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Youth in interfaith dialogue: Intercultural understanding and its implications on education in the Philippines

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Abstract

In the wake of religious conflicts around the world, interfaith dialogues are being introduced to facilitate intercultural and religious understanding and tolerance. Although the participation of young people in interfaith dialogue and its impact on education is crucial to its sustainability, the literature on youth and interfaith has been very limited. This article addresses this gap by probing the significance or impact of interfaith on the views of our youth respondents on other religions. The view of our youth respondents show that interfaith dialogues do not have to begin and end in theological discussions. To them, the significance of interfaith revolves around the *person* (and not his or her religion), *friendships*, and *collective participation in the community*. We use these insights to reflect on their possible implications on the conduct of education in the Philippines. Three areas are explored: the necessity of interfaith dialogue within education, the feasibility of implementing it in the classroom, and its potential for youth empowerment. The article draws from interviews with the members of the Muslim-Christian Youth for Peace and Development (MCYPD), an interfaith community based in a neighborhood in Metro Manila.

Keywords

Youth, interfaith dialogue, intercultural cooperation, youth and religion, education, Philippines.

La juventud en el diálogo interreligioso: el entendimiento intercultural y sus implicaciones en la educación en Filipinas

Resumen

Tras los conflictos religiosos alrededor del mundo, se están introduciendo diálogos interreligiosos para facilitar el entendimiento y la tolerancia religiosas. Aunque la participación de los jóvenes en este diálogo es fundamental para que sea sustentable, la literatura sobre la juventud y lo interreligioso ha sido muy limitada. Este artículo aborda este vacío, sondando la importancia o el impacto de lo interreligioso sobre las perspectivas de los jóvenes que encuestamos acerca de otras religiones. La perspectiva de estos encuestados demuestra que los diálogos interreligiosos no tienen por qué empezar y terminar en discusiones teológicas. Para ellos, la importancia de lo interreligioso se centra en la *persona* (y no su religión), las *amistades*, y la *participación colectiva en la comunidad*. Utilizamos

Palabras clave

Juventud, diálogo interreligioso, cooperación intercultural, juventud y religión, educación, Filipinas.

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estas ideas para reflexionar sobre sus posibles implicaciones en la conducta de la educación en Filipinas. Se exploran tres áreas: la necesidad del diálogo interreligioso dentro de la educación, la factibilidad de implementarlo en el salón de clases, y su potencial para el apoderamiento de los jóvenes. El artículo se surte de entrevistas con la Juventud Musulmana-Cristiana para la Paz y el Desarrollo, una comunidad interreligiosa ubicada en un barrio de la Gran Manila.

Introduction

Many parts of the world have long been characterized by religious conflict, or at least by tensions that are justified religiously (Juergensmeyer, 2003). The 9/11 attacks on the US simply globalized awareness of such a reality (Smock, 2002b). Historically rooted strife between Christians, Hindus, and Muslims is evident in societies around Asia and Africa, for example; and even in the West, the arrival of immigrants has engendered everyday forms of religious xenophobia. While Huntington (1996) argues that contemporary conflicts are between geographic civilizations along religious lines, the reality is that tensions do exist within everyday local contexts as well.

The connection between religion and violence can be explained by how religious ideas are often employed to instill religious commitment, organize resistance, or even effect martyrdom (Hall, 2003). Other observers argue though that religion, because of its inherent social boundaries, is predisposed to inflict violence especially on others who do not share it. In Wellman and Tokuno's (2004, p. 380) view, conflict is necessary to create and nurture religious identity: "We believe it is folly to assert that true religion seeks peace; or that religion is somehow hijacked when it becomes implicated in conflict or even violence. Indeed religion does produce conflict and, less frequently, violence."

Not many share Wellman and Tokuno's pessimism, however. Institutions around the world have responded to religious conflict by initiating interfaith dialogue as a way of fostering understanding between religions, building peace in the region, and even facilitating community development. In the Philippines, a predominantly Catholic country with significant religious minorities including Muslims, Protestants, and indigenous peoples, efforts to encourage dialogue have also been introduced. The Philippine Department of Education, for example, recently adopted the Face to Faith initiative of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, a program that involves interfaith dialogue as part of basic curriculum (Quismondo, 2011). This, including the establishment of international and local interfaith organizations, is in response to the growing recognition of the need for interfaith dialogue among peoples of different religions to assuage the tensions that may be

caused by discrimination among them. In particular, the goal is to establish peace and solidarity between Muslims and Christians in Mindanao.

Deemed central to these efforts is the involvement of young people for they do not only “share in the problems...but they also inherit the responsibility to sustain the peacebuilding effort in the region” (Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy, 2004, p. 6). It is therefore not surprising that novel approaches in interfaith dialogue like Face to Faith now target young people. Yet despite this recognition, there has been a dearth of research on youth and their involvement in interfaith efforts. A recent study by World Vision (LAWGCP, 2007) in the Philippines probed young people’s notions of peace and conflict but has not been able to explore the motivations and significance of their participation in interfaith activities. Conducted in the cities of Davao and General Santos, the study asked questions such as how the children and adult respondents think of peace, how they identify differences among people, and what they believe to be the cause of conflict. However, it was not able to inquire why the respondents were active in such causes, or whether they found meaning in their participation. Further, the research was silent on interfaith dialogue and the forms of dialogue that were surfacing in these areas.

Methods and significance

This article addresses this gap by drawing from the experiences of young people involved in the Muslim-Christian Youth for Peace and Development (MCYPD). MCYPD is an interfaith organization based in a neighborhood in Caloocan, one of the cities of Metro Manila, the capital region of the Philippines. Ranging from 12 to 24 years old, twenty-two youth members and officers (out of thirty-five) agreed to be interviewed. Interviewees were invited according to gender and religious affiliation: Catholic, Evangelical Christian (or Born Again as colloquially known), and Muslim. Interestingly, one of our informants considers himself multi-faith.

Drawing from these interviews, we probe the different ways by which our respondents have articulated the significance or impact of MCYPD on how they view interfaith and fellow members of different faith. At one level, this article contributes to the journal’s thematic focus on youth studies by looking at interfaith dialogue as a means of non-violence. We do this by arguing that interfaith dialogues do not have to begin and end in theological discussions. In the case of our respondents, the significance of interfaith revolves around the *person* (and not his or her religion), *friendships*, and *collective participation in the community*. In view of these three aspects, we argue that interfaith is both a “living dialogue” and a “dialogue of cooperation” (Haney, 2009). One

possible study that resonates with ours focuses on the meaning of participation in volunteer projects for English youth in Latin America (Hopkins *et al.*, 2010).

But at another level, this chapter is an important inquiry because it also assesses how interfaith dialogues can reshape pervading stereotypes about other religions in changing societies. Lessons drawn from our interfaith youth can then contribute to innovations in education (Gundara, 2000). The Philippines, of course, is predominantly Catholic with 81% of the population professing the faith. But the presence of Protestant and Muslim groups is also considerable at 7.3% and 5.1%, respectively, according to the census in 2007 (Pangalangan, 2010). Metro Manila, although distant from the realities of conflict in Mindanao, is fast becoming home to migrating Muslims from the South. In Metro Manila, the Muslim population has increased from 95 in 1903 to 58,859 in 2000 (Watanabe, 2007).¹ Indeed, the mobility of Muslims in the capital is revealed by a recent survey showing that 66.5% of Muslim households have resided outside of Metro Manila for at least six months (Ogena, 2012). More recently, Watanabe (2008) estimates that the Muslim population in Manila could in fact be around 120,000. In her fieldwork, she has also been able to count at least 80 mosques in the metropolitan area, although official data show only 32. These demographic trends are certainly reflected in everyday life, notwithstanding the classroom. Drawing from his research and experience as educator, Baring points out that the classroom today has also become pluralistic as students come with different religious and ethnic backgrounds (2011).

Review of literature

Driven by thinkers and practitioners involved in interfaith efforts around the world, the literature on interfaith dialogue has become increasingly rich in recent years. Indeed, never has the need for interfaith efforts been more acute because of the emergence of religious conflict around the world. This development, however, must not be taken to mean that interfaith dialogue as an approach is an entirely new model of thinking about religion. In his introductory text, Forward (2001) suggests that to dialogue with people of other religious traditions traces its history back to the Greeks and even early Christianity. In this sense, recent efforts to understand other religious traditions are a continuation of this ethos. Indeed, at its core, interfaith dialogue is about “per-

1 Interestingly, Manila was a predominantly Muslim area with strong political and economic activities before the Spaniards arrived in the 16th century (Aguilar 1987). As a result of Spanish rule, Muslims became marginal and have been mostly confined to other regions including Mindanao.

sons of different faiths meeting to have a conversation” (Smock, 2002b, p. 6).

Models of interfaith dialogue

Straightforward as it may be, recent literature demonstrates that interfaith has taken on different approaches and reflections, which are typically contingent on the needs of local contexts. Hence, interfaith has been conceptualized in various forms and experimentations including facilitating workshops, community organizing, and even political peacebuilding (Abu-Nimer, 2004; Tyagananda, 2011). An important collection of writings, for example, has been produced by the Institute of Peace in Washington (Smock, 2002a). Mainly written by practitioners, the collection brings together reflections and case studies of interfaith efforts around the world. Working with religious stakeholders in the former Yugoslavia, for example, Steele (2002) has suggested that peacebuilding stakeholders can take on the different roles of observer, educator, advocate, and intermediary. Peacebuilding as an effort aims to prevent war, resolve existing conflicts, or help in postwar reconstruction. Based in Northern Ireland, Liechty (2002) proposes mitigation as an approach to temper the existing conflicts between Catholics and Protestants. To Liechty (2002, p. 94), mitigation is the “capacity to lessen or eliminate possible negative outcomes of a belief, commitment, or action—while still upholding it.” Changes in how religious activities are carried out, for example, can be introduced to avoid offending the sensibilities of other religious individuals. Another fascinating case is presented by Gibbs (2002), an Episcopalian priest, on the global aspirations of his organization, the United Religions Initiative (URI). To Gibbs, the global reach of URI lies in being able to partner with grassroots organizations in order to facilitate dialogue through the methodology of appreciative inquiry (AI). Instead of focusing on problems that need to be resolved, AI first invites participants to value personal experiences and diverse religious traditions as a way of building lasting interpersonal relationships.

That these writings have been written by practitioners and engaged academics is a possible explanation for the emphasis on models or guidelines that, while descriptive as literature, are also prescriptive in the end. In this sense, interfaith as a field of inquiry marries both empirical and applied research.

Forward (2001), a Methodist minister himself, offers a comprehensive historical account of the modern interfaith movement. He suggests that the Parliament of the World’s Religions in 1893 could have been the first attempt at bringing together major religions. He suggests, however, that the main debacle for it and the other interfaith efforts across the decades has been the

exclusivist mindset of religious individuals that treat people of other faiths as inferior or even erroneous. To him, the fact of the global movement of ideas and people renders it impossible for such individuals to remain secluded without engendering conflict over sensitive issues. Three prime issues needing interreligious dialogue are the changing role of women, the diversity of human sexuality, and the need to care for the environment. Reflecting his background as a theologian, he then calls for a change not just of behavior by being good to others, but also in terms of theological thinking: "Religion has to be humble enough to ask whether our rapidly changing world sets each faith the task of examining its own assumptions to see whether they are meaningful and beneficial for the needs of the third millennium" (Forward, 2001, p. 118). In other words, any interfaith dialogue must primarily have an impact on one's cherished theology.

Exclusivism is also an issue that Tyagananda (2011), a Hindu monk himself, takes up in designing and running interfaith dialogues. He notes that the motives of participants in an interfaith dialogue need to be checked against exclusivist attempts at trying to convert or replace the religion of others. To him, the dialogue models of mutuality or acceptance are desirable. Mutuality, on one hand, "is based on the recognition that religions of the world are equal partners" through which relationship cooperation may be achieved (p. 228). Going beyond basic tolerance, however, the model of acceptance affirms even the truth claims of other religions. The goal of dialogue in this sense is not so much theological unity as the acceptance of the reality of diversity. Tyagananda is a believer of interreligious dialogue and so what appears to be a descriptive account of different models based on experience in the end informs a prescriptive conclusion: "In order to lead richer, more fulfilling religious lives, each of us must learn to be interreligious, a state of being that travels the pathless path to the truth that is beyond all religious labels" (p. 230).

Interestingly, this prescriptive tone is implicit in Huang's (1995, p. 139) discussion of the "fusion of horizons" that takes place in a dialogue. Although he suggests that his is only descriptive, his discussion is lodged against the problems of exclusivism and universalism, which are, again, two of the dialogue models rejected by Tyagananda as well. To Huang, who draws from philosophy, what happens in an interfaith dialogue in the end is that individuals interpret what they discover about the other religion in the light of their own faith. The processes, then, of conversion or unifying different religious elements are carried out by individuals in light of an already existing religious perspective. In view of globalization, Huang ultimately welcomes the maximization of fusion of horizons as an ideal.

Perhaps one of the most prominent thinkers and practitioners in the field of interfaith dialogue is Mohammed Abu-Nimer, who

has experience conducting research and interfaith workshops across the globe. Gleaning from his work on Palestinian-Israeli conflict, for example, Abu-Nimer (2004) argues that there are three conditions that leaders and activists must fulfill in order to make any interfaith successful. First, in contrast to the claims of Wellman and Tokuno (2004), individuals must believe that religion has a constructive role to play in resolving conflicts. Second, dialogues are avenues to change hostile attitudes toward other religions by finding commonalities. For this, Abu-Nimer (2004) suggests that the interfaith facilitator be somebody that all parties involved find trustworthy. Finally, interfaith dialogue in itself must be seen as an avenue for political change. Abu-Nimer challenges the assumption that religion must be kept at bay in any peace negotiation since conflicts can also be religious in nature. In fact, in an earlier essay, Abu-Nimer (2002) contended that it is the very spiritual and ethical character of interfaith dialogue that makes it unique and more compelling than secular forms of dialogue.

Limitations

Although the literature on interfaith dialogue has been extensive, we take it that the emphasis has been mainly on models that have been effectively based on the experiences of different thinkers and practitioners. This to us has two underpinning considerations. At one level, the discussions primarily deal with theological differences and how they can be negotiated or mitigated. One side of the discussion, for example, calls for a change to theological thinking itself whereas the other assumes that differences will always be present, and so the attitudes toward interfaith need to be properly addressed. Perhaps this emphasis on theological differences is explained by the fact that the typical interfaith activist has a religious background. In addition, religion, from a theological point of view, is understood in these contexts as a set of beliefs. Asad (1993) has taken note of this inadequacy in the sociology and anthropology of religion. Reflecting our background in the social sciences, we contend that religion needs to be understood also in terms of social relationships (Davie, 2007; Riis and Woodhead, 2010). From this point of view, interfaith dialogue becomes a process of forging friendships first and foremost. As will be spelt out below, this is what we have discovered in our research among young people. What is then being accepted, using Abu-Nimer's (2004) framework, is not just the validity of the other's religious beliefs, but the person himself or herself.

At another level, we also suggest that the focus on models in the literature, while demonstrating their effectiveness based on experience, overlooks how people think about and articulate the

impact of interfaith on their lives. This, we believe, is what Tyagananda (2011, p. 229) hints at when he points out that a dialogue “brings people together and, when they get to know one another as fellow human beings, it breaks the ice and creates warmth.” He then goes on to say that it is “difficult to hate a religion when you personally know that warm, intelligent, and considerate people practice it.” Therefore in this article, instead of elaborating another model, we unravel the nuances of the significance of interfaith on our youth informants.

We also note here that the literature on interfaith dialogue has predominantly dealt with the experience of adult participants. From a sociological perspective, much of the problems of religious conflict could possibly be drawn from years of socialization during childhood. At that stage, ideas about one’s religion—and the other—are shaped gradually (Bartkowski, 2007). These ideas, in the end, arguably inform the perceptions and treatment of other religions. In this light, interfaith activities for the young become part of their religious socialization process, and not simply an intervention that takes place during adulthood. We thus agree with the claim of Phua, Hui, and Yap (2008, p. 642) that interfaith youth engagement affords “gradual education” to advance beyond “mere tolerance” towards “true respect from understanding.” By focusing on the significance of interfaith dialogue on youth, we add to the study conducted by World Vision (IAWGCP, 2007) on young people’s notions of peace and conflict in the Philippines.

MCYPD

The Muslim-Christian Youth for Peace and Development (MCYPD) is one of the several interfaith initiatives established by the Peacemakers’ Circle, a local non-governmental organization that facilitates dialogues, peace workshops, and self-awareness retreats.² Peacemakers’ Circle began as a pioneering entity of the United Religions Initiative (URI) in the Philippines, which explains its emphasis on grassroots participation (Gibbs, 2002). MCYPD is in the local district of Barangay³ Tala in Caloocan, one of the cities of Metro Manila. Around Metro Manila are other interfaith communities⁴ under Peacemakers’ Circle, which, as described above, is a testament to the needs of the growing presence of Muslims and other faiths.

The original members of MCYPD are children of the adults active in the pioneer interfaith group in the community, the Mus-

2 See <http://www.thepeacemakerscircle.org/>

3 Smallest administrative unit in the Philippines.

4 Culiati and Taguig are other areas of the Peacemakers’ Circle.

lim-Christian Peacemakers' Association (MCPA). As the population of immigrants from other provinces and with different religious background increased, these adults deemed it necessary to bring in the youth in their neighborhood. MCYPD began in early 2011 when children of the adults went house-to-house to invite their neighbors and 'barkadas' (close friends) to a meeting and discuss the possibility of interfaith activities. They were then formally recognized as a cooperation circle⁵ by the Peacemakers' Circle in July 2011. Indeed, the history of snobbery and discrimination between Muslims and Christians in Barangay Tala has been particularly hurtful for the Muslims. Quite telling is the story of Macklis Bala, an interfaith leader in the community who was interviewed for a documentary (Peacemakers' Circle Foundation, 2006):

My Christian brothers and sisters here were afraid of us because they heard that we were bad people. That was heavy for me to take because I really wanted to befriend them, most especially my neighbors. If they had the chance, they would have even petitioned our non-entry because they heard that Muslims were evil—like we were murderers.

Today, success stories can be gleaned from both the youth and adults. As will be further elucidated, some of our Christian respondents, for example, have indicated in the interviews that they now know the personalities of their Muslim friends with whom they are living. Contrary to stereotypes, they are now considered "kind" and "friendly." As regards the adults, their own interfaith group is now involved in livelihood activities. In fact, they were recently granted another loan by the Department of Social and Welfare Development (DSWD) to help them in their business. The granting of this new loan is attributed to the fact that the organization has paid their previous dues on time.

In what follows, we draw from our interviews with the youth of MCYPD. The youth group is composed of at least thirty active Muslim and Christian (Catholic and Evangelical) youth leaders and members (12 to 24 years old). Their usual meeting place is in the house of one of their elders, but they are planning (with assistance from the URI) to construct a small office of their own. Its leadership structure maintains a balance between Muslim and Christian youth leaders although the number of members is subject to fluctuation since families in the community are mobile. Some, for example, have decided to leave to study elsewhere while others have returned to Mindanao. Interestingly, MCYPD is

5 A cooperation circle (in URI's language) is a group composed of at least three or more religions. Although autonomous, it should be noted that the MCYPD constantly seeks the assistance and guidance from its elders.

being moderated by an adult Muslim for MCPA, who is married to a Christian. The group gathers on a weekly basis in which interfaith prayers are carried out. What is interesting, however, is that their meetings are not necessarily about theological differences. Most of the time, they are driven by efforts that can aid their community. These projects, for example, have included river cleanups, tree planting, and waste segregation.

The significance of interfaith for the youth of MCYPD

In this section we directly address the main point of this paper, namely, what our youth respondents consider the significance of being part of an interfaith community. For this we align with Forward's (2001) fundamental understanding of interfaith dialogue. To him, to dialogue is to go through a process in which individuals are willing to risk in order to learn from each other and, in so doing, be transformed accordingly. In this sense, interfaith is not just a conversation. Forward's understanding of such transformation, however, is primarily in relation to theological discourse. As argued above, this emphasis on theology is also the tendency among other interfaith thinkers and practitioners. In the case of our respondents, it is not so much about theology as it is about the relationships they are able to form. Three areas are emergent from the interviews: the person-and not religion-friendship, and community engagement. Through these areas, we suggest that in the lives of our young people, interfaith has been a transformative relational experience.

Person, not religion

The first salient theme in our interviews is to us a fascinating discovery. When asked what they have learned about the other religion through MCYPD, our respondents have constantly pointed to the character of the follower rather than the contents and doctrines of the religion. To be sure, some of them have described the differences in terms of food restriction or even the names of God, for example, but references to the character of a Muslim or Christian is more prevalent. Manilyn (17), explains that she realized that her Muslim peers are in fact "kind" and "friendly." She then admits that "my view of Muslims has drastically changed. I thought before that they were a bad people. But now it has changed. I see that they are very nice and sincere." A Muslim, Ali (21) recounts that when he was much younger, "I could not really go out of the house. So to me, it is important to really know my friends. Whenever they pass by our house, I would ask, 'Are they [Christian neighbors] nice or are they cranky?'"

Ali happily shares that he now knows his Christian peers very well. Further, Aslaine (17), a Muslim, shares how through joining the circle, she was able to befriend her enemies (who were also Christians) from before: “If not for the MCYPD, I would not have been able to get to know my enemies. Now we are really close friends. We learned to respect each other.”

This is not to say they have not learnt the substantive differences between their religions. Our respondents have been able to identify some differences in terms of feasts like Ramadan and Christmas, dietary restrictions, and even wedding rituals. But in explaining these differences, our informants are quick to suggest that learning made more sense as they can now associate these to specific friends of theirs. As Marilhyn (18), a Catholic, puts it, “it is more interesting to learn directly from my Muslim friends than from our books at school.”

The experience of interfaith dialogue among our youth informants shows that it has helped them humanize the other religion. The narratives are consistent in recounting how they harbored negative impressions or stereotypes about the other religion. Through interfaith, discussions of religious differences have been surfaced but these are not, in the end, the most important realization for our informants. What has changed is that Islam or Christianity is no longer an abstract idea or religion dominated by pervading stereotypes. Instead, friends with whom they have established relationships have become the human face of Islam or Christianity. In this regard, while interfaith practitioners would see the value of theological engagement (Cilliers, 2002), the experience of our youth informants reveals that it is not the most important consideration at all. Interfaith dialogue has definitely allowed them to recognize the different religious beliefs and practices, but these are secondary. To them the most significant impact lies in being able to see that Muslims or Christians can be their friends as well, thereby negating pervading stereotypes against each other.

Friendship

In our interviews, we also noticed that our informants see their participation in MCYPD as an opportunity to make new friends. There are two possible reasons for this. One, our informants are in their formative adolescent years wherein the need for socialization and belonging is heightened (Miles, 2000). And two, many of our informants are relatively new as immigrants to the community. When we ask Asmin (18), a Muslim, what motivated her to participate in the organization, she admits that “I really want to have friends from around here.” She has also shared with us that the most memorable occasion for her at MCYPD was when “we all participated in a fundraising activity. We prepared a dance

number together and we were all there. These were my friends.” Although she has only been with MCYPD for a year, Asmin has now taken the role of the organization’s auditor. Asmin’s narrative demonstrates that the interfaith community is able to bridge religious and cultural differences by tapping into the needs of young people for friendship. To us, this is in itself a fascinating finding because immigrants can have the tendency to isolate themselves from the mainstream (Singh, 2010).

Several have pointed out, too, that the most meaningful memories they have of the circle involves interaction with their peers, including youth from other interfaith cooperation circles in other parts of Manila. For Aslaima (21), a Muslim, she considers performing an ethnic dance in Makati City for a URI-sponsored fund raising activity as one of her most memorable experiences in the MCYPD. To her, its significance lies in having done it with her friends. As Faisal (19), a Muslim, puts it, “the reason why I constantly involve myself, why I do not want to quit, is because I have found true friends here—they will not leave you.”

What the data reveal is that the youth view the organization as a community of friends. Although MCYPD began with the help of the elders’ encouragement, most of the members joined because their friends were part of it. What the MCYPD’s example demonstrates therefore is that interfaith dialogue has a sustainable foundation when members begin as friends. Indeed, the growth of their friendships is what motivates them. When asked how else can MCYPD be improved, they did not refer to administrative or structural matters. They highlighted personal qualities that they need to change. They have cited, for example, arrogance, stubbornness, and misunderstanding as some of their typical issues. To them, these are negative attributes that can affect the friendships within the community.

And because friendship has become the main motivation for participating in MCYPD, it has also become the main reason for trying to understand the other. For our Christian informants, new realizations about Islam point to prohibitions such as that of eating pork and its protectiveness when it comes to women. Put differently, our informants constantly recall those aspects of religious difference that could help them avoid offending their peers and thereby maintaining healthy friendships. Relevant lessons mentioned by our informants like Rowell (16) and Kevin (18), both Catholic, include the importance of being nonjudgmental as the Golden Rule in keeping their friendships. Indeed, given that there has been a history of snobbery and discrimination in the area, there is a need to encourage friendships, and the young people are able to accomplish it. As Regie (19), a Christian, puts it, “although there are those who are stubborn in our community, what is important is the friendship that has been formed. That’s what is important—the friendship.”

Participation in the community

The suburban neighborhood where MCYPD is located is reputed to be dangerous. What feeds this stereotype is not just the lower income status of its residents, but the fact that there are new Muslim immigrants. Faisal (19), a Muslim, recounts how he has tried to parry even the jokes hurled at him about his neighborhood:

Some people have asked me if it were true that when an outsider enters our village he will no longer be able to come out alive. And then they ask me if I were a Muslim. I said to them that people have different temperaments [and we cannot blame religion]. Like there are Christian killers as there are good Christians as well. So for me, we are all equal.

It takes time to finally eradicate these stereotypes, and interfaith communities are formed to that end. But interfaith discussion is most of the time confined only to the members of the community. Building bridges with the wider community is therefore necessary to effect change at that level. Indeed, as Steele (2002) sees it, peacebuilding, which covers a wide array of community engagement, should “contribute toward the transformation of society into a just and harmonious order.” Our youth informants, interestingly, are engaged in their community in different capacities.

Being the only registered youth organization in their village, MCYPD is often invited to help in cleanup drives, participate in the local government’s projects, and even send a representative to the monthly meetings with the local youth council. The United Religions Initiative (URI) has also invited them to participate in rallies advocating for peace. Apart from these invitations, our youth informants have also initiated their own projects such as tree planting and waste segregation in the community.

But beyond these community activities, MCYPD has begun to see its potential in local youth politics. They have campaigned, for example, for Marilhyn, one of the members who is now an elected representative in the local youth council. She relates how it was through the MCYPD that she decided to run and that without her friends’ support, her victory would not have been possible: “Aside from gaining awareness we were given opportunities to get involved in the community. The MCYPD actually became my driving force for running in the elections. Before I used to loathe politics since I viewed it as dirty.”

Collectively, these engagements project an image that Muslim and Christian youth can in fact work together for the community. As Marilhyn has articulated, the MCYPD has also been an avenue for opening new opportunities for the youth. Local participation (and by extension youth involvement as well) in development efforts has been criticized either as sheer rhetoric or tyrannical

(Henkel and Stirrat, 2001). This, however, goes against the logic of interfaith involvement at the grassroots level where conflicts are taking place and must be addressed. Interfaith at the level of the religious and the clergy is welcome, but it cannot be the only form of dialogue. The experiences of our young people show the potential of dialogue and involvement among their peers.

Additionally, we argue that our youth informants find their participation in the community meaningful precisely because they themselves have experienced discrimination one way or another. It is these everyday modes of discrimination that they are contesting. Indeed, young people can be aware of their social issues and be instrumental in effecting changes (Lansdown, 2010).

Finally, our informants also see the spirituality of community engagement. Camille (15), a Christian, explains that “we are also able to help out in times of calamities whether here or elsewhere. We help others, especially those in the midst of conflict. If we are unable to do so, our conscience pushes us to help, even a little...” Interestingly, this spirituality aligns with observations concerning the religiosity of young people around the world, which seems to be predominantly characterized by social engagement (Flory and Miller, 2010). In the Philippines, Cornelio (2010) has identified this as a form of action-oriented reflexive spirituality among Catholic youth.

Interfaith and youth participation

In discussing youth participation and interfaith dialogue, it may be instructive to recall that such dialogue comes in different forms. For this we draw from Haney’s (2009) framework. These include: 1) “living dialogue”, or that which consists of building positive relationships with people from other faith traditions, as they are neighbors and fellow human beings; 2) the “dialogue of cooperation,” an interfaith collaboration for a unifying cause, such as that of promoting peace and justice in the world; 3) the “dialogue of religious experience,” which opens a person to respect what the other deems sacred—how one experiences God in one’s life; and 4) “theological dialogue,” discussions on the knowledge and interpretations of God. All these forms of interfaith dialogue stress that individuals should learn *from* rather than just *about* other religions. But as we argued in the review of literature above, much of the discussion concerning interfaith has revolved around theological considerations. In this section, we show how in fact the first two (living dialogue and dialogue of cooperation) are the most crucial in the experience of our informants.

The participation of youth in interfaith efforts shows that they have both the capacity to *learn* and to *contribute* to interreligious understanding and community-building. Indeed, young people

are in their formative years, which allows them to explore the other more readily and openly. The narratives above show their personal realizations that run counter to the stereotypes formed about the other. In other words, many of our informants have realized that their Muslim or Christian peers are, in the end, “nice people” to have as friends. In addition, our informants have longed to establish friendships with their peers in the neighborhood especially because many of them are immigrants from other regions. Here we highlight how friendships naturally facilitate the growth of MCYPD. Although other youth interfaith efforts are driven by the government, as in the case of Singapore (Phua *et al.*, 2008), MCYPD demonstrates how dialogue can be run, managed, and facilitated by youth themselves. Arguably, the potential of MCYPD lies in the social support-seeking behavior of Filipino adolescents. According to a 2002 survey, 97.4% of Filipino youth (15-24) belong to a peer group (UPPI, 2004).

As a result, the interfaith community has certainly afforded them the space to be spontaneous as Muslims or Christians without the fear of discrimination. Put differently, relationships in the organization are deemed significant because of the equality and respect given to each one. As Aslaima (21), a Muslim, describes it, “We are free to express ourselves here. We respect each other regardless of class or religion.” In this sense, MCYPD is a strong and positive case of how interfaith can rectify negative and discriminatory attitudes against people of other religions. The neighborhood in which MCYPD is located has a history of religious tension. Indeed, MCYPD has become an example of a peacebuilding and transformative organization (Neufeldt, 2011). That the goal has been to establish positive interpersonal relationships makes their community an example, too, of what Haney (2009, p. 624) considers as “living dialogue.”

Interfaith and education

Our findings above have significant implications on making the education system a more befitting avenue for the pursuit of inter-religious understanding. We agree with Milligan (2003, p. 468), who, based on his research on education in Southern Philippines, contends that “schools and the educational values they embody can provide useful windows on the contemporary dimensions of [religious] tensions as well as the institutional mechanisms for trying out changes that might reduce tensions.” In this section, we suggest three areas: the necessity of interfaith dialogue in the classroom, the feasibility of implementing it in the classroom, and the potential for youth empowerment. Along the way we highlight considerable structural limitations within the Philippine education system.

First, we argue that introducing interfaith dialogue in the classroom is called for more than ever because of migration and increasing multiculturalism, as pointed out at the onset of this article. Baring (2011) has rightly noted that classrooms in the Philippines are becoming more multi-ethnic and multi-religious, a condition that can be taken advantage of to tackle key lessons concerning human rights (Bombongan, 2008; Sazonova, 2004). The potential is promising: our respondents demonstrate that interfaith dialogue has the capacity to challenge existing stereotypes and bridge social gaps that migration and increasing multiculturalism engender.

Two imminent issues, however, get in the way. On one hand, the main dilemma in adopting this approach is that education as a system is largely instrumentalist especially in relation to the modernization paradigms of the state. This has been the case, for example, in Singapore (Chua, 1995; McInerney *et al.*, 2008). In the Philippines, the new developments that will add two extra years to align the basic education system to the global standard of twelve years are primarily justified according to the technical and employable skills a high school graduate acquires afterwards (Villafania, 2012). Elsewhere, Raffin and Cornelio (2009) have also highlighted the market-driven approach to the setting up of tertiary institutions in the Philippines to address the demand for global labor in such sectors as healthcare and information technology.

On the other hand, a problem is also with regard to values or religious education itself. As Baring (2011) observes, even within the context of formal religious education in the Philippines, interfaith dialogue is not taken into consideration. The assumption is that interfaith dialogue takes place outside the classroom. Indeed, in Philippine basic education, private religious schools, which are often Catholic, offer formal religious education through subjects like Christian Living (Gutiérrez, 2007). State-funded schools, which constitute the vast majority, are expected to integrate the teaching of values in such mainstream subjects as language, math, and science (Almonte-Acosta, 2011; Muega, 2010). In recent years, the curriculum was changed such that values education, which used to be a separate subject, was dropped and its lessons have supposedly become integrated in the other subjects under the Revised Basic Education Curriculum (RBEC) (Almonte-Acosta, 2011).

From his survey, however, Muega (2010) has observed that even the understanding of what constitutes values education is fragmented among teachers across the Philippines. Undeniably, the shift to RBEC has exposed this limitation. In Muega's (2010) study, the result is that teachers themselves do not share consensus on the content of values education, whether it is the transmission of religious ideas, universal values, or critical thinking concerning moral dilemmas. Teachers are not sufficiently trained in the area of values education. In this light, an effective and suc-

cessful discussion of religious differences and interreligious understanding faces fundamentally systemic challenges.

Second, we also argue that the classroom offers a readily available safe environment for an in-depth discussion of religious beliefs and practices. In contrast, interfaith dialogue is to a large extent self-selective. We noticed that, as our findings above show, religious understanding can, if not checked, be limited to such external differences as religious practice, clothing, or behavior only.

This in itself is a problem that needs hurdling within the education system itself. In his critical essay, Milligan (2003) shows that Philippine textbooks themselves have perpetuated this limited understanding of the Muslim minority, by, for example, asserting the Christian heritage of the country. He then rightly points out that “such attitudes, whether explicitly articulated or not, are widespread and leave the Muslim Filipino with little doubt as to where he or she stands in Philippine society” (Milligan, 2003, p. 480).

This situation once again shows that the problem with the successful integration of interreligious dialogue in the classroom is structural. As the teachers in the previous section, textbooks, whether deliberate or otherwise, harbor their own predispositions.

Nevertheless, in light of our findings above, we do not necessarily consider this challenge impossible to hurdle. Instructive in this regard is our finding that interfaith dialogue has often brought about realizations that are beyond doctrinal or theological differences. Pedagogically, educators can take advantage of the already existing diversities within the classroom (Almonte-Acosta, 2011). An interfaith approach that draws from the sharing of students who come from different religious backgrounds can in itself be a tool to challenge stereotypes and misunderstandings. In other words, interfaith dialogue as an activity in itself can now be introduced in the classroom given the increasing diversity in Philippine society. These discussions can then be connected to a wider understanding of human rights in the world today (Sazonova, 2004). We are convinced that these efforts are not necessarily difficult to implement. After all, the social context of the Philippines allows for interfaith discussion since 69.7% of Filipinos “strongly agree” that “we must respect all religions” (ISSP Research Group, 2008).

Third, we have also seen that our informants, as the previous section shows, were not simply passive participants in interfaith dialogue. They were not, in other words, simply attending the activities. There is a potential for youth empowerment. As mentioned above, MCYPD is the only youth organization recognized in their community. This has opened doors for them to participate in several community projects like cleanup drives, waste segregation, and other special events. They have also been able

to elect one of their own into the local youth council. The experience of our informants shows that even if they may not be professionals just yet, they are able to offer tangible contributions to the community. Their example has certainly shown the community that youth of different faiths can in fact work together.

In agreement with Haney (2009, p. 624) once again, having a unifying cause makes an interfaith community also a “dialogue of cooperation.” As a result, although MCYPD is strictly not a political organization, it now has political leverage in the community, and its strength and advocacy lie in the diversity of faiths it represents. Even more importantly, it is representing the youth, a sector that is often marginalized in politics and policy-making (Miles, 2000).

Put differently, the ability of interfaith dialogue to nurture interreligious participation and friendships can be seen as an opportunity to bridge social distance between individuals of different faiths in the classroom. In this sense, interfaith dialogue can be carried out not simply to achieve consensus in beliefs and practices, which can in itself be precarious, if not impossible to achieve. In his study on interfaith dialogue in the US, Cannon (2011) argues that individuals can focus on building “strong relationality” or a community that recognizes that differences will always be present.

But based on our research, interfaith does not have to end there. Our findings above demonstrate to us, too, that such bridging can also be enabling. We suggest therefore that facilitating interfaith dialogue in the education system can be a novel way of encouraging socio-political participation among youth (Almonte-Acosta, 2011). Again, we are confident about this since youth can be aware of their existing conditions that may drive them towards social action, as Cornelio’s (2011) research on generational consciousness shows. This is one area that needs future research.

Conclusion

This paper has drawn from the experience of young people involved in interfaith dialogue and intercultural understanding. These young people have become the key stakeholders of the Muslim-Christian Youth for Peace and Development (MCYPD), an interfaith circle located in suburban Metro Manila. We have argued at the onset that interfaith dialogues have become more important in light of increasing religious diversity in the capital region and the Philippines as a whole. We have also suggested that encouraging interfaith and intercultural dialogue among young people is more strategic in introducing the values of religious respect and cooperation that can impact educational understanding.

We have sought to understand in what sense being part of an interfaith community has had an impact on them. Three themes proved to be emergent. First, MCYPD has helped them humanize the other. When they talk about Islam or Christianity, for example, they are now thinking about individuals they realized could also be their friends. Second, MCYPD has effectively become a peer group for our informants. In context, many of their members, especially the Muslim ones, are considerably new to the neighborhood. Establishing friendships is very important, and MCYPD has afforded them the space to do so. And because the other religion now has a human face, learning about religious differences is meant to help them show respect and avoid offending each other's sensibilities. Finally, our informants see the value of making an impact on their community as an interfaith youth group. They have been invited to participate in various activities of the community, including environmental projects and other government initiatives. They have also fielded their own candidate for the local youth council, thus demonstrating their political leverage as a youth group.

Clearly, the interfaith experience of our informants has not dwelt largely on theological matters. To be sure, they did discuss religious differences in terms of rituals, beliefs, and clothing and dietary restrictions. But in our interviews with them, these matters did not dominate their understanding of MCYPD. If anything, discussing these religious differences has helped them identify those aspects of everyday life that could be offensive had they not known enough. To them, what matters most is that through interfaith, they were able to gain new friends from another religion, whether Catholicism, Protestantism, or Islam. The engagement has been powerful in contesting pervading stereotypes about the other religion. For this reason, MCYPD can be considered a "living dialogue." But our informants have gone beyond sheer dialoging. Their organization has become instrumental in showing the community that Muslim and Christian youth can cooperate for specific projects. In this sense, MCYPD can also be considered a "dialogue of cooperation."

These findings have clear implications on the conduct of education today. We have noted that interfaith dialogue is often understood as taking place outside the classroom. We have suggested, though, that introducing it in the classroom set-up or in the structure of the school can help face the challenges brought about by increased cultural and religious diversity today. Three areas have been put forward: the necessity of interfaith dialogue within education, the feasibility of implementing it in the classroom, and the potential for youth empowerment.

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