Kindergartners Explore

“The Fun Thing about Studying Different Beliefs Is That . . . They Are Different”

Ben Mardell and Mona M. Abo-Zena

Emily: Just because your mom says he’s real doesn’t mean he is real.
Robert: Who made the first person on earth?
Max: God.
Emily: Gorillas. People evolved from gorillas and started to lose their hair to be more like people.
Max: God made the first person on Earth. The first people are Adam and Eve. I’m sure God is the one. Gorillas can’t talk. They do nothing.
Emily: That’s not true.
Max: It is true. Gorillas are not a person that has magic.

These kindergartners are sitting around the snack table, talking. Conversations like this are not uncommon in early childhood classrooms. Young children are actively working to make sense of the world, including what it means when people disagree about deeply held beliefs (many of which originate at home and reflect religious and spiritual values). Early childhood is a time when understandings of differences are formed (Derman-Sparks & Edwards 2010). Guided explorations about differences in beliefs are important because they help children develop healthy attitudes about spiritual plurality, and they cultivate meaningful home-school relations with diverse families.

This article is for early childhood teachers, administrators, and families interested in helping young children develop positive views about diverse spiritual beliefs and the people who embrace them. The article is based on a project in which Max, Emily, Robert, and their 15 classmates studied their own and others’ understanding of creation, heaven, and the divine at the Eliot-Pearson Children’s School, a lab school at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts. The Children’s School is an inclusion model early childhood center serving 3-year-olds through second-graders. (At the time of the project, Ben was the kindergarten room’s lead teacher. Mona, then a doctoral student in child development, consulted on the project.)

The article is organized around five questions readers may have about the project:

- Why was this project undertaken?
- What did the project involve?
- What did the parents say?
- What did the teachers learn?
- What did the children learn?

Our answers explain why we explored this unusual—and we suspect in many places, taboo—topic, and why we believe teachers should recognize and support children’s learning about spirituality, beliefs, and religion.

**Why was this project undertaken?**

The children’s expressed interest led us to a study of beliefs. We were reluctant to undertake this project, unsure about opening up such a potentially controversial subject. This experience has led us to believe that in order to raise citizens who can navigate and contribute to our religiously diverse world, early childhood educators must create safe spaces for children to explore spirituality and differing beliefs (Baumgartner & Buchanan 2010).

In their play (see photographs on p. 13) and conversations, the kindergartners demonstrated a strong interest in spiritual matters (for example, the conversation between

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Photos courtesy of the authors.
Max, Emily, and Robert). While we noted this interest from the start of the year, we initially made no effort to integrate it into the curriculum. Midway through the year, several children asked directly to study God. The success of the ensuing God Study Group (four children who met for six weeks to pursue this interest) convinced us that it was possible to study beliefs with kindergartners.

It is not just our kindergarten students who are interested in spiritual matters. Many young children are particularly curious about beliefs, making frequent reference to topics with religious and spiritual implications (Coles 1990). Because early childhood is the genesis of knowledge about and dispositions toward differences, it is a good time for guided explorations of different beliefs that can help children develop healthy attitudes toward others and themselves.

Curricula on religion are supported from multiple perspectives. From an academic perspective, religion is a central component of social studies. From an interfaith perspective, leaders from faith traditions have collaborated to find common ground to guide religiously inclusive school policies, practices, and curricula (Haynes, Thomas, & Ferguson 2007). From the social justice perspective, religion and religious pluralism are essential elements of an anti-bias approach. Hence the wisdom of the NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards and Accreditation Criteria that call for the acknowledgment and discussion of different beliefs in early childhood settings (NAEYC 2007, criteria 1.A.02, 2.L.03, 7.A.02).

The National Council for the Social Studies explains, “Knowledge about religions is not only characteristic of an educated person, but is also absolutely necessary for understanding and living in a world of diversity” (Haynes, Thomas, & Ferguson 2007, 44). While the study of specific world religions generally occurs in middle and high school, developing the disposition of tolerance is a task for early childhood education. This is particularly important in the United States, the world’s most religiously diverse nation (Eck 2002). To help our youngest citizens appreciate and understand one another, we should provide safe places for them to explore spiritual beliefs and differences.

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What did the project involve?

During the final two months of the school year, our kindergarten curriculum focuses on one topic that all the children explore together (to view one such capstone project, see “An Example of a Developmentally Appropriate Kindergarten Study” on the CD-ROM that accompanies the third edition of Developmentally Appropriate Practice)
(Copple & Bredekamp 2009)). To guide this project, we use the tool of documentation to listen carefully to children’s interests, ideas, and level of engagement to fashion developmentally appropriate activities (Katz & Chard 1989; Mardell 1999; Project Zero & Reggio Children 2000).

Children generate questions, solve problems, and create collective products, participating in the “whole game of learning” (Perkins 2009).

The Beliefs Project began with children drawing pictures of their theories and questions (for example, Robert asked, “Why can you not see God? ‘Cause God made something, but he doesn’t have hands. It’s just clear. So who made the first people on the earth? God?”). The children and teachers then discussed these theories and questions among ourselves, interviewed members of the school community and local experts (including a priest, imam, rabbi, and an atheist philosopher) about their beliefs, listened to and then discussed music with spiritual significance, and transformed the dramatic play area into some children’s vision of heaven. The children shared what they had learned with their families and school community by each contributing a piece to a class puzzle and describing the piece in a short video.

To provide a detailed picture of our teaching practices, we focus on how the children turned the dramatic play area into heaven. The impetus to transform dramatic play had several sources. Play is a core resource for young children’s learning (Carlsson-Paige 2008), and for the first few weeks of the Beliefs Project, we had been wondering how to access play to support the children’s explorations. At the same time, looking over video and observation notes, we realized that two children with language delays had been having difficulty participating in conversations. These two children were wonderful and committed players, so dramatic play seemed an obvious way to help them engage in the inquiry. And all the children were interested in heaven. In their conversations, questions, and drawings, heaven appeared again and again.

So we invited the children to create their vision of heaven. The process took a week and involved intentionally choreographing individual, small group, and whole class activities. To begin, six children (including the two with language delays) chose to draw their ideas of heaven during exploration time. After a review of the diverse ideas about heaven that the class had encountered, the children drew and chatted for 40 minutes. This in-depth experience helped the children with language difficulties articulate their ideas. As one explained, “I’m making it beautiful. My friend told me how heaven looks.”

Children then shared their ideas with their classmates:

Larissa: This is the stairs to get up, and here’s a little slide, and you can lie down. And the curtains aren’t finished.

Caroline: I think a heart would be the center of heaven.

Emily: I think heaven is a planet like Earth, but you can only go when you are dead. Some
people think God is perfect, but if God is perfect, why are there wars? I think there is a good god and a bad god and they fight. And sometimes one wins and sometimes the other wins. I think heaven is nice because you should have what you want when you die. To get into heaven you climb in and slide down, like a playground. Stairs are narrow and hard to get up, so you have to be dead to go. If you’re dead, you can slide up.

The next day another group convened. The teacher shared the drawings and comments from the previous day to launch plans for dramatic play. The children built on the playground idea, deciding to add swings. Perhaps because of an association with hearts, it was suggested that there be a lot of red. The group captured their ideas in a collective drawing, which they shared with the whole group to get feedback. The reaction was generally positive, and additional ideas were provided (for example, the need for clouds).

Work days followed. While children could come and go as they chose, the high level of engagement with the project was clear when four children asked to stay inside during recess to work on the dramatic play area. After three intensive days of construction, heaven was opened for play. It was a very popular destination.

What did the families say?

The parents were critical allies during the Beliefs Project. They encouraged us to pursue this inquiry, shared conversations they were having with their children, and made pivotal suggestions about the project. This is not surprising. Spiritual questions—religious and nonreligious—occupy a significant part of many adults’ thoughts. Families embraced the opportunity to engage in something so important to their children’s education. Of course, smooth sailing through such an emotionally charged topic was not guaranteed. The positive outcome we enjoyed was the result of efforts to respect and include all the families’ beliefs, and the overall culture of the school.

The teaching team invited families to participate in the project even before its inception. As we considered undertaking this inquiry, we sent out information about our intentions and invited feedback. While generally supportive, parents asked to be kept informed and expressed the desire that certain points of view be represented. During the project we issued weekly newsletters and kept a binder that charted daily activities. Parents were invited to join us in our conversations with a local priest, rabbi, imam, and philosopher, and we held several meetings to discuss the directions of the project.

At one of these meetings a family raised a concern that the curriculum’s name (originally the God Project) was not inclusive; although all families have a belief system, not all of these include a belief in God or a higher being. We acknowledged this concern, and brought it to the children. They unanimously concluded that it would be important to rename the project (to the Beliefs Project) so that no one would feel left out.

Family involvement in the project reflected the level of parent involvement in the school generally and the positive regard for diversity. As one mother reflected, “Eliot-Pearson already has a whole culture of being able to talk about differences . . . . It was very comfortable for children, for parents, [and] for teachers to move into this kind of conversation, to push the frontier a little further. Because we were already so comfortable talking about [differences].”
As with other anti-bias topics, tolerance about differences in beliefs is an essential disposition for all children.

Of course, it is conceivable that in other contexts families may be opposed to such a project. In such a situation, we recommend working to understand the nature of the opposition, explaining the goals of the project (to further a tolerance of different beliefs, not to teach specific beliefs), and explaining the importance of children participating in such experiences.

At a reunion of the families one year after the project was completed, parents indicated that they could not have imagined such public conversations about religious differences, because they had been raised at a time when such discussions were taboo. They were delighted their children were freed from this restriction. They marveled at young children’s ability to engage in deep conversations about religion and beliefs. And they appreciated the potential long-term impact of the project.

What did the teachers learn?

We learned that young children can engage in authentic and civil discussions about beliefs. These kindergartners were curious about their classmates’ beliefs. They listened attentively to the views of members of our extended community. They enjoyed trying to make sense of questions that have perplexed humanity from the beginning of time. And we learned that allowing for such conversations in the classroom can help build connections between home and school.

We now believe that early childhood educators need to be proactive and intentional in incorporating issues of religious diversity into classrooms. Here, our foremost advice is to listen. We suspect that conversations that touch on religious and spiritual matters occur in classrooms with more frequency than many adults think. Teachers can model interest and tolerance, provide information about the images and practices that children encounter (for example, the Madonna statue in the yard across from the school playground or why Younnis is going to be absent from school for Eid), and help clarify misconceptions about others’ beliefs.

Just as teachers include experiences about cultural and racial diversity in formal curricula, teachers should consider bringing differences in beliefs into classroom conversations. The objective is to support children’s explorations of their own questions and learn about the perspectives of others. Listening will alert teachers to the specific interests of their students.

We acknowledge that some teachers may face greater opposition, receive less support, and feel less comfortable in discussing beliefs with young children. Not everyone will feel prepared in undertaking curriculum units on beliefs. Nevertheless, we believe that these conversations should occur in all early childhood settings. As with other anti-bias topics, tolerance about differences in beliefs is an essential disposition for all children. Teachers should encourage children to ask questions about, discuss, and explore different beliefs whether they attend public or private, secular or religious schools. Parents, teachers, and administrators should discuss a range of developmentally appropriate ways to support open and curious attitudes toward different beliefs and the people who hold them.

What did the children learn?

When children are deeply engaged in a topic, they learn in many directions at once (Project Zero & Reggio Children 2000). Participation in the Beliefs Project promoted the children’s problem-solving and critical-thinking abilities. It provided authentic experiences in using books and technology to gain information, in discussing and presenting ideas in a group, and in using drawing and writing to express ideas. In Massachusetts, these are among the language arts curriculum standards for kindergarten (Massachusetts Department of Education 2001).

To conclude the project we helped the children create a video. Each child contributed a drawing of a puzzle piece with a verbal explanation of their thinking about beliefs. Some children discussed heaven while others focused on the big bang. Regardless of the topic, each child demonstrated a high level of commitment to producing quality work. The children drew several drafts, using peer feedback to improve their drawings, and embraced the challenge of explaining their beliefs. For example, one of the children who had difficulty with expressive language explained, “I believe in heaven and God lives in my heart. He acts for all of the children, and all of our prayers. And all the animals and all the earth. We have to go to God.” Interestingly, despite this striking amount of verbal output, the child expressed dissatisfaction, saying she had not explained all she wanted to. I comforted...
The children also learned tolerance. At the conclusion of the project, we asked the children what they had learned. Larissa answered, “There are many different beliefs in this school and even more beliefs in the world.” Caroline expressed her enjoyment of the study, explaining, “All of the ideas together, it looked nice for Dramatic Play Heaven. I just feel like I’m having a party of everyone’s beliefs.” Max picked up on this idea, saying, “It’s something like Caroline’s. It’s like a big party of beliefs.” Having disagreed sharply with Emily about the genesis of people several months earlier, Max now explained, “The fun thing about studying different beliefs is that they are different.”

References


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