

Comparing Perspectives on Religious Education: The Treatment of Religion in Hong Kong Liberal Studies

1. **OBJECTIVES OR PURPOSES OF THE PAPER:** The primary purpose of this paper is to analyze how religion is portrayed and explored within the Liberal Studies curriculum in Hong Kong schools. Liberal Studies is the main place for social studies and moral and civic education in Hong Kong today, as one of four required subjects (alongside math, English, and Chinese). Liberal Studies aims in part “to help students appreciate and respect diversity in cultures and views in a pluralistic society.” However, it is also a new part of curriculum which teachers can find hard to implement. This paper specifically analyzes how religion is discussed and described in Liberal Studies curriculum materials including major textbooks used, as textbooks are thus far often directing the course of classroom teaching in Liberal Studies.

2. **MAIN PERSPECTIVE OR THEORETICAL/CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK USED:** A comparative multicultural framework undergirds this project. The researcher’s past experience in multicultural religious education in the United States informs the choice of topic. Though both the United States and Hong Kong are proudly diverse places with strong traditions of religious freedom, Hong Kong lacks the tradition of common schooling of many Western societies and its aim to help students understand and assimilate with one another. As a result, the multicultural content may not be as celebratory about diversity there. Additionally, in Hong Kong it is understood that individuals can participate in various religious traditions at the same time, while in Western societies people tend to be more exclusive in their religious belief or unbelief. Though comparisons of multiculturalism in education are a backdrop to this project, its ultimate aim remains to consider whether students are learning what they should learn to understand religiously diverse others from the Liberal Studies curriculum, from an intercultural-multicultural stance which values dialogue and initial respect and good faith in the midst of diversity.

3. **ANALYTICAL METHODS, RESEARCH DESIGN, OR MODES OF INQUIRY:** This paper will employ a qualitative content analysis of content discussing or portraying religion in Hong Kong in Liberal Studies teaching and learning resources. The qualitative analysis will focus on “latent” content. That is, the meaning or the context of references will be scrutinized, rather than merely the manifest (obvious) presence or absence of them. Pictures as well as text will be analyzed to understand connotations used. This paper is part of a larger study, which includes parallel investigation by the presenter and research assistants and active research alongside student teachers and practicing teachers in Hong Kong. This background will also be discussed in evaluating findings.

4. **DATA SOURCES OF EVIDENCE:** 5 of the most popular Liberal Studies textbooks currently used, in the subjects of “Globalization” and “Hong Kong Today”; additional curriculum guidelines and resources given by the Hong Kong Ministry of Education Curriculum Development Council.

5. **RESULTS AND/OR CONCLUSIONS:** So far, results show that religious is very unevenly explored in Liberal Studies as a whole, in terms of both breadth and depth. Unlike in areas where multicultural curriculum is more entrenched, there is no major comparative framework offered, where the diversity of religious experience either in Hong Kong or worldwide is discussed. Additionally, sporadic coverage is particularly negative toward Islam, in relation to terrorism. This is a particularly surprising finding to the researcher, who is familiar with the United States issues around representation of Islam in education, and who did not expect for the challenges to be so severe in Hong Kong, which is not a place with a particular history of terrorism.

6. **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY TO THE FIELD OF COMPARATIVE OR INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION:** This study sheds light on the different ways multiculturalism

is expressed in different educational environments as it considers the representation of religion in Hong Kong curriculum in comparison with the traditional multicultural framework of Western societies wherein portraying the breadth of international religious diversity (and internal religious diversity) are often important goals. As Hong Kong Liberal Studies aims to develop student appreciation for diversity, the study also can enable Hong Kong curriculum and textbook developers to consider ways to improve Liberal Studies, as the newest part of Hong Kong curriculum, and the most essential subject from the perspective of civic education.