The Integration of Religious Pluralism into Teacher Preparation

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Preparing future teachers for their roles in classrooms is growing ever more challenging. Concerns involving safety, salaries, and overall respect for the profession have created an emerging shortage in licensed teachers, one that has parents concerned and politicians paying attention. Despite the barriers to recruitment, the quest to train and support the most effective teacher workforce continues, buffered by opportunities to serve a diverse student population and to close ever-widening opportunity and achievement gaps. Racial, ethnic, and language diversity makes the United States a rich mosaic of cultures, but it can often be the religious differences of students and parents that raise very unique challenges in providing equity and acceptance for all. Part of what makes a 21st century educator effective is the ability to appreciate differences in culture, worldview, and ethnicity. As such, the exploration of religious pluralism and the integration of such into our education curriculum, instruction and dialogue has now become a major area of focus at a school of Education in the southeast United States. Preparing future teachers for the difference in religious views that may be experienced in their own classroom is now part of how we approach teacher preparation. By integrating religion-centered role play and simulations into our teaching, this research focused on providing teacher candidates with valuable tools through which to be prepared for diverse classrooms. As part of our study and efforts, student surveys and data were collected to analyze the impact and the work moving forward.

1. Introduction

"Few would deny that religious diversity is an obvious fact. There are, and have been throughout history, numerous religions, and so too are there many people who do not follow any religion. This situation generates a multiplicity of worldviews and forms of life, at least many of which appear to be in tension with one another" (Burley, 2018, p. 1).

Thus is the term "religious pluralism" defined, although this term has now morphed enough in its existence that others may see it a little more informally. Kirby states that "[r]eligious pluralism is the belief that people who embrace different and even conflicting religious views

can and should seek to live in harmony with one another while celebrating each other's religious distinctives" (2020, p. 1), while The Aspen Institute defines it a little differently:

> "Religious pluralism is the state of being where every individual in a religiously diverse society has the rights, freedoms, and safety to worship, or not, according to their conscience. This definition is founded in the American motto *e pluribus unum*, that we, as a nation, are gathered together as one out of many. So, our thinking about pluralism focuses on the American reality of religious diversity and the rights and freedoms guaranteed to us in our Constitution. First, religious diversity in America is increasing, and with ongoing demographic shifts, will continue to do so. But religious diversity on its own is not religious pluralism; that requires a bit more: (Aspen Institute, 2019, p.1)

Indeed, as vast as the historical context within which the world has viewed religion differently, so too has the outlook on what religious pluralism means and how it impacts people from all backgrounds and beliefs evolved. One of the most well-known of religious pluralism scholars is John Hick, who highlighted through his work the significance of varying experiences as they relate to religious traditions (Rowe, 1999). Within the United States, however, a country that is not yet three hundred years old, this explosion of varying viewpoints has been realized quite rapidly. "Increasingly, our culture and society see religious pluralism as a healthy quality of the diverse world we live in" (Amr, 2007, p. 2), which is a welcome shift and one that should translate to all corners of any community.

With a focus on this positive perception of religious pluralism, the conceptual framework used to guide this study is one grounded in work from half a century ago. Sydney Ahlstrom, recognized as a pioneer in this work, focused his exploration on this growing religious diversity as he lived through a time of great change in America, publishing his groundbreaking work after the turbulent period of the 1960s and in reaction to what he described as a "current upsurge of interest in religion" (1960, p. 20). As a Yale University professor with a specialty in religious history, Ahlstrom recognized the need to explore religious pluralism beyond the surface level (Ahlstrom, 1972; Ahlstrom, 1988). Hutchison, in referencing Ahlstrom's work, noted that "pluralism—the acceptance and valuing of diversity—is something which Americans have honored in rhetoric only and, when the chips were down, evaded or denied in its logical applications" (1974, p. 315).

Ahlstrom's aim was to delve beyond religious narrowness, and to consider religious history and diversity against and within a broad spectrum of disciplines. The conceptual framework inherent in Ahlstrom's work, therefore, is built upon two foundational principles: the importance of religious history to understanding the American experience, and the long-holding influence of Protestantism on American culture (Ahlstrom, 1972; Williams, 2007). As stated by Ahlstrom when discussing this second tenet, labeled as "Social Gospel", a "major element in America's moral and religious heritage was Puritanism, with its powerfully rooted convictions that the shaping and, if need be, the remaking of society was the Church's concern" (1972, p. 787).

In 1988, a decade after his original work, Ahlstrom reflected once again on this important topic, publishing "The Problem of the History of Religion in America," using this opportunity to openly question whether his work would still be applicable beyond his own lifetime. The conclusion was that it would be, primarily because of one quality that Ahlstrom noted in regard to America when contrasting the American experience to all others . . . "its sheer multifariousness" which presents a "very complex picture" (Ahlstrom, 1988, p. 127). Ahlstrom would also acknowledge at that time that religious pluralism is an ever-changing phenomenon, with constantly evolving potential as to how it affects American culture. Ahlstrom noted that "maturation of a global civilization is already giving new impetus" to his own work (1988, p.

137), and the fluid nature of this topic is still at work today. While Ahlstrom's framework was conceived to address the American landscape in his own time, this work may also provide the context to consider contemporary events, and may also be highly applicable in present day—perhaps, even more so.

Thus, it is on both of these conceptual principles from Ahlstrom—recognizing the influence of religious history on our culture, and seeking out a respect and understanding of diverse religious views—that this study is grounded and explored. As American public schools have traditionally honored certain long-held societal norms that must now be considered against the backdrop of more diverse communities and classrooms, and, from the first principle, as the American education system seeks to contribute to the success of all students in contributing to a peaceful and productive society, this study is of a crucial and critical nature. Applying this framework, one that was constructed with a vision of understanding both American religious history and the relationship between religion and other aspects of culture, this framework of religious pluralism is, in this study, expanded to the K-12 classroom environment. This study and approach are also still evolving, and the implications for educators are far from being wholly standardized. As Patel describes: "While the existence of interfaith or interreligious studies is increasingly hard to ignore, its meaning and import is still being debated" (Patel et al., 2018, p. xvii).

First year teachers have enough challenges to try to navigate while finding their way in a new profession, including instructional expectations, curriculum unpacking, and working in partnership with colleagues, students, and their parents. Add another element into the mix, however, and the job of a first-year teacher becomes potentially perilous, as cultural differences of students, including religious differences, may present new teachers with "headline-producing" conflicts. As shared through the NEA, one of the largest teachers' unions in the U.S., "The U.S. Supreme Court protects students' individual rights to pray, wear religious symbols, and express their religious beliefs at school, yet prohibits such practices if they are perceived as disruptive, discriminatory, or coercive to peers who don't share the same beliefs" (Posqick-Goodwin, 2018, p. 2). Who is to say what is disruptive or discriminatory? The logical answer might be "the classroom teacher", but are new teachers equipped to face unexpected situations that may arise concerning religious diversity in the classroom?

Preparing future teachers for this very reality is often not part of the formal teacher preparation curriculum, despite the growing diversity of schools. "A wide body of research tells us that many K-12 teachers are apprehensive about addressing or acknowledging religion in the classroom. Some fear that acknowledging the religious identities of students paves the way for conflicts with parents who may have strong views, either for or against addressing religion in the classroom. Research suggests that many teachers feel ill-equipped to deal with religious issues because they themselves lack religious literacy" (Reid et al., 2019, p. 1). This literacy, argues Marcus (2016), is a "core civic competency", and, therefore, a valid competency for future teachers to possess. (p. 1).

The research gap in this field is significant. Whereas there is no shortage of studies conducted on religious pluralism and diversity, the vast majority of these are from outside of the U.S., such as Nielsen's "Accommodating Religious Pluralism in Denmark" (2014) or Alam's "Islam and Religious Pluralism in India" (2013) or Flannery's "Pluralism, Religious Education and Diversity in Irish Schools" (2014). For specific work, however, on how to best prepare U.S. teachers for religiously diverse classrooms, there is scant work to reference. While Jelen's 2007 work on "The Constitutional Basis of Religious Pluralism in the United States: Causes and Consequences" is grounded in the topic, it is, in contrast, much more focused on religious ideas within the public discourse, and not on the school setting itself. Roof's work on

"Denominational America and the New Religious Pluralism" is somewhat related, but, from the year 1985, not current to today's American school landscape.

Perhaps one of the closest current works in this area is Conway's 2024 "Exploring Religious Pluralism in the Classroom: How to Use Religious Education in Schools to Combat Extremism." This study is not based in the U.S. (Great Britain), and it does not touch on the preparation of teachers in entering into religiously diverse classrooms, but it does reference the exploration of addressing religious diversity in the K-12 classroom. "Combatting religiously motivated violent extremism through what is taught in schools", Conway writes, "would stand a much better chance of success if it could draw on the religions of the young people" (p. 1). The author in this particular case provides suggestions of a content nature, such as the proposal to add a play titled "Nathan the Wise" to the religious education curriculum.

Similarly, 2014 research conducted in Canada focused on religious diversity, but not in the K-12 arena. Warner-Soderlholm and Kriger, instead, focused their work in higher education, beginning first with a discussion of the five major religions, and then proceeding into the important task of preparing future higher education instructors and professors for culturally diverse learning environments, with the ultimate goal to "understand the underlying and often unspoken religious dimensions of cultural diversity and how these can affect the way we interact in both work and learning environments" (Warner-Soderlholm & Kriger, 2014, p. 1). With K-12 learning environments vastly different from those at the university level, it is difficult to generalize this work to a different country as well as a different educational level.

The lack of current, relevant studies in this important area of K-12 teacher preparation in the U.S. as it relates to religious pluralism in the classroom is significant. This study seeks to fill the gap in this research by exploring ways in which teachers may be better prepared as schools and communities become more diverse and as classrooms increasingly include students from many cultural backgrounds.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Multicultural Education

The term "multicultural education", an idea that overlaps and intersects with a recognition and appreciation for religious diversity, is now readily recognized within the education sphere. As stated by Banks and Banks in the 2003 work on this topic: "Multicultural education is an idea stating that all students, regardless of the groups to which they belong, such as those related to gender, ethnicity, race, culture, language, social class, religion, or exceptionality, should experience educational equality in the schools" (Banks & Banks, 2003, p. 25). The articulation of such an "idea" is a classroom free of bias, and one that feels welcoming and safe to children from all cultural backgrounds, including from differing religious experiences. This awareness and purposeful experience should permeate every corner of the schoolhouse, including calendar decisions, event planning, and celebrations.

Multicultural education includes attention to five dimensions which educators may reference as they assess their own implementation of multicultural education: content integration, the knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, an equity pedagogy, and an empowering school culture and social structure. In addition, one must honestly assess the many areas along the education spectrum in which religious diversity may potentially impact or be impacted. These could include resources, such as textbooks, curricular matter, school behavioral rules, including dress codes, instructional methods, and classroom values (Banks & Banks, 2003). While the strategies discussed in the programmatic changes that are featured in this article align

more directly with prejudice reduction and empowering school culture, they also touch upon all elements of multicultural education (Banks, 1995; Banks & Banks, 2003).

2.2. Understanding Against the Backdrop of Faith

"The Christian share of the U.S. population is declining, while the number of U.S. adults who do not identify with any organized religion is growing." Thus was one conclusion reached through surveys conducted as recently as 2015 by the Pew Research Center (2015b, 2015c, p. 1). These studies also found that trends are impacting people of all demographic groups, although the drop in Christianity is focused more predominantly on younger adults. These changes are occurring in Latinos, blacks and whites; college students and those without a college education; and men as well as women.

While the United States remains home to more Christians than any other country in the world (70.6% of the U.S. population identified as Christian in the 2015 studies), there can be no denying that the population aligned with Christian denominations of religion and worship is shrinking (Pew Research Center, 2015a). At the time of the Pew research, those identifying as "non-Christian" in religious practice (including Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and other religious practices) had grown to 5.9%, and those identifying with "unaffiliated" (such as atheist and agnostic) had grown to 22.8% (Pew Research Center, 2015c). Likewise, there can be little doubt that the changing landscape of religion in America has translated into many shifts in terms of multicultural approaches to education. At the end of the 20th century, this phenomenon could be described in the following way: "The century which began in the United States as a much-heralded 'Christian Century' appears at its conclusion to have been the 'Century of Religious Pluralism'" (Lindner, 1999, p. 9). Community, social, or other norms which may have, in past decades, favored a more Christian-focused approach may now be considered in terms of a variety of religious practices. How this affects the most mundane of community traditions that include external stakeholders, such as school calendars and school events, is still unfolding.

The path to religious diversity in the classroom is not necessarily an easy one. In preparing teachers for the diverse needs of their future classrooms, to what extent might pre-service educators feel an abandonment toward their own religious beliefs or values? Chaturvedi raised this important question in a related way in analyzing the nature of religious pluralism: "Its acceptance raises serious questions about our understanding of the concept of truth, our conception of a religious worldview and the nature of believers' commitment" (2016, p. 43).

Ultimately, it may be more about the attempt to "evolve a constructive conception of religious tolerance and strengthen interfaith dialogue" (Chaturvedi, 2016, p. 44) than about anything else. Setting the stage for the dialogue and the recognition that religion and faith are intricate parts of one's cultural background, and thus, a vibrant part of life that travels with the student into the K-12 classroom, may be a strong beginning. As Patel described, interfaith approaches within the pre-service teacher preparation landscape would be more about learning and understanding. "As an academic field, interfaith studies would examine the multiple dimensions of how individuals and groups who orient around religion differently interact with one another, along with the implications of these interactions for communities, civil society, and global politics" (Patel, 2013, p 38).

2.3. Teacher Preparation for a Diverse Community

In considering religious pluralism and interfaith studies in terms of the preparation of future professionals, it is helpful to consider the varying points related to these studies. McCarthy

(2018) identified several emphases across various disciplines while comparing works in this field, and concluded that interfaith approaches could include scholarly method, understanding, with purpose, diversity, and fostering empathy and appreciation of other religions. Another of McCarthy's conclusions would apply to this study and project in particular; that of professional preparation.

Awareness is crucial as new teachers may lead classrooms in which students come from a variety of cultural and social backgrounds, including variance in race, ethnicity, language, and religion. When it comes to the latter, "[t]he project of strengthening the social fabric by reducing ignorance and promoting engagement across lines of difference is vital" (McCarthy, 2018, p.5). Banks and Banks suggest that to prepare educators to avoid negative situations regarding religious diversity, "every educator must first become better informed about religion in general, and especially about its influence on human beings now and throughout history" (p. 117).

Decisions made by teachers regarding how to teach controversial topics are paramount; these must be deliberately introduced to future teachers rather than expected outright. One example could be Banks and Banks' outline of the teaching of evolution. As described by these multicultural educational researchers:

> "How a teacher handles the teaching of evolution is crucial. Two possible exam questions illustrate how easy it is to avoid a direct confrontation with these children and their parents, and at the same time continue to teach the prescribed curriculum: Poor: It took millions of years for the earth to evolve to its present state. (True/False). Better: Evolutionists believe that it took millions of years for the earth to evolve to its present state. (True/False). The first question requires the student to agree with a statement of "fact." The second question allows the student to answer that one group of people has a different set of beliefs than the child has, while at the same time protecting his or her own integrity. The difference is subtle, but powerful. The second question respects diversity of beliefs while teaching scientific information—that is, information about evolutionary theory. No child is forced to go against personal or family beliefs" (p. 117-118).

As shared by the Aspen Institute, the goal for all, including educators, should be that "[d]iverse religious communities themselves thrive, meaning leadership is good, community institutions are sustainable, community ties remain strong, and congregants know the basic theological content of their own traditions" (Aspen Institute, 2019, p. 1).

3. Materials and Methods

After a competitive application process in August of 2019, the School of Education at a southeast United States private university was chosen to participate in a yearlong interfaith cohort, and to spend the 2019-2020 academic year exploring pedagogical questions around religious pluralism in the classroom. Consideration was given to how the learning and study going forward may impact course preparation and the cultivation of knowledge and skills in the education suite of courses, particularly in terms of how to lead our students in effectively navigating religious differences for the common good.

The goal of this work was to strengthen the preparation of our future classroom teachers and equip them with the outlook and the tools to engage in meaningful ways across religious and worldview differences. "Teacher preparation programs are largely responsible for teacher training and are therefore in a key position to lead the profession to ensure teachers are equipped with the best, most relevant and effective theory, practices, and strategies" (Ceglie et

al., 2023, p. 1), thus, as an institution we strive to lead towards the strengthening of the next generation of K-12 educators and leaders. Producing teachers who are ready and excited for a diverse classroom, full of differing worldviews, perspectives, and beliefs, is an integrated part of how we approach the future teaching workforce and our place in it.

As part of this exciting work, there was much learning from the international experts in this emerging field. Several significant sources for this work included Interreligious/Interfaith Studies (Patel, Peace & Silverman, 2018), Eboo Patel's "Toward a Field of Interfaith Studies" and Jones and Meyer's "Pedagogies of Interfaith and Interreligious Studies Classrooms: A Working Paper." As the learning and research continued, a transformation of curriculum and pedagogy was taking place, one which recognized the significance of future educators who are prepared and eager for diversity in their classrooms. This work was eventually focused on two particular courses:

- EDU 355 Schooling in the Context of Poverty. Course Overview: Candidates investigate stereotypes and misconceptions regarding low-income students and families in the United States. Candidates learn and apply strategies to engage, motivate and effectively teach students who live in poverty. Candidates will learn and apply the SIOP model and strategies for teaching linguistically diverse students. Our focus will be to examine best practices and methods of teaching and understanding students living in poverty and English Language Learners. 4 hrs.
- EDU 465 Critical Issues in Education. Course Overview: This course discusses the origin, development, and current status of elementary and secondary school curriculum, instruction, organization and structure and evaluates the trends and issues likely to influence all of these in the schools. This course explores social, historical, political and philosophical issues that impact K-12 education nationally and internationally. Special emphasis is placed on diversity and equality issues, leadership, parental involvement, community service, religious pluralism, and ethical advocacy. 4 hrs.

Curricular and pedagogical changes were made within each of these courses in order to effectively blend teacher education content with preparation for diverse backgrounds and worldviews, specifically in terms of religious viewpoints. Using the work featured in "Meeting Others, Seeing Myself: Experiential Pedagogies in Interfaith Studies" (Hickey & Suarez, 2018) and "Learning from the Field: Six Themes from Interfaith/Interreligious Studies Curricula" (Vecchio & Silverman, 2018), both of which are featured in Interreligious/Interfaith Studies" (Patel, Peace & Silverman, 2018), it was determined that role playing opportunities were the most effective way to explore this issue both as college students as well as pre-service teachers.

Again, relying on the work of Banks and Banks (2003) and focusing on prejudice reduction and the empowerment of school culture, while also utilizing timeless work from Allport (1954) in "The Nature of Prejudice", we sought how to be of assistance to our pre-service teachers in the forming of future classrooms, spaces where there are positive attitudes between students of differing cultural backgrounds. From Allport's work, this inter-cultural contact is most effective when it includes: a) equal status; b) cooperation; c) support from those in authoritative roles, such as teachers; and d) interactions in which students are seen as individuals. In articulating this and transferring it to the world of the classroom teacher, this is best articulated in three ways: knowledge of religions; scenarios in which all cultural backgrounds have equal status, and an understanding that all students are individuals, made up from complexities that include but are not limited to their experiences (Allport, 1954).

A broad-to-focused approach was chosen, beginning with a study of the world's major religions in EDU 355. This study of the major religions included time to research, to discuss, and to explore. This new knowledge was then followed by a school community-based role play

activity, in which students, working in small groups, were presented with realistic scenarios in which one or more of these major religions, as an organized group, may become involved in the life of the school or school community. Playing out these scenarios enabled students to place themselves in the educator role and to determine what is appropriate, what is legal, and what is in the best interest of students.

The next phase of this religious pluralism emphasis was then rolled out in EDU 465, a course designed to explore the critical issues facing Education. Since students had previously explored religious diversity in the context of the broader school community, emphasis was now narrowed to religious pluralism in the classroom. Students were led through an exploration of legal implications surrounding religion and public schools, specifically the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment and landmark court cases centered on religious freedom and school functions. At this point, the course shifted into case scenario and role play mode. Eight scenarios were introduced and examined through a role play experience over the course of eight weeks (one role play per day). For these role-play experiences, one student played the role of the teacher, while the other students were given "roles" of various children sitting in the classroom, each of whom had differing religious backgrounds or beliefs, or no beliefs at all. These scenarios tackled such realistic occurrences as holiday parties in the classroom, prayer on the football field, or chants sung during a Choral concert. The teacher role was required to "listen to the voices and perspectives of the students in your classroom", as it applied to the scenario at hand. The education students were asked to journal their thoughts and reactions at the conclusion of each role play, with a culminating survey at the end of the eight weeks.

Each scenario was developed with two goals in mind: to prepare future teachers with realistic situations in which they might legitimately find themselves, and to make each scenario a unique and challenging one, rife with potential wrong moves. As noted in the examples, for each scenario, the student in the teacher role was reminded that, at times, saying or doing "nothing" is the right decision, whereas, in other situations, some type of statement, discussion, or action is required. Those in the student and teacher roles were also reminded prior to each role play that student descriptors are only that: quick phrases that give us a tiny glimpse into student characteristics. They should never be used to make sweeping assumptions or generalizations about any individual person.

The researcher in this case previously served as a school administrator, therefore, many of these original scenarios echoed challenges faced from owned experiences in school leadership. Other scenarios were formed using feedback from colleagues in the field of school leadership and classroom teaching, and yet others were inspired from external sources, such as Interreligious/Interfaith Studies, an outstanding collection which highlights simulations of this very nature (Patel et al., 2018).

As a representation of the specific scenarios used in this work, several are included below in their entirety, along with student roles.

3.1. Phase I – Community Scenario, Example 1: (to be Completed by Groups Acting in the Role of the School's Teacher Leadership)

Sunrise Community Church is just .3 miles down the road from Sunnyview Elementary School, the school in which you all have been teachers for the last several years. As you know, Sunrise Church has been a strong school partner over recent years, raising money for school supplies and also donating clothes and food to families who are displaced out of their homes.

Recently, the school gained some media attention as each student in the third grade had perfect attendance for the entire first three months of the school year. Quite an accomplishment! The

pastor of Sunrise Church has recently contacted the school and would like to provide bicycles for each of the forty-two third grade students in honor of this accomplishment. This is a wonderful incentive for our students and will encourage great attendance at school. The church plans to pray over the bicycles at their weekly Sunday morning service and then bring the bicycles to the school on Monday morning. During the presentation of the bicycles, the pastor will share with the kids that they have prayed over each bike for their safety. Then the church members will give the bicycles out (along with a new safety helmet) and talk with the students about bike safety.

Your teacher leadership team must now decide: Should this event happen? If so, are there any issues of concern? If not, why not?

3.2. Phase II – Classroom Scenario, Example 1: (to be Completed with One Person in the Teacher role and the Rest Acting in the Role of Students)

It is December 15th and finally the last day before Winter Break arrives. The last thing on your schedule for today's school day is the traditional classroom holiday party. Many of the parents have already sent in items for the party, including Santa Claus sugar cookies and Rudolph the Reindeer lollipops. You expect there will be several parents who will be stopping by and joining the party this afternoon as well. In fact, parents are starting to trickle in your classroom now.

One of your students' mothers enters the classroom. She has signed up to bring two dozen cupcakes for the party. She sets the cupcakes down on the food table and you notice that they are decorated in blue frosting with a Star of David and Happy Hanukah sticking upward from the middle of each. One of the other students has noticed the cupcakes and has just asked, "Is that the star that was over Jesus' manger?"

You must now decide: What will you think? What will you feel? What will you do? What may be the results or repercussions of your reaction or non-reaction? The students in your class may or may not have noticed or may or may not react to what you have just heard. Listen to their voices.

3.3. Phase II – Classroom Scenario, Example 2: (to be Completed with One Person in the Teacher Role and the Rest Acting in the Role of Students)

It is March 17th and finally time for your middle school's annual Spring Choral Concert. As you walk around your 6th grade Math classroom, you notice a few students who, while working in their small groups on their math problems, are also talking about the concert tonight. As you approach one particular group, you overhear a student sharing the following with her small group of peers: "I think Mr. Ehsan is great, but I also know he has a different religion than I do. I know this because he tells this to the whole class each day. And don't get me wrong, I like him a lot, and I think he's a great Chorus teacher, but I just don't feel comfortable singing the Adhan, which he said is an Islamic call to prayer, in the concert tonight. He has told us that if he sees anyone not singing tonight, we will get an F for our concert grade, but I just don't want to. I know he must be aware that some of us feel this way, because he reminded us yesterday that we sang a Christian song at our Winter Concert. I just don't know what do to."

You must now decide: What will you think? What will you feel? What will you do? What may be the results or repercussions of your reaction or non-reaction? The students in your class may or may not have noticed or may or may not react to what you have just heard. Listen to their voices.

3.4. Phase II – Classroom Scenario, Example 3: (to be completed with One Person in the Teacher Role and the Rest Acting in the Role of Students)

It is January 8th, and your 7th grade third period Science class is on their way back to your classroom. Lunch has just ended, and the seventh graders have been outside on break. You hope that this class has finally started getting back into their routines after a long Winter Break. To help get them excited about school and learning again, you have planned a fun Physics lab for them to do, complete with toothpicks, play dough, and wheels! They are going to have so much fun, and you just can't wait.

As the students file into your classroom, one-by-one, everyone is talking about what happened on the walking track during break. Apparently, one of your students traveled over the break and collected Gideon's Bibles from each hotel that he and his family visited. At break today, according to the students, he was giving these out to students as well as looking up particular scriptures and showing these to those around him.

You must now decide: What will you think? What will you feel? What will you do? What may be the results or repercussions of your reaction or non-reaction? The students in your class may or may not have noticed or may or may not react to what you have just heard. Listen to their voices.

3.5. Phase II – Classroom Scenario, Example 4: (to be Completed with One Person in the Teacher Role and the Rest Acting in the Role of Students)

It is February 14th and your 4th graders have been busy over the last twenty minutes exchanging valentines for Valentine's Day. Yesterday, each of your students had made their own personalized valentine envelope and had tacked these around the room to the board stripping. You had made sure to send a list of the students' first names home the week prior so everyone would be sure to send a valentine for each person.

Now, it's finally the last hour of the school day and it's time for the Valentine's Party and the opening of valentines. As you are walking around the room, you notice a valentine from a particular student, one whose family is of the Hindu faith, that contains two lines from a traditional Hindu Prayer of Love. The front of the valentine says "Love Your Lord as a fish loves water. The more the water, the greater the joy." As you walk around the room you see that every student in the room has received one of these valentines. It is almost time for dismissal, at which time your students will be packing up their valentines to take home.

You must now decide: What will you think? What will you feel? What will you do? What may be the results or repercussions of your reaction or non-reaction? The students in your class may or may not have noticed or may or may not react to what you have just heard. Listen to their voices.

3.6. Phase II – Student Simulation Roles, Selected Examples

Student Name: Anna. Anna's family is Jewish and Anna is active in her synagogue, attending worship regularly and volunteering with synagogue-related events and outreach. She is proud of her Jewish traditions and history.

Student Name: Rachel. Rachel's family has raised Rachel in the Pentecostal church. Rachel rarely talks about her religious beliefs or values while at school with her friends.

Student Name: Jake. Jake is part of a large family that has never attended a church or spoken openly about beliefs or faith. Jake doesn't really think about whether he believes in "God" or a higher being. He figures someday, when he gets older, he may think about it then.

Student Name: Sage. Sage has parents who are practicing Wiccan and attend Wicca rituals each week. Wiccan principles are evident in Sage's home. Sage understands the Wiccan sect, but is not sure whether or not she considers herself Wiccan. Sage never refers to herself or her parents as "witches", and often appears bothered when people describe all Wicca as witches, or vice-versa.

Student Name: Tommie. Tommie attends the Roman Catholic church in his hometown every weekend with his parents. His goal is to take a trip to the Vatican upon graduating high school and partake in mass with the Pope.

Student Name: Terra. Terra's parents are atheists, but Terra began following the Buddhist teachings ten months ago. She studies the teachings of Buddha each day when she first awakes, and is determined to infuse the spiritual principles of Buddhism into every aspect of her life.

Student Name: J.T. J.T. is the oldest son of a Muslim family. Every member of his family is devout in their Islamic faith. J.T.'s younger sister attends the same school, and it bothers J.T. to see others staring at the Hajib that she wears each day.

Student Name: Fejz. Fejz's family is Muslim and emigrated. from Albania to the US twelve years ago. While his family has raised Fejz with teachings from the Quran, they have also adopted a few secular traditions in their home, such as putting a wreath on their door each December.

Student Name: Ben. Ben considers himself an Orthodox Jew, as do his parents and his two sisters. Ben observes very strict observances of Jewish Law and is confident and focused in his study of the Torah.

Student Name: Courtney. Courtney and her family are Jehovah's Witness and are often active on weekends at the church and out in the community. While in school, Courtney sometimes finds herself faced with difficult dilemmas that seem to contradict her faith and beliefs.

Student Name: Harini. Harini and her family moved to the United States three years ago from India. She and her parents are Hindu.

3.7. Research Questions

Candidates who participated in the Religious Pluralism study as part of their Educator Preparation Program course sequence were asked to complete a post-survey on their experience and what this meant to their development as a future teacher. The three research questions associated with this study included:

1. How do pre-service teachers perceive the impact on their professional growth as a result of a religious pluralism study and simulation series?
2. How do pre-service teachers perceive the impact on their personal growth as a result of a religious pluralism study and simulation series?
3. What component of the religious pluralism study will be most surprising or intriguing to pre-service teachers?

The anonymous survey given to all participants at the conclusion of the Religious Pluralism simulation activity included three questions, all of which were open ended in design and written to gage perceptions of participants in terms of the impact of the religious pluralism study on their development and future of a teacher and their personal growth. Twenty-four candidates

participated over the course of two years. Participants were given the option of completing the survey in any setting they wished: in the classroom, outside of the classroom, etc., and were given a one-week window directly following their participation in the simulation to submit their responses.

4. Results

In analyzing the responses, the Theme and Pattern Coding approaches were utilized. While these are often used for cognitive interviewing, in this case, they were applied to the open-ended responses (Weaver, 2021). According to Caulfield (2019): "Thematic analysis is a good approach to research where you're trying to find out something about people's views, opinions, knowledge, experiences or values from a set of qualitative data – for example, interview transcripts, social media profiles, or survey responses" (p.1).

Using a semantic approach, in which responses were taken explicitly (Caulfield, 2019), key patterns were first assigned, based on the thorough review of each response using a coding system. A Grounded Theory approach was utilized for this work, one in which codes emerged organically from the data itself, as outlined by Kara. (2020). Themes were then noted within the patterns, and hierarchies established, as suggested through the work of Miller et al. (2014). Using this approach, then, the work began with no pre-conceived "theory" as to how students would react or how they would discern that the work and activity had changed their preparation as a teacher. Instead, using a Grounded Theory approach, the analysis was "grounded" within the responses themselves (Caulfield, 2019).

This theoretical approach to the data followed the common six-step process, beginning with a familiarization of all the responses provided. Then, a coding system was established, using the data to drive this coding, as described above. The themes that developed from the patterns of the data were then reviewed, followed by a defining and naming of each. Finally, a write up was possible using the hierarchy that had developed from the themes and patterns. That write-up, as well as conclusions and significance, are highlighted further in this paper.

4.1. Question 1

Question 1 on the survey was as follows: *As a future teacher, what is one way in which this religious pluralism study impacted your professional growth?* After becoming familiar with the responses and then using the explicit wording to drive the coding process, the following patterns were detected:

1: Provided insight or understanding into the potential religious differences of students.
2: Helped in better understanding the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment
3: Emphasized the importance of making sure that students feel comfortable and welcomed in the classroom
4: Prepared the teacher candidate for real life classroom scenarios
5: Improved confidence as a beginning teacher
6: Prepared for professional and appropriate interactions with students and parents

Using the work of Miller et al. as a guide (2014), two themes that encompassed the patterns then emerged (Figures 1 and 2):

I: Professional Expertise and Knowledge (2, 4, 5)
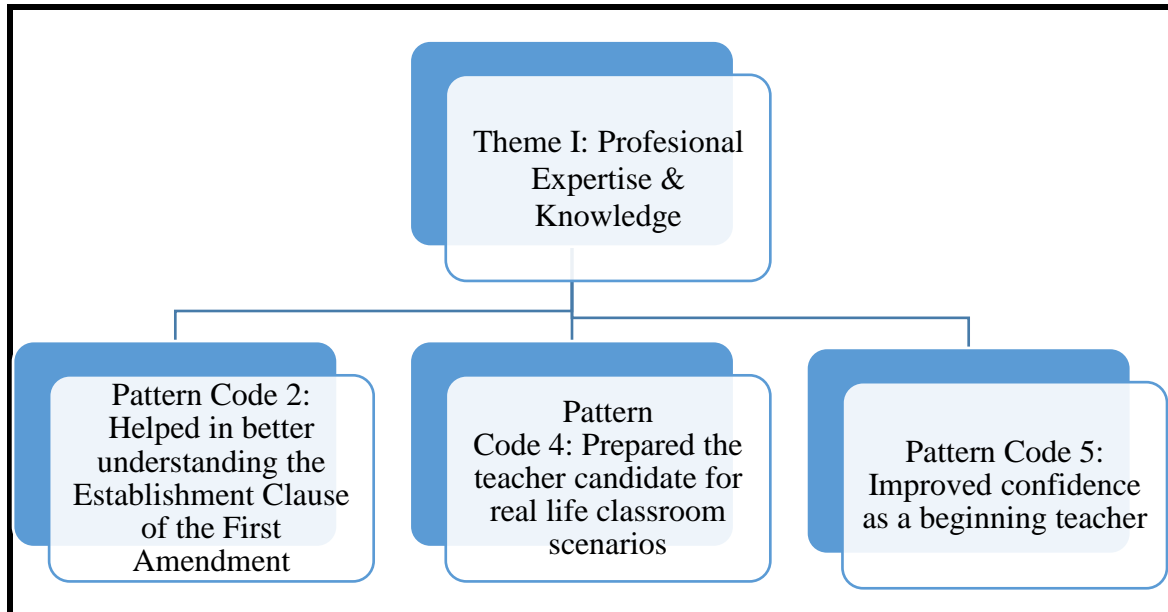II: Ability to work with all students (1, 3, 6)

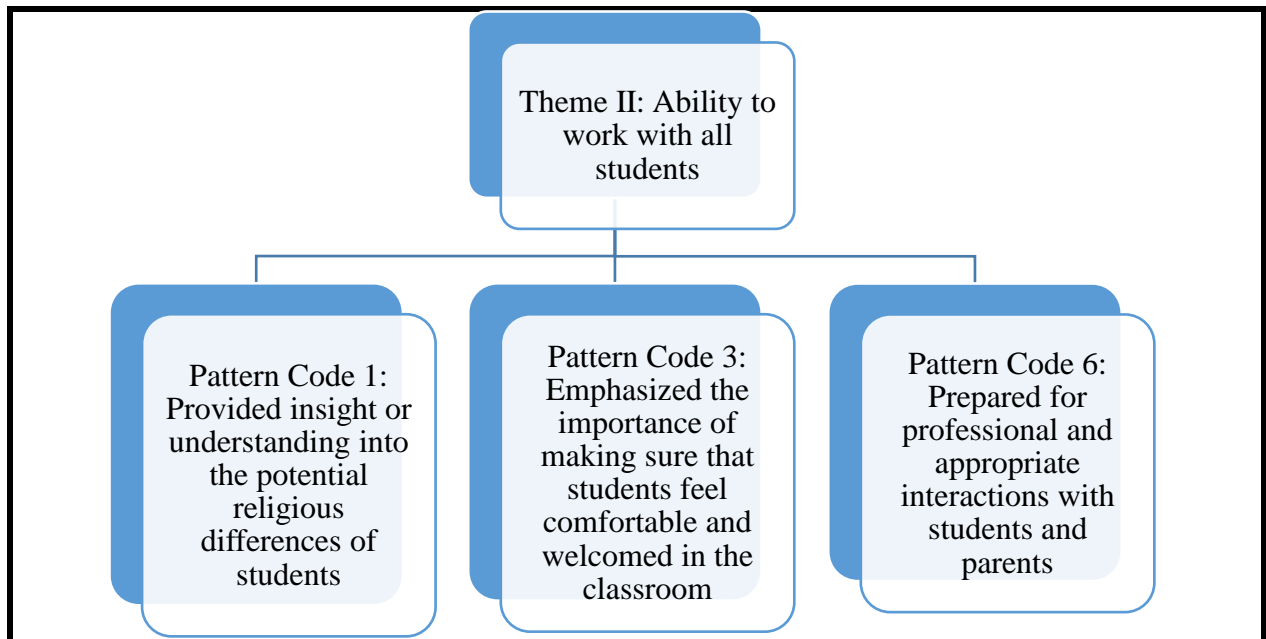*Figure 1.* Pattern and Theme Hierarchy for Question 1, Theme I

Figure 2. Pattern and Theme Hierarchy for Question 1 Theme II

The frequency with which patterns and themes were offered by the candidates were as follows, in order of prevalence:

- Theme I, Pattern 4: Prepared the teacher candidate for real life classroom scenarios (15 entrants)
- Theme II, Pattern 1: Provided insight or understanding into the potential religious differences of students. (8 entrants)
- Theme I, Pattern 5: Improved confidence as a beginning teacher (6 entrants)
- Theme I, Pattern 2: Helped in better understanding the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment (3 entrants)
- Theme II, Pattern 3: Emphasized the importance of making sure that students feel comfortable and welcomed in the classroom (2 entrants)

- Theme II, Pattern 6: Prepared for professional and appropriate interactions with students and parents (2 entrants)

4.2. Question 2

Question 2 on the survey was as follows: *As a future teacher, what is one way in which this religious pluralism study impacted your personal growth?* After becoming familiar with the responses and then using the explicit wording to drive the coding process, the following patterns were detected:

1: Deeper understanding of how to deal with religion-related issues in the classroom
2: Improved decision-making ability
3: Renewed focus on the importance of being an unbiased professional who is neutral toward students
4: Helpful exposure to varying religious viewpoints and opinions, including those of peers and colleagues
5: Increased awareness of others' beliefs
6: Increased sensitivity to students and their journey

Using the work of Miller et al. as a guide (2014), three themes that encompassed the patterns then emerged (Figures 3, 4 and 5):

I: Professional Expertise and Knowledge (1, 2)
II: Personal traits related to fairness and unbiased approaches (3, 6)
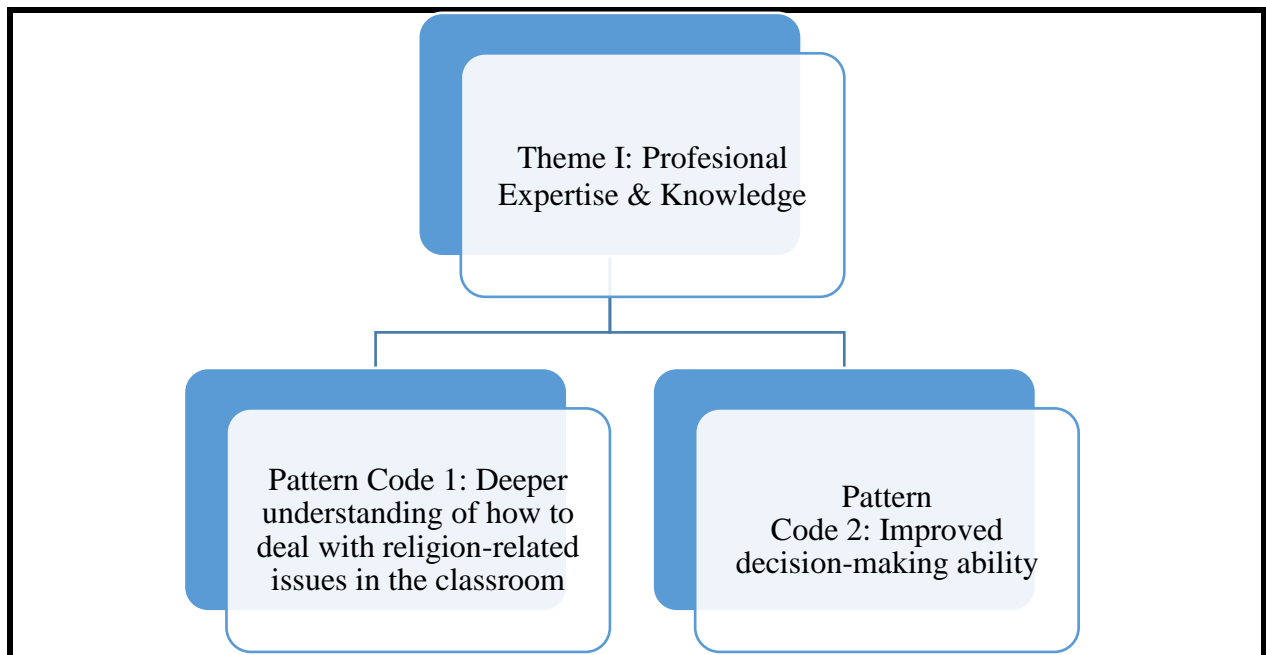II: Exposure to and understanding of diversity (4, 5)

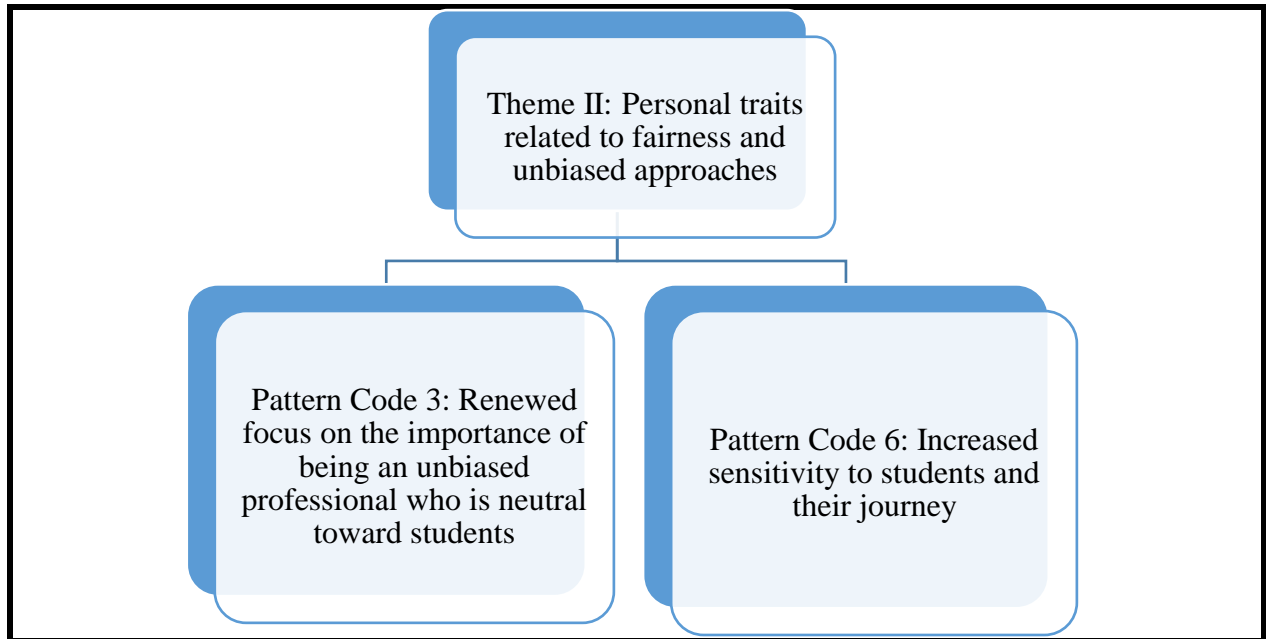*Figure 3.* Pattern and Theme Coding Hierarchy for Question 2, Theme I.

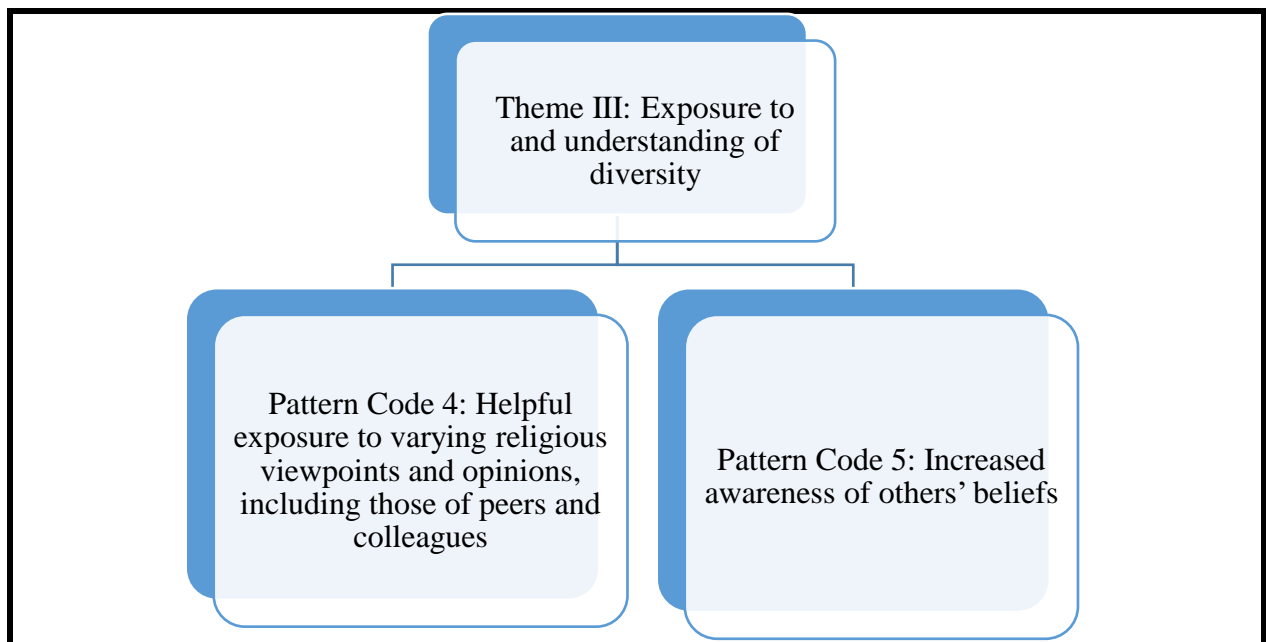*Figure 4.* Pattern and Theme Coding Hierarchy for Question 2, Theme II.

Figure 5. Pattern and Theme Coding Hierarchy for Question 2, Theme III.

The frequency with which patterns and themes were offered by the candidates were as follows, in order of prevalence:

- Theme III, Pattern 4: Helpful exposure to varying religious viewpoints and opinions, including those of peers and colleagues (12 entrants)
- Theme III, Pattern 5: Increased awareness of others' beliefs (9 entrants)
- Theme I, Pattern 1: Deeper understanding of how to deal with religion-related issues in the classroom (7 entrants)
- Theme II, Pattern 3: Renewed focus on the importance of being an unbiased professional who is neutral toward students (6 entrants)
- Theme I, Pattern 2: Improved decision-making ability (1 entrants)
- Theme II, Pattern 6: Increased sensitivity to students and their journey (1 entrants)

4.3. Question 3

Question 3 on the survey was as follows: *What part of our religious pluralism study surprised or disappointed or intrigued you the most?* After becoming familiar with the responses and then using the explicit wording to drive the coding process, the following patterns were detected:

1: How many different religions there are.
2: The potential reactions of parents as related to varying situations.
3: The importance of thinking ahead about all possible religious-related situations and being prepared
4: The legal implications surrounding these types of situations.
5: The application of the First Amendment to situations with students and teachers.
6: The situations where a non-reaction from the teacher is actually appropriate.
7: Being introduced to real situations that could happen, being prepared as to what to do.
8: Recognizing how little the candidate knew about diversity and other religions
9: Recognizing how peers in education might react differently
10: The importance of seeing situations from the student's perspective and supporting students at all times.

Using the work of Miller et al. as a guide (2014), two themes that encompassed the patterns then emerged (Figures 6 and 7) :

I: Professional Expertise and Knowledge (2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7)
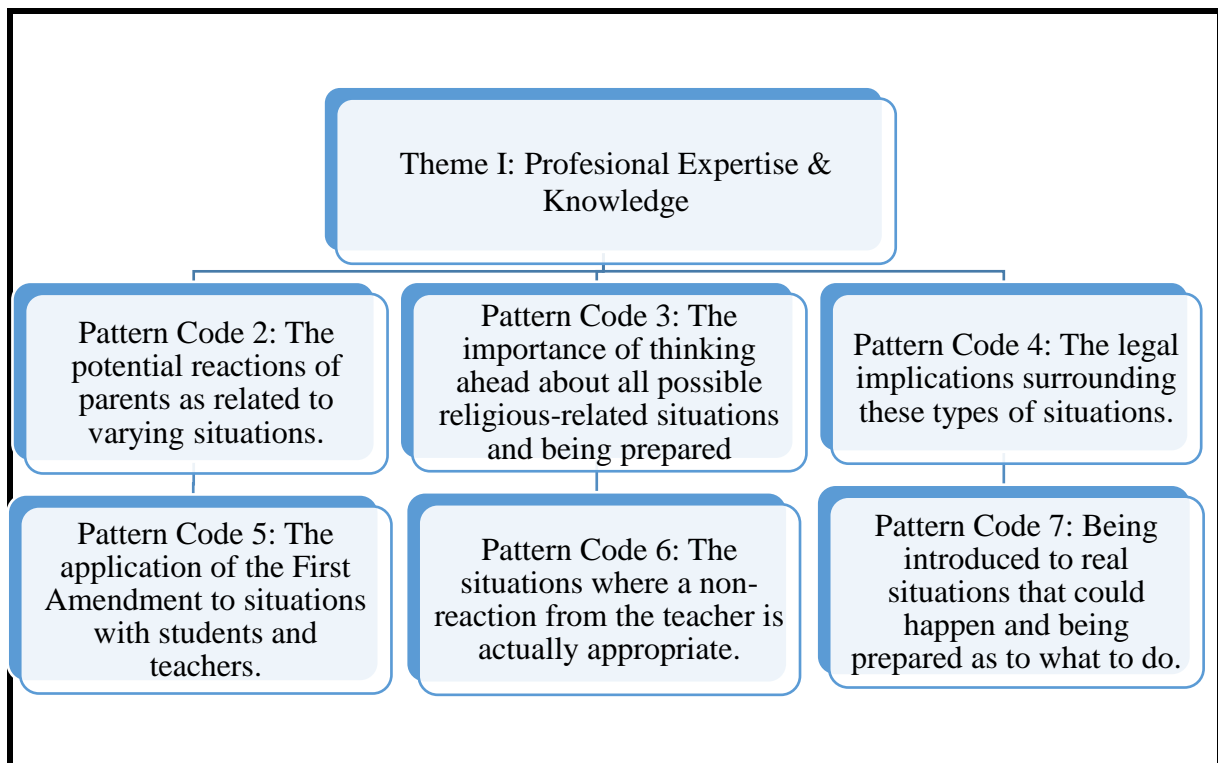II: Exposure to and understanding of diversity (1, 8, 9, 10)

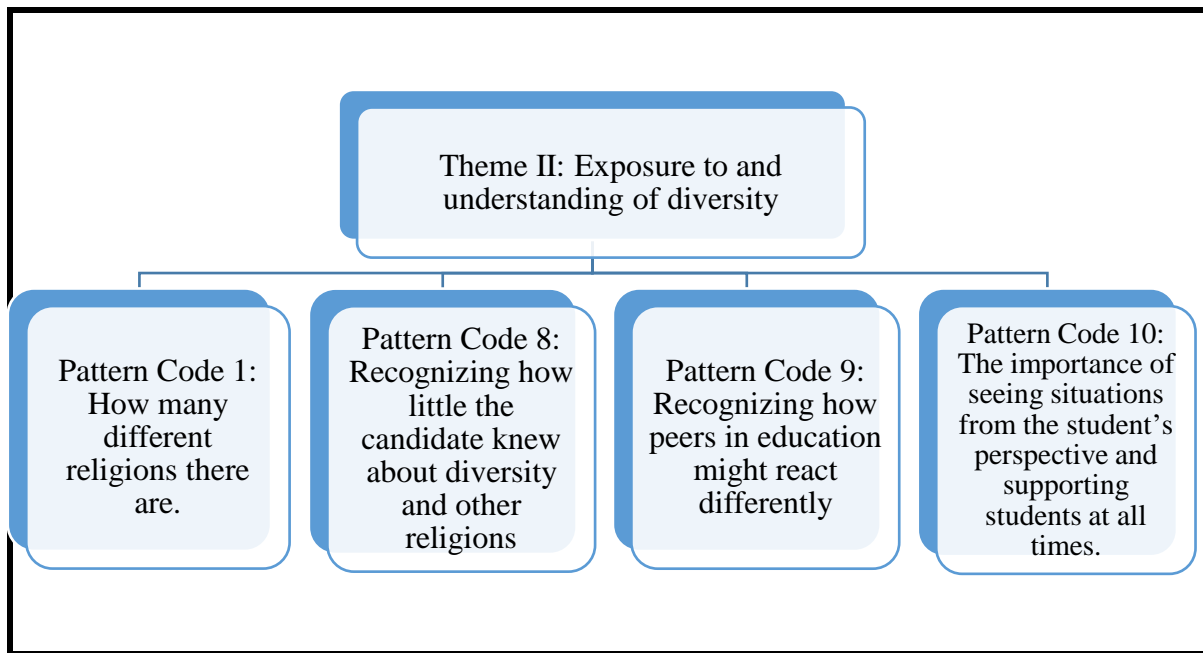*Figure 6.* Theme and Pattern Coding for Question 3, Theme I.

Figure 7. Theme and Pattern Coding for Question 3, Theme II.

The frequency with which patterns and themes were offered by the candidates were as follows, in order of prevalence:

- Theme I, Pattern 7: Being introduced to real situations that could happen, being prepared as to what to do. (12 entrants)
- Theme I, Pattern 3: The importance of thinking ahead about all possible religious-related situations and being prepared (5 entrants)
- Theme I, Pattern 5: The application of the First Amendment to situations with students and teachers. (4 entrants)
- Theme II, Pattern 1: How many different religions there are. (3 entrants)
- Theme I, Pattern 4: The legal implications surrounding these types of situations. (3 entrants)
- Theme II, Pattern 9: Recognizing how peers in education might react differently (3 entrants)
- Theme II, Pattern 10: The importance of seeing situations from the student's perspective and supporting students at all times. (3 entrants)
- Theme I, Pattern 2: The potential reactions of parents as related to varying situations. (2 entrants)
- Theme I, Pattern 6: The situations where a non-reaction from the teacher is actually appropriate. (2 entrants)
- Theme II, Pattern 8: Recognizing how little the candidate knew about diversity and other religions (2 entrants)

5. Discussion

5.1. Research Question 1

How do pre-service teachers perceive the impact on their professional growth as a result of a religious pluralism study and simulation series?

It is clear from the responses that candidates felt most impacted in their professional growth by becoming more confident and more aware and prepared for real life classroom scenarios. The simulation activities included an elementary Valentine's Day party, one in which a student brings homemade Valentines that include a religious message. Another included a student who wears a t-shirt to school that features a public figure who is known for anti-Semitic views. Yet another focuses on a Choral teacher who is requiring students of all backgrounds to sing an Islamic call to prayer in a concert, and another highlights a student who is handing out Bibles and sharing favorite verses. These are just a few random samples of the simulations presented, but through the assumption of both the teacher roles and the student roles, pre-service candidates were led to consider how these situations might unfold real-time in their future classrooms, and the importance of making good decisions in assuring an unbiased and welcoming classroom for all. In addition, responses would suggest that participants found that their own understanding of potential religious differences of students was gained during this experience.

5.2. Research Question 2

How do pre-service teachers perceive the impact on their personal growth as a result of a religious pluralism study and simulation series?

There were four patterns and three themes that garnered the most responses from participants, with the theme of "Exposure to and understanding of diversity" as the predominant focus of participant responses. Candidates cited helpful exposure to varying religious viewpoints and opinions, including those of peers and colleagues, as well as an increased awareness of others' beliefs as leading thoughts within this theme. Candidates' affirmation of a deeper understanding of how to deal with religion-related issues in the classroom as well as a renewed focus on the importance of being unbiased as a professional were other results of this religious pluralism work that impacted the candidates' personal growth.

5.3. Research Question 3

What component of a religious pluralism study will be most surprising or intriguing to pre-service teachers?

Within this question, there was only one reaction from participants that was given with enough frequency to stand out amongst the analysis. Candidates noted that being introduced to real situations that could happen and being prepared as to what to do was of the most surprise and intrigue as they experienced this religious pluralism activity.

5.4. Implications and Recommendations for Future Research

The implications for this work are vast. A more-prepared teacher workforce not only leads to higher levels of student achievement, but to a more welcoming and inclusive classroom environment. Students of all cultural backgrounds and religious affiliations must first feel safety and acceptance before they can learn, and with the rich culturally diverse fabric of the United States, ensuring welcoming classroom climates for all is paramount. This important work begins in educator preparation programs, where future teachers are able, through activities such as the simulation study highlighted here, to practice and explore potentially difficult situations prior to facing them in the "real world" of classroom teaching.

Future research opportunities in this area could extend to other groups of pre-service as well as practicing educators. School leaders face these same types of situations, as often, a teacher who is not prepared may simply "pass the buck" to their administrator. Practicing educators may

have never had these discussions in their pre-service learning, and may benefit from professional development in this area. As additional engagement ensues with simulation-learning focused on religious pluralism, it is critical for empirical and other data to be utilized as we forge a path forward in preparing our educator workforce for cultural and religious diversity.

6. Conclusions

Sharing this work is paramount, as schools of Education across the United States and throughout other continents and countries could benefit from a replication of these embedded strategies and curricular additions. For the school of Education featured in this work, this will not be the end of the exploration and change in this area. Considerations are already in place for opportunities to expand, with the following as potential options:

- Religious pluralism role-play in graduate level Master of Education Courses.
- Religious diversity study and discussion embedded into the Master of Educational Leadership program
- A third part to the undergraduate Religious Pluralism suite of activities, perhaps in the student teacher phase, during which candidates would highlight, during a Student Teacher Seminar, an example of religious diversity and how it has impacted their student teaching classroom.

Specific recommendations for other teacher education programs, based on this study's findings, would include:

- Begin any effort of this nature with a focus on religious literacy. In the case of this study, that started with an in-depth examination of the five major religions of the world, but this religious literacy building could be accomplished in numerous ways.
- Create specific community-based and classroom-based scenarios and role-play opportunities that highlight potential conflicts or situations that teachers may face as they begin their careers in the classroom. The samples provided in this report could be used as a baseline, or others may be built from scratch. Rely on colleagues in the field of education to provide ideas, professionals who may have faced challenging situations before and who can describe these in the form of a scenario. Find examples in external resources or articles, such as the following one from an article on religious diversity: "Mukesh is my name. I am 9 years old and in the 4th grade. I am a Hindu, and I am a strict vegetarian. Strict vegetarians neither touch nor eat meat and eggs. We view them as life or as a source of life and believe that they shouldn't be destroyed. I appreciate Easter celebrations, but in some ways they are difficult for me. I have a hard time handling eggs. Painting eggs and egg hunting can be fun, but I always feel I am doing something wrong" (Kirmani & Laster, 1999, p. 1). With this student dialogue as the foundation, a scenario could be designed for role-play that would place this student in the middle of a classroom egg-coloring activity in an elementary classroom.
- Design these scenarios to be respectful of all religions and to present the situations in ways that the "right" answer is neither obvious nor singular, meaning, perhaps there are several "right" things to do. As stated earlier in this report, it is imperative as working through any simulation that candidates understand that over generalizing or simplifying the various factors that make up any human being's cultural or religious background is inappropriate and counterproductive. While the simulations include situations based on religion and student roles that involve a two or three sentence description of the individual, classroom teachers must also keep in mind that each student in their

classroom is so much more than their religion, their language, their ethnicity, or any other part of their cultural experience. As adeptly described by Wicht (2014), "Avoid generalized or simplified statements. These types of statements imply easy answers such as 'Islam is ...' or 'Hinduism means ... ' or 'Atheists think ...' Instead, when discussing religious and nonreligious beliefs with students, remind them that religions are internally diverse, dynamic and embedded in culture" (p. 1). The same holds true to religious pluralism simulations for pre-service teachers. Religion is as diverse as the classrooms in which we teach.

- Incorporate opportunities for reflection, either through open discussion, journaling, survey completions, or other means. In this study, it was evident that the teacher candidates involved experienced growth in their own understanding of various religions and improved confidence in their ability to be prepared for situations of this nature. Much of that growth and learning occurred through the active simulation, but these candidates also had opportunities to reflect continuously on their learning after each simulation.

Across the globe, we must not only lead in this regard, but also be willing to see our own classrooms differently as we model for our pre-service teachers the appreciation for religious differences in our community and our world. This work will continue as we embrace the opportunity to grow and expand our own understanding in this important work.

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