

The International Interfaith Initiative Research Project: Urban Schools, Faith and Civic Engagement

Robert J. Helfenbein

*Center for Urban and Multicultural Education
Indiana University-Indianapolis*

Charlie Wiles

International Interfaith Initiative, Director

How do religion, society, and education intertwine to affect the lived experiences of students? An opportunity to study this “complicated conversation” (Pinar, 2004) arose with the founding of the International Interfaith Initiative (I.I.I.). This collaborative project sponsored the Peace Learning Center, the Office of the Mayor of Indianapolis, the Sagamore Institute, and the Center for Urban and Multicultural Education (CUME) brought together teachers and students from public and private middle schools to participate in an interfaith youth dialogue series in the Fall of 2006. Concurrently, an ongoing community dialogue among prominent faith communities and the aforementioned partners continues to be facilitated with the expressed goal of assessing the feasibility of establishing an International Interfaith Research Center and Museum in Indianapolis, Indiana.

Recognizing that future leaders will require skills to work effectively between and among people with different faith backgrounds the International Interfaith Initiative (III) hosted a Youth Dialogue Series to provide a safe and structured opportunity for Indianapolis youth to meet and learn about the various communities that comprise our city. The dialogues also provide a variety of invaluable opportunities for all members of participating faith-based and educational institutions to learn about one another, their respective faith traditions, and share in meaningful service and educational activities.



The first Youth Dialogue Series brought together 20 inter-religious 8th grade students from 5 local schools to discuss issues of faith, youth culture, and society. The five participating schools included St. Thomas Aquinas School (Catholic), Congregation Beth-El Zedeck (Jewish), Rousseau McClellan (Indianapolis Public Schools), The Oaks Academy (Evangelical Christian), and the School of Knowledge (Islamic).

Administrative representatives from the different organizations began meeting in February 2006 to assist in planning the dialogue series, which began for students in June 2006 and is continuing to date. The five institutions were asked to nominate four 8th grade students to participate. The individual schools ultimately chose the participant students; however, III encouraged choosing students that represented the diversity within

each community. As it is currently planned, the Youth Dialogue Series consists of three stages to be completed over a two year period.

Students who participated in the initiative gained leadership skills by having the experience of hosting the other students when they visit their respective schools.



Students also enriched their understanding of our community, its diversity, and some of the issues we face living in a pluralistic society.

This program's unique contribution is that it builds community between groups that traditionally and historically are reluctant to speak to one another. The Youth Dialogue Series was a pilot program in 2006-07 and, with its continued success and diligent academic documentation, will be replicated locally, regionally, and nationally. Ultimately,

the goal of III's Youth Dialogue Series is that dialogue between students with diverse faith backgrounds becomes self-sustaining, whereby after the 2 year program has ended, these students are continuing to contact each other and continue to participate in other programs together. Student generated themes such as religion and the media, stereotypes, and commonalities in faith provided the impetus for the dialogues and the object of the CUME study.

As a beginning research component, the Youth Dialogue Series provided the opportunity to put theorists alongside practitioners by engaging in an emergent curriculum research project with oversight by representatives from the participating institutions. Using a methodology correlative to Lather's 'critical inquiry' (1986), the I.I.I. seeks to foster students' awareness of their educational, social, and religious experiences through dialogue with students of differing religious and cultural backgrounds. Providing insights that will assist researchers in coming to greater understandings of the 'lived experiences' of our students, the resulting research paper focuses on how dialogue acts as curriculum and is realized through the relationship between faith, education, and community all in pursuit of positive civil society.

References:

Lather, P. (1986). Research as praxis. *Harvard Educational Review* (pp.257-277). Beverly Hills, California: Sage.

Pinar, W. (2004). *What is curriculum theory?* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Links:

International Interfaith Initiative [homepage]

<http://www.internationalinterfaith.org/>

Interfaith conversation group helps young people learn about diverse religions

http://www.ypress.org/joomla/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=109&Itemid=2

Initiative to explore international Interfaith Research Center & Museum in Indianapolis [press release]

<http://www.indygov.org/eGov/Mayor/PR/2006/9/20060920a.htm>