

Assessing Religious Knowledge and Conversational Ability in Pre-Service Agricultural
Educators

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Introduction

Approximately sixty-six percent of the U.S. population identifies as Christian, twenty-seven percent as religiously unaffiliated, and six percent as part of a non-Christian religion (Public Religion Research Institute, 2024). Although public schools cannot track students' religious affiliations, their religious demographics are believed to reflect the broader U.S. population (Pew Research Center, 2019). Since religion is a key aspect of identity and culture (Pierre-Yves et al., 2009), religious diversity in classrooms contributes to cultural diversity. To effectively educate students from diverse religious backgrounds, teachers must develop cultural sensitivity, often gained through interactions with different cultures (Vincent et al., 2015; Plata, 2008). While there is a recognized need for preservice teachers to engage with religious diversity (Subedi, 2006), little research has focused on their knowledge and preparedness in this area. This study aims to explore preservice agriculture teachers' knowledge of religions and assess their perceived ability to converse with students of those religions about that knowledge, specifically Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986). Social cognitive theory posits human learning occurs in social environments through interactions with others (Schunk, 2012). Interactions within social environments directly influence one's self-efficacy. As individuals spend more time and opportunities interacting with an environment, they become more confident in the environment (Schunk, 2012). Bandura states this learning can occur enactively via direct participation or vicariously through observing modeled behavior (Bandura, 1986). In the realm of education, viewing religion from a social cognitive lens allows educators to understand how religion influences their students (Carone et al., 2001) and teacher educators can understand how to promote interactions between preservice teachers and religious diversity to increase self-efficacy for interacting with religious diversity in their classrooms (Martin et al., 2009).

Methodology

Using an explanatory descriptive questionnaire design (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), the study's population was preservice agricultural educators enrolled in the University of Kentucky. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling (Etikan et al., 2016). The questionnaire was distributed utilizing Qualtrics. Twenty-six individuals participated ($n = 26$) and were asked to assess their knowledge of the history, beliefs, traditions, holidays, and symbols of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, respectively. In addition, participants rated their perceived ability to discuss these five areas with a student from each of these faiths. To assess

their knowledge, participants rated themselves on a five-anchor Likert scale in which 1 denoted “No knowledge at all” and 5 denoted “Very knowledgeable.” To assess their ability to discuss with students from the faith, participants rated themselves on a five-anchor Likert scale where 1 denoted “Unable to discuss” and 5 denoted “Can discuss with sensitivity and understanding.” Data was analyzed using descriptive statistical analysis.

Results

Among the three religions, the mean knowledge ranged from “No knowledge at all” to “Very little knowledge” ($M = 1.67$) to between “Knowledgeable” and “Very knowledgeable” ($M = 4.34$) on the scale. Christianity emerged as the area preservice teachers were most familiar with, while Judaism and Islam were much less understood. In terms of conversational ability, the mean scores spanned from “Struggle to have a basic conversation” ($M = 2.04$) to between “Can have an informed discussion” and “Can have a discussion with sensitivity and understanding” ($M = 4.48$). Preservice teachers felt much more comfortable having a discussion about Christianity with Christian students with students than they did discussing Judaism or Islam with students of the respective faith (Table 1).

Table 1: *Preservice Agriculture Teacher’s Knowledge and Conversational Ability Surrounding Diverse Religions*

Religion	Knowledge		Conversational Ability	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Christianity	4.34	0.72	4.48	0.68
Judaism	2.29	0.89	2.52	1.22
Islam	1.67	0.84	2.04	0.72

Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, the preservice agriculture teachers demonstrated a deficiency in knowledge of Judaism and Islam and limited self-efficacy for having a culturally sensitive conversation with students of these religions. Generally, these educators have not been adequately prepared to engage with religiously diverse students, highlighting a need for teacher education programs to better prepare future teachers for such interactions. Programs can address this by increasing purposeful, enactive interactions between preservice teachers and diverse religions. Social cognitive theory suggests these interactions foster cultural sensitivity (Bandura, 1986; Vincent et al., 2015) and build self-efficacy for future interactions (Schunk, 2012). For instance, the University of Kentucky requires preservice educators to attend an “Immersion Experience,” such as visiting a mosque, followed by reflective writing. Teacher education programs might also introduce culturally relevant courses that explore multiculturalism within agriculture, better equipping preservice agriculture teachers to engage with students from diverse religious backgrounds through vicarious learning.

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