

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

Webinar Series

## Nurturing Seeds:

Religious Literacy as a Skill for Peaceful Engagement

**EPISODE 3:**  
Learning to Engage: Designing for Inclusion – Religious Literacy in Education

**SPEAKER**  
**Daniel Del Nido**  
Assistant Director of the Education Program, Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding

**MODERATOR**  
**Kate Soules**  
Co-founder and Executive Director of the Religion and Education Collaborative (REC)

THURSDAY, JULY 24, 2025  
2 PM LISBON

**TANENBAUM**  
COMBATING RELIGIOUS PREJUDICE

INTERNATIONAL DIALOGUE CENTRE  
**CID**  
KACIBD

*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 for Interreligious Understanding, 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 Center 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, called 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.

**DANIEL DEL NIDO:** I work for the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding. We're a nonprofit organization based in New York City, and our mission is to promote justice and build respect for religious difference. We work 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.

As head of Tanenbaum's Education program, I work with schools, individual teachers, and sometimes with school districts, mostly in the United States. - The program's overall goal is for K through 12 age students- in the United States, that's roughly ages 5 through 18 - to build behaviours of respect for difference, including religious difference. We do that by creating written curricula and lesson plans for teachers, by providing training and professional development for educators, and by running a Network of Inclusive Educators that brings together 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:** My example comes from a teacher that we worked with for a few years on our teacher network. He taught High School at a Jewish day school in the Detroit metropolitan area in Michigan.

He taught a number of different courses, including a history elective on the modern Middle East for 10th graders. This course addressed the history of the region, and a number of different conflicts, including highly sensitive ones 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. He wanted to focus on having them build empathy and the ability to take in multiple perspectives when engaging with difficult topics. So, we worked with him to integrate conflict resolution and transformation skill-building and references to religiously motivated peacemakers into his curriculum for this class.

This involved teaching students about religiously motivated peacemakers who engage their communities to address and transform conflicts in a number of different settings, including in the Middle East. We also wanted to give students an opportunity to practice the skills that they saw these religiously motivated peace actors using in their work.

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 angry. 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. One is that it shows the importance of curricular and pedagogical design in a way that connects content knowledge about peace-making and the role of religion in peace-making - especially in case studies, to skill-building and application work for students. It shows students how they can use the knowledge that they're gaining in the class and makes for a much more meaningful lasting experience.

There's also a focus on the pedagogy of skill-building. This teacher had specific behavioural goals for his students - build empathy and 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. Even in moments where religion is not obviously connected to a particular situation - a conflict situation or a social situation - the skills and knowledge acquired in religious literacy education can still be relevant, and can help students engage these situations. So, when we are training and educating youth for religious literacy, we're doing so not just for their classrooms 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 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 even around that district, to understand what the state of religious and cultural diversity looks like. And then to get a sense from a variety of stakeholders about what the culture of the institution is like. We can then get into what they think they need to work on: where they see their strengths, and where they see fault lines within the community.

And when I say "stakeholders", it's part of our theory of change that the climate in which children learn is shaped by a number of different inputs. There are the students themselves and their interactions. There's what they're taking from teachers, and other educators in formal settings. There's also, what's happening in that broader school community, in the hallways and in the cafeteria, and on the bus ride. And so, there's administration and staff to think about there and then there's also parents and the larger community. We try to engage all of these stakeholders as much as is possible to get a rich sense of the community's needs. We spend a lot of time on needs assessment and offer opportunities for surveys or interviews. And then we try to identify a leader or a couple of leaders within those different populations who we can focus on in our training work, so that even when we finish a partnership with a school or a school district, there's somebody who can carry on the work. We try to find change agents within the school, and we shape our intervention, whether it's written resources or trainings or workshops, around them.

**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 pushback that you've gotten from different stakeholder groups?

**DANILE DEL NIDO:** Yes - also a great question, and an important one, because you can get various forms of either hesitancy or resistance from different stakeholders in different ways . 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,, 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. From parents as well: they want to understand what our motivations are, what our background and philosophy are 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 the non-teaching, not administrative staff: Environmental service workers or people who work in the cafeteria. They'll sometimes say that this might not be relevant to me. I don't need to know this.

There isn't one strategy that's going to work with all of these groups. 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, a 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: when we engage with teachers, 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 I have a PhD. in religious studies, and I cannot even begin to tell you about all the things I don't know. Instead, we focus on inquiry - learning how to ask the right questions and finding the right information. It is a mindset shift for educators who understandably want to feel like they're in command of the material , but also recognize that this field is so vast that it's not possible for one person, or even a team of people, to become a master. So, focus more on learning how to ask questions, learning where to find the information that you want to find, and then developing 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 a 30,000 feet above ground overview of

Buddhism, say, look at a particular community, how they live out their religious identities, and help students use the skills they build in that inquiry in other situations.

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

**KATE SOULES:** You talked in your discussion of 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 want to put their energy into learning more 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 of prioritizing your learning objectives. 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. It opens up their thinking to seeing what's there in their own community and it can, as you say, open 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 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 investigate.

## 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 who are not teaching. You talked about people who work in the cafeteria, the 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, their families, even to understand religious perspectives on health. So do you ever work with that group specifically, or is everybody integrated? How do you make it apparent that everybody needs to know about this and not just say the history teachers?

**DANILE DEL NIDO:** We once did a professional development session 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 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 with these outside-of-the-classroom populations, that interpersonal piece is what we try to focus on. Because by learning this aspect of people's identities, and by being able to communicate 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 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. There's also research that comes out of Quebec into the effectiveness of various interventions (Lester & Roberts 2006, Chan 2021). But I do think that there needs to be more.

When we work with schools or school districts, we try to think about evaluation both quantitatively and qualitatively. We give both to schools and to the teachers who work with us on our Network of Inclusive Educators 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, as well as questions about learning about others, and about their curiosity towards others.

The surveys also include questions about how to recognize when someone is being mistreated for their religious identity, and about the knowledge and willingness to engage in that kind of situation. One way that we conduct impact analysis is by seeing the change from beginning to end. And, as much as possible, we try to give the survey again then we try to, a few months out, or afterwards, to see just how "sticky" these skills are.

Another more qualitative strategy is to help teachers, administrators, and parents identify behaviours that they want to encourage. And to be able to be specific and almost visualize these behaviours. For example, if we want to build curiosity in students what does that actually look like in practice? That might look like a student 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. We try to work with them to identify the specific behaviours that they want to see, as a way to demonstrate impact.

**KATE SOULES:** This is an area that I am very passionate about: 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 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, 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.

Another approach is to think about the impact of religious literacy education on student interpersonal skills. In particular, their ability to engage with conflict situations and difficult conversation in a more empathetic and sensitive way.

Another way to make the case is to discuss other contexts where religious literacy matters. In earlier conversations in this series, Erin and Dicky discussed the importance of religious literacy in international diplomacy and civic engagement. I would also add its importance in workplaces or in healthcare settings. It would be really impactful to hear from individuals within these sectors about why the skills and knowledge of religious literacy education are important for them.

That's how I think about this question. We need to emphasize this distinction between academic and devotional understanding of religion. And then we get into 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 is 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 religious literacy as a field there's the idea that there's violence, there's bullying, there's conflict, and 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. 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.

But we also want to 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. And that means not just K-12 but also pre-K, and even 3K - so students as young as 3. When we engage with those early childhood populations, the conversation is different. We encourage students to think about both everyday and special activities they do, including with their families, and then connecting themselves to other people's lives. Children at that age really like to make those comparisons and to share aspects of their lives such as foods, clothing, activities, and so on.. 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 activity? Why do we celebrate this holiday? Why do we go to this place every weekend?”

That curiosity and engagement really builds the buy-in from parents and families. When parents see their child showing more curiosity and engagement with their own identities and communities, it 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 chilling effect where people 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:**

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 in school contexts. 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 developing 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 about their 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 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 this is actually a way to help students learn how to apply academic skills to learning more about their own religious tradition and identity. And 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.

## **Acknowledgements**

***The International Dialogue Centre - KAICIID extends its heartfelt thanks to Daniel Del Nido, Kate Soules and the audience who participated in this online session. We also express our gratitude for the valuable cooperation with the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding***

***"Learning to Engage: Designing for Inclusion – Religious Literacy in Education" was the final Episode 3 in the webinar series "Nurturing Seeds: Religious Literacy as Skill for Peaceful Engagement".***

Webinar Series

# Nurturing Seeds:

Religious Literacy as  
a Skill for Peaceful  
Engagement

3 EPISODES  
JULY 17, 21 & 24, 2025



 **TANENBAUM**  
COMBATING RELIGIOUS PREJUDICE

INTERNATIONAL  
DIALOGUE CENTRE  
**CIID**  
KACHO