

The Unscripted

Series

Topic:
Religion

About

There are scripts running all the time in the classroom that tell us how to act, what to say, what's right and what isn't. In education these scripts are often referred to as the curriculum. The curriculum represents the formal resources that have been explicitly chosen to help students learn (E.g. Official textbooks or lesson plans). But a lesser known curriculum is also simultaneously operating in the background. This quiet script has been dubbed the "hidden curriculum" by several educators to describe the unintentional side effects of what we've chosen to teach. In the sections below, we hope to help you consider what has been excluded from the scripts that teach students how to live. We know that you can only cover so much material in the limited amount of time you have with your students. The good news is that you don't need to tackle everything in order to become a little more conscious of how the educational system impacts your own teaching practices. If we can help you do that - we will have achieved a major goal toward unpacking the power of scripts not only for your students but for you too!

What?

In the sections below we want to help educators reflect on the idea of "faith" as a process of meaning making, "belief" as a particular way of making sense of things and "religion" as an organizing cultural system for both faith and belief. Depending on your own cultural background and teaching context you may be wary of religion and/or religious language. We understand these concerns and hope to help you explore religion as a powerful cultural system that organizes some of the most deeply held beliefs, values and practices. Because religion creates, sustains and advances cultural ways of life it is important to effectively prepare students to respectfully engage different kinds faith traditions and explore what they think and feel about religion in developmentally appropriate ways. This is particularly important for teaching students in the United States who may come from marginalized religious communities. Having the skills and competencies to understand and articulate Christianity as a historically privileged religious tradition in the United States is an important first step toward unpacking how cultural beliefs, values and practices have been used to both emancipate people of color as well as to oppress and enslave them.

So What?

As a cultural construct, it should come as no surprise that religion is not immune from bias, bigotry and prejudice. The Founding Fathers of the United States understood the dangers of linking government and religious systems and sought to separate them in the constitution for the life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness of citizens. The founding of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania serves as a case in point for those fleeing oppressive religious and government forces. William Penn fled persecution in England for being a Quaker and came to America in 1682. He established Pennsylvania as a place where people could enjoy freedom of religion. Yet, Penn owned slaves. In Philadelphia (the city of brotherly love) the paradox of race and religion can also be seen in a historic racial schism in 1794 at St. George's church which led to the founding of the Mother Bethel congregation. When officials at St. George's church pulled blacks off their knees while praying, Richard Allen, a self-educated former Delaware slave, organized and led a small group of black congregants out of St. George's church. Due to persisting interference by white Methodists, Allen sued in the Pennsylvania courts in 1807 and 1815 and won the right of his new congregation to exist as an independent institution. Sensitive to the plight of other black Methodists in surrounding communities who were also encountering racism, Allen held a convening in Philadelphia in 1816 and the first African Methodist Episcopal (AME) denomination was formed. Today, global membership of the AME denomination is estimated to be around 2.5 million - one of the largest Methodist denominations in the world. Presently, the role of religion in American society has changed dramatically from the early 1800's due in no small part to globalization and immigration. The presence of mosques, temples, and other houses of worship serve as important cultural artifacts evidencing an increasingly diverse array of world religions practiced in the United States. Yet, it is important to remember that religious pluralism doesn't necessarily reduce racism and segregation - in fact it can create new challenges for how we make meaning of the world. It is important to recognize the privilege to avoid uncomfortable conversations about religion and race and reflect on how we might create safe spaces for more discussion about where these collide.

Now What?

Here are some additional resources to help you take action:

- Explore the Religious Pluralism Project at Harvard :<https://pluralism.org/dr-diana-eck>
- Survey your educational institution to determine if there are spaces that support religious students of color for educational success.
- Explore resources from the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC): <https://ifyc.org/>
- For discussion...ask religious students of color if they have culturally representative mentors and role models?
- Read "Mentoring big questions and worthy dreams for young adults": <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/104515950301400105>
- Consider this activity on cultural relativism and ethnocentricity https://aace-english.com/free-lessons/world-religions/ADV_Ethnocentrism_or_Cultural_Relativism.pdf
- Consider "My Multicultural Self" exercise <https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/tolerance-lessons/my-multicultural-self>
- Explore this racial justice tool for leaders from the United Methodist Women: <https://www.unitedmethodistwomen.org/download-resources/racial-justice-tools-for-leaders.pdf>
- Collection of resources from The Institute of Faith and Learning at Baylor University: <https://www.baylor.edu/ifl/index.php?id=937717>
- Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative: <http://www.muslimarc.org/about>
- Collection of Jewish resources from EVOLVE: <http://evolve.reconstructingjudaism.org/judaism-and-race>
- "Religious Diversity in the Classroom" from Teaching Tolerance: <https://www.tolerance.org/professional-development/religious-diversity-in-the-classroom>