## **Transcript** Learning to Engage: Designing for Inclusion – Religious Literacy in Education



This fireside conversation explored how integrating religious literacy into classrooms can build more inclusive, empathetic, and respectful learning environments across diverse educational settings

Daniel Del Nido shared practical strategies and case studies from his work at the Tanenbaum Center, highlighting how educators, staff, and entire school communities can develop lifelong skills for respectful engagement—starting from early childhood.

The webinar series "Nurturing Seeds: Religious Literacy as a Skill for Peaceful Engagement" is a collaboration between the International Dialogue Centre and the Tanenbaum Centre for Interreligious Understanding.

Setting the Scene: From the Classroom Outward: An opening look at how religious literacy in schools builds lasting respect for difference—and why this work begins with educators and expands to whole communities.

Kate Soules, Co-founder and Executive Director of the Religion and Education Collaborative (REC), Moderator:

Thank you for joining us for the final episode of this Webinar series, for now nurturing seeds of peace. The series has been hosted by the International Dialogue Center and the Tannenbaum Center for interreligious understanding. I see that folks have already started introducing themselves in the chat, so feel free to continue to do so.

My name is Kate Soules, and I've been the moderator for all of these sessions. I'm the Executive Director of the Religion and Education Collaborative and a religious literacy consultant and researcher, primarily focusing on schools and education.

Today, I'm going to be talking with Daniel Del Nido about how religious literacy can foster inclusion and respectful engagement in classrooms and learning spaces. Welcome Dan.

Danile Del Nido, Assistant Director of the Education Program at the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding:

Thank you, Kate. Very glad to be here and thank you to the International Dialogue Center for hosting these conversations. It's been really great.

**KATE SOULES:** Can you start out with giving us a little bit of context for your work? And then maybe a couple of concrete examples of how you see religious literacy in action.

**DANILE DEL NIDO:** Yes, absolutely. So, the organization that I work for is the Tannenbaum Center for interreligious understanding. And we're a nonprofit organization that's based in New York City, and our mission is to promote justice and build respect for religious difference. As an organization. We do that in a number of different fields and institutions, in healthcare fields, in workplaces across the globe, in international peacebuilding settings and in the education sector. And that's where the education program that I work for is mostly located, but we do a lot of work in providing training and curricula for people in workplaces or in healthcare settings or in education.

So thinking about the work that I do primarily with schools, sometimes with individual teachers, sometimes with school districts, we're really focused on building lasting behavioural change. So the overall goal of the education program is for K through 12 age students. So in the United States, that's roughly like ages 5 through 18, to build behaviours of respect for difference, including religious difference. And we do that by providing written curricula and lesson plans for teachers, by providing training and professional development for educators. And by running a teacher network of teachers who are committed to religious literacy education with a focus on inclusivity.

In Conversation: Designing for Respect and Real-World Skills - Exploring how religious literacy education nurtures empathy, diffusing conflict, and responsive teaching grounded in community realities.

From Curriculum to Character How religious literacy shapes behaviour, builds peace, and prepares students for life beyond the classroom.

**DANILE DEL NIDO:** So the specific example that I want to talk about of religious literacy in action is an interesting one, and one that I've thought about over the past couple of years. It comes from a teacher that we worked with for a few years on our Education Advisory Board. That's our teacher network. And he taught High School at a Jewish day school in the Detroit metropolitan area in the State of Michigan.

He taught a number of different courses, including a history elective on the modern Middle East for 10th graders. And so this course addressed the history of the region, and a number of different conflicts, including highly sensitive conflicts like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

When this teacher was working with us, he said that he really wanted his students to work on addressing complex issues with sensitivity. That he really wanted to focus on having them build empathy and the ability to take in multiple perspectives when engaging with difficult topics like conflicts or sensitive topics. So we worked with him to integrate conflict, resolution and transformation skills and connection with religiously motivated peacemakers into his curriculum for this class.

So this involves things like adding profiles of religiously motivated peacemakers who are employing their religious beliefs and their communities to address and transform conflicts in a number of different settings, including in the Middle East. Some of these also involved skill-building for the students. So we wanted to give students an opportunity to practice the skills that they saw these religiously motivated peace actors using in their work.

And the story he told us is a couple months after we started working with him. He told us about a baseball game that happened at his school. He was also the head coach of the school's baseball team, and his team was winning a very lopsided game against another school, and players on the other team were getting kind of angry. And this is the kind of situation where things can get quite nasty or fights can break out. And what amazed him, was that he saw students in his modern Middle East class using the de-escalation techniques that they learned in that class to resolve this situation and to resolve it peacefully and to lower the temperature on the field.

I really like this anecdote for a couple of reasons. Actually, one is that it really shows the importance of curricular and pedagogical design in a way that connects both content knowledge about peace-making and the role of religion in peace-making, especially in case studies with actual skill-building, and application for students, and to show how they can use the knowledge that

they're gaining in the class it makes, for a much more meaningful experience and lasting experience for the students.

There's also a focus on skills here. This teacher had a specific behavioural goal for his students, build empathy, take others, perspectives when thinking about conflict situations. And so we designed the course, and he designed his curriculum around that goal.

And the last thing I like about this anecdote is that it shows the transferability of skills that are developed in religious literacy education. it's really fascinating and rewarding to see that even in moments where religion is not obviously connected to a particular situation, a conflict situation, a social situation, the skills and knowledge acquired in religious literacy, education can still be relevant, and can help students help youth? Engage in these situations. And it's an important thing. it's a helpful way for us to start this conversation and thinking about when we are training and educating youth for religious literacy, we're doing so not just for their classrooms, or something immediate, but for any number of the contexts that they might enter into both in their lives as students and as adults.

#### Tailoring to Context: Understanding School Communities and the climate in which we learn

**KATE SOULES:** Something that we've talked about across all of the Webinars is that religious literacy is so context specific. And what you're talking about is shaping that content and skills to fit that specific context, and then being able to see how the students are expanding, that, taking that outside of the classroom?

When you start working with a new school or a new district or teacher, how do you figure out what you need to do to understand that context and shape what you're going to work with that particular school on.

**DANIEL DEL NIDO:** That's a great question. It involves a couple of different things:

One is to understand the populations within that school and the communities around that school, or that teacher, or even within that district, to understand what the state of religious and cultural diversity looks like in that area. And then to get a sense from a variety of stakeholders, and I'll say a little bit more about what I mean by that in a second, about what the culture of the institution is like, what they think they need to work on where they see their strengths, where they see fault lines within the community.

And so, when I say "stakeholders", it's part of our theory that the climate in which children learn is shaped by a number of different inputs, if you will, into an ecosystem, there's the students themselves and their interactions. There's what they're taking from teachers, educators in formal education settings. But also, what's happening in that broader school community, what's happening in the hallways and in the cafeteria, and the bus ride. And so, there's also administration and staff to think about there and then there's also parents and the larger

community. So we try to engage all of these stakeholders as much as is possible in order to get a rich sense of the community's needs. And so we spend a lot of time on needs assessment and try to offer opportunities for like surveys or interviews to get a sense of what the community needs. And then we try to identify a leader or a couple of leaders in some of those different communities who we can really focus on in our training work under the idea that even when we might be done with a partnership with a school or a school district, there's somebody who can carry on the work, and so we like to try to find those change agents within the school, and we shape our intervention, whatever that might be, whether it's written resources or trainings or workshops around that.

**KATE SOULES:** I really like this approach, and it's very deliberate. And, holistic, what are some of the challenges that you've faced or push back that you've gotten from different stakeholder groups?

**DANILE DEL NIDO:** Yes - also a great question, an important one, because you can get various forms of either hesitancy or resistance from different stakeholders in different ways when it comes to. For example, educators themselves. We often hear from educators that they don't feel prepared to address these issues: there wasn't adequate pre-service training, or that they don't feel like they have the background knowledge in religion to address these issues responsibly when it comes to administrators. Say, there's a worry about parent pushback or community pushback - the idea that we're addressing issues that are too sensitive for this community to engage with and from parents as well. They want to understand what our motivations are, what our background and philosophy is when we work with that community. So there can be resistance or just hesitancy from a number of different sectors. And I should also mention, sometimes we work with schools: the non-teaching, not administrative staff. So people like environmental service workers or people who work in the lunch counter. They'll sometimes say that this might not be relevant to me. I don't need to know this.

And I think that just overall, there isn't one strategy that's going to work with all of these groups. But I always try to err on the side of more transparency, and to try to bring people on as partners and give them a role in building the proper learning environment, building that welcoming, learning environment for the students.

#### From Facts to Inquiry: Shifting the Educator Mindset Towards Curiosity, Confidence, and Lifelong Learning

**KATE SOULES:** You mentioned that the teachers, the educators, often worry that they don't have the adequate training or content knowledge. I found that oftentimes, when you go into an educational context and say, "Oh, we are here to bring religious literacy", there's this assumption that that means you need to know all the facts. Like you need to learn this huge body of content knowledge about religions. Yet as scholars of religion, we know that we're never going to know all of those facts. So how do you help the educators understand that it's not about knowing the content knowledge it's about knowing how to learn about the content, knowledge.

**DANILE DEL NIDO:** You absolutely hit it on the head that we engage with teachers and there is this belief that there's this long list of religious traditions and I need to learn this set of facts and

histories and texts from each one of them. What I'll start by saying is that like, look, I have a PhD. In religious studies, there is so much I don't know. I cannot even begin to tell you about all the things I don't know. And so what we try to focus on are things like inquiry, learning how to ask the right questions and finding the right information. So it is a mindset shift for educators who often want to feel like they're in command of the material understandably, but to recognize that this field is so vast that it's not possible for one person, or even a team of people, to become master of the material. So, to focus more on learning how to ask questions, learning where to find the information that you want to find, and then to develop more disciplinary literacy to think about how to engage with content knowledge when you're teaching it.

And so one way that I think is really helpful - and this goes back to that earlier anecdote is to focus on case studies and to give the opportunity for educators and for students to work through these case studies, because that will give them the analytic and inquiry experience that they can transfer to other situations. So instead of trying to offer that broad 30,000 feet above ground overview of Buddhism, say, to look at a particular community, how they live out their religious identities, and to use the skills they build in that to apply to other situations.

### Seeing the Unseen: Religious Diversity Within Communities - Uncovering surprising internal diversity in schools

KATE SOULES: You talked earlier about - in your needs assessment - learning about the community and who's represented in that community. And I imagine that you probably use that at times to help educators prioritize what they might want to put their energy into learning a little bit more detail about. For instance, I used to live in a town that had a very significant Jewish population, and so if I worked with educators in that town, I would ask them to prioritize learning about different Jewish traditions and maybe not put as much energy into learning about Hinduism right away, because they don't have as many Hindus. It's not something that they're encountering so frequently - not to say that they shouldn't learn about Hinduism - but we all have to prioritize. And so thinking about "where's your energy best spent in this immediate moment?"

**DANILE DEL NIDO:** It's a matter, I think, of prioritizing your learning objectives. So with the needs assessment—you're absolutely right—these can become teaching tools in their own right - and quite illuminating teaching tools actually. One of the things that often comes out is that people don't realize just how diverse their community actually is. There can be an assumption among communities that there's a certain degree of homogeneity. But once you really dig in, you find not just that diversity between religious identities, but also diversity within different religious identities.

So just because a group of people identifies as Jewish or Christian, they don't necessarily believe the same things, practise the same way, or have the same kind of communities. And sometimes, that's one of the first opportunities for people to see religious diversity in their own community and not just as something abstract or "out there in the world," but here and now. So to open up

their thinking to seeing what's there in their own community can, as you say, opens up avenues to other investigations into religious diversity in the world.

**KATE SOULES:** That's so valuable because schools and districts collect so much data about their students and staff and educators. But one of the things that they don't collect any data about is the religious identity of the population - one of the unique aspects of the US Education system - and so a school might be very familiar with all of the other data that they have, but this is data they've never seen before.

**DANIEL DEL NIDO:** And so what results from that is that the religious makeup of a school or a community can often be invisible to them before they step back and take the time to really investigate and dig in.

#### Beyond the Classroom: Religious literacy isn't just for teachers, it impacts everyone who supports students

KATE SOULES: The other thing that you mentioned earlier that I wanted to come back to was the importance of religious literacy for all of the people in the school classroom who are not teaching. So you talked about people who work in the cafeteria Library, school nurses, all of those very important members of the community who might not otherwise be involved in this kind of professional development. When I was doing research on teacher learning about religious diversity one of the participants in my study was a school nurse, and I was intrigued because the participants in the study ended up being far more diverse in terms of school roles than I'd expected, And talking to the school nurse about why she participated, and then what she got out of it was really fascinating and just all of the ways that she was able to use that learning to better connect with the students she worked with, the families, understand religious perspectives on health. So do you ever work with that group specifically, or is everybody integrated? How do you make it so apparent that everybody needs to know about this and not just say the history teachers?

**DANILE DEL NIDO:** Yeah, we did a PD, a professional development, a couple of years ago with a group of school social workers. In a lot of American public schools, social workers have mental health roles, or other social and emotional engagement roles with students. So they're often not in the classroom. But if a student is experiencing an issue of some sort, if they're having a problem in the school, the school social worker will be the person they go to.

And one of the things that came out of that conversation, which was really valuable, is that religious literacy helps you understand the person you're engaging with at a deeper level. And again, it's not just about their stated religious identity or affiliation, or lack thereof. It's how they live their lives. The more deep and fine-grained your religious literacy investigation and inquiry is, the more you can find out about another person, what matters to them, and how the actions they take, the habitual actions they take on a daily basis, that form their sense of self.

And so when we work, especially with these outside-of-the-classroom populations, that interpersonal piece is what we try to focus on. Because by learning this aspect of people, and being able to talk about it with them respectfully, you open up a whole new area of engagement and the ability to talk to another person, to have a meaningful conversation with them, and to address issues when they come up. It might be the case that it's someone in the cafeteria who's engaging with a conflict situation, and it could be helpful for them to understand how to inquire into how people's identities, say, are informing that conflict situation.

**KATE SOULES:** Right. Religion isn't confined to the history classroom or the literature classroom students, educators, staff. Everybody brings their religious identity and experience with them, whether they're in the library or the cafeteria in the hallways. And so it's so important for the whole school community to recognize that.

From Policy to Playground: Embedding Religious Literacy Across School Life - Audience questions deepen the dialogue on measuring impact, teaching in secular systems, early childhood education, and bridging classroom and home.

### How Can Schools Measure the Impact of Religious Literacy? Tracking Growth in Empathy, Belonging, and Respect

**DANILE DEL NIDO**: I do think that we need to do more in terms of empirical research into this. There is some empirical research on the effectiveness of religious literacy initiatives. I'm thinking of the course in Modesto, California, or in—there's also research that comes out of Quebec—into the effectiveness of various interventions. But I do think that there needs to be more.

When we work with schools or school districts, we try to think about it, as you say, both quantitatively and qualitatively. One thing that we do, we'll give this to schools and also to the teachers who work with us in our network of inclusive educators, is pre- and post-surveys that address a number of issues related to religious literacy. These are primarily aimed at their students, but there are some for the teachers themselves, thinking about how well they understand their own background, like the meaning of the holidays they celebrate, their practices, their values, things about learning about others, and their curiosity towards others.

The surveys can involve how to recognize when someone is being mistreated for their religious identity, and the knowledge and willingness to engage in that kind of moment. One way that we conduct impact analysis is by seeing the change from beginning to end. And then we try to, again in as much as is possible, keep giving the survey a few months out, or afterwards, to see just how sticky these skills are. So that's one way.

Another thing, and this is more qualitative, is to help teachers or administrators, or parents as well, identify behaviours that they're looking for. And to really be able to be specific and almost

visualize these behaviours. Think about, for example, if we want to build curiosity in students. Okay, what does that actually look like in practice? That might look like a student asking, being able to phrase a respectful question. Or if they come across something that they don't understand, to ask about it instead of immediately passing judgment on it. So we try to work with them to identify the specific behaviours that they want to see, as a way to demonstrate impact. And so that's more of a qualitative way of thinking about it.

**KATE SOULES:** Yeah, this is a question that I also really love. This is an area that I am very passionate about, and the need for more research on the impact of religious literacy education in all sorts of contexts.

One of the biggest challenges I see in measuring impact is that it's often very hard to predict where you might see those impacts pop up in the future. You shared the story at the beginning about how it showed up in a baseball game. I had a student who was one of those students who was always very quiet. You were never sure if you were getting through to her. And a year after she had left my school — she was an 8th grader when I had her, and she had moved on to high school — she sent me an email back saying, thank you so much for teaching me about Islam. I have a new Muslim friend in my new school, and we went to the mosque together this weekend, and I never would have said yes to that if we hadn't learned about Islam previously.

So, yes, a student that you would never have predicted would be the one reaching out to tell you about the impacts. So this just makes it very challenging, because we don't really want to measure that content knowledge. It's those skills, those behaviours, and trying to think about what are some proxy measures that we can use to try and think about behavioural change, attitudinal change.

# Making the Case for Religious Literacy in Secular Education: How can we promote the academic value of religious literacy without crossing into devotional territory?

**DANILE DEL NIDO:** There are a number of ways to address that question. One is about the value of the non-devotional academic study of religion. And this gets us into what Kate and I were just talking about, in terms of the difficulties of empirically measuring it. But in terms of the overall goals that we have—and that you can see—they fall into a number of different areas. One is about civic participation, and the ability to understand and engage with political or social issues, where religion is a component, in a way that's informed, responsible, and empathetic.

And there are other ways to think about it. Think about that impact more behaviourally and interpersonally, to say that students can engage in these difficult situations, these conflict situations, in a more empathetic and sensitive way with religious literacy education.

Another piece, though, is (we were talking earlier about the other contexts of religious literacy) in places like workplaces or in healthcare. In some of the earlier conversations in the series, about the international diplomacy sectors or civic engagement sectors. Another way to make that case

for religious literacy education, and this specifically academic instruction of religion, is to hear from these groups, and to hear from these sectors about why this kind of education and the skills of religious literacy are important for them.

That's how I think about that question. Thinking about having this distinction between academic and devotional understanding of religion. And then there's a whole set of questions about how that's done in practice. But another piece of it is how we make the case for it and show that it is valuable to do so.

**KATE SOULES:** That last thing you said about making the case for it. That's so important. And something that you and I have talked about a lot is how do we make the case for religious literacy? And—from the modern emergence of this as a field - there's violence, there's bullying, there's conflict—in order to solve those problems and prevent all these negative things we need religious literacy. But what you and I have talked about a lot is, how do we shift that narrative to focus on the positive value? That civic engagement, the conflict resolution before we're responding to a conflict so that we're taking a more proactive approach instead of saying, "Oh, there's a problem, let's solve it. Let's put the things in place ahead of time. So those problems don't emerge."

**DANILE DEL NIDO:** Right, so that schools or teachers or school districts are equipped to engage with them when they occur. And so often this is something I hear, not just for us, but for many people working in the field is that they get a call after something bad has happened. So there's something happening in the world, or some incident that occurred in the school, and some harm has already been done, and that's when the intervention is called for, and that's inevitable, of course, that's going to happen and we're glad to get that call, and I mean not glad that it occurred, but glad that they're addressing it in a robust way.

But I think that we also want to, as you say, shift that conversation towards the proactive, equipping, or inoculation- if you will, of schools and school communities, so that they're prepared.

**KATE SOULES:** Right, like you said though, building those skills ahead of time, so that hopefully, when that incident occurs, the people on the ground are already equipped to respond, and it doesn't escalate. And then they don't need to call you, because they've already engaged with you.

**DANILE DEL NIDO:** Right, right.

How early is too early? What does age-appropriate religious look like and how do we build family and community buy in from the start?

**Daniel:** It can start in early childhood. It can start in—what we talk about—K through 12. But there's also pre-K, and even 3K, so students as young as 3. When we engage with those early childhood populations, the conversation is different. It's about thinking about what I do, what I do with my family, and then starting to connect that to other people. And young children at that age really like to make those comparisons, really like to be able to share about the things they do

as a family. So starting the conversation that way—I think it can be as early as 3K or pre-K, certainly early childhood.

When it comes to family and community buy-in, there are a couple of ways of approaching that. One is, as we were saying before, to engage with the families and communities proactively and to be transparent about the goals for any religious literacy program—not just one that occurs in early childhood, but also later on. One thing we've especially seen with this younger group, when we've worked with teachers doing early childhood to younger elementary, is that students will go home and ask their parents questions like: Why do we do this thing? Why do we celebrate this holiday? Why do we go to this community?

And when that happens—that curiosity—it really builds the buy-in from parents and families. When they see their child showing more curiosity and engagement with their own identities and communities, it really generates goodwill.

**Kate Soules:** And yeah, we have a colleague who teaches high school, and he generates parent buy-in by offering parent classes. So once a month or so, he'll offer an evening seminar for parents on whatever topic their students are learning about, so that the parents are able to engage their children in conversation. I would be really curious to see what that might look like for parents of younger children, equipping them to be able to answer some of those questions. Because kids have strange questions. Sometimes they're really hard questions.

You never know what they're going to come up with. And so, in a culture where we're kind of trained not to talk about religion in public—and oftentimes not even very much at home—starting that culture of "you can ask questions, we can find answers together" is a really good way to get parents to have that buy-in. If kids are used to talking about this from a young age, then they'll be even more prepared to do more in-depth study when they get to middle or high school.

Daniel Del Nido: Yes, and to communicate also that there aren't any dumb questions. So often—and this is true across the board—people are worried about getting something wrong, making a mistake, looking like they don't know, or seeming ignorant. That creates a kind of chilling effect where they just don't want to engage with the issue because they're so worried about embarrassing themselves. And that's just as true for teachers as for anyone else. That's part of why we want to inculcate this mindset that everyone is a learner when it comes to religion. Your student's a learner, and you, the teacher, are a learner—and that's okay. We're all learning together.

Learning About Others, Discovering Ourselves: Closing reflections on how religious literacy strengthens identity, curiosity, and connection, and why this learning journey never really ends

**DANIEL DEL NIDO:** There isn't a bright line where religious literacy starts and stops. Where religious literacy education starts and stops. And so there is some overlap between these two things.

I think the first thing to say is that when we make a distinction between academic and devotional study of religion—or teaching religion versus teaching about religion—we have specific goals in mind when we're doing that at school. We're trying to prepare children to engage with others and to help them understand what's happening in the world in a deeper, richer way. So the goals of instruction differ. It's not about exploring your own spiritual life, attachment, or deepening a sense of identity. That's where there can be perceived conflict—or even suspicion—when schools engage in this kind of education. But one data point that does come out of the existing empirical research is that there's sometimes a fear that students, when they learn about other religious traditions, will become detached from their own—that they'll become less connected to their identity. And that simply hasn't shown up in the data. In fact, what has shown up—particularly in Modesto—is that students become more curious. They become more curious about their own identities. So this is one of those areas where research can be really valuable. And it's also an area for communication with parents—to say clearly that, yes, we are teaching for specific purposes, and we want to be transparent about what those are. And those purposes are not in conflict with what's happening at home.

KATE SOULES: I'm so glad you brought up that research about students often becoming more engaged in their own religious tradition when they start learning about religion in school. And that's an area where we need a lot more research, because this is a continual concern among parents and communities—that if students learn about something that's different from themselves at school, they're going to either stop believing in what they are taught at home or be tempted to convert to another religious tradition because it looks fun and exciting. And we just don't have—we have some, but not enough—data to really support that idea that no, this is actually a way to help students learn how to then apply those skills to learning more about their own religious tradition and identity. And maybe make parents aware that your child might be coming home with more questions about your own tradition and be prepared to start discussing this more. But it's not because they're necessarily going to reject it. They're just realizing that there are more questions you can ask than you might otherwise be exposed to within your religious community.

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