TLIC PAPER

Experiencing Religious Diversity in Teacher Training: The Dynamics of Learning in Encounter

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the essential relationship between encounter and education, this paper explores the significance of encounter for religious education in religiously diverse contexts. The study delves into the evaluation findings of a collaborative and project-based course conducted in higher education. This course aims to involve students in the development and implementation of collaborative projects centered around Religious Education, with a particular emphasis on cultural and religious diversity. The empirical findings primarily examine students' firsthand experiences with a specific focus on learning in encounter within religiously diverse groups. The paper critically analyzes the planning, execution, and reflective aspects of learning experiences facilitated by collaboration and encounters. It explores the course's structure, methodology, and outcomes. It also investigates and reflects upon the quality of students' experiences within religiously diverse groups, as well as potential influences on their learning. Additionally, the paper explores how these encounters can be constructively integrated to enhance future collaborative scenarios in higher education. By emphasizing encounter as a vital component of education, this paper underscores the importance of engaging with diverse religious perspectives. The findings of this study contribute to the ongoing exploration of how encounters can enrich the educational process and improve future collaborative initiatives within the higher education sector.

KEYWORDS

learning in encounter, religious diversity in teacher training, higher education sector, culturally and religiously sensitive learning, course evaluation study

1   PERSPECTIVES ON CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

The influence of cultural and religious diversity on social coexistence is evident globally [1]. In societies worldwide, individuals from various cultural and religious backgrounds, each shaped by their unique histories of socialization, coexist and actively contribute their respective religious and cultural perspectives to their communities. These interrelations between society, culture, and religion manifest

in diverse ways, as people form their own sets of beliefs, worldviews, and traditions through the influences of socialization, education, and personal experiences [2]. According to Paul Tillich, culture serves as a means of expressing religion, while religion itself becomes an integral part of culture [3]. As Tillich states, "Religion is part and parcel of the culture in which it is lived" [4]. These interconnected relationships between religion and culture extend beyond families and societies and permeate various facets of everyday life and human interactions. In an era marked by globalization and migration, it becomes crucial to recognize and value the significance of cultural and religious identities, acknowledge their visibility within society, and foster a constructive embrace of diverse cultural and religious affiliations [5].

Hence, the existence of diverse cultural and religious identities within societies necessitates the creation of inclusive learning environments that are grounded in principles of appreciation and equality [6]. The complex nature of culture and religion, along with the diverse worldviews and practices they engender, calls for a high degree of adaptability, often referred to as tolerance for ambiguity [7]. In light of this, educational institutions bear a significant responsibility in sensitively embracing and incorporating diverse cultural and religious backgrounds [8]. Culturally and religiously responsive education is paramount for teachers to effectively navigate the challenges presented by diverse classrooms. Therefore, the higher education sector must be prepared to integrate culturally and religiously responsive education into teacher training programs, especially in the field of religious education. As spaces of learning that are both social and democratic, higher education institutions hold the responsibility of providing environments that foster an appreciation for diversity and promote equality. In these learning spaces, cultural and religious responsiveness, as well as the educator's willingness to cultivate an open and sensitive climate, emerge as vital attributes. Such learning environments should account for the varied geographies of students' socialization experiences.

It becomes evident that the higher education sector and especially study programs for teacher training, have the task of perceiving diversity in worldviews and religions as a social reality and developing it constructively concerning societies and schools.

To unlock learning opportunities through encounter and collaboration, it is crucial to incorporate students' diverse life experiences into educational processes [9]. Experiential learning can offer ways for this task and has been widely discussed as a valuable approach in diverse educational settings, emphasizing the importance of encounter, experiences, and reflection [10]. Experiential learning can be regarded as one of the most original learning processes, deeply rooted in human nature [11]. Of course, not all experiences are equally educative. However, personal experience and education are often closely related [12]. By engaging in encounter within culturally and religiously diverse project teams, students have the opportunity to build connections with others, strengthen their self-awareness, and cultivate relationships with organizations, groups, and society at large [13]. In this context, project-based and collaborative scenarios are regarded as particularly effective approaches for addressing the demands of an increasingly diverse world, as well as for nurturing competencies in collaborative and independent learning [14].

In this context, the course "Encounter- and project-based learning in religiously diverse contexts" was developed at Ludwigsburg University of Education (LUE).[1] The course aims at students in teacher training who want to teach Religious Education in schools in Germany. This paper discusses results from a qualitative evaluation study

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[1] https://www.ph-ludwigsburg.de/en/ (Access 29/6/2023).

with a special focus on possible potentials for culturally and religiously sensitive education through encounter in teacher training. In this study, students share their ideas on and experiences with cultural and religious diversity in learning spaces and discuss the role of collaborative and project-based learning in culturally and religiously diverse contexts in the higher education sector.

2   COLLABORATION AND ENCOUNTER – DISCUSSION OF THE COURSE DESIGN

The course "Encounter- and project-based learning in religiously diverse contexts" encompasses several key aspects, including (a) exploring cultural and religious diversity within educational contexts, (b) engaging in project-based and experiential learning, (c) collaboratively developing learning tasks in the realm of Religious Education, and (d) implementing these tasks at a learning festival.[2] The primary objective of the course is to foster interconnection and collaboration among students from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds through a project centered around Religious Education. The course was conducted through a combination of face-to-face and digital modalities, with approximately half of the sessions held in person at LUE and the remaining half delivered digitally via learning management systems like Moodle. Face-to-face sessions primarily involved providing foundational theoretical concepts and facilitating guided discussions. On the other hand, digital sessions offered an array of learning arrangements, such as readings, podcasts, audio presentations, interactive forums, videos, and chats, based on student-generated questions and reports. The course's emphasis on collaboration and project-based learning aims to enable students to gain insights into cultural and religious diversity through encounter, while also acquiring practical experience in designing learning tasks in the field of education. Notably, a distinctive feature of this course is that students dedicate several weeks during the semester to autonomously develop project-based learning tasks in Religious Education, which are subsequently integrated into a learning festival where children actively participate and learn alongside the students at LUE. As a result, students of this course not only experience cultural and religious diversity through their project-based work but also provide an opportunity for children engaging in these tasks to encounter and learn from diverse perspectives. During the project phase, the students were supported by a tutoring system. Faculty members from LUE assisted the project groups in the development, organization, implementation, and reflection of their projects. Students are eligible to earn up to three credit points according to the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and can utilize their projects as a foundation for their Master's Thesis. Against this backdrop, the study reports on the development, implementation, and evaluation of this course within the Teacher Education program at LUE. The study involved thirty-six participants enrolled in teacher education programs, with a specific focus on students majoring in Religious Education. Students' attitudes, practices, and preferences concerning learning experiences in collaborative and religiously diverse settings played a vital role in designing and evaluating the course. To provide insights into students' learning experiences within the described settings, the paper focuses on a qualitative study that explores students' reflections on their personal encounters and learning

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[2] The Learning Festival of LUE invites pupils from schools in the area to visit the University Campus and participate in learning tasks designed by the students of LUE.

journeys. Through this exploration, the study assesses the current practices employed and presents a comprehensive analysis of the course.

3 QUALITATIVE STUDY DESIGN

The study aims to explore and discuss the reflections and discussions of students who participated in the course, focusing on their individual experiences in collaborative and encounter-based learning contexts. To achieve this, a creative qualitative design was employed and conducted digitally. The research focus, which centers on students' experiences in learning in project-based settings and diverse environments, necessitated an innovative approach that considers multiple perspectives.

To gather data, students were instructed to engage in group discussions and share their answers to specific questions through an online platform. Before this, an interview guide was sent to the students via email [15]. The participants were given sufficient time for reflection, and once the group discussions were completed, they submitted their answers to the research team using a digital transfer system [16]. This asynchronous digital method of data collection is a relatively new technique in qualitative research. It encourages respondents to carefully consider and structure their ideas and responses, promoting deeper reflection [17]. By employing this asynchronous digital approach, the study seeks to obtain data that provides a comprehensive view through the lens of thoughtful and subjective feedback.

The semi-structured questionnaire used in the study includes several categories that were developed deductively.

These categories include:

a) project-based collaboration in diverse groups,
b) the role of encounter,
c) experiential Learning in encounter, and
d) future teaching competencies.

These deductive categories were derived from theoretical frameworks that emphasize experiential learning. Each category comprises multiple key questions supplemented by prompts or follow-up questions. The qualitative study focuses mainly on the evaluation of learners' experiences and attitudes towards learning in encounter in culturally and religiously diverse, collaborative, and project-based contexts. Additionally, it explores reflections on learning strategies and perceptions of personal growth and transformation within the learning process.

4 FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The analysis and discussion of the data show different combined categories, which are based on the deductive categories and new inductive impulses found within the data. The findings are structured and discussed according to these categories. Several answers and reflections show links to more than one category and are therefore discussed in various contexts. The students' projects focused on culturally and religiously diverse topics in the field of Religious Education, such as "Experiencing religious diversity with all senses," "Quran and Bible – comparative

perspectives," "The element of water in the Abrahamic context," or "Symbols in Islam and Christianity."[3]

4.1 Project-based collaboration in diverse contexts

In the discussed course, project-based collaboration takes center stage, fostering an inclusive learning environment where students work in culturally and religiously diverse groups. They actively engage with participants from various backgrounds while also developing learning tasks that cater to children with diverse biographies. This approach equips students with the skills to navigate diversity and promote inclusivity.

- The course has garnered positive feedback from interviewed students who highlight diverse and enriching learning experiences. By interacting with students and teachers from various cultural and religious backgrounds, students were able to gain valuable insights into various religions and worldviews. Guided discussions within religiously diverse groups facilitated authentic and intense learning experiences, with a wide range of theological topics being explored: *"The wide diversification of theological topics, related to authentic insights was very helpful."* Collaboration in the course is described as motivating, as students engage in discussions based on firsthand and authentic experiences. However, students also acknowledged the significance of a well-rounded theoretical foundation, which was developed during the course sessions. Students report that the course successfully blends practical experiences with comprehensive theoretical knowledge, creating a robust and rewarding learning environment.
- During the interviews, many student groups highlighted their sense of membership, driven by a shared objective of developing learning tasks for children. This common goal fostered a strong commitment to collaboration. Students felt a personal responsibility for the successful implementation of their collaborative projects, resulting in high motivation and active engagement within their groups. Within this context, discussions among group members naturally emerged, exploring both the similarities and differences in their individual religious affiliations and imprints. These conversations often extended beyond the confines of the coursework, facilitating further dialogue and reflection. Some students expressed that the collaborative processes prompted them to reflect on their own religious and cultural backgrounds in a meaningful way. *"There were many intensive and profound discussions ... and the interaction was interesting and authentic."* As a result, students gained a deeper understanding of diverse cultural and religious affiliations, prompting them to critically examine their own cultural and religious contexts. The development of a cohesive group dynamic, coupled with various collaborative tasks, played a crucial role in facilitating these transformative experiences.
- Several student groups emphasized the relevance of the course's projects to their future work fields. *"The projects are relevant for our future work, as we are going to teach children with diverse religious backgrounds..."*. Collaboration within culturally and religiously diverse groups equipped students with the necessary skills for navigating diverse classrooms and beyond. This emphasis on diversity was evident in students' projects, which focused on exploring and addressing cultural

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[3] All results, quotations, charts, transcriptions and analysis phases of the study are available through the author.

and religious diversity in various ways. The projects intended to highlight both the similarities and differences between different cultural and religious contexts, opting for a multisensory approach to engage learners effectively. Some students underscored that collaborative, project-based, and diverse settings in teacher training played a vital role in developing the essential competencies required for working in diverse schools and societies.

4.2 The role of encounter in diverse learning environments

Encounter seems to play a pivotal role in the collaborative processes of the course and project groups, as highlighted by the interviewed students. In the evaluation the value of encounter is discussed many times. The participating students find encounter beneficial for their learning experience. The diverse contents and interactions within these encounters enable students to shed biases and engage in discussions that they may not have in other settings: *"Especially the various contents and the interaction. Getting rid of biases and discussing questions which one would not ask outside this setting."* Students report that these encounters fostered experiences of mutual trust and contributed to establishing a constructive, culturally, and religiously responsive atmosphere. *"Through the ongoing encounter one could break down prejudices. We learned that prejudices develop if one does not engage with other (religious) contexts".* Participating students recognize that prejudices can arise when one fails to engage with other religious contexts. Through encounters in the course and project groups, students describe a respectful and prejudice-conscious learning atmosphere. Furthermore: *"To realize that fellow students with other religious backgrounds were interested in my religion was good to see. (...) Some questions (about my religious backgrounds) could only be answered with difficulty, and I had to reflect on my religious affiliations and imprints again and again."* This realization prompts students to reflect on their own religious affiliations and imprints. Some students discuss experiencing emotional involvement due to these encounters. The development of empathy, particularly through project-oriented tasks, seems to enable students to engage in open discussions [18]. Empathy, closely linked to encounter in project-based settings, can have a profound impact on the individual perspectives of participating students. It involves developing a reflective awareness of the project's topic and the participants involved. Encounters within the course and project groups can facilitate this development of empathy, contributing to transformative learning experiences.

4.3 Experiential Learning in encounter

Experiential learning needs encounter and can profit from collaborative and project-based learning arrangements [11]. The interviewed students discuss their experiences in (1) the course, (2) the project teams, and (3) the learning festival:

1. Interaction with fellow students and guided discussions emerged as pivotal elements of the course, fostering valuable learning experiences. Within a diverse mix of individual cultural and religious backgrounds, students gained awareness of their sociocultural imprints in cultural and religious contexts. The selected course contents, combined with discussions among peers and teachers, provided constructive learning opportunities. Encounter was highlighted as a key factor in these learning experiences, as it facilitated a deeper understanding

of different religions: *"The encounters in the course ... made the other religion more comprehensible and real."* Through encounters in the course, students found the other religion more comprehensible and authentic. Furthermore, the course served as a foundation for the project-based approach, offering valuable guidance and acting as a starting point for the development of learning tasks. In addition to this, the course is seen as a basis for the project-based approach and is discussed as a helpful starting point and guidance for the development of learning tasks.

2. The importance of a constructive group dynamic and guidance through lecturers are mentioned many times as essential traits of the project-based part of the course. Encounters in the project teams are discussed as authentic, as common goals helped to establish experiences of trust and belonging. Some students emphasize the importance of project-based work for their future teaching competencies: *"The project-based work is relevant to our future work fields ... as it prepares us for religious diversity in schools."*

3. The Learning Festival and its preparation led to various learning experiences: Some students report that they were struggling with the heterogenous learning levels of the students: *"Generalization just does not work".* Other students reported positive experiences with active learning approaches and collaborative tasks for the participating pupils. In general, the students are highly satisfied with the motivation and the level of participation of the pupils. A high level of differentiation, made possible through learning circles and various learning options, is discussed as an important trait for the pupils' motivation.

4.4   Future teaching competencies

The interviewed teams recognized the strong practical relevance and encounter within culturally and religiously diverse groups as highly significant for their future work fields: *"Reflecting on one's awareness of prejudice and one's individual imprint. (...) The dismantling of stereotypes."* Developing a diversity-responsive attitude was seen as fundamental for teachers and should be established during teacher training. Culturally and religiously responsive education was discussed as an interdisciplinary approach that should be integrated into schools more broadly. Encounter and personal experiences played a vital role for many students: *"... educating children in religiously diverse settings is easier if one has had experiences oneself."* Some students expressed that their diverse teams provided constructive impulses that sparked further reflection on theological issues. They acknowledged that learning about religion is an ongoing process, whether it involves understanding different religious views or deepening one's own religious perspective: *"It seems as if one never stops learning about religion – be it a different religious view or your own."* However, a few students noted the absence of a focus on exegetical perspectives and current issues, which they felt could have provided a more profound understanding of certain topics. They also mentioned that visiting different places of worship would have been beneficial in fostering a stronger connection and understanding of various religious denominations.

5   DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The qualitative approach employed in this study aims to explore students' reflections on their experiences in collaborative and project-based settings, with a specific focus on encounter in religiously diverse groups. The goal is to gain a

deeper understanding of the importance of encounter in such settings and how these experiences can be effectively integrated into future higher education courses. Therefore, the study analyses the planning, execution, and critical reflection of learning experiences through collaboration and encounter. The methods employed largely focus on the same phenomena, and the findings are discussed in this analysis by triangulating the different qualitative perspectives [19].

- Experiences in learning through encounter in culturally and religiously diverse contexts offer a range of learning opportunities. The study suggests that these experiences can be profound and long-lasting when they occur in authentic and open settings [20]. Encounter between learners from different cultural and religious backgrounds can lead to the dismantling of prejudices and foster mutual understanding. Embedding encounter within project-based settings, where students with diverse backgrounds collaborate towards a common goal supported by well-structured courses and mentoring programs, can promote constructive and sustainable learning. Project-based work can cultivate a sense of involvement, belonging, and strong connections among participants [21]. Emotional involvement can enhance motivation and foster open and tolerant attitudes toward other religions and worldviews. Within projects, learners seem to enjoy a high level of autonomy to pursue individual interests while also collaborating with others, thus encountering diverse ideas and perspectives [22]. Learning through encounter in religiously diverse contexts enables the development of new knowledge about other religious views, as well as self-reflection on one's own beliefs: Learning about others and learning about the self [23].
- The role of encounter in teacher training is crucial for cultivating a culturally and religiously responsive attitude. Teachers in culturally and religiously diverse classrooms need to be self-conscious, critical, and reflective of their own beliefs, imprints, and behaviours [24]. The study indicates that students in teacher training benefit from project-based and collaborative settings that facilitate encounter in diverse teams. Exposure to unfamiliar cultural and religious backgrounds prompts students to reflect on their attitudes and challenge potential stereotypes. Students seem to value encounter within culturally and religiously diverse teams and are motivated to reflect on their individual ideas and imprints through project-based collaboration. Additionally, the goal of developing learning tasks for pupils in these projects offers opportunities for the development of didactic competencies, as it connects reflection on cultural and religious diversity with practical orientation. The implementation of the projects and the communication with children and teachers at the Learning Festival were particularly impactful in creating intense learning experiences.

Overall, this study underscores the value of encounter in collaborative and project-based settings within culturally and religiously diverse contexts. The research highlights the importance of creating genuine and inclusive learning environments, as well as incorporating encounter into teacher training. These measures are essential for enhancing the depth and long-term effectiveness of students' learning journeys.

6 OUTLOOK

Religious Education can support schools in developing inclusive spaces that foster recognition, representation, and a sense of belonging, free from discrimination.

Children must have safe environments that acknowledge and embrace cultural and religious diversity, allowing them to engage constructively with these differences. Schools have a unique opportunity to create such spaces where children can naturally and positively experience the recognition of diverse cultures and religions. With the guidance of skilled educators, children can develop an understanding of both others and themselves within an inclusive learning environment. Embracing Humboldt's concept [27] of learning through alienation from one's own world, schools can lay the groundwork for a culturally and religiously sensitive education based on interactive experiences. Against this backdrop, encounter is a fundamental aspect of learning that can foster authentic and sustainable experiences among students in schools and the higher education sector. Collaborative and project-based strategies hold immense potential for learning in culturally and religiously diverse contexts, as they promote interaction and collaboration among students. The study highlights the following points:

- Learning in encounter within project-based settings is empathetic and authentic, leading to the dismantling of prejudices as students come together with shared tasks and a common goal.
- Learning in encounter encourages strong participation when implemented in collaborative and project-based contexts. Joint responsibility for a project fosters involvement and exchange.
- Learning in encounter facilitates authentic interaction when students collaborate in project teams.
- Learning in encounter takes into account the individual development of students and the group's level of development. Learning occurs in relation to others.
- Learning in encounter enables students to become both learners and teachers simultaneously. In collaborative processes, students learn while teaching others, fostering a sense of mutuality and total commitment. *"The community moves toward a mutuality that encourages total commitment and a willingness to share."* [25].

Considering these points, learning in encounter can be seen as a crucial factor for learning in culturally and religiously diverse groups. Collaborative projects, particularly in the field of Religious Education, should incorporate the concept of encounter to provide students with authentic and constructive learning experiences with their peers. The structure of such courses should include a theoretical foundation for all students, discussions on strategies for project-based learning, a realistic and clear timeframe, a mentoring program for the projects, a platform for presentation and reflection, and opportunities for reflection on the learning experiences.

Learning in encounter, facilitated by project-based, collaborative, and blended learning designs, can be transformative as it addresses the challenges of culturally and religiously diverse groups constructively while supporting students in becoming self-reflective and culturally and religiously responsive members and teachers in diverse societies [26].

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