The Interfaith Initiative: An Interfaith Dialogue Experiment

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THE INTERFAITH INITIATIVE: AN INTERFAITH DIALOGUE EXPERIMENT

by

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Jessica Molly Graff
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ABSTRACT

This capstone explores the interfaith dialogue surrounding teaching world religions in an elementary classroom setting. The Interfaith Initiative does this through a six-week program that engages kindergarteners through sixth graders on the five major world religions: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. With interactive activities such as games, skits, and crafts, the students can examine and discuss abstract concepts like fasting, karma, and tolerance. This capstone measures the success of this program through the interactive curriculum, drawings of abstract concepts done by students, journals by the principal investigator, and transcripts of audio interviews between the principal investigator and students regarding aspects of the program. As well, this program also produces a final product of an op-ed detailing the experiences of the principal investigator and furthering the conversation on interfaith dialogue on a larger scale. The goal of the Interfaith Initiative is not only to prove the benefits of teaching world religions at a younger age rather than waiting for higher education, but additionally to engage students in interfaith dialogue in a classroom setting. This program was able to add valuable information to the field of interfaith studies by displaying that these conversations benefit students in exploring diversity, new traditions, and the world around them.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Interfaith Initiative would not have been possible without the continual support and dedication of my mentor and advisor, Dr. Kristy Nabhan-Warren. Not often are we lucky to meet someone who is able to dream alongside us, and this thesis was blessed with a mentor who not only was able to dream, but also create and construct. I would also like to thank the Engaged Social Innovation Advisory Board for their ingenuity in creating a major, and their trust that students would follow through with their vision. I especially would like to thank Art Spisak for his assistance in getting this program through IRB, Dave Gould for his kind words when I wanted to give up, and Thomas Keegan for getting me interested in this major at all. Finally, I would like to thank my students, for their laughter, honesty, and faith, because without them, this project and program would have been nothing.
CAPSTONE OVERVIEW

"All major religious traditions carry basically the same message, that is love, compassion and forgiveness the important thing is they should be part of our daily lives." – The Dalai Lama

While this capstone started as a study to prove the benefits of teaching elementary-aged student’s world religions and religious tolerance rather than waiting for secondary education, it became so much more. The Interfaith Initiative is a program not only about different faith traditions, but it is project that explores interfaith dialogue in a new and innovative way.

I am often asked why I chose to do my project, is it because of the current political climate? Is it because I am attempting to force religion on a bunch of elementary school students? Is it because I am simply a religious nut?

If I am being honest, my project started as many projects do, in a selfish attempt to understand myself. A Jewish girl who had grown up in a Buddhist-influenced new-age religion and converted to Christianity when she came to the University. To understand my love of meditation, matzo ball soup, and my heavenly father. I had always lived between categories in a categorically inclined world and I felt that maybe if I could explain how religion was not so back and white, maybe my faith would feel less so. I sought the company and attention of those who would understand my dilemma best, children. The next generation who is just beginning to comprehend what everything means, why a woman would wear a hijab, and what is the fuss with fasting anyway. I realized that kids would be able to see past the limits that society had put on what a religion was supposed to be, and, so maybe, I could too.

However, this project has not come without its challenges. From building the curriculum, getting IRB approval, to even simple things like keeping my classroom in check during the first warm days of spring, this program has tested and stretched me in ways I could never have imagined.

While I had anticipated challenges from both the afterschool programs and the parents of the students I was teaching, I found that gaining the interest of schools and the acceptance of parents was the easiest step of all. As I pitched my project to the thirteen afterschool directors, I was shocked to find that all thirteen were excited and willing to have me come teach at their school. As I spoke to different parents about the program, I was excited to hear that many of them understood the necessity of what I was doing. One parent even reached out to me at the end of the program to let me know how despite being non-religious herself, she wanted her children to be engaged in the world around them and was thankful that her students got the chance to be in the program. I
would like to think this lack of controversy is because of how interfaith awareness has grown recently, but I also think it has to do with the emphasis I placed on transparency. I made sure that every parent and afterschool director had a copy of the curriculum before I even started teaching. I wanted to make sure that both parties knew exactly what their students were learning, and knew that I was happy to be a resource if they had questions. While I may have struggled with building the curriculum, I knew that it was extremely important that no parent struggled with the content of my project.

As mentioned, my first actual challenge was building the curriculum itself. Going into my capstone, I had minimal teaching experience and was unfamiliar with most classroom management techniques, but teaching is a learning experience. Through my curriculum, I was able to learn how to tangibility teach religion, and how to make abstract concepts simple. While I will not be stepping back into the classroom anytime soon, these techniques will be beneficial when I engage with interfaith conversations with my peers and even my superiors on the job. Through interactive activities such as playing the dreidel game, using dominos to display karma, and teaching the students meditation, I felt that I was able to make the different world religions come alive for my students, even for just an hour a week.

My second challenge was going through the University of Iowa’s Institutional Review Board. While this was an unexpected setback in putting together the program, this is where I gained the most insight into the ethical process of research. Through the IRB process, I could refine the goals of my project and look deeper into the value this program would add to this body of research. These skills were extremely beneficial in creating a professional research study that would appeal to the students, but also the parents and schools’ where I was working. With IRB’s approval, I was able build a program that would protect its most important aspect, the students.

Despite them being crucial to my program and capstone, the biggest challenge to the Interfaith Initiative was the students themselves. While teaching, I was humbled by their curiosity and ingenuity. I was taught that it is ok to not have all the answers and the importance of thinking on your feet. While many adults are afraid to explore religion, my students were not. I was continually challenged by their questions, repeatedly laughed at their antics, and even teared up at having to say goodbye six weeks later.

If I learned anything from this experiment it is that faith is surprising and so are children. And that it is much easier to accept that we are all similar than to decide we are different.

I think the Interfaith Initiative benefits the community in that it brings interfaith dialogue to the classroom in way that has never been done before. It allows the younger generation to engage with world religions in a tangible way, and equips them for the
diversity of the world around them. But even if they leave the program and forget what monotheistic means, they learned about respect and tolerance, and that is the biggest innovation of all.
PROGRAM BREAKDOWN

The Interfaith Initiative is a six-week program conducted during the spring 2017 semester that was taught at three elementary schools in Johnson County, Iowa during the afterschool programs at James Van Allen Elementary, Herbert Hoover Elementary, and Ernest Horn Elementary. The Interfaith Initiative was taught at James Van Allen on Tuesdays at 3:30pm, at Herbert Hoover on Wednesdays at 3:45pm and Ernest Horn on Thursdays at 3:30pm. Students ranging from kindergarten through sixth grade were able to participate in the program and student groups ranged from fifteen students to twenty-five students. Along with studying the five major world religions, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, the program also used the theme of “The Golden Rule” to tie all of the world religions together. Through this theme, the program emphasized respect and religious tolerance while exploring and engaging students on different religions traditions. The breakdown of the weeks went as follows:

Week One – Introduction

Week Two – Christianity and Judaism

Week Three – Islam

Week Four – Hinduism

Week Five – Buddhism

Week Six – Review and Wrap Up

Note: The Interfaith Initiative was also taught at Bluford Garner Elementary and Grant Wood Elementary as a private citizen, without IRB approval, during the spring 2017 semester. While this will not be able to be counted as University of Iowa research, this was beneficial in testing out the curriculum on actual students and adapting activities to fit the classroom setting. Due to it not being official University of Iowa approved research, documentation will not be included from these schools.
CAPSTONE DOCUMENTATION

I have chosen to document my capstone, the Interfaith Initiative, in five different ways. Though the curriculum itself, samples of the drawings done by the students during the program, journal entries I had made throughout the program, transcripts of the interviews between myself and the students, and the op-ed published in the online interfaith magazine INTER about the experience as a whole.
THE CURRICULUM

I choose to document the curriculum due to its innovative nature and because I believe that by allowing others to access this curriculum, it will further the interfaith conversation in the classroom. By documenting the curriculum, other interfaith leaders can access this project, furthering the interfaith dialogue in the classroom and benefiting students beyond Johnson County.

The Interfaith Initiative Week One

Objective of week one: to introduce the golden rule and get the students thinking about what that means in terms of world religions.

Warm up: Play the game “Who do you love?”

1. Arrange the chairs in a circle so that the seats are facing inside.
2. The player who is “it” stands in the center of the circle, and the other kids sit in the chairs facing her. The “it” approaches one of the seated children and says, “Who do you love?” The player who is approached must come up with an answer, such as “I love everyone wearing pink” or “I love everyone who has a dog,” and then anyone wearing pink or who has a pet dog must stand up and scramble to find a new seat.
3. Players cannot shift to the seat next to them, should it become vacant. They must move at least two chairs away from their original spot. In the meantime; “it” should try to sit down in one of the vacant chairs.

Once everyone finds a spot, the one player left standing becomes the new “it” and must then approach a seated player and ask, “Who do you love?”

Then do introductions:
Ask each child:
Name
Age
What is one thing they love?
If they belong to a particular religion?

*It is ok if this takes a while. Students should feel comfortable talking about themselves in the program. Engage with each student as they tell you about themselves*

Golden Rule Lesson: Begin by showing the video clip
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d56rsXJ86Yw

After video, ask class: “So what is the golden rule? Give me some examples.”
After examples: “Now I want you to think and tell me about some of the differences between the children, raise your hand”
“One of the differences was that these children practiced different religions, which is what we are going to be looking at during these three weeks. *Show pictures of the different religions in slides. See if anyone has heard of any of the religions*

After slides ask class: “So what is a religion?”
Definition: “Well religion is a way to explain a certain set of beliefs and practices.”

Then ask “So what do you think is a belief?”
Definition: “It could be a strong feeling you have about something or something that you believe is true.”

**Explain example and ask them if they have any of their beliefs to share**
Ex: I believe pizza is the best food in the world or I believe that we all should be honest.

After examples say: “Some people feel very strongly about their beliefs, they could even love them, just like we talked about things we love in the beginning of class. But sometimes we love different things, like you love dogs and you love cats. It’s ok to love different things. Do you think you should be mean to someone if they love different things than you?”
*Someone answers no*

“Exactly. That’s why we use the golden rule, so that we can treat others how they want to be treated, even if they love different things than us. All of the religions we are going to study use the golden rule, this shows how even though we may believe different things, we should all still treat each other the way that we want to be treated.”

“Next week we will be looking two groups who have different beliefs, Christianity and Judaism and how they both use the golden rule”

**Close Out Drawing Activity:**
Bring paper and markers and have the kids draw an example of the golden rule. Bring back next session and talk about for the next warm up activity.
Interfaith Initiative Week 2
Objective: To understand some of the religious traditions surrounding Christianity and Judaism and how that interacts with religious tolerance and the golden rule.

Warm Up: Acting Game
Split class into table groups:
Give each group a scenario, have them act out what it looks like when you follow the golden rule, and what it looks like when you don't follow the golden rule.

1) Your classmate falling in front of your friends
2) Your little brother or sister borrowing your toys without asking
3) You getting made fun of for what you believe

Ask after activity:
“How did those situations make you feel?
For the third group, do you think getting made fun of for your beliefs happens a lot?
Do you have any examples?”

Disclaimer before direct lesson begins “Now remember, there are different groups, or sects in each of the religions we are studying. To explain this little better I am going to use an analogy, pretend you are part of a religion that believes that pizza is the best. While everyone may believe that pizza is the best, some people might think pepperoni pizza is the best, while other may think Hawaiian is the best. Though they all may agree on a foundational belief (pizza is the best), they disagree on the details (pepperoni vs. Hawaiian). Religions can be like that too. While they may all believe in the same foundation, they might disagree on certain details. So what we are going to be learning about today is Judaism and Christianity’s foundational beliefs.”

Direct Lesson: Judaism
What you say:
“It’s monotheistic: what does that mean? (Only one God)
All the religions we will be looking at today are monotheistic.”

“Some religious texts Jewish people use read are the Torah (contains five books of Moses and the 613 commandments (mitzvot) and the 10 commandments) and the Tanach (Hebrew Bible), which contains not only the Five Books of Moses (Torah) but also 39 other important Jewish texts.”

“Judaism was established by a promise between God and Abraham a really long time ago
This promise was that the Jewish people would be God’s chosen people and one day a messiah (or special leader) would come back and make the world a better place.

The Jewish people went through many struggles though, they were enslaved for a really long time in Egypt and a man named Moses, with the help of God rescued them and
gave them the Torah, which are the laws of God that people who practice Judaism live by. One way the Jewish people celebrate this freedom is through Passover.

**Passover:** This is a holiday in the spring celebrating the Jewish people’s freedom from slavery in Egypt. It lasts seven or eight days and includes a special feast called the Passover Seder. It’s filled with telling the story of Passover and eating special kosher foods, which means they were blessed by a Rabbi, or Jewish priest.

**Explaining some other Jewish Religious traditions and holidays:**

**“Rosh Hashanah** is the Jewish New Year and Yom Kippur is one of the most important Jewish holidays, known as a day or prayer or fasting, which means a time where instead of eating or playing games or going on the computer, you think about your religion. This is a way that the Jewish people renew themselves, or get ready for the New Year. They also celebrate by sounding the shofar (a hollowed-out ram’s horn).”

**“Hanukah is probably the holiday you are all the most familiar with:** One religious tradition Jewish people celebrate is Hanukah, a holiday in winter that celebrates the rededication of the Jewish temple. A temple or synagogue is where Jewish people go to celebrate their beliefs. A long time ago, there was a mean king in Jerusalem named Antiochus III who would not let the Jewish people practice their religion. However, with the help of a brave man named Judah Maccabee, the Jewish people were able to send the king away and Hanukkah celebrates this victory. During the celebration, they light a menorah for 8 days and nights, with the candles representing knowledge and creation. Another thing they would do during the celebration is play with a dreidel.”

**Dreidel Game:**

Have kids sit in a circle
The game is played by distributing to all participants Chanukah Gelt (coins). Everyone places a coin in the middle and someone spins the Dreidel. If the Dreidel stops showing Nun, he neither wins nor loses. If Gimmel, he wins the entire pot. If Hay, he gets half the pot. If Shin, he must put one in the pot.
Pot=coins placed in the middle of the circle.
N (Nun), G (Gimel), H (He), S (Shin),

**After the game ask:** “Do you think you were being sportsman like during the game?”

**When students answer no say:** “the golden rule is great way to act during a game, instead of fighting over the coins or calling each other names you can help one another. What do you think it would look like if you used the golden rule during the game?”

**Emphasize that being a good sportsman is an important part of the golden rule.**

**Direct Lesson: Christianity**

What you say: “Christianity Is also monotheistic. It is based on the life of Jesus Christ, who Christians believe, is the son of God that came down from heaven to help Christians establish a new convent, or promise, with God.”
**Turn slide to bridge image, explain image:** “So if one cliff is the Christian people and another cliff is God, Jesus was the bridge who brought them together. Christians believe that Jesus is the messiah, or special leader that the Jewish people were waiting for. But Jewish people don’t believe that Jesus is the special leader and are still waiting for him/her to arrive.”

“The Christian Bible, or religious text of the Christian people, is split into two parts the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament contains many of the same teachings as the Torah, which we just learned, is part of what religion? Someone answers Judaism. Right and the New Testament is about the teachings of Jesus Christ.”

“In the writings of the New Testament, Christians believe Jesus came down from heaven to teach, but some people didn’t like that. Jesus would call himself the son of God or the messiah, and that made some people angry. So one of his 12 followers, or disciples, betrayed him, and his punishment was to die on a cross, or be crucified. But Christians believe that three days later he rose again and that means that Jesus really was the son of God and that he was so powerful that even he could defeat death.”

**Explaining some of the Christian holidays and traditions:**

“Christians celebrate two major holidays, Christmas and Easter. Christmas is holiday during the wintertime when Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus and Easter is a holiday in the springtime when Christians celebrate Jesus’ defeat over death. Christians celebrate both of these places with a church service and lots of time with family.”

Example of the golden rule in Christianity:
The Good Samaritan
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A8VRSFuFDGk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A8VRSFuFDGk)

After the video ask “So which of the three people used the golden rule? If you were passing by, what do you think you would do?”

**Final Activity:** Pass out construction paper and have the student draw something they have learned that day, collect drawings and discuss next class

**Next Class we are discussing Islam!**
Interfaith Initiative Week 3
Objective: To understand some of the religious traditions surrounding Islam how that interacts with religious tolerance and the golden rule.

Warm Up Activity: Review Game

Play - Who Am I?

Have the students get into partners. The partners designated as "it" leave the room. While they are away, the others decide what review word they should be when they return. For example, if they decide on an Astronaut, they call the partners back, and partners have to ask each child in the circle questions about what/who they are (what they should buy, what would they wear, what they would do). Once the "it" group guesses what/who they are another group takes a turn. If the pair cannot guess who/what they are, they can ask a classmate for help. The classmate that can guess what/who they are gets to go next. The goal is to have the students recall different key characters/holidays from the previous lesson.

Examples to choose from:
Moses
Jesus Christ
Hanukah
Easter
Passover
Christmas
Joseph
The Good Samaritan
Torah
Bible

Make the last round Abraham
If students remember say “Great, we are going to talk about Abraham again today, let’s go back to our seats so we can discuss how Abraham relates to Islam”
If students don’t remember “it’s ok! We are going to talk about Abraham again today, let’s go back to our seats so we can review!”

Reminder before the direct lesson (if students remember disclaimer you don’t have to go in depth but just remind them.)
“Now remember, there are different groups, or sects in each of the religions we are studying. To explain this little better I am going to use an analogy, pretend you are part of a religion that believes that pizza is the best. While everyone may believe that pizza is the best, some people might think pepperoni pizza is the best, while other may think Hawaiian is the best. Though they all may agree on a foundational belief (pizza is the best), they disagree on the details (pepperoni vs. Hawaiian). Religions can be like that too. While they may all believe in the same foundation, they might disagree on certain details. So what we are going to be learning about today is Islam’s foundational beliefs.”
Direct Lesson: Islam

Review who Abraham is – “God and Abraham made a promise a really long time ago that the Jewish people would be God’s chosen people and one day a messiah (or special leader) would come back and make the world a better place.”

“So remember five minutes ago when I told you about a guy named Abraham? Well Abraham had many sons and one of those sons was named Ishmael. And Ishmael had many sons and from his many sons over many years came Muhammad.

Now who is Muhammad?

Muslims (people who practice Islam) believe that Muhammad is the last prophet of God (Muslims call God Allah)

There were many prophets before him such as Abraham, Joseph, and even Jesus, but Muhammad was the last.

Similar to the Bible and the Torah, Muslims also have a book of teachings called the Quran. The Quran contains lessons God spoke to the Muslim people through the prophet Muhammad.

The foundation of Muslim beliefs is in the 5 pillars of Islam.

The five pillars are:

Faith
Prayer
Charity
Fasting
And a Journey to the Holy Land

Emphasize how the pillar of charity is a good example of the golden rule.

Note: Say “the boy in this picture is wearing a taqiyah. This a special cap that is often worn during prayer. It was believed that Muhammad wore a similar cap. Women in Islam also often wear religious coverings. This next slide will explain some of them. Women wear this as a symbol of modesty and privacy, so that they can focus on their religion.”

Explaining some of the Islamic holidays and traditions:

“There are two official holidays in Islam: Eid Al-Fitr and Eid Al-Adha. Eid Al-Fitr is celebrated at the end of Ramadan (a month of fasting during daylight hours), and Muslims usually give zakat (charity) on the occasion. Eid Al-Adha is celebrated on the tenth day of Dhu al-Hijjah and lasts for three days, during which Muslims usually sacrifice a sheep and distribute its meat in 3 parts: among family, friends, and the poor. Both of these holidays center around charity, something that we said was a good example of the golden rule.”

“So one word I mentioned was fasting, do any of you know what fasting is? It’s ok if you don’t, one way we are going to learn more about fasting and Ramadan is through this book.”

Read “Night of the Moon: A Muslim Holiday Story”
After story ask:
“What did you guys think of that book? What did you learn? What is Ramadan?”

“Right, Ramadan is a month long holiday in the summer where Muslims fast and pray in order to honor the first time God spoke to Muhammed. And Fasting is where you give up something you like in order to get closer to your beliefs. You don’t always have to give up food, you can give up video games, or toys, or even your cell phone. The goal is for when you would normally be doing that thing, whether it is eating or playing games, you think about your religion instead.”

Challenge students to fast this week, ask them to give up something small, maybe their favorite snack and ask them to think about the golden rule instead! Tell them that we will talk about this challenge next time and see what they learned!

Final Activity: Pass out construction paper and have the student draw something they have learned that day, collect drawings and discuss next class
Next Class we are discussing Hinduism!
The Interfaith Initiative Week Four
Objective: To understand some of the religious traditions surrounding Hinduism how that interacts with religious tolerance and the golden rule.

Check in: Say “How did you guys do with the challenge last week? Did any of you fast? If so, what did you fast?” Review what fasting is and encourage the students who didn’t fast to think about trying so in the future.

Warm Up Activity/Review Game- Charades
What you will need- write each of the words on the slip of paper and place them in a hat.
Have the students break up into two teams. Each team has one representative come up to the front and a piece of paper is pulled from the hat. The word will be a review word from the previous lessons from the list below. The student then has to act out the word and whatever team guesses first gets a point. Whoever has the most points wins.

Words to pick from:
Jesus Christ               Quran
Hanukah                    Hijab
Easter                     Ramadan
Passover                   Fasting
Christmas                  Faith (belief in one God)
The Good Samaritan         Prayer
Torah                      Charity
Bible                      Fasting
Dreidel                    Pilgrimage (special religious journey)
Five Pillars of Islam      Monotheistic

Reminder before the direct lesson (if students remember disclaimer you don’t have to go in depth but just remind them.)
“Now remember, there are different groups, or sects in each of the religions we are studying. To explain this little better I am going to use an analogy, pretend you are part of a religion that believes that pizza is the best. While everyone may believe that pizza is the best, some people might think pepperoni pizza is the best, while other may think Hawaiian is the best. Though they all may agree on a foundational belief (pizza is the best), they disagree on the details (pepperoni vs. Hawaiian). Religions can be like that too. While they may all believe in the same foundation, they might disagree on certain details, So what we are going to be learning about today is Hinduism’s foundational beliefs.”

Direct Lesson: Hinduism
“This is a religion based in India, it is polytheistic which means it has many Gods. Here are some of the deities that are celebrated Go through slides as you explain the Gods
Brahma: the creator (created the universe)
Vishnu: The Preserver (protects the universe)
Shiva: The destroyer (destroys and transforms the universe. Seen as both fearsome and powerful)
Ganesha: remover of obstacles.
Krishna: has many embodiments, also seen as a form of Vishnu, trickster God, has many stories about him.

Their sacred texts include the Vedas and the Upanishads

They believe in reincarnation, and that we are stuck in a cycle, called samsara. The main goal of Hinduism is to break out of this cycle through Karma.

Ask: “So does anyone know what karma is?”

Karma is the energy that results from your actions, so for a good action you get good karma, for a bad action you get bad karma.

Karma Story Activity (Domino Activity)
Get out the dominos. Tell the students that we are going to play a story game. You will start the story by saying “One day a man was walking in the woods...” then have the students come up with an action for the story. Examples being “He met a dog/he was attacked by a bear.” Every time a student comes up with the next part of the story, they can come up and put a domino down in a line. Eventually the story will become silly and you will knock the dominos down.

Have the students do this activity once showing an example of good karma and one of bad karma. Remind students to not put their elbows on the table or dominions will fall down. Also if students kill the man early, say he can come back and continue story because Hindus believe in reincarnation*

Then say: “This shows how every action the man made lead to another action, just how each domino helped the other dominos fall down, this is how karma works.”

After the game ask: So do you think having good karma is important? What do you think happens when you have bad karma? How do you think this relates to the golden rule?

Traditions and Festivals

“There are many festivals that Hindus celebrate, but we are going to talk about two.

Holi - Holi is the Hindu festival of colors. It marks the beginning of spring and the victory of good over evil. Holi is not a religious holiday for everyone, although it does have a religious history. (similar to Christmas) It is most commonly celebrated in Northern India and usually takes place in February or March. It is a two-day festival, during the first day t Hindus build bonfires to help get the evil spirits out of the air and celebrate with gifts of food. The next morning, they chase each other with dry-powdered colors, dancing and singing, celebrating thanksgiving and family.
Diwali - Diwali is the festival of lights for Hindus and Sikhs. The celebration lasts for five days and is marked by sweets, fireworks and lights. It celebrates the triumph of good, light and knowledge over evil, darkness and ignorance. Diwali celebrates a good year of harvesting and honors the Goddess of Wealth. Diwali usually takes place in October or November, but the date is different each year.”

Play video about Diwali –

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HrrW3rO51ak

After video say: “both holidays we talked about today have to do with the celebrating the good in the world around us, do you think that has to do with the golden rule?”

If students say no, say: “Well it actually does. If we focus on celebrating the good rather than the bad, we are treating the world the way it wants to be treated and being more respectful of the world around us. The golden rule doesn’t always have to be a way of acting, it can also be an attitude, like choosing to think about the good instead of the bad.”

Final Activity: Pass out construction paper and have the student draw something they have learned that day, collect drawings and discuss next class. Next Class we are discussing Buddhism!
The Interfaith Initiative Week Five
Objective: To understand some of the religious traditions surrounding Buddhism how that interacts with religious tolerance and the golden rule.

Warm Up Activity/Review Game – The Hot Seat
For this review game, have one student sit facing the class. Go through the slides with key words on them on the board behind their seat. The audience raises their hands and the “Hot Seat” student can call on three students for clues to guess the word. Change the “Hot Seat” student if they don’t get the word correct.

Words that will be on the slides include: (feel free to add your own!)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jesus Christ</th>
<th>Quran</th>
<th>Diwali</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hanukah</td>
<td>Hijab</td>
<td>Holi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easter</td>
<td>Ramadan</td>
<td>Karma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passover</td>
<td>Fasting</td>
<td>Samsara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christmas</td>
<td>Faith (belief in one God)</td>
<td>Vishnu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Good Samaritan</td>
<td>Prayer</td>
<td>Shiva</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torah</td>
<td>Charity</td>
<td>Ganesha</td>
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<td>Bible</td>
<td>Fasting</td>
<td>Krishna</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dreidel</td>
<td>Pilgrimage (special religious journey)</td>
<td>Brahma</td>
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<tr>
<td>Five Pillars of Islam</td>
<td>Monotheistic</td>
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Reminder before the direct lesson (if students remember disclaimer you don’t have to go in depth but just remind them.)
“Now remember, there are different groups, or sects in each of the religions we are studying. To explain this little better I am going to use an analogy, pretend you are part of a religion that believes that pizza is the best. While everyone may believe that pizza is the best, some people might think pepperoni pizza is the best, while other may think Hawaiian is the best. Though they all may agree on a foundational belief (pizza is the best), they disagree on the details (pepperoni vs. Hawaiian). Religions can be like that too. While they may all believe in the same foundation, they might disagree on certain details. So what we are going to be learning about today is Buddhism’s foundational beliefs.”

Direct Lesson: Buddhism
Also began in India, but is practices many places besides India. Buddhism is practiced in places like China, Tibet and Sri Lanka. Buddhism is also polytheistic. Have any of you heard of the Dalai Lama? Well he is a very important Buddhist monk in Tibet. Buddhism is very similar to Hinduism in that they believe that there is a cycle of birth, life, and death. They also want to break out of this cycle by finding enlightenment.

One difference is that they believe the path to enlightenment was brought to them by the Buddha. And though you may think of him as the jolly guy on this statue (points to statue on slide) he is actually very different. That statue is actually called Hotei, and he is the god of happiness and contentment. This skinny guy is actually the Buddha.
We are going to watch a video about the story of how the Buddha came to be:

**Video:**
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_3gK4VO9roE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_3gK4VO9roE)

**After video ask:** “How do you think the Buddha’s life relates to the golden rule?

**Say:** “Well the Buddha wanted to help everyone by having them reach nirvana and wanted to find an end to the suffering in the world. Like we mentioned last week, the golden rule can also be an attitude of seeing the good and wanting to help people, just like the Buddha.”

**Holidays and Traditions**

“Buddhists believe that the way to nirvana is by following the eightfold path”

![Eightfold Path Diagram]

**Ask** “What parts of the eightfold path do you think go along with the golden rule?**

**After students answer say:** “You’re right! Respecting life and saying nothing that hurts others are great examples of the golden rule!”

**Meditation Activity**

“Another part of the eightfold path is meditation, have any of you guys meditated? Well if you don’t know what meditation is, it is a way of calming down your mind and focusing on your thoughts. Some people do it for religious reasons and some people do it as a stress reliever or for other reasons. Buddhists meditate to clear their minds so they
can focus on enlightenment. I’m going to play a Buddhist meditation and we are going to try to see if we can clear our minds.”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xTQCdDKncqo
Note: Only play about 5 minutes

After video ask: “What did you guys think? Was it hard to clear your mind?”

Challenge: Over the next week challenge the students to try meditating even just once and see how it effects their day (make sure to remind them that this is optional)

Next Week: Review and Wrap Up!!
The Interfaith Initiative Week Six
Objective: **To go back and review what we have learned, emphasize the importance of tolerance and the golden rule in all situations.**

Warm Up Activity/Review Game – Re-Watch Video
Replay the video from week one and bring out the old drawings from week one. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d56rsXJ86Yw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d56rsXJ86Yw)

**After video ask:** “What are some examples of things you have learned since the first week? Do you think your definition of the golden rule has changed from the first week to the last week?

**Have students take their old drawings back and re-draw what they think the golden rule is now. If it has not changed have the students write that on the back of their page.**

Final Review Game – “You’re the teacher”
Have the students get into five groups, one for each world religion we have studied. Assign each group a religion and have them give a two-minute presentation about it. Feel free to assist them and remind them of the important things we learned about. Encourage them to do skits in the presentation or let them have paper if they want to draw charts, creativity is important!

**After the presentations say** “I’m glad you all learned so much, but what do you think is the most important thing you learned during this program?”
Hopefully a student responds the golden rule
“Yes, that’s correct, the golden rule. Though we learned about religions all over the world it is important to remember they all share the same thing, the golden rule, treating others the way that you want to be treated.”

Bead Activity
Kids are given letter beads and string and told to write one word that means the golden rule to them (ex: respect, kindness, love). Go around having each kid explain why they chose each word. Then use the bracelet as a reminder of how they should treat others and what they learned.
STUDENT DRAWINGS

I chose student drawings as a form of documentation because it allows the students to display how they have learned abstract concepts such as fasting and karma in a manner that is familiar and age-appropriate. At the end of each lesson, the students were asked to draw a picture of something they learned and for the documentation I have taken a sample of the best drawings from throughout the program.

As well, I have taken a separate sample of the final drawings students present during the last day of the program. During this final week, the students are asked to break into groups and are assigned one of the religions we studied. After they are assigned a religion, the students made a small presentation on what they learned and presented it to the class. I have attached these as documentation because they display what the students have learned throughout the program and their ability to retain factual information about abstract concepts. Both sets of drawings are included in the appendix.
JOURNAL ENTRIES

I chose journal entries I had written throughout the program as a form of documentation to display my own personal learning process during the project. The journals include emotional reactions, classroom management challenges, and adjustments I made to activities while teaching. These journals were logged after every class and accurately detail the highs and lows of my project.

As well, the journals contain the results of the introductory interview and log how many students were in each grade. During the introductory survey students were asked to raise their hands if they were familiar with a religion in a style similar to: “How many of you have heard to Judaism?” To log what grade they were in they were asked to raise their hand depending on each grade in a style similar to: “Raise your hand if you are in second grade.” These journals entries are transcribed by the principal investigator and organized by school.

James Van Allen Elementary

Week One:
Results of Introductory Survey –
Christianity – 4
Judaism – 6
Islam – 7
Hinduism – 5
Buddhism – 2
Religious Tolerance – 2

Grade Breakdown –
Kindergarten – 3
First Grade – 2
Second Grade – 2
Third Grade – 1
Fourth Grade – 2
Fifth Grade – 3
Sixth Grade - 0

The staff is super supportive, I have about thirteen students and a really great classroom space. It is a smaller group but hopefully big enough to foster learning, it will be interesting to see what size classes do the best. Still, I am really happy with the staff, they are supportive and excited which means the kids are excited. One student was behavioral today, he would just jump the gun and ask questions but nothing that couldn’t be answered, we talked about Minecraft and he opened up a bit. Remember that connecting with students is important. The group seemed engaged but the first week is always a little awkward. We have a good conversation about beliefs, they asked about what if you break your beliefs which is interesting and we brought up how that
could make you a hypocrite. Remember to speak in lay language because I had to clarify a few words. Overall, good week.

Week Two:

I am sick so I had a really hard time with classroom management. They would not raise their hands and would not listen, or had a hard time staying quiet when other students were speaking. I had to use a lot of reminders. They loved the activities though and we went over until 4:38pm and some students even stayed after to play the dreidel game some more. The students wanted to know why the gelt was not chocolate...again. In the future just don’t mention it. The lecture portion of today’s class felt rushed, maybe I should tell it in a more story format? Overall, I think I won the kids over this week.

Week Three:

I had to turn a student away from attending the program this week, but as the program begins to build on itself we need the consistency.

Man, today was difficult, I was coughing a lot and that was hard and I felt like class got out of hand because of it. The “who you are” game didn’t go that well, I have to be clearer in the directions, maybe send two kids out of the room instead of one and have one student be the designated “retriever.” As well one student who practiced Islam kept correcting and interrupting me but overall I think she enjoyed getting to talk about her faith. Some students stayed to play the game some more so it was challenging but I think it is going well.

I forgot about the fasting challenge.

Week Four:

I am interested in seeing how the domino game goes.

They were very distracted today and a few of the students were not in attendance today. I think is the weather, they did not listen very well at all and I have to shush them. The domino game went well though and I was able to emphasize how karma is like the golden rule which I think is a good point to make. I felt a bit rushed through teaching them about the holidays of Hinduism but I think they thought it was cool.

Week Five:

Still distracted this week but some of the students recognized me on the playground which is cute. During the hot seat game they made me play a round and kept changing the slide, but I was impressed at how many words they knew. They were not very respectful though and had a hard time sitting through meditation. They were also not interested in participating in the challenge. Next time, I should have gotten name tags for such a large group, it would help with classroom management.

Week Six:

The beads went everywhere! Normally it is easier to contain them but they went crazy! They also made more bracelets/necklaces than they were supposed to and abused
the beads. I need to set clearer limits on how many bracelets students can make so there are enough beads for all of the classes. The presentations went well though, they had a lot of trouble getting into groups and listening but once we got that figured out, they were a lot better. On a positive note, I got some really great interviews from students.

**Herbert Hoover Elementary**

**Week One:**
Results of Introductory Survey –
Christianity – 6
Judaism – 4
Islam – 1
Hinduism – 3
Buddhism – 5
Religious Tolerance – 5

Grade Breakdown –
Kindergarten – 3
First Grade – 0
Second Grade – 0
Third Grade – 4
Fourth Grade - 2
Fifth Grade – 1
Sixth Grade - 0

I have had a lot of communication issues with this school regarding both the waivers and the time of the program. It was originally supposed to be at 3:30pm but had to be pushed to 3:45pm or later. This makes things very difficult. I’ve had waiver issues at all of the schools and I wonder how I could fix this in the future. This will be a smaller group, about ten, but they are a great group of kids. The discussion was fruitful and they right away understood that we were talking about respect. I am interested in seeing how the age gap works since we do not have any first or second graders.

**Week Two:**
I’m sick so I didn’t realize how hard it is to be energetic and happy when you are sick so that stinks. I kept stumbling over my words which was difficult. The students asked a ton of questions which is good but we had some issues with the acting game, they said it was harder to follow the golden rule than to not follow the golden rule and that sometimes it was hard to say sorry which I found interesting. But by the end I emphasized how important and easy it is to help people and they said they would change their answer which I thought was important to note. They also noted how it is important sometimes to not say anything rather than say something mean.

**Week Three:**
It went well, they were super engaged in the idea of fasting and learning more about that. I am nervous about the younger kids though, I feel like they aren’t getting as
much out of the program, one student asked me what a religion was and that was a bit concerning since we are on the third week. Though as long as they understand the golden rule, that is what is important.

One of the students brought in Matzo Crackers for all of the students to try since we had talk about Judaism the week before. I thought that was really sweet and displayed how they were bringing the material home to share with their parents.

**Week Four:**
They were ok, we had some issues with the domino game. I decided to demonstrate once with good karma and once with bad karma and I think that helped. They asked lots of good questions, like why does good always win over evil. Also I think they younger students are finally getting it. One student wrote about the golden rule during the drawing activity which felt like a big victory. I think it shows that you can definitely hammer ideas over time but I think this is an important one to do. At least it’s something.

**Week Five:**
The students were very good. Super receptive to the hot seat game, I only had to separate two students. During the video about the origin of Buddha, one student asked about asceticism, or monks who don’t engage in worldly pleasure. We had a good conversation about why they choose enlightenment/a spiritual future over their current life and how sometimes people do thing things for their faith that might not make sense to us. Overall, a good class.

**Week Six:**
I think this is the group I will miss the most, mostly because of the small size. I really got to know all of the students well. They did a good job on the presentations, even though I had to help them a lot. We were starting to run out of letter for the bracelets, who knew “e” was such an important letter? They seemed to have a great time though!

**Ernest Horn Elementary**

**Week One:**
Results of Introductory Survey –
Christianity – 6
Judaism – 4
Islam – 9
Hinduism – 5
Buddhism – 5
Religious Tolerance – 2

Grade Breakdown –
Kindergarten – 1
First Grade – 2
Second Grade – 2
They are a good group of kids, three practice Islam so I am a little nervous about teaching them. It’s important to remind myself that is ok to not know everything. We had some technical issues with the sound and computer, I need to talk to the librarian about that. They are the biggest group so I hope I can manage the classroom.

**Week Two:**
I fixed the sound issues, but interestingly enough the students also found it easier with the acting game to not follow the golden rule. But by the end this was re-brought up and they changed their minds. They gave lots of good examples though of when they saw bullying and kids getting made fun of. These examples were used to help emphasize how important it is to use the golden rule, so it what happened to you doesn’t happen to other people. Students were very engaged, one asked to see my notes and curriculum.

**Week Three:**
I was the most nervous about the week because this was the first time I had outspoken Muslim students in my class, but I feel like I learned a lot and that is ok to not be an expert. If I look at it as a learning experience rather than a teaching experience I am much better off. I think they enjoyed it too, and the game went a lot better with partners and I think collaboration adds a lot to the experience. The third week is always the big hump so I hoping it goes smoothly from here.

**Week Four:**
Oh my gosh they were crazy today! It was so hot in the classroom and everyone was distracted, even me! It was terrible. They were also super sassy. The domino game went ok, I think I am selling myself short but I have been sick for a month and it has really been effecting my teaching. Their pictures were good though and they seemed to understand the concepts. I think summer is just getting to them.

**Week Five:**
A lot of students were gone today on a field trip which was difficult. We had about five students missing and most of them were those that talk a lot so it was harder to engage this week. They had a bit more trouble with the hot seat game, once again because of the missing students. The good thing though is that it did give the opportunity for students to talk that normally didn’t and that was nice. I think overall if I could do this again I would cap the class because it allows me to get to know the students better and really listen and engage.

**Week Six:**
I got my best interviews here, even though they had some issues with the presentations because of the missing students the week before. They either had really good presentations or had trouble, I wish I could have found a way to make the groups more even but I didn’t want to single students out. They loved making the bracelets,
probably the group that was the most enthusiastic about it and since it was the last class they could make as many as they wanted. And as I was leaving, a student thanked me for making this program, moments like that make it all worth it.
INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS

I chose interview transcripts as a form of documentation to display how students felt the project impacted them in their own words. These short interviews were taken on the last day of the program and were transcribed by the principal investigator. With these interviews, I was able to gauge how students responded to the program and whether the program was successful. Two students, a male and a female, were chosen from each school and asked a series of short questions similar to:

“How old are you?”
“What is one thing you learned during the program?”
“What was your favorite activity?”
“What was your least favorite activity?”
“Do you think you would have learned about religion if you had not been in this program?”
“Do you think it is important for kids your age to learn about religion?”
“Do you think this program will help you in the classroom and in life?”

James Van Allen Elementary, Female

-Begin Interview-

Principal Investigator: “Ok, I think it’s recording, so just say how old you are.”

Student: “um, Eleven”

Principal Investigator: “ok, so what is one thing that you liked about the program?”

Student: “I learned, like, I didn’t know about Buddhism that the Dalai Lama was like the monk. I knew the Dalai Lama was a person but I didn’t know who he was and I also learned more about how religions follow the golden rule. I learned the Hindu festivals, like Diwali and the, I can’t remember the other one.”

Principal Investigator: “Great, so what was your favorite activity from the program?”

Student: “I liked doing the dominos with the karma, I thought it was interesting to see how karma played out.”

Principal Investigator: “Yeah that was fun! So, what was your least favorite activity?”

Student: “hmmmm”

Principal Investigator: “It’s ok if you don’t have one.”

Student: “I don’t know, I don’t think I have one, they were all really fun.”
Principal Investigator: “Thanks! So, if you hadn’t come to this program do you think you would have learned about those religions?”

Student: “No.”

Principal Investigator: “Ok, and do you think even though you are not super old that it’s important for kids to learn about religion?”

Student: “Yeah.”

Principal Investigator: “Do you think this will help you with your classmates and if another classmate has a different religion than you?”

Student: “Yeah, cause I’d like be able to connect with them and like respect their beliefs.”

Principal Investigator: “Yeah, definitely! Ok well thank you so much!”

-End Interview-

**James Van Allen Elementary, Male**

-Begin Interview-

Principal Investigator: “So, say how old you are.”

Student: “I am eight.”

Principal Investigator: “Ok, cool, so what is one thing you learned from being part of this program?”

Student: “Um, all of the different types traditions that all of like Buddhism and Christianity.”

Principal Investigator: “Ok, and so what was your favorite activity?”

Student: “Probably making all of the cards on the piece of paper.”

Principal Investigator: “Doing the drawings?”

Student: “Yeah.”

Principal Investigator: “So, what was your least favorite activity?”

Student: “That’s really hard, I don’t have one.”
Principal Investigator: “Ok, so do you think you would have learned about those religions if you hadn’t come to this program?”

Student: “I wouldn’t have learned about them.”

Principal Investigator: “And do you think it’s important that people, even people your age learn about these religions?”

Student: “Yes.”

Principal Investigator: “Yeah, why do you think that?”

Student: “Um, because then you can treat others the way you want to be treated, even if they don’t treat you how you don’t want to be treated, then you can treat them better than how they are treating you.”

Principal Investigator: “Yeah that’s great! Ok, well that’s all I needed from you, great job!”

-End Interview-

**Herbert Hoover Elementary, Male**

-Begin Interview-

Principal Investigator: “Ok, so tell me how old you are?”

Student: “I am nine years old.”

Principal Investigator: “Ok, so what is one that you learned in this program?”

Student: “I learned different religions and what they believed in and what festivals they celebrate.”

Principal Investigator: “Great, so what was your favorite activity during the program?”

Student: “My favorite activity was doing the karma dominos.”

Principal Investigator: “Yeah that was super fun! So, what is your least favorite activity?”

Student: “I don’t have any, I love them all.”

Principal Investigator: Ok, do you think if you hadn’t gone to this program, you would have learned about religions?”

Student: “I might have, but I don’t think so.”
Principal Investigator: “And do you think this program is going to benefit you in the classroom?”

Student: “Yes.”

Principal Investigator: “Ok, how so?”

Student: “If there are new students I could interact with them if they’re a different religion. We could talk about it.”

Principal Investigator: “Ok, great job!”

-End Interview-

**Herbert Hoover Elementary, Female**

-Begin Interview-

Principal Investigator: “So tell me how old you are.”

Student: “I’m eleven.”

Principal Investigator: “Ok, so what was one thing that you learned from this program?”

Student: “I learned about different kinds of religions, like Buddhism.”

Principal Investigator: “Ok, what was your favorite activity in this program?”

Student: “Um, I liked playing the games, like before we learned anything.”

Principal Investigator: “Ok, so what was your least favorite activity in the program?”

Student: “Nothing.”

Principal Investigator: “So do you think it’s important for students your age to learn about religion?”

Student: “Yes.”

Principal Investigator: “And do you think if you hadn’t gone to this program you would have learned this stuff?”

Student: “Maybe.”

Principal Investigator: “And do you think this program will help you in the future when you’re in the classroom?”
Student: “Mmhmm.”

Principal Investigator: “How do you think it would help you?”

Student: “If there is like a test in social studies.”

Principal Investigator: “Ok, do you think it would help you with any of the students if you met a student with a different religion?”

Student: “Yeah.”

Principal Investigator: “Ok, great! All right, that’s all I needed!”

-End Interview-

**Ernest Horn Elementary, Female**

-Begin Interview-

Principal Investigator: “So tell me how old you are.”

Student: “I’m ten.”

Principal Investigator: “Ok, what is one thing that you learned during the program?”

Student: “I learned a lot about Diwali, the festival of lights, and everything they do in Buddhism and Hinduism. Like I learned what Buddha is, at first I thought he was just some sort of elephant dude.”

Principal Investigator: “So, what was your favorite activity that we did?”

Student: “I like the charades.”

Principal Investigator: “So you liked playing charades?”

Student: “Yeah.”

Principal Investigator: “So was your least favorite activity if you have one?”

Student: “It was kinda hard acting stuff out. There was actually one person who didn’t even like do it.”

Principal Investigator: “That sounds difficult.”

Student: “And I don’t really know how to act very well.”
Principal Investigator: “So do you think if you hadn’t gone to the program you would have learned about these religions?”

Student: “No, probably not.”

Principal Investigator: “And do you think it’s important for kids your age to learn about religions?”

Student: “Yes, so then when they meet someone with a different religion and they’re like doing a special activity, you’re not like ‘What are you doing?’ Like they understand.

Principal Investigator: “Definitely, and do you think what you learned in this program is gonna help you in the classroom or in your life as your go forward?”

Student: “Yeah, help me in my life but not really in the classroom cause we don’t talk about religion very much. This is only place I can learn about it.”

Principal Investigator: “Ok, great job!”

-End Interview-

Ernest Horn Elementary, Male

-Begin Interview-

Principal Investigator: “Ok, so tell me how old you are.”

Student: “I am eleven.”

Principal Investigator: “Ok, so what is one thing that you learned in this program?”

Student: “What is one thing that I learned? So, it can just be anything?”

Principal Investigator: “Or overall.”

Student: “Ok, I’ve learned basically a lot about the golden rule is one thing that I’ve learned a lot about and I’ve also learned a lot about religions and respecting people’s religions and who they are.

Principal Investigator: “Yeah definitely, so what is your favorite thing that we have done in the program?”

Student: “I would say a lot of the fun games cause they taught me a lot and they also were fun to do.”
Principal Investigator: “So, what was your least favorite thing that we did.”

Student: “Wait let me think, I don’t know, um, I would have to say my least favorite if there had to be a least favorite would be, oh gosh, I would say charades because it happened for so long, like for a while, it was just like, get to the point.”

Principal Investigator: “Ok, do you think it is important for kids your age to learn religion?”

Student: “Yes I do think it is important because a lot of times, when I came here, I was surprised that a lot of these kids didn’t know what religion was. And it’s really important because people have different beliefs if they don’t know what religion they are and let’s say they are in a religion but they don’t know they’re in a religion that can be like really weird.”

Principal Investigator: “Of course, do you think you would have learned about religion if you hadn’t come to this program?”

Student: “Eventually but not as soon.”

Principal Investigator: “Yeah, and do you think this program, what you leaned, is gonna help you in the classroom or in your life?”

Student: “Definitely, cause after this I might be able to connect with people a bit more.”

Principal Investigator: “Yeah, great!”

-End Interview-
I chose an opinion editorial as my final piece of capstone documentation because it serves to further the conversation about interfaith dialogue in the classroom. Due to the University of Iowa’s encouragement of publically engaged scholarship, this piece is to be published in the online magazine for the Interfaith Youth Core, INTER, this piece is best suited to reach audiences interested in interfaith leadership. Through this venue, I hope to encourage others to innovate similar programs and begin nationwide dialogue on the importance of equipping the younger generations with the tools to engage with the diverse world around them. Below is a transcript of the piece.

The Interfaith Initiative: An Interfaith Dialogue Experiment

As I left the elementary school that afternoon after a long day of teaching, I was taken aside by the supervisor of the after school program. Though I was initially nervous that I had done something wrong, which can easily happen when you are attempting to teach 20 children world religions, I was pleasantly surprised when she happily recounted how she had seen a few of my students meditating on the playground earlier that week and how excited she was that it seemed like my program was having an impact on them. She laughed at how they would cross their legs and expertly say “om,” only to get distracted by a rock 15 seconds later. Though having students excited to meditate may seem like a small victory when stress-relieving exercises are on-trend, in a climate where teaching world religions in a classroom setting can be seen as controversial, it’s the little victories that count.

As a senior at the University of Iowa, I decided for my final thesis to build a program that would explore interfaith dialogue in a classroom setting. I created a six-week after school program for kindergarteners through sixth graders about the five major world religions: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Then, I taught the program at five different schools with students who opted into the program with their parent’s permission. Through the University of Iowa, I was given an incredible network of resources and advisors that helped make this possible. With this project, I was hoping to prove the benefits of starting religious literacy at an elementary-school level rather than waiting for secondary education and the importance of teaching students about the diverse world around them.

Children are often able to ask questions and explore concepts even adults find baffling, so in a time when faith is becoming more black and white, I sought the company of those who might be able to see religion as more of a spectrum of colors. Personally, I grew up surrounded by people who practiced diverse religious traditions such as Judaism, Buddhism, and Christianity. My exposure to different faiths as a child gave me a unique perspective on religious diversity as an adult and I wanted to share that. While I am not a religious scholar or an experienced teacher for that matter, I
hoped my passion for the subject and my interest in the thoughts of the next generation would help guide me as I began my experiment in interfaith dialogue in the classroom.

I had never designed a curriculum before and I often struggled with finding the right words to say. I knew that teaching religions in schools could be seen as controversial – even with students opting in to an afterschool program – and I wanted to make sure my curriculum was as transparent as possible. I didn’t want parents thinking I was trying to evangelize their child, but I also wanted my students to learn as much as possible. I continually grappled with striking the right balance. Why should a ten-year-old care about enlightenment, and how do I make the five pillars of Islam fun? Luckily, or maybe it was divine intervention, I realized that I could use a theme to bring these religions together: the golden rule. All traditions emphasize respect and treating others the way you want to be treated. This way, despite what they may or may not learn, they still left the program with the most important lesson of all, religious tolerance, a lesson that goes beyond just the classroom.

My favorite thing about teaching children are the questions. Kids are unafraid to ask hard questions, even ones that stump me. As my students and I watched a video about the Hindu festival of Diwali, I watched as their eyes lit up at the festival of lights, but seconds later I watched their brows furrow as they learned that this was a festival celebrating good over evil. After the video ended one student raised his hand and asked me why good was always winning and why evil couldn’t win for a change. They rest chimed in, citing how in the stories they read and television shows they watched, it seemed like the minute evil had a chance, good swooped in and saved the day. While I stood perplexed at how to answer, another student spoke up (reminding me that the fireworks from the video weren’t the only things that were bright). He told the class that like karma, good things come from good and evil things come from evil, and we were probably better off trusting good than evil if we wanted things to be good in the world.

But my students also reminded me that it is sometimes hard to be good. After challenging the class to create and perform a skit with and without the golden rule, I asked them which one was easier to do. While an adult might have known the answer was supposed to be the skit with the golden rule, the students were unafraid to be honest and told me that sometimes it was hard to be nice to others. This led to a conversation where we discussed how the students often felt peer pressure to stay quiet instead of sticking up for others, and that many of their classmates took recess as an opportunity to bully others while playing sports. Eventually we concluded that in the long run it is better to use the golden rule. But of course, they were right, sometimes it is hard to be nice. I was shocked by the examples they shared and glad they were willing to be honest. In moments like these I was reminded that my students were not the only ones who were learning during the program, and how important it is to not just be a teacher, but also a good listener.

Watching children learn about the culturally diverse and wonderful world around them has been the biggest victory of my college career. Watching them rambunctiously play the dreidel game while shouting “Gimmel” and “Nun” at their tablemates; or learn about karma by setting up dominos and watching them all crash down, displaying how
every action leads to a reaction in the universe; or laugh as they recount their attempts to “fast their homework” as we discussed Ramadan; and how sometimes being part of religion means doing things that are difficult. And then there was everything I learned. I was reminded that the playground can be a dangerous place, tolerance isn’t always easy, and sometimes it’s ok to not have all the answers, even if you’re claiming to be the “expert.”

On the last day of program, I asked one of my students if she felt that students her age should learn about other religions. At eleven years old, she responded that not only did she feel like it was important for her to learn about this topic, but that if she ever met a new student that had different traditions than her, she would now be able to connect with them. For me, this was when I realized I had done what I set out to do. Even if none of my students remembered the definition of monotheistic, I wanted them to learn about tolerance and be able to engage with the world around them in a new way. As I had watched adults on the news fall deeper into previously held convictions, I felt encouraged that a group of children in Iowa were willing to adopt some new ideas of their own. My students gave me hope that diversity and religious tolerance doesn’t have to be polarizing even as the world around us becomes more so. Bringing interfaith conversations into the classroom allows us as adults to not only shape the next generation, but to re-shape ourselves, and remember how easy it really is to see the world through the eyes of a child.

Small victories may seem simple and I can’t promise that my program will change anything besides giving some kids a fun activity to do after school, but as I heard about my students meditating on the playground that day, I couldn’t help but hope that a new type of interfaith conversation was started.
NEXT STEPS

While the Interfaith Initiative will always be a passion of mine, I am taking my interest in interfaith dialogue out of the classroom and into the political sphere. Using what I learned from this program, after graduation, I hope to pursue a position working on religious policy. Through this avenue, I want to further interfaith dialogue nationwide, and emphasize the importance of being informed on the diverse number of religions in the United States. As well, I hope to use this platform to assist in crafting legislation that allows those of minority religious groups to practice their faith safely and diminish the fear of religious hate crimes.

Though I will no longer be teaching, I wanted to make sure that the Interfaith Initiative was assessable and replicable. As well as including my curriculum in this thesis, each of the schools that was taught at received a USB port will all of the curriculum and PowerPoints used during the lessons so that they are able to continue teaching this program. I felt that because this project centered around interfaith dialogue it was important to continue that dialogue even after this project is complete.

Despite the program being a success in my opinion, there are some things I would do differently next time. While I enjoyed teaching a wide age range of students, I felt that the third through fifth graders benefited the most from the program. Though the kindergarteners were still able to engage on abstract concepts, their inability to read made some activities difficult and they had a hard time staying focused. With the students who were in third through fifth graders they were truly able to engage with some of the more difficult material and get the most out of the program. While I believe that all of the students learned material throughout the six weeks, if I could do it again I would try to focus on that age range in order for the students to truly benefit from the curriculum.

I would also make the class size smaller and cap the group at fifteen students. Though it is important to reach as many students as possible, having large groups of students in the program made it difficult to manage the classroom and keep the students on task. Furthermore, it made it more difficult for me to get to know the students in depth. Since I was only there one day a week, I left some of the larger classes not even knowing all of the student’s names. I felt that with a smaller class, all of the students would feel more comfortable asking tough questions and that I would have been able to engage with students on a deeper level.

Finally, I would have extended the curriculum to include more of the secular perspective. During the program, a parent reached out to me and expressed how they would have loved to see a more theological approach along with the traditions of world religions. While I was unable to explore this due to the restrictions of IRB, I think it would have been interesting and beneficial to explore aspects of secularism, atheism and other more minor religions such as Paganism and Mormonism. While I think it would be challenging to explain certain theologies in tangible ways to children, I think it is important when exploring interfaith dialogue, to share every perspective even if you are unfamiliar with it.

Even though I will not be continuing the Interfaith Initiative, I believe it was extremely impactful on not only my life, but also the trajectory for my future. I hope those that read this thesis feel the same way.
APPENDIX

SAMPLE DRAWINGS FROM THROUGHOUT THE SIX WEEKS
SAMPLE FINAL PRESENTATION
DRAWINGS

Hinduism

- They are not monotheistic
- They believe in karma
- They have to fast
- They have a light and a color festival

1. We celebrate Easter because that is when Jesus Rose from the dead.
2. This is the cross
3. The Bible is what we read from.
They eat Matsuri ball soup on Passover.
They celebrate Passover.
The Israelites ate matzah on Passover.
On Passover, they celebrate the day they got their freedom from the Egyptians.
On Hanukkah, they celebrate the day the Menorah candles lasted 8 days.
Their religious symbol is the Star of David.
They read from the Torah.

Buddhism
- Believe in multiple gods; polytheistic
- Believe in Buddha and other deities
- Monks fast and try to find enlightenment
- Meditate in a strange position
- Believe in 8 fold path - ways to improve Earth
- Dali Lama is true Monk
- Many legends in Buddhism
- No Book in Buddhism
- Buddhism
- Praying

Islam Fun Facts

Ramadan:
- Fasting
- Wearing a special scarf
- Eating before dawn
- Muslim

Islam's Symbol
- Crescent moon
- Star

Praying
- Stands 4 times a day
- Say the name of Allah 100 times