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A Muslim Woman Visits Catholic Kindergarten: Ecumenical Practices and Lessons to be Learned

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Prior to beginning my Master's program at the University of Saskatchewan (U of S), I did not feel compelled to formally address ecumenical practices within our Kindergarten classroom. It was my belief that, as a Catholic educator, it was my job to instruct our students in the doctrine of the Catholic Church and that such a responsibility did not require me to address the numerous other faiths that permeated our classroom. On the rare occasion, when a child from a different faith referred to his or her own religion, customs, or practices, I would affirm the comment with a slight nod and not fully attend to the child's comment. In my mind, non-Catholic beliefs were a minefield that I did not feel I had the necessary skills to enter into. Children, I believed, simply needed to love and respect all people. Surely that was good enough?

As I began a Master's Degree in Early Childhood Education, I learned a great deal about the value of parent knowledge and honoring the knowledge parents impart to their children. As comments such as, "In my religion we do not cross ourselves the same way," or, "In your Church you call them Saints but in ours they are called spirits," were innocently stated by my Kindergartners, I tucked these remarks into the back of my mind. As I wrote my thesis entitled, *Painting a Picture: Why Diverse Parents Choose Catholic French Immersion for their School-Aged Child* (Bronkhorst, 2015), my students' comments nagged at me and invited me to explore their significance within my research. I began to consider that, as a Catholic educator, it was important to honor people of different faiths who selected to attend our school division. I was inspired by Pope Francis's remarks in July 2013, when he chose to personally address the Muslim faith at the end of Ramadan in a talk entitled, *Mutual Respect through Education* (Hafiz, 2013, n.p.). He spoke specifically about the roles of the media, family, schools and, religious educators in achieving a foundation of mutual respect and caring, "We have to bring up our young people to think and speak respectfully of other religions and their followers." I began to wonder how I could model and promote ecumenical practices.

Momina Khan: A Brief History

At the time of my wondering, Momina Khan and I were classmates at the University of Saskatchewan, both taking a graduate-level class on parent and family engagement in education. Momina is a soft-spoken, intelligent woman and a devout Muslim. She immigrated to Canada from Pakistan in 2000, arriving in Toronto with her husband, a physician, and three children. Their fourth child was born in Canada. The course required us, as graduate students, to visit different cultural and educational venues to become more familiar with diverse circumstances of families in regard to schooling, teacher practices, and cultural beliefs within our province. While some of us planned to visit a First Nations¹ Early Childhood Center in Northern Saskatchewan and others visited classrooms in schools or communities that were unlike the ones in which they taught, Momina led a trip to the local Mosque. Working together, we decided she would visit my Kindergarten classroom to teach the class about her culture. As a Kindergarten teacher, I have deliberately set out to create a curriculum and atmosphere of inclusivity. While outwardly, Momina's appearance is somewhat different than what students in a Catholic school would expect to encounter, it was my hope that Momina's presentation would strengthen their understanding of this message.



Momina Visits Kindergarten

Momina arrived on a sunny but cold morning in November. She was wearing a long grey wool coat and over her head a lovely burnt-orange hijab that was more elegant than the ones she typically wore. In the classroom, Momina removed her winter jacket and I observed her ornate green and gold

¹ In Canada, First Nations people are the Indigenous people who first inhabited this land. Historically referred to as "Indians," this word is now considered inappropriate because Columbus coined it when he felt he had found India when, in fact, he had arrived in North America. The term Aboriginal is in disfavor because it does not attend to the diversity within the First peoples of Canada and between the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples of Canada.

outfit. She explained that the ensemble, a loose pyjama like pant and shirt, is called *salwar kameez*, and is typically worn for celebrations such as Eid or festivities such as weddings and engagements. As we talked, Momina began to remove objects from her various bags and place them on the small coffee table in front of our gathering place in the classroom. She positioned intricate jewellery, beaded shoes, sparkling handbags, a small replica of rickshaw, and a taxi-like vehicle. Beside it, she placed a handmade fan with sequins and embroidery. In another area of our classroom, she placed a variety of food such as cookies, and moong dal that is a snack often served in Pakistan before tea.

The bell rang and soon my students boisterously entered into our classroom. As they removed their bulky winter gear at their lockers, their inquisitive eyes inspected the elegant woman standing before them. From their expressions, it was obvious that the students, who had been anticipating Momina's visit, were both excited and curious.

Once the children and I were settled in our gathering place, Momina began her presentation. She talked to us about how she is from both Pakistan and Canada and she has a love of both her countries. First, Momina explained the significance of the *salwar kameez* to the children and the oohed and awed over the garment. "It's so pretty!" one child stated. "I like the shiny beads on your shirt" and "I wish I could wear that!", were just some of the comments. Next, she turned her attention to the items on the table. When she held up the jewellery she had bought my children were quick to point out how much their mothers loved jewellery too. "Yes, most women love jewellery. We have that in common" giggled Momina. When she pointed to the beaded shoes described that the shoes were special celebrations. Again, my students remarked on their beauty, their sequins, and beads. "I wish I had shoes like that!" one child expressed. When she held up the handbags one by one, she explained they were used to carry money just like the purses in Canada. My students were very captivated, "My mommy would love that purse!" a little boy remarked. "When I grow up I want a purse like that!" a little girl called out enthusiastically. The rickshaw and its function brought with it comments such as, "I wish we had those in Saskatoon", "I want to ride in one", "I want to go to Pakistan one day and ride in one!" were heard throughout the room.

Momina also sang us a traditional song called *Milli Maghma* that expresses her love for Pakistan.

You are my homeland.
My name is because of you.
You are my treasure home, and a nest
I am a flower and you are my garden
I am a wave and you are my ocean.
I am known in the world because of you.
We must fulfill this bond together.
You are my nation.

Although the children could not understand what she was singing, they sat in rapt attention and applauded enthusiastically when she was done. She explained the significance of the words to the children and stated that she now feels this way about Canada too.

Near the end of her presentation, Momina made a comment about her own children. My students immediately became curious. “You have kids?”, “How old are they?”, “Do they go to school like us?” Momina explained that her family is like many young Canadian families. “I have four children and they go to school just like you”. She asked them how else her family was the same as their families. The comments were numerous, “I have a mom and dad”, “You are pretty like my mom”, “You like jewelry like me”, “You love Canada too”, and “Your kids go to school too” were just a few of the similarities my children brought up.

“And how am I different?” she asked the children. “You don’t talk like us,” one child said referencing her accent. “You do not dress like us,” another said. “I have more boys in my family,” observed a child. “You don’t look like other people I know,” remarked a girl”, “I think my mom is older than you,” added another.

Next, Momina asked the children if they had any questions about what she was wearing. I was surprised because my students remained uncharacteristically silent. Perhaps it was because she had already explained the purpose of the *salwar kameez*? I wondered.

Finally, Momina prompted my students, “Why do you think I wear this?” she asked, touching her hijab. The students became visibly animated; they looked at each other, and then back at Momina with wide eyes then they erupted into a gush of theories. Hands flew up eagerly. At that moment, I realized that the Kindergartners had wanted to ask her about her hijab but

for some reason had held back. Almost every child had an idea as to why she wore the hijab. Some of their guesses included, "Because your hair is messy?" "Maybe because it's very cold outside?", "Cause you like to look pretty," and "You don't like your ears?" Momina accepted each suggestion with a kind smile. After they had exhausted their theories, Momina said, "I will tell you why I wear this." Again, there was a noticeable shift in my students' body position. They leaned towards her in anticipation.

Momina smiled and pointed to the cross that hung prominently in our classroom. "Do you see the cross on the wall?" she asked my students. The children affirmed that they did. "What does the cross mean?" Again, a sea of raised hands appeared. "It's because Jesus died for us," spoke one girl. "It means we believe in God," another student explained. "Exactly," Momina confirmed. "And you have a cross in your classroom because you love God." Touching her hijab, she explained, "And I wear this," she explained, "because it is the way I show that I love God." It was a simple and beautiful explanation for my Kindergarten students. "That's so cool," some of the kids stated. "I've always wondered why," announced another boy. "Me too," other children remarked.

Momina's Impact

Shortly after sharing her snack with all of the children, Momina left our classroom, but she did not leave our hearts. Later that afternoon, I observed some of the children playing in the kitchen area. The girls had placed scarves, tablecloths, and table runners over their heads. As I quietly observed them, I heard the words, "Momina," "Pakistan," and "God," uttered during their play. When there was a natural break in their imaginative play, I asked the girls why they had covered their heads. "We are playing Momina!" they explained. When I asked them why they were "playing Momina," one insightful student said, "Because she is beautiful and we like the way she loves God!" Another child added, "We love God too." Chills ran up my arms and I am quite certain my heart skipped a beat.

Early years educator, researcher and author Vivian Paley speaks to the fact that play is important in how children make sense of their world. Specifically she said, "Children use dramatic play to figure out the answer to all the big questions" (Illinois Early Learning Project, 2010 Fall, para. 7). It was readily apparent that this is what my students were doing with their new knowledge of Pakistan and the hijab. As they wove their new knowledge into their dramatic play I was pleased that they had incorporated the hijab as a way to

show their own love of God. I was overjoyed because visits such as Momina's clearly demonstrate that knowledge imparted to young school-aged children can positively shape their acceptance of diverse people. Pope John Paul II stated,

It is absolutely clear that ecumenism, the movement promotion Christian unity, is not just some sort of "appendix" which is added to the Church's traditional activity. Rather, ecumenism is an organic part of her life and work, and consequently must pervade all that she is and does. (1995, p. 20)

Visits such as Momina's, therefore, are the gentle and age-appropriate steps that can begin to lay an ecumenical foundation within our youngest citizens.

Ecumenism Practices in the Early Years

There are good examples within our Saskatoon Catholic Schools of educators who seek to honour people of different faiths. In particular, I think of a principal who, wanting her Muslim families to be able to participate in the school's Christmas lunch, ensures the meat is *halal*—slaughtered according to Islamic law. I know of another principal who ensures that bake sales do not take place during Ramadan, a time of strict fasting between sunrise and sunset for these students. These are strong example of respecting non-Catholic faiths within our Catholic School System.

In terms of faith diversity, in my own Kindergarten class, I have had a variety of non-Catholic parents who are deeply rooted in their own faiths make family presentations to us. Two particular families stand out for me. When Peter, a father of one of my students, talked to the Kindergartners about his career as a Baptist Minister, he did not mention the differences between our two religions, but instead focused on the fact that he loves God and wants to do His work. Parents of Mennonite faith, James and Margaret, presented to our classroom too. "We are Mennonite and a very long time ago, our families came to Canada because it was a safe place," stated Margaret, "In our family the Lord is very important just like in all religions!" While these are modest introductions of different faiths, they are important because they are the tender seeds planted that invite the roots of ecumenism to develop and flourish.

Preservation of Catholic Schools

Within Canada's Catholic division, there exists a fear that formally acknowledging the number of non-Catholic students within our elementary schools might threaten the existence of the Catholic school system. This anxiety is fueled by examples from within provinces such as Newfoundland Labrador, which, in a landmark referendum resulting in an amendment to the Constitution of Canada, terminated publically-funded Catholic schools within the province in the 1998-99 school year. A steady pressure exists within Canada to eliminate publically funded Catholic schools in favour of secular schools. While the anxiety is real, so too is our mandate as Catholic educators to teach ecumenical practices. Inviting non-Catholics into our schools offers us the opportunity to teach students there is more than one way to live a life of faith.

In December 2014, Pope Francis was quoted as saying, "For me ecumenism is a priority" (Tornielli, 2014, n.p.). He also said, "I believe in God, not a Catholic God. Jesus is my teacher and my pastor, but God, the Father, Abba, is the light and the Creator. This is my Being. Do you think we are very far apart?" (Vultaggio, 2013, para. 2). I wonder how might we establish, within our Catholic Schools, this ecumenical perspective that is not solely teacher driven but one that is curricular expectation?

Envisioning a Path: Different Beliefs Walking Alongside Each Other

This past winter, our school was privileged to have Delvin, a Cree man originally from Little Pine First Nations, come to our school several times teach us about First Nations culture. For his first presentations he spoke to our Kindergarten class about the significance of Aboriginal drumming. Delvin explained that the Spirit or God is in all living things. Because of the Spirit, or God, we are all connected to each other. He also spoke about his belief that we all have a Spirit guide, or an Angel, that watches over us. When he honoured his drum with sweet grass he interchanged the words honor and bless. Delvin was able to make meaningful connections between his First Nations beliefs and our Catholicism that promoted understanding and acceptance of First Nations culture. First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) education is central to the Saskatchewan curriculum. As I observed how Delvin placed his faith alongside Catholicism it was at that point that I began to envision rich and authentic opportunities for other faiths that exist within our schools and community.

Delvin came to our school because, in Saskatchewan, it is mandated that children be instructed about First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI). In 2007 Treaty Education was introduced “making it mandatory instruction in history and content... in the K-12 curriculum” (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 3) Within our Catholic schools, FNMI and Catholic education walk alongside each other in mutual respect and acceptance. I look specifically to the first goal within this document which states, “By the end of Grade 12, students will understand that Treaty relationships are based on deep understanding of peoples’ identify which encompasses: languages, ceremonies, worldviews, and relationship to place and land” (p. 4). I wonder if, within our Catholic schools, something similar can be accomplished for other faiths? I envision extending offers to community leaders, guests, or parents to make similar presentations that would invite their faiths to walk alongside our Catholic faith.

How Would Momina’s Visit Look Today?

Looking at how the world has changed since Momina’s visit a few years ago it would be amiss not to address the changes that have taken place in our world. A great deal has happened in the world resulting in many having an irrational fear of Muslims. The hijab is often in the media for the wrong reasons.

The appropriateness of traditional clothing worn by some Muslim women, particularly the head covering known as the hijab, has been the focus of often fierce media debates. The hijab debate has come to symbolise the clash of cultures fanned by links between Islamic extremism and 21st century terrorism. (Posetti, n.d., para 1)

The hijab, a symbol of piety and modesty (Gomaa, 2014) has taken on a negative connotation for some non-Muslims in Western society. This portrayal of the hijab and the Islamic faith within mainstream society has prompted me to have new wonders. How would my Kindergartners receive Momina today? Have they overheard news stories about terrorist attacks or adults talking about their own fears? Has the television been on when presidential U.S. candidates are speaking? Has Islamphobia somehow begun to take shape in these young impressionable minds?

More than ever, I recognize the reshaping of society’s notions of the Islamic faith as being a priority. Momina herself recently addressed this concern,

The barbarity in Paris, Sydney, and Ottawa has raised critical questions regarding the role of educational institutions in shaping an increasing pluralistic society....The reaction towards Islam, a misunderstood religion, and toward Muslims has been propagandized through media, movies, art, and cartoons. This increasing reaction and tension is leading to serious divisions in societies. (Khan & Pushnor, 2016, n.p.).

As an educator, changing society's views towards Muslims starts in school and it begins with our youngest citizens. The development of ecumenical practices, suggested above, is central to achieving this goal. I look to Pope Francis for guidance,

How often is Jesus inside and knocking at the door to be let out, to come out? And we do not let him out because of our own need for security, because so often we are locked into the ephemeral structures that serve solely to make us slaves and not free children of God. (Francis, 2013, n.p.)

More than ever before, sowing a garden of an ecumenical spirit within our schools for all children is paramount. It is not always easy to do the right thing and our path is not always well marked. We must ask ourselves, "What would Jesus do? I believe that He would challenge us to develop more ecumenical practices within our Catholic schools so that the seeds planted in the early years of a child's schooling become beautiful and resilient examples of tolerance and acceptance of others. In doing so, we can become true missionaries of Christ.

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