinions about the matter with Douglas stating that because teachers were state or federal employees their time spent conducting the prayer was taking government monies and using them not to teach, but conduct or lead religious activities (*Ibid*, 1994). Likewise the court case of *Abington Township v Schempp* (1963), which stated that school sponsored prayer was no longer allowed, but schools could still teach *about* religion (Greenawalt, 2005; Haynes, 2001). The direct fall out of this decision was prayer before all football games and graduation ceremonies was prohibited.

Due to these cases, educators must act a certain way, as government employees; they lose some autonomy with the title. Haynes (2001) suggests that legally teachers and administrators are to protect the religious and spiritual rights of all students and not proselytize their own viewpoint. However when age appropriate and first asked, it is not the Establishment of a school

sponsored religion for a teacher to tell their personal belief in this area (*Ibid*, 2001) for there is a difference between a responsive statement and an attempt at proselytizing. For public school educators the key for expressing their own personal beliefs revolves around their contract and when their contract hours are over the teacher has more freedom to express their religion. More discussion on the role of teachers and administrators is in Haynes, 2001 (p. 26-28).

The reality of these governing forces, at public schools, are there must be some awareness that public school funding comes from federal and state taxes, therefore they cannot be given to facilities that adopt to proselytize or practice a specific religion over another (Greenawalt, 2005; Haynes, 2001). That means if public schools started to teach or practice religion they would no longer be able to operate using federal funds due to a cessation of tax money from the government; hence one of the probable causes of the formation of private schools. The balance of religious behavior can then be affected by the need for school funding.

Where is the concrete line between forcing students to participate in religious classes and allowing student's the opportunity to express their religious beliefs at the same time retain federal and state resources. The following three cases that illustrate the difficulty of the balance. Zachary Hood was an elementary student who was not allowed to read her favorite story because it came from the Beginner's Bible (Haynes, 2001). Her teacher decided that such reading was the school promoting one religious viewpoint over another. The court decision, *Roberts v. Madigan* (1990), found that a Colorado public school teacher had to remove his personal Bible from the sight of students and was forbidden to read it silently when students were involved in other activities (Carter, 1993). Additionally he had to remove any Christian books from the class library, but was allowed to keep books on Native American religious traditions and the occult. Finally, Carter shares another story of Jewish students being warned that they could only take

one day off for Yom Kippur. If they decided to take two days off instead they would be “charged with six absences.” In these three, but not all inclusive, instances one asks if the other students are being forced to participate in a school established religion or are individual’s freedom of expression being stifled.

There is quite a difference between knowing the laws and properly applying them to everyday situation. Also with the official position of public schools that of neutrality (Haynes, 2001), there is room for ambiguity that may cause some educators to avoid the issue. Anderson (2004) asks educators not to fall into the trap of avoiding the issue of spirituality due to concerns about separation of church and state but instead deal with these concerns in an appropriate and enthusiastic way. Though with lawsuits for mishandling the issue one cannot blame public school educators for taking this avenue (Haynes, 2001). After looking at some of the laws that have affected the separation of Church and State, maybe the answer to how public school educators can handle the laws will not be found on American soil, but by looking at how other countries handle the issue.

#### *Other Countries and Separation of Church and State*

Other countries handle the issue of religion and spirituality in their classrooms and school facilities or school climate differently than in America. It may help American educators understand how to act or react to religious/spiritual situations by looking at this example. As well addressing the legality of certain regions may add a new dimension of how American educators can effectively revise or advocate their circumstances. Finally it may benefit the American public school system to see other countries debate the benefits and drawbacks of religion and spirituality.

The topic of separation of church and state does not seem nearly as emotionally charged or realistically important in other countries. In March 2007, an advisory council, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), working with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), held a summit to discuss just this topic: "Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools". A 134-page report was released that summarized experts' discussions on topics such as: guiding principles, curriculum concerns, human rights issue of teaching religion, and teacher education. The main assumptions of this advisory council was "first, that there is positive value in teaching that emphasizes respect for everyone's right to freedom of religion and belief, and second, that teaching about religions and beliefs can reduce harmful misunderstandings and stereotypes." (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2007, p. 11-12). The ODIHR made the assumption that the world and specifically the public schools in their area were becoming more diverse. Therefore, there was a strong emphasis on embracing the idea that religion and belief was not practiced by crazy people with who have a negative connotation, but the practicing of religion and belief is a fundamental human right that must be allowed.

In England there is not a separation of church and state therefore maintained schools incorporate religious topics in the curriculum (Castelli & Trevathan, 2005; Francis, Robbins, and Johnson, 2001). According to the Education Reform Act 1988, it states in Chapter 1 section 1.2a that "the curriculum for a maintained school satisfies the requirements of this section if it is a balanced and broadly based curriculum which promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society" and section 2.1a "the curriculum for every maintained school shall comprise a basic curriculum which includes provision for religious

education for all registered pupils at the school” (Office of Public Sector Information, n.d.). In England they are confronted with the reality of legislating a religious education.

In New Zealand, a country known for their history of secular schools, there is an increasing proposition to include values and moral based education (Fraser, 2004). More specifically the inclusion of relevant religious practices for indigenous tribes has been shown to fall under the realm of cultural diversity as opposed to religious evangelism. With these various examples from other countries there are some things that need to be considered.

One critique comes from those who believe that moral or spiritual education should be only in religious environments. A main opponent of including spirituality as a topic of discussion in schools are those who tend to be considered more conservative or traditional/orthodox; believing that the sacred or religious, has its proper place and to have it occur outside of that place would be sacrilegious (Castelli & Trevathan, 2005; Francis, Robbins, & Johnson, 2001); protecting the Church from the State.

There are places where incorporating spirituality, in whole or part, is an educational practice and looking closely at what other countries have already debated, American public schools could find some guidelines for helping educators navigate the issue on our soil. The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) suggested many ideas that American public school educators could look into. First, when dealing with curriculum it should be: adhere to professional standards; be inclusive and historically relevant and accurate; be sensitive to alternative viewpoints; and be actively responsive to the effect that each subsequent religion has on the school and greater community (Santoro, 2008). Additionally there should be a support

system for teachers to learn more about curriculum and teaching to specific religions to become better equipped educators.

Three of the major conclusions of the council focused specifically around gaining knowledge about the topic of religion and spirituality. The first conclusion was an increase in knowledge of religion and beliefs will foster an “appreciation of the importance of respect for everyone’s right to freedom of religion or belief...” (Santoro, 2008, p.85). Second, knowledge can reduce the outbreak of religious conflict that results from a lack of understanding or fear; instead cultivating a respect, not a conversion acceptance, for others beliefs. Finally, knowledge of religious beliefs is an “essential part of a quality education.” (p. 85).

#### *Alternative Viewpoints on Goals of Public Education*

An inclusive public school education is a difficult thing to define. There are many diverse groups that exist and the goals of education are many. Greenawalt (2005) lists a few of those goals: vocational training, enhancement of capacity for choice, knowledge and enrichment, education for life as a citizen, and moral character and ideals. Some educators would agree in part like Haynes and Berkowitz (2007) in regards to character education. While other educators, such as Starnes (2006) believe that schools should not explicitly teach character, but model it. Public school education has many different definitions and ideologies that form the foundation on which there is debate. It is the hope then that a good public education would successfully teach them all; in some way.

One need not look any further than each school’s individual mission statement to see the hope that the public educational system has for its students. Here are a few examples from schools in Western Wisconsin: Barron Area School District: “To ensure all students reach their dreams while making a positive impact on the world” (Barron Area School District, 2009); Eau

Claire Area School District: “To educate our children in partnership with the family and community to live responsible, creative, and fulfilling lives in a rapidly changing world” (Eau Claire Area School District, 2009); and Menomonie High School: “The MHS Community ensures learning, caring, and responsibility for ALL!” (Menomonie High School, 2009).

Additionally, this hope is embedded in the culture of public education as seen in the U. S. Department of Education’s slogan: “providing educational excellence for all Americans” (U. S. Department of Education, 2008). Allen and Coy (2004) offer an additional and more specific goal of public education for “educating students for responsible citizenship emphasize values of respect for others, cooperation, and learning to live in a diverse society.” With all of these goals and hopes, the important take home message is the emphasis on an education that is all inclusive and complete.

Unfortunately what can be defined as complete and inclusive can be a bit tricky, depending on who you ask. Anderson’s (2004) view of complete education process is one that includes both the intellectual pursuits as well as incorporating spirituality and religion. One of respecting religious beliefs and not avoiding or ignoring the importance of them. Greenawalt (2005) agrees and states that, “knowledge of civilizations includes knowledge of religion” (p.27). Haynes (2001) adds that merely mentioning religion in the curriculum does not go far enough and in a way demeans the importance of the topic. It seems the proponents of teaching religion and spirituality would like it to be included as a core idea or theme in the curriculum.

Other educators see the public school arena as no place for explicitly teaching a religious or spiritual perspective. Nelson (2005) states that if science teachers were required to teach intelligent design it would present problems. These could include science teachers having to discuss and critique a topic that directly leads to spiritual assumptions, such as the origin of life,

and will “force” students to examine their religious beliefs. The Establishment Clause directly limits this type of teaching in the public schools, where teachers cannot teach about religious doctrines, which is what intelligent design is categorized. In fact Nelson (2005) contends that science teachers have weakened the scientific evolutionary theories so as to not offend certain religious persuasions that disagree with it.

Carpenter (2007) writes that studying religions should be like that of studying art or any other humanity course. He strongly urges that a liberal education is one of reason and not religious belief. Carpenter so strongly believes in a liberating education that he states, “however, of most significance to the liberal arts education is the fact that religion and religious belief cannot be used to make or decide truth claims” (p. 28). Also even with 76% of Americans having some religious faith, the results of the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) 2008 listed a ten percent decrease in those that have some religion and an almost seven percent increase in those that report having no religion (Kosmin & Keysar, 2009). It would seem that religious faith in America is on the decline and non-religious or secular beliefs are increasing in popularity.

However strong the argument may be not to teach religious and spiritual topics, in American public schools, religion and spirituality are still very important to those of faith of a record number 181,000,000 and efforts to teach about the topic can still occur without teaching judgments about which religion is true (Greenawalt, 2005). A common ground seems to exist that teaching *about* religions is viable both legally and ethically.

## Chapter III: Methodology

### *Introduction*

This study was designed to explore four principle questions of spirituality as it pertained to: the preparedness of educator training in religious and spiritual matters, the perceived support from their school for students' and educators' religious and spiritual beliefs, and the understanding of laws that apply to religion and spirituality in public schools. The issues to be addressed include subject selection and description, instrumentation, data collection procedures, data analysis, and limitations of the study.

### *Subject Selection and Description*

The subjects for this study were selected from Western Wisconsin public schools that have participated in the University of Wisconsin-Stout School Counseling Masters Internship Program. An email, with a link to the online survey, was sent to the contact person, usually the principal, asking him/her to forward the link to educators at their specific school. If the contact person forwarded on the survey they were asked to email the researcher back with total number receiving the forwarded email. The following schools participated by forwarding the email link: Amery School District, Arkansaw Elementary, Bruce School District (Elementary, Middle, and High), Cameron High, Eleva-Strum Elementary, Neillsville Middle and High, River Falls High, and Webster School District. Participants come from the following educational departments: administration, counseling, general education teachers, and special education teachers.

### *Instrumentation*

A survey entitled: "An Assessment of Training, School Climate, and Legal/Ethical Issues Related to Spirituality and Religion: In Western Wisconsin Public Schools" was adapted for public school educators from an existing survey, created by Sheridan, Wilmer, and Atcheson

(1994). This survey was designed to measure social work faculty views of religion and spirituality. It was specifically chosen because it closely related to this study's research questions. The survey was tested and found to be valid and reliable by Sheridan, Wilmer, and Atcheson (1994). The validity of the survey may have been compromised because of modifications for this study.

#### *Data Collection Procedures*

This survey was modified to an online version using SelectSurveyASP Advanced 8.1.6 from the University of Wisconsin-Stout educational materials. The subjects were informed via email that they had been chosen as part of a research study and asked to participate in the study by forwarding the email to his/her staff (teachers, counselors, school psychologists, other support staff and administration) and asked to take the survey him/her self. They were told that the survey would take about 10-15 minutes and a link was supplied to participate in the study. By clicking on the link and completing the survey, they were informed that they were agreeing to the confidentiality agreement. After one month, a second follow-up email was sent to those who responded to the initial email with one week prior to the closing of the survey. This was to remind those who had yet to take the survey and to allow those who may have experienced technical difficulties a second opportunity to take the survey. Follow-up emails were sent to those that forwarded the email on to thank them for their participation.

#### *Data Analysis*

Data was analyzed using SPSS 16.0. Frequency and means were computed on demographic information. Each question was analyzed using frequency count, mean, or paired sample t-test to determine results.

*Limitations*

- Sample size was limited because population was to survey only western Wisconsin public school educators
- Participants may have answered differently or not at all due to demographic questions that were requested
- Modifications made to the survey may have caused unforeseen reliability and validity limitations

## Chapter IV: Results

There were four research question proposed for this study:

Question #1: Do educators perceive their educational training as being sufficient in preparing them, both with knowledge and confidence, for issues involving spirituality and religion; legally and practically in the work place?

Question #2: Do public school educators perceive public schools as being an accepting place for students to explore their own personal spiritual and religious beliefs?

Question #3: Do public school educators feel that an accepting climate is present for the expression of spiritual and religious beliefs?

Question #4: Do public school educators believe that it is possible for staff and students, to discuss spiritual and religious matters in schools without violating any legal or ethical laws?

The online survey instrument had a total of 48 questions that were categorized within the framework of the four research questions. Q1 had eleven corresponding survey items, Q2 had seven, Q3 had nine, and Q4 had eight. Ten of the survey questions asked for demographic information, while there were two different sections that participants could enter qualitative information.

### *Demographic Information*

In total there were  $N = 61$  respondents. The average age of educators was  $M = 43.13$ ,  $SD = 10.58$  with years of educational experience being  $M = 16.77$ ,  $SD = 10.23$ . Of those that reported ( $n = 56$ ), 35 were female and 21 male. Of those that reported ( $n = 55$ ), 54 classified as Euro-American/White with one as Native-American/Alaskan Native/First Nations. Of those that responded ( $n = 56$ ), 39 completed a public masters program, 12 a public bachelors program, and three and two completed a private masters and bachelors program respectively. Two groups

comprised of, Secondary 7-12 and Administrator, each had 17 participants, with 14 for Pupil Services (counselor, school psychologist) and 8 for Elementary K-6.

Figure 1 shows the participants current religious affiliation or spiritual orientation. Of those that reported, 48 or 85.71% participants had a Christian affiliation. The “Other” category consisted six responses: ECKANKAR, Native American Beliefs, Christian: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon), Christian: Seventh Day Adventist, Baha’i, and Naturalist.

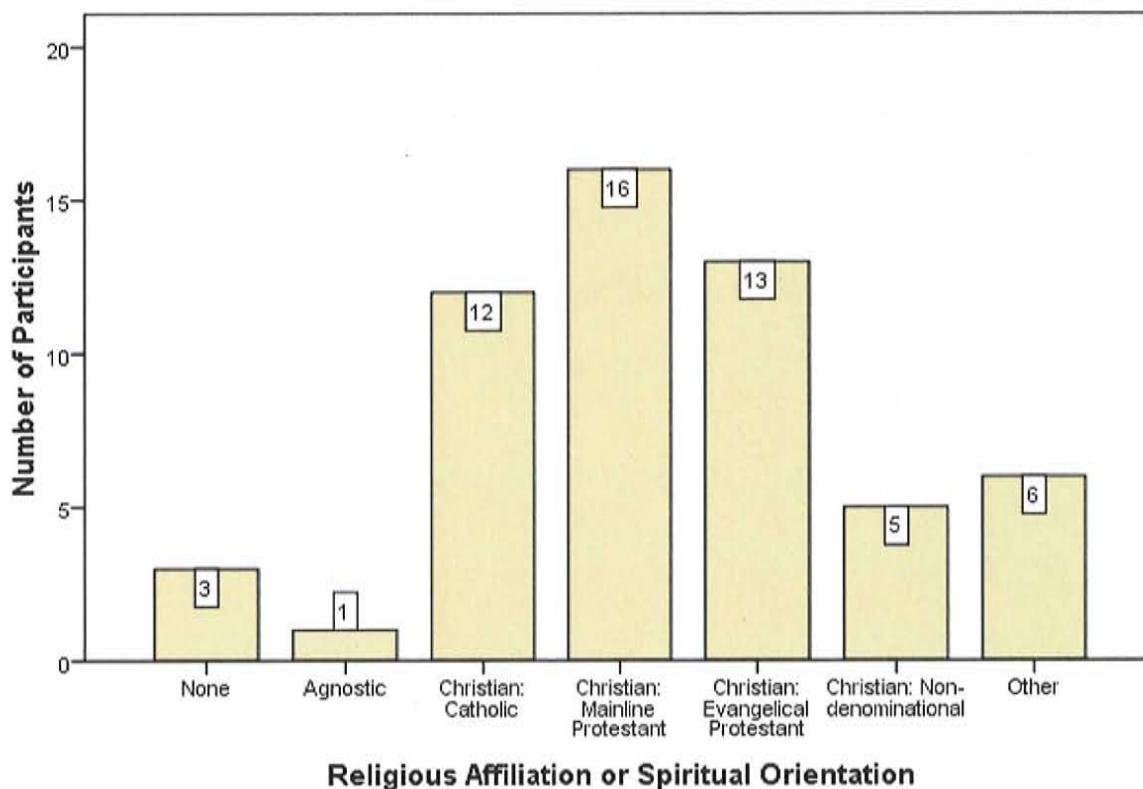


Figure 1. Frequency of current religious affiliation or spiritual orientation.

Figure 2 consists of the frequency that educators currently participate in religious services and personal religious practices. Of those that responded, 27 or 49.1% attend religious services daily

or once a week and 49 or 89.1% use some personal religious practice daily or once a week.

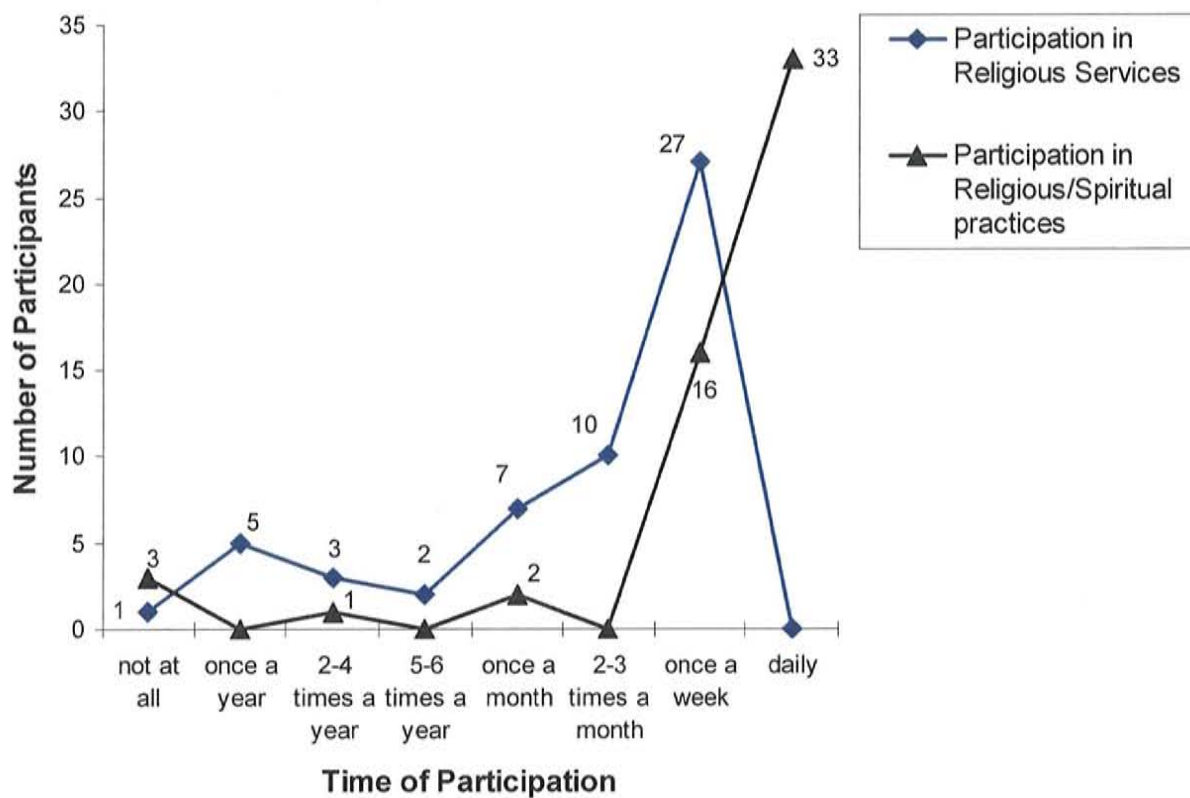


Figure 2. Frequency of current participation in religious services and personal religious practices.

Figure 3 indicates educator's relationship to organized religion or spiritual groups, with 49 or 89.1% of those who responded claiming some sort of identification with varying degrees of involvement.

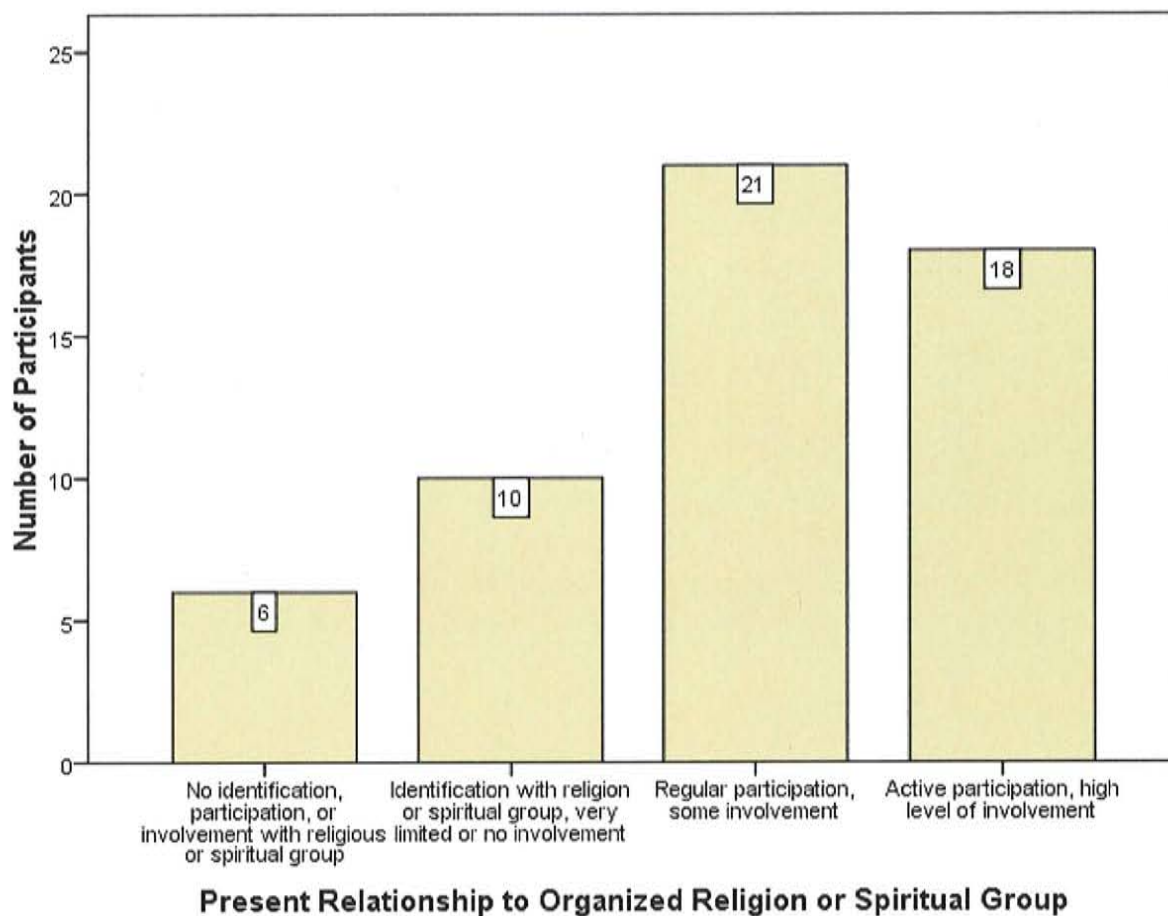


Figure 3. Frequency of current relationship to organized religion or spiritual groups.

#### *Research Question 1*

Research question #1 was: Do educators perceive their educational training as being sufficient in preparing them, both with knowledge and confidence, for issues involving spirituality and religion; legally and practically in the work place? This research question had ten corresponding survey questions that asked about educational training being: #s 27-36.

Survey Question (SQ) #27 read: “In your own professional educational training, content on religion and spirituality was presented.” Participants had four possible responses ranging from

“never” to “often”. Of those that reported ( $n = 58$ ) 37 or 63.8% reported that content was never or rarely presented in their professional educational training.

SQ #28: “Rate your satisfaction with the amount of content on religion and spirituality included in your own graduate education.” Question 28 used a five-point Likert scale with 1 being “low satisfaction” and 5 being “high satisfaction”. Of those that reported ( $n = 58$ ) exactly half the participants reported “neither low nor high satisfaction” with the amount of religious and spiritual content. The average rating of satisfaction was  $M = 3.14$ ,  $SD = .98$ .

SQ #29: “Did your professional educational training offer a separate course on religion and spirituality?” Participants had four possible responses ranging from “no” to “yes, it was required for all students”. Of those that reported ( $n = 57$ ) 33 or 57.9% had no separate course on religion and spirituality and 24 had a class with 12 as an elective and 12 as a requirement for some or all students.

Survey questions #30-36 used a five-point Likert-scale with 1 being “strongly disagree” and 5 being “strongly agree”.

SQ #30: “Religion and spirituality should be examined as general aspects of human culture and experience.” Of those that reported ( $n = 57$ ) 49 or 86% agreed or strongly agreed that examining religion and spirituality should be done. The average score was  $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = .71$ .

SQ #31: “Diverse religious behaviors and beliefs should be compared and contrasted.” Of those that reported ( $n = 57$ ) 43 or 75.5% agreed or strongly agreed that religious matters should be compared and contrasted. The average score was  $M = 3.88$ ,  $SD = .85$ .

SQ #32: “Content should avoid both a sectarian and anti-religious bias.” Of those that reported ( $n = 57$ ) 37 or 64.9% agreed or strongly agreed that training programs should avoid an

anti-religious bias. No participants reported strongly disagree. The average score was  $M = 3.68$ ,  $SD = .93$ .

SQ #33: "Dialogue should be explicit about value issues and should respect value differences." Of those that reported ( $n = 57$ ) 48 or 84.2% agreed or strongly agreed that value issues should be clearly expressed and value differences should be respected. The average score was  $M = 4.05$ ,  $SD = .79$ .

SQ #34: "Both the potential benefit and harm of religious beliefs and practices should be examined." Of those that reported ( $n = 57$ ) 38 or 66.7% agreed or strongly agreed that benefits and drawbacks of religious beliefs and practices should be examined. The average score was  $M = 3.67$ ,  $SD = .99$ .

SQ #35: "Content should emphasize the relevance of having a working knowledge about religion and spirituality for effective practice with students." Of those that reported ( $n = 57$ ) 40 or 70.2% agreed or strongly agreed they should have a working knowledge of religion and spirituality. The average score was  $M = 3.68$ ,  $SD = .89$ .

SQ #36: "Students should be encouraged to critically explore their own perspectives and biases about religion and spirituality." Of those that reported ( $n = 57$ ) 59.7% agreed or strongly agreed that students should critically explore personal biases about these issues. The average score was  $M = 3.56$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ .

In summary, the scores for the professional training section that asked if spiritual and religious topics/classes were available, 57.9% of those who reported said no classes were offered and 63.8% of those who reported said that religious and spiritual content was never or rarely present. Figure 4 is the summary of mean scores for professional training questions #30-36 that asked what may be included in a professional training program. All of the scores were based on a

five-point Likert scale with 1 being “strongly disagree” and 5 being “strongly agree” with the means for the scores above the middle point of 3 being the neutral score.

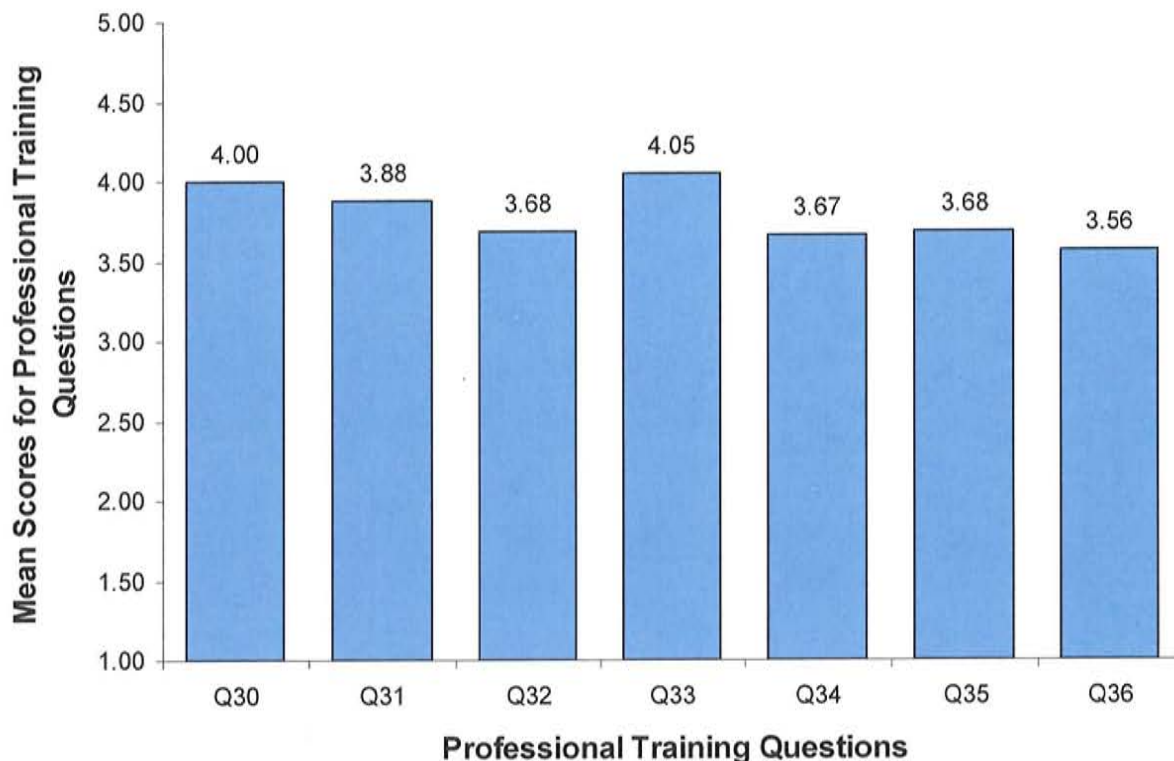


Figure 4. Summary of mean scores for professional training survey questions.

#### *Research Question 2*

Research question #2 was: Do public school educators perceive public schools as being an accepting place for students to explore their own personal spiritual and religious beliefs? This research question had seven corresponding survey questions that asked about educational training being: #s 6-9, 11, 16, and 18 that all used a five-point Likert scale with 1 being “strongly disagree” and 5 being “strongly agree”.

Survey question (SQ) #6 read: “Educational practice with a spiritual component has a better chance to empower students than practice without such a component.” Of those that

reported ( $n = 60$ ) 28 or 46.7% agreed or strongly agreed that a spiritual component has a better chance to empower students. The average score was  $M = 3.30$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ .

SQ #7: “Knowledge of students' religious or spiritual belief systems is important for effective educational practice.” Of those that reported ( $n = 61$ ) 36 or 59.0% agreed or strongly agreed knowledge of students' religious and spiritual beliefs is important. The average score was  $M = 3.39$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ .

SQ #8: “Educators should be able to assess the positive or beneficial role of religious or spiritual beliefs and practices in students' lives.” Of those that reported ( $n = 61$ ) 24 or 39.3% disagreed or strongly disagreed that educators should assess the positive role of religious or spiritual beliefs on students. The average score was  $M = 2.87$ ,  $SD = .94$ .

SQ #9: “Educators should be able to assess the negative or harmful role of religious or spiritual beliefs and practices in students' lives.” Of those that reported ( $n = 61$ ) 18 disagreed, 20 were neutral, and 20 agreed that educators should assess the negative role of religious or spiritual beliefs on students. The average score was  $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = .91$ .

SQ #11: “The religious backgrounds of students do not particularly influence the course or outcome of the educational practice.” The average score was  $M = 2.90$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ , with very few neutral responses ( $n = 9$ ). Of those that reported ( $n = 61$ ) 29 disagreed or strongly disagreed and 23 agreed or strongly agreed that a student's religious background do not influence outcomes.

SQ #16: “Addressing a student's religious or spiritual beliefs is necessary for holistic educational practice.” Of those that reported ( $n = 61$ ) the majority 80.3% were neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree. The average score was  $M = 2.64$ ,  $SD = .91$ .

SQ #18: “Religious and spiritual beliefs and practices are part of multi-cultural diversity. As such, educators should have knowledge and skills in this area in order to work effectively with diverse student groups.” Of those that reported ( $n = 58$ ) 54 or 93.1% agreed or strongly agreed that religious/spiritual beliefs and practices are part of multi-cultural diversity. The average score was  $M = 4.10$ ,  $SD = .55$ .

In summary, those questions that asked about assessment of student’s beliefs or the effect of student’s beliefs on educational practice had means that were around the neutral point, with one exception, SQ #11, where the participants had strong opinions in both directions. However, those questions that focused on teachers attaining some sort of knowledge about the student’s beliefs and practices or in general had a mean around the agree point, which was the fourth point on a 5-point Likert scale.

### *Research Question 3*

Research question #3 was: Do public school educators feel that an accepting climate is present for the expression of spiritual and religious beliefs? This research question had nine corresponding survey questions that asked about educational training being: #s 1-5, 17, 19, 22, and 24. Survey questions used a five-point Likert scale with 1 being “strongly disagree” and 5 being “strongly agree” except #s 22 and 24 which were yes or no questions.

Survey question (SQ) #1 read: “Spirituality is a fundamental aspect of being human.” Of those that reported ( $n = 61$ ) 58 or 95.1% agreed or strongly agreed that spirituality is fundamental to being human. The average score was  $M = 4.46$ ,  $SD = .65$ .

SQ #2: “Educators should become more sophisticated than they are now in spiritual matters.” Of those that reported ( $n = 60$ ) 27 or 45% were neutral about becoming more

sophisticated in spiritual matters and 23 or 38.3% agreed or strongly agreed. The average score was  $M = 3.30$ ,  $SD = .91$ .

SQ #3: “It is important for educators to have knowledge about different religious faiths and traditions.” Of those that reported ( $n = 61$ ) 55 or 90.2% agreed or strongly agreed to the importance of knowing about other religious faiths and traditions. The average score was  $M = 4.18$ ,  $SD = .65$ .

SQ #4: “Religious concerns are outside of the scope of educational practice.” Of those that reported ( $n = 61$ ) 32 or 52.5% disagreed or strongly disagreed that religious concerns were outside of the scope of practice. However, 19 or 31.1% agreed or strongly agreed that such concerns were outside of the scope. The average score was  $M = 2.82$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ , with only nine neutral responses.

SQ #5: “Spiritual concerns are outside of the scope of educational practice.” Of those that reported ( $n = 60$ ) 45 or 73.8% disagreed or strongly disagreed that spiritual concerns were outside the scope of educational practice. The average score was  $M = 2.35$ ,  $SD = .99$ , with only four neutral responses. A pair-sample t-test was computed to determine if there was a significant difference between SQ #4 and SQ #5. There was found to be a statistically significant difference  $t(58) = 3.56$ ,  $p = .001$ . Participants disagreed stronger with the notion that spiritual concerns are outside the scope of educational practice than when asked about religious concerns.

SQ #17: “Public school education should include content on religious and spiritual diversity.” Of those that reported ( $n = 61$ ) 35 or 57.4% agreed or strongly agreed with the inclusion of content on religion and spirituality. The average score was  $M = 3.34$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ .

SQ #19: “There is another dimension of human existence beyond the bio-psycho-social framework currently used to understand human behavior. Public school education should expand

this framework to include the spiritual dimension.” Of those that reported ( $n = 58$ ) 24 or 41.4% agreed or strongly agreed and 21 or 36.2% disagreed or strongly disagreed that public schools should expand to include a spiritual dimension. The average score was  $M = 3.05$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ .

The next two questions are follow-up questions to SQ #21: “Assume that there is a proposal for offering a class on religion and spirituality within your program at the school where you are employed and you have been asked to vote on whether to offer such a course.” SQ #22: “A conflict with mission of education?” Of those that reported ( $n = 58$ ) 39 or 67.2% said no it would not conflict and 19 or 32.8% said yes it would conflict with the mission of education.

SQ #24: “A conflict with your (respondent's) beliefs?” Of those that reported ( $n = 57$ ) 42 or 73.7% said such a class would not conflict with their beliefs and 15 or 26.3% said that it would.

In summary, participants reported that the inclusion of spiritual and religious aspects in the public schools was seen as an agreeable idea. Participants felt that spirituality, as evidenced by SQ #1 and 5, had some place in their lives and their school, though they felt less strongly about religion in their school. When the question to include spiritual and religious aspects was worded as an existential issue there was a pretty even split between those that agreed and disagreed. However, when phrased as a diversity issue there was more who agreed with inclusion 57.5% as compared to the existential issue 41.4%.

#### *Research Question 4*

Here is research question #4: Do public school educators believe that it is possible for staff and students, to discuss spiritual and religious matters in schools without violating any legal or ethical laws? This research question had nine corresponding survey questions that asked about educational training being: #s 10, 12-15, 20, 21, 23, and 25. Survey questions used a five-point

Likert scale with 1 being “strongly disagree” and 5 being “strongly agree” except #21 with four other options and #s 23, and 25 which were yes or no questions.

Survey question (SQ) #10 reads: “The use of religious language, metaphors and concepts in educational practice is inappropriate.” Of those that reported ( $n = 61$ ) 26 or 42.6% disagreed or strongly disagreed and 22 or 36.1% agreed or strongly agreed that using religious language was inappropriate. The average score was  $M = 2.95$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ .

SQ #12: “An educator’s use of scripture or other religious texts in practice is appropriate.” Of those that reported ( $n = 61$ ) 34 or 55.7% disagreed or strongly disagreed that it was appropriate to use religious texts in practice; while 16 or 26.2% agreed or strongly agreed. The average score was  $M = 2.62$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ .

SQ #13: “It is against educational ethics to ever pray with a student.” Of those that reported ( $n = 61$ ) 31 or 50.8% agreed or strongly agreed that it was not appropriate to pray with a student; while 18 or 29.5% disagreed or strongly disagreed. The average score was  $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ .

SQ #14: “The use of spiritual language, metaphors and concepts in educational language is inappropriate.” Of those that reported ( $n = 61$ ) 27 or 44.3% disagreed or strongly disagreed that it was appropriate to use spiritual language in educational practice; while 19 or 31.1% agreed or strongly agreed.. The average score was  $M = 2.90$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ .

SQ #15: “It is sometimes appropriate for an educator to share his or her own religious or spiritual beliefs with a student.” Of those that reported ( $n = 61$ ) 38 or 62.3% agreed or strongly agreed that it was sometimes appropriate to share his/her own beliefs with student; while 11 or 18% disagreed or strongly disagreed. The average score was  $M = 3.46$ ,  $SD = .98$ .

SQ #20: “Public school education should include content on how to effectively deal with religious or spiritual issues in practice.” Of those that reported ( $n = 58$ ) 20 or 34.5% disagreed or strongly disagreed that content should be included; while 22 or 37.9% agreed or strongly agreed. The average score was  $M = 3.02$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ .

SQ #21: “Assume that there is a proposal for offering a class on religion and spirituality within your program at the school where you are employed and you have been asked to vote on whether to offer such a course. How would you vote?” Of those that reported ( $n = 57$ ) 41 or 71.9% were for such a proposal (38 as an elective course and 3 as a required course) and 16 or 28.1% were against the proposal.

Questions 23 and 25 were follow-up questions to SQ #21.

SQ #23: “A conflict with public school ethics?” Of those that reported ( $n = 58$ ) 36 or 62.1% said such a class would conflict with public school ethics and 22 or 37.9% said that it would not.

SQ #25: “A conflict with the principle of church and state?” Of those that reported ( $n = 58$ ) 34 or 58.6% said such a class would conflict with principle of church and state and 24 or 41.4% said that it would not.

In summary, research question #4 asks questions about legal and ethical issues. Participants were supportive of including a class on religion and spirituality with almost four out of five for this proposal. Sixty-two percent did feel that such a course would violate school ethics and a smaller 58.6% felt it would violate separation of church and state. Over half of the participants felt that it was inappropriate to use religious texts in practice and pray with a student. However, 62.3% felt that it was okay to sometimes share his/her personal religious or spiritual beliefs with students.

### *Qualitative Results*

Two questions on the survey gave participants a chance to write in comments or suggestions. The first, SQ #26, asked if there were any other conflicts with a spiritual or religious class proposed in SQ #21 and the second, SQ #48, gave participants a chance to comment in general about anything concerning the study. Below are the summarized results.

Those that responded to SQ #26 had four basic themes: the implementation of a proposed course, content of proposed course, and conflicts to a proposed course. Those that discussed implementation for a course talked about way material is presented. Some suggested that material be presented through clinical observer standpoint, while others felt teaching through everyday actions was sufficient. Additionally, one participant stated that any approach should be value neutral and another reported that the teacher should not attempt to persuade students of his/her beliefs.

In regards to content of a proposed course and a major theme of teaching *about* religious and spiritual topic is essential. Content should be about all religions and offer a variety for students to explore. At the same time there was a strong theme that many did not want educators to instruct or advocate for one religion over another. However, one participant went as far to say that there was not enough time to adequately understand each religion so as to teach it in an accurate way. Finally, participants mentioned a proposed course could come to some opposition from the community or parents of students. One participant even stated that they had already fought and lost a “case of religion in the school”. No participants made any possible recommendations for dealing with opposition.

In all there were 18 participants that had general comments and suggestions for the research study. Below is a summary list of those comments categorized by a common subject word.

- Diversity: many participants paired this term with religion to discuss students' rights to participate in some way; whether through actual practice, belief, or gaining information
- About and Understanding: many participants commented on learning about religions to gain some form of understanding to benefit teachers, students, and educational practices
- Force: some participants felt that to force students to confront religious views was inappropriate. Instead they focused on critical thinking skills, courses as electives, and unbiased views if such courses would be taught
- Ignorance: some participants claimed the importance of not being ignorant of other religions

## Chapter V: Discussion

The data for this study was logically broken down into six parts: professional training, student exploration of personal beliefs, accepting climate of spiritual and religious beliefs, legal and ethical issues, demographics, and qualitative responses. Each section will be discussed here due to the difficulty of making broad statements for all the data.

### *Professional Training*

With the first research question being: Do educators perceive their educational training as being sufficient in preparing them, both with knowledge and confidence, for issues involving spirituality and religion; legally and practically in the work place. It was found that over half the of participants who responded did not have the opportunity to take a class that focused on religious and spiritual issues. It would be clear then that these educators did not feel their training was sufficient in terms of receiving or exploring religious and spiritual knowledge. Participants overall had agreeable responses for the inclusion of various spiritual and religious explorations in a professional training program for educators. The data supports that participants agreed religious and spiritual topics should be studied by educators in their professional training programs, but they also reported there was not an opportunity to do so in their programs. Professional educational training programs may need to look further at this area to see if they are addressing this problem adequately and effectively.

### *Student Exploration*

The second research question was: Do public school educators perceive public schools as being an accepting place for students to explore their own personal spiritual and religious beliefs. These participants made a distinction between learning about a student's beliefs and the expression of a student's beliefs. The data supports that participants were very accepting when it

came to attaining knowledge about a particular belief. However, when participants were asked about addressing students' beliefs, religious background of student, and assessment of positive and negative effects of religious and spiritual effects on students' lives, the results were difficult to put in one category. Some participants were in agreement that addressing these issues was important, others were against it, and with some neutral on the topic all together. The data indicates that there is something different about attaining knowledge of students' religious beliefs and the role of students expressing those beliefs in the public school setting.

### *Accepting Climate*

The third research question was: Do public school educators feel that an accepting climate is present for the expression of spiritual and religious beliefs. This question looked beyond just the students' expression to general expression of spiritual and religious beliefs. The data supports that participants felt spirituality and religion had a role in public schools. They were more supportive of spirituality and religion as a diversity topic than one that pursues the meaning of life. As well they were more supportive of spirituality than of religion being acceptable in public schools. This might be due to the many different and inclusive definitions of spirituality.

### *Legal and Ethical*

The final research question was: Do public school educators believe that it is possible for staff and students, to discuss spiritual and religious matters in schools without violating any legal or ethical laws. Participants had strong opinions about the topics questioned. They were in agreement that using religious texts and prayer with students is not appropriate. However, the opposing opinion was larger than expected, which was surprising especially in the case of prayer with students.

There seems to be a strong legal and ethical guide that participants follow, but do not always agree with. For instance, the majority of participants were in favor of a class on religion and spirituality, but felt that such a class violated the principle of separation of church and state and public school ethics. This might be due to the fact that participants would like to include religion and spirituality, but feel it would not be welcome. However, as we have seen from the literature if this class were taught *about* religion and spirituality, it would not be establishing one religion (Greenawalt, 2005). Interestingly, the presence of a class on religion and spirituality did not go against the majority of respondent's personal beliefs and the majority did not see a conflict with the mission of public school education.

Finally, many of the participants felt it was okay to share their beliefs with students, which follows along with the literature recommendation that when age appropriate and asked first it would be okay to share (Haynes, 2001). It seems that participants understand the difference between proselytizing and responding to questions.

### *Demographics*

The population for this study was overwhelmingly religious and spiritual in nature. Participants were mostly Christian, who not only went to church, but practiced some form of personal religious or spiritual belief, whether prayer, reading of holy texts, or mediation. This may have played a strong role in the positive responses toward the study and inclusion of religious and spiritual topics in professional training and public school practice.

### *Limitations*

Being an exploratory study, there is a lot of data for this study. There are a lot of interesting interactions present, but due to the general nature of survey questions, it is not possible to make concrete predictions. Statistically significant differences were not able to be

diversity among the participants will make it difficult to make statements that are generalizable to other populations.

### *Conclusions*

Educators are supportive of the idea that religion and spirituality should be studied and knowledge about religion and spirituality should be attained. As the literature and U.S. Supreme Court cases such as *Abington Township v Schempp* (1963) state, teaching *about* religion is perfectly acceptable (Greenawalt, 2005). But there was more resistance and hesitation or confusion when it came to students expressing their beliefs. Educators have some understanding of legal and ethical laws, but there is not a resounding agreement with them. With many not having any access to religious and spiritual training, there is an opinion that religion and spirituality are important, but implementing them in public school practice is not as clear.

### *Recommendations*

Further studies should expand on the results of this study in the areas where there were sharp contrasting opinions, such as the area of student's exploration of religious and spiritual beliefs and questions about legal and ethical issues according to current laws. Further studies should look to expand to more diverse populations and larger geographic regions to compare to the results of this study. Future studies might look at expanding the questions and educator knowledge of legal and ethical issues in educator's professional training programs and their current place of employment. Finally, future studies might look to take some of the demographic information, such as educational training program, age, years as an educator, or gender to see if there are significant interactions.

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