

This week's question to consider:

**In a predominantly Christian society, which is reflected in subtle (as well as obvious) ways in the education system, where does that leave those of us who... aren't?**

*Pro tip:* Being equitable means taking care to learn to identify our unconscious biases. It is crucial to understand that respecting others and inviting them into an inclusive learning environment means fostering a curiosity and openness when it comes to differences of religion. It's even more important to understand what that means in context of our work, and to take care to know the difference between inclusion and assimilation.

Religion! Wowzers. Did you think I'd be talking about religion this week? No? Me either. Surprise! Still, the more I think about it, the more I think it's strange that this topic hasn't yet been addressed in this column. Particularly where it comes to the school calendar, and Christianity.

A delicate topic indeed, religion. Freedom of religion is important to many, many people. Religion plays a significant role in many people's lives. A source of comfort, a source of community, a connection to spirituality, and nature, and God. Interestingly, spellcheck, which I've set to *English (Canada)*, insists here that God must be a capitalized word, which... is it? Is it a capital letter because it is a name? Is there is only one? Is that true for all religions\*?

In acknowledging, then, that religion is an important topic to delve into, and to offer context, I would like to be upfront about my own biases in this area, since they inform my understanding. I grew up in a Christian household, with exposure to many denominations of Christianity. I live in a Christian-dominant society, where everyone here is aware of the major Christian celebrations, and where the school calendar even includes mention of some of them. Therefore, the holidays that the kids are granted coincides with many of those Christian celebrations.

This is not an accident, but an inheritance.

Ask anyone who has lived in New Brunswick for a couple of years, and they can tell you that there is a winter break that many call Christmas break, there is a long weekend in the spring associated with easter, which again, is a Christian observance, and the school calendar, though containing within it many other days of observance, does not observe nor mention any other religion's celebration.

There's no holiday designated in the school calendar in observance of Hanukkah. In fact, I had to look up how to *spell* Hanukkah, to be certain. I'm generally able to spell words correctly consistently, and I was missing a "k", so this shows a lack of exposure to seeing it spelled or reading it, when compared to Christmas, a word no easier to learn, that I did not hesitate to spell.

There's no holiday that highlights the importance of Ramadan or Eid al-Fitr. During this time, many, including children, practice a strict form of fasting (no food or drink during daylight hours). In high schools, Advanced Placement programs have previously held examinations that fall within these two bookends, which is to say, during the fasting period. This may still be happening. There isn't even a long weekend to denote the start of the lunar cycle of Ramadan, or its end at Eid al-Fitr. There's a sizable Muslim population in this district, which means that the awareness of important days is increasing, but not everyone is at the same level of base knowledge yet. It's an extra. It's not seen as important information to navigate the school year for everyone attending school.

There's no holiday for those who are agnostic. Recognizing that this is a form of religious observance isn't even commonplace. I hazard to say that most would be hard pressed to even explain what it means to be agnostic, so I'll pop a definition in here. There's no collection of people who reunite in this district (as far as I know) to talk about what it means to have this point of view.

It could be argued that we can't have holidays sprinkled throughout the school calendar without end, since it would mean we are left with far too few teaching days. I'm not here to advocating for a holiday for each observed religion or spiritual practice. The reason I am talking about this in such a persistent way is that this is one of the strongest indications of the prevalence of the Christian influence here, and therefore, one of the easiest ones to see once it is pointed out. This is about developing the ability to see things. As they are. Just seeing.

So, what does that mean for those in Anglophone South School District who... aren't?

It may mean that there are holiday-themed activities in your building, holidays tied to religion, which doesn't resonate with either you, or a cross-section of your student population.

It may mean that you are the lone voice in your school for students to come talk to about what they are experiencing in a Christian saturated environment. Unconscious, for the most part. But it's there.

It may mean that the form of inclusion is an attempt that seeks to bring in non-Christian students into Christianity, rather than sharing ideas about what religion means to each person.

Again, there is no easy solution here. My objective in writing this column, first and foremost, is education to promote awareness and achieve equity. Realizing our influences and biases is the only way to become sensitive to how our biases play a role in how we move throughout the world. This isn't to make anyone feel that there is anything wrong with their religion<sup>†</sup>. This is to open your eyes to the unconscious influence religion plays in how we do and see things, even in a secular school system.

An important aspect in this discussion is the notion of assimilation vs inclusion. They are often conflated to the detriment of those who we are trying to include. Please know that assimilation is not inclusion, and it never has been. Knowing the difference is very important as we move forward in our equity efforts, beautiful people.

This in mind, let's consider a few situations, a few intentions, and how certain actions/reactions might be considered either assimilation or inclusion. Note, we are always assuming good intent. Before you read ahead to the explanation, take a moment to consider each situation, and see if you can identify whether it's a matter of inclusion or assimilation before I give you my point of view.

ag·nos·tic /ag'nästik/

noun

a person who believes that nothing is known or can be known of the existence or nature of god/s or of anything beyond material phenomena; a person who claims neither faith nor disbelief in god/s.

source: Oxford Languages & Google  
retrieved: 16 September 2022



### Situation 1

A school is holding a Christmas talent show. All students are invited to audition whatever talent it is they would like to show. There is a tree on the stage. None of the acts has anything to do with Christmas, it happens to be happening in December, in the week prior to the winter holiday.

Is it assimilation? Is it inclusion?

### Situation 2

A classroom decorates the classroom for the season of November/December/January. Students cut out snowflakes, snow people, and stars, the last of which they hang from the ceiling. All students have participated in some way in decorating. A student has brought in a menorah and put it in the corner of the room. Another student has taken to wearing a Santa hat during December.

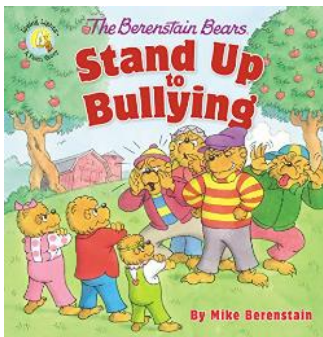
When they finish their schoolwork, students in this class are encouraged to do a crossword puzzle with a winter wonderland theme. A fake fir sits in the room, which has been decorated with twinkle lights. A classical music playlist of holiday-specific mix of music is played on random for the last hour of the day.

Is it assimilation? Is it inclusion?

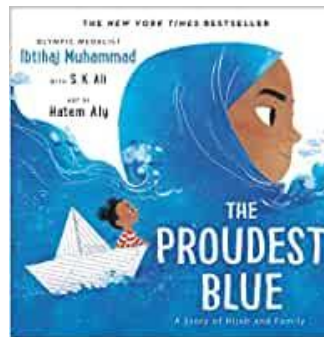


### Situation 3

A group of teachers in a professional learning community (PLC) has decided to add books to their shared library. They notice that there are not a whole lot of books that include a variety of religions and cultures, and they'd like to include some, given that there is a cross-section of their student population that consists of students with diverse faiths. They select a few books to help diversify their bookshelf. The books they have chosen are:



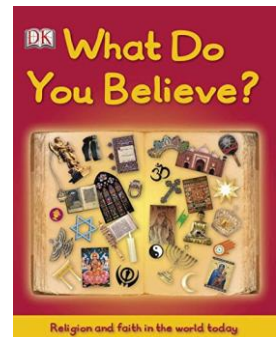
*Stand up to Bullying  
(Berenstain Bears/Living  
Lights: A Faith Story)*



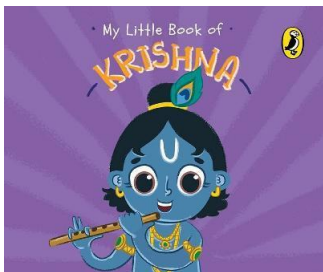
*The Proudest Blue: A  
Story of Hijab and Family*



*Ajeet Singh, The  
Invincible Lion*



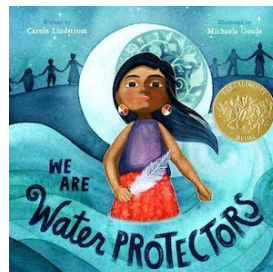
*What do you believe?*



*My Little Book of Krishna*



*It's a Mitzvah!*



*We Are Water Protectors*



*Shmelf the Hanukkah Elf*

Is it assimilation? Is it inclusion? Is it neither? Are these good books to add to a classroom library? How can we tell? Hint: check who wrote it, who illustrated it, what the message is, who the publisher is, and think about how a person with the highlighted identity might feel when seeing/reading that book in the room.

## Answers and explanations

**Situation 1.** This is a subtle form of *assimilation*. The reason is that the undertone and unspoken message is this:

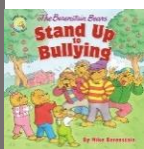
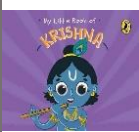


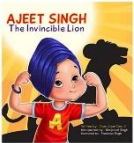

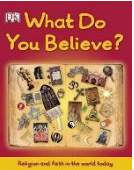

It is typical and normal to ascribe “Christmas” to anything happening in December.

Consider how can this situation be rendered more inclusive. Is it a “Christmas” talent show? Can we leave a tree on the stage? What steps could be taken to make those who aren’t Christian feel like they belong at the talent show? How can all students feel seen and have a sense of belonging?

**Situation 2.** This is *inclusion*. Students appear to have been encouraged to bring in their winter celebrations traditional symbols. There is a variety of décor. The classroom community is sharing in their own culture and religion since there is a mix. There is nothing wrong with sharing of an aspect of one religion, provided that there is no exclusion (whether implied or explicitly stated) of other religions, and provided it is clear. If such a playlist were to be curated to only play Christmas-specific music, it might be a vague form of assimilation if it weren’t acknowledged nor talked about.

**Situation 3.** Some of these books promote inclusion, and others, assimilation. Let’s briefly review them.

assimilation	inclusion
Aims for erasure of difference	Invites those with other points of view to the table
Brings others in to experience <i>my</i> truths	Brings others in to share <i>their</i> truths
Seeks uniformity	Seeks variety and diversity
Changes those in the minority	Elevates those in minority to the same importance as those in majority

Book	Verdict	Book	Verdict
 <p><i>Stand up to Bullying</i> (Living Lights: A Faith Story)</p>	<i>Assimilation</i> . Emphasizes Christian ideals by treating them as the norm, which is the status quo already in a majority Christian society. Also, offers no strategies to kids for standing up to bullies, despite its title.	 <p><i>My Little Book of Krishna</i></p>	<i>Inclusion</i> . Board book with overview of Krishna, one of the Hindu gods. Collective effort of Penguin India Editorial team rather than attributed to one author.
 <p><i>The Proudest Blue: A Story of Hijab and Family</i></p>	<i>Inclusion</i> . Explains the importance of Hijab, Muslim representation through story, written by two Muslim women, illustrator is Egyptian Canadian.	 <p><i>It's a Mitzvah!</i></p>	<i>Inclusion</i> . Celebration of Jewish faith, written by a Jewish woman whose work has been focused on equity. Illustrator is an Australian woman whose work focuses on diversity.
 <p>Ajeet Singh, <i>The Invincible Lion</i></p>	<i>Inclusion</i> . Offers representation of Sikh people. Anti-bullying message promotes inclusion. Written, interpreted, and illustrated by Sikhs.	 <p><i>We Are Water Protectors</i></p>	<i>Inclusion</i> . Highlights Indigenous culture / point of view, written by an Indigenous woman (Anishinabe/Métis), illustrator is Indigenous woman (Raven moiety and Kiks.ádi Clan).
 <p><i>What Do You Believe?</i></p>	<i>Inclusion</i> . Explores themes of religions, highlights commonalities rather than differences, shows representation. Not without problems, presents beliefs as facts, offers samples but cannot cover everything.	 <p><i>Shmelf the Hanukkah Elf</i></p>	<i>Assimilation</i> . Attempts to incorporate one religion within another, which is a form of erasure of identity. <a href="#">This article, written by a Jewish woman explains a bit more.</a>

In talking about this, my goal (hope?) is that we as a district, as schools, as PLCs, as educators, can develop an ability to realize the role our biases play in how we select material, how we present ideas, and how we talk about religion to our students.

There is no separating religion's influence on our school system, but there is a way to become more inclusive of differences when it comes to religion. And this begins with identifying our biases and coming to terms with what they mean for how we move about in the world.

### Recommended Resources

EdCan Network Article by Erin Reid, Dr. Crystena A. H. Parker-Shandal, Dr. Alice W.Y. Chan (Sept. 2019) | [Religion in the classroom](#)

Ontario Human Rights Commission Article by Cara Faith Zwibel (2012) | [Faith in the Public School System: Principles for reconciliation](#)

Pew Research Center Paper by Ira C. Lupu, F. Elwood, Eleanor Davis, David Masci, Robert W. Tuttle, David R. and Sherry Kirschner Berz. (updated Oct. 2019) | [Religion in the Public Schools](#)

Poking the uncomfortable spots in hopes of moving the beautiful people forward in their learning,

Your friendly neighbourhood Anti-Racism & Equity Coach  
Therese Trofimencoff (*she/they*)

---

\* No, there is not exactly one god in all religions. For example, in atheism, there are zero gods. In agnosticism there is the possibility of zero, one, or multiple gods and goddesses. There are other religions that hold space for multiple gods and goddesses. The adjective for such a religion is "polytheistic." Some polytheistic religions alive and well today ([according to Wikipedia](#)) are Taoism, Shenism or Chinese folk religion, Japanese Shinto, Santería, most Traditional African religions, various neopagan faiths, and most forms of Hinduism.

† Provided, of course, that the religion in question has absolutely nothing to do with doing terrible things to baby goats, doggies, and cats' toe beans. I will condemn that one. That religion, if it exists, is a categorically terrible religion to observe, and I remain firm on that. You leave those to beans alone! Unless it's to tickle/admire. And you let those baby goats in pajamas hop around! Unless you are changing the pajamas, of course. And don't even get me started on the purity of trust in a doggie that is looking up with *those eyes* at their person! [Don't at me](#) on this.