

Teaching Practice in Contexts of Religious Plurality in Colombia

Prácticas pedagógicas en contextos de pluralidad religiosa en Colombia

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Abstract

The objective established for this study was to identify the religious beliefs of primary school students in a context of cultural diversity and the perspectives of curriculum design proposed by religious education in educational institutions the Cauca Colombia. Using qualitative methodology: micro-ethnography, non-structured informal interviews were conducted with-grades 3, 4 and 5 students to identify their religious beliefs. In order to reveal the programmatic elements of the religion class curriculum, teachers conducted participant observation, as well as implementing field diaries to track religion class and the interactions of students. The analysis of institutional documents and the study plans for religion of the respective grades complemented the investigative and comparative work done by the teacher. The findings showed religious plurality in schools in the Cauca with interaction between Catholic, Christian, and indigenous students with ancestral beliefs, who valued the religion class, but questioned why only one religion was presented and not that to which they belonged. The proposal of religious education in the institutions participating in the study used, the standards of the Catholic Church as a reference, but there are schools in which the teachings of the indigenous worldview and Christian churches are being integrated as an experience of dialogue and interaction beyond proselytizing purposes such as progressing toward tolerance and peace in the school environment.

Keywords: teaching practice, religious education, religious plurality

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Project "Dialog between the religious beliefs of primary school students and the curricular design of religious education in educational institutions in the Cauca region" [«Diálogo entre las creencias religiosas de los estudiantes de la básica primaria y el diseño curricular de la educación religiosa de instituciones educativas del Cauca»]. Funded by the Religious Education bachelor's degree program of Universidad Católica de Manizales (Colombia).

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Resumen

La presente investigación estableció como objetivo identificar las creencias religiosas de los estudiantes de la básica primaria en un contexto de diversidad cultural y las perspectivas del diseño curricular propuesto por la educación religiosa en instituciones educativas del Cauca, en Colombia. A través de una metodología cualitativa, la microetnografía, se realizaron entrevistas no estructuradas a los estudiantes de los grados 3, 4 y 5 para identificar sus creencias religiosas. Para develar los elementos programáticos del currículo de la clase de religión, los docentes realizaron una observación participante e implementaron diarios de campo para el seguimiento de la clase de religión y las interacciones de los estudiantes. El análisis de los documentos institucionales y el plan de estudios de religión de los respectivos grados complementó la labor investigativa y de contraste de los docentes. Entre los hallazgos se evidencia una pluralidad religiosa en las escuelas del Cauca en las que interactúan estudiantes católicos, cristianos e indígenas con creencias ancestrales que valoran la clase de religión, pero cuestionan que se presente únicamente una religión, y no aquella a la que pertenecen. La propuesta formativa de la educación religiosa en las instituciones participantes del estudio tiene como referente los estándares de la Iglesia Católica; sin embargo, hay escuelas en las que se están integrando las enseñanzas de la cosmovisión indígena y las iglesias cristianas como una experiencia de diálogo e interacción, más allá de fines proselitistas como camino hacia la tolerancia y la paz en el ámbito escolar.

Palabras clave: práctica pedagógica, educación religiosa, pluralidad religiosa

This article presents the results of a project conducted by the Religious Education Bachelor's Degree Program of Universidad Católica de Manizales (Colombia), intended to promote the research skills of students enrolled in the program in the Cauca Department in order to identify the religious beliefs of primary school students and the curricular structure of Religious lessons in a context of religious and cultural plurality. The specific objectives pursued were: to identify the religious beliefs of primary school students, to reveal the pedagogical relationships between the programmatic function of the Religious Education curriculum and religious beliefs, and to reflect on the available possibilities in Religious lessons considering religious plurality.

The project was a useful exercise for encouraging interaction between the practice of pre-service teachers and the research conducted in schools from the perspective of religious education, taking into account that the Colombian Constitution and the Ministry of Education stipulate freedom of religion. The Cauca Department displays a high degree of religious plurality due to the presence of different cultures: natives, mestizos, and afro-descendants. Popayán, its capital, is visited during its Easter celebrations, which are defined as intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO. Garcés, Osorio, Barona, Clavijo, and López (2010) state that religion built the nation, but that it was also an instrument for oppressing the natives.

The Caucan territory is inhabited by many native families, including the nasa and the misak, which stand out due to their strong cultural tradition in the country and their struggles for upholding their ancestral values and traditions. The world view of the nasa people is based on the beings of nature: fire and water regulate the Sun and the Moon, and the stars are their progenitors (Comunidad Andina, 2009). The misak believe that they are the children of water and the word: «Nature is full of spirits that move within this dimension of spaces and times, and our misak people is part of this nature» (Fondo de las Naciones Unidas para la Infancia [UNICEF] & Universidad del Cauca, 2010, p. 47).

Religious diversity in the Cauca Department encompasses Catholic and ancestral traditions, and Pentecostal and Evangelical Christian groups are present as well: «Throughout history, several practices configured the intense relationship between Catholicism and the indigenous culture and, at the same time, they organized the establishment of new social, political, and religious practices, including contemporary Catholic and Protestant missions» (Demera, 2005, p. 359).

The research conducted in Cauca Department schools provided an overview of the interaction between teaching practices, religious lessons, and religious plurality in a region with an ancestral, Catholic, and Christian religious tradition. Acknowledging the religious beliefs held by primary school students made

it possible to reflect on the implications of the religions present in the classroom as a democratic exercise that promotes tolerance, respect, and peace. The participating teachers, through the analysis of the pedagogical contents of religious lessons, recognized the need to identify theological, pedagogical, and didactic elements in order to add diversity to the religious education provided.

Conceptual framework

Background

Providing religious education in a context of religious plurality has become relevant in nations characterized by cultural diversity. This section provides a review of studies and experiences connected to this subject. In Catalonia (Spain), reflections on religious diversity in schools were presented in the document "Religious Diversity in Open Societies: Discernment Criteria". This article includes proposals for encouraging the participation of all religious communities in educational centers, including Christians, Muslims, and Jews, and provides teaching alternatives to make all creeds visible.

López (2006) addresses religious diversity in the European Union by describing the interaction between churches and religions in Italy, France, the Netherlands, and Belgium, mentioning some agreements established between larger religious communities, emergent beliefs, and minorities, and also proposing the criterion that learning about the values of each religion is a task for citizens, while living in faith is a task for the family and communities.

In Colombia, religious diversity is an emergent issue, with studies being conducted from the perspective of the social sciences in order to analyze the new religious movements present in Colombian society. The research carried out by Beltrán (2005) describes religious diversity by establishing a link between the presence of Protestant churches and their growth. In the educational field, this topic is addressed reflectively; likewise, the editorial compilation by Madgenzo (2008) comprises research including studies by Cifuentes and Figueroa (2008) and Sanabria and Fletscher (2008).

The Ministry of Education (2014) holds that the assessment processes carried out by Religious Education teachers should focus on the development of disciplinary competences focused on ecumenism, inter-religious dialog, and the recognition of the cultural value of religion, and stresses «the need to identify the cultural traits, the social dynamics, and the historical processes where it becomes explicit» (p. 25).

Studies on religious plurality and its associations with religious lessons in Colombia are scarce; at the same time, the topic of religious diversity in the classroom is gaining relevance. Nevertheless, stakeholders in several areas, including schools, are interested in identifying the cultural and religious values present in the Colombian context.

Pedagogical practice and knowledge from the perspective of religious education

Pedagogical practice is defined by Tezanos (2010) as the discussions and actions about the possibility of teaching carried out by the teachers responsible for contributing to the generation of the cognitive and social competences necessary for transforming the culture. This approach to teachers' knowledge and actions gives relevance to the teaching profession, whose practitioners, rather than merely conveying information, consolidate the management of knowledge by taking contextual settings into account. Regarding the specificity of knowledge, the author clarifies: «Therefore, teaching is a response to demands for constructing knowledge, specifically, pedagogical knowledge, which is the natural product of collective critical reflection on teaching work» (p. 11).

Pedagogical practice is preceded by a grounded element: programming, described by Gimeno (2008) as the «prescriptive definition of what the action will comprise and what it will achieve. Therefore, it is relevant for the configuration of the pedagogical project» (p. 10). In addition, the author notes that practice needs some degree of knowledge of the dynamics of reality, which requires suitable openings to analyze educational actions and strengthen the school.

For Zabala (2007), pedagogical praxis entails delving into the setting of the classroom in order to identify, analyze, understand, and contribute to the comprehensive education of people within the school system as a socializing context where the configuration of social relationships begins.

Understanding pedagogical interventions demands that we ascribe to a model in which the classroom constitutes a micro-system defined by a special social organization, by interactive relationships [...] where educational processes are regarded as elements tightly integrated into the system. Thus, what takes place in the classroom can only be examined within the interaction of all the elements active in the classroom. (p. 15)

The teacher's pedagogical intentions and their educational transcendence in the school through praxis are relevant in all areas of knowledge. In the case of Religious Education in the Colombian school curriculum, the Ministry of Education (2014) points out that «Religious elements play a relevant role in the framework of reality. In order to study this subject in schools, lessons must take into account the cultural identities and the contextual constructions where religion is experienced» (p. 24).

Religious education is defined as an educational approach to understanding religious phenomena in human experience, in contrast with cultural and social aspects of civilizations. Meza and Suárez (2013) state that religious education in schools raises awareness of historical reality among students and encourages them to transcend it in a critical manner.

Meza, Suárez, Casas, Garavito, Lara and Reyes (2015) infer that religious education leads to a deep reading of the Mystery, thus showing that «“true” religious experience involves opening up to the transcendent dimension of the other, because he or she fully constitutes the Other» (p. 251). The educational aspects of Religious lessons reflect the interaction between pedagogical, didactic, theological, and religious elements that fosters the educability of the subject, thus consolidating his/her relationship with him/herself, his/her environment, and God.

Religious Education is a subject that consolidates the comprehensive view of education present in Colombia's General Educational Law Number 115 (1994). Articles 23 and 24 stipulate the considerations for its implementation in the classroom, but noting that, according to the Colombian Constitution (1991), the country is a secular State. Religious Education lessons must guarantee students' freedom of thought and religion; parents can choose their children's type of religious education without being obligated to receive it. The Ministry of Education provides a number of measures to guarantee teaching and learning processes, stressing the relevance of teacher performance in terms of curricular design. For the Ministry, this is an ethical task that not only depends on individual criteria: disciplinary knowledge, along with the interests of the school and society at large, are also relevant; therefore, pedagogical selection is crucial for student education.

The aim and contents of Religious lessons in Colombia have several connotations in terms of their implementation in the classroom. The Colombian Episcopal Conference, considering the Catholic tradition of the country, constructed curricular proposals for this subject in 1992, 2004, and 2012. The 2004 curricular structure incorporated the development of competences related to knowing, doing, and being, advanced by Delors (1996).

The Colombian Episcopal Conference's curricular proposal has been adopted by State and private schools; however, in contrast with other curricular areas, there are no national guidelines or standards for Religious lessons. Given the freedom of religion stipulated by the Constitution (1991), Decree 4500 of the Ministry of Education was promulgated in 2006 in order to implement this right in the classroom, specifying its role in comprehensive education, the ability for students to choose whether to receive take part in Religious lessons, and the prevention of the use of Religious lessons for religious proselytism by State teachers.

Colombian legislation on religion, churches, and religious education encourages pedagogical reflection and praxis involving diverse and plural Religious lessons, because this is a latent need in schools and given that democratic principles require that all citizens be recognized.

Religious education from the perspective of religious plurality

With respect to religious education from the point of view of diversity, UNESCO (2006) clarifies:

Religious education can be defined as the acquisition of knowledge about one's own religion or spiritual practices, or about the religion or beliefs of others. Inter-religious education, in contrast, is aimed at actively developing relationships between people of different religions. (p. 13)

UNESCO has proposed an educational approach to Religious lessons from a perspective of plurality that clearly entails dialog and interaction with religions. However, it establishes two possibilities for schools, teachers, parents, and students: employing religious education to foster recognition and respect among religions and generating inter-religious actions leading to dialog and cooperation.

According to Ameigeiras (2008), religious plurality is relevant in several human contexts of interaction and development:

This plurality is made explicit through multiple religious' institutions, organizations, groups, and movements present in society. Their coexistence involves confrontation and/or competition and not only manifests the so-called "goods of salvation" in different ways, but also reflects a wide variety of religious beliefs and practices ranging from institutional guidelines in all their diversity to the individual notions of subjects and their strongly automated processes (p. 61).

With regard to the religious configuration processes of societies, it is evident that, over the course of history, notions of belief were transformed from the Enlightenment onwards; during this period, some societies abandoned monolithic world views determined by religious beliefs and generated different perspectives on religious creeds.

Religious plurality has several connotations. In the theological field, the diversity of religious creeds is acknowledged and must be actively addressed; therefore, it converges on religious plurality and, supported by theological reflections, makes Christianity engage in a dialog with other religions based on several considerations.

The Second Vatican Council (2002) values religious traditions: «From ancient times down to the present, there is found among various peoples a certain perception of that hidden power which hovers over the course of things and over the events of human history» (n. 2).

According to Tamayo (2013), religions are currently called upon to overcome their prejudice by means of a liberating understanding of culture, which should result in an inter-cultural and inter-religious theology. Gutiérrez (2013) states that religious plurality consists in acknowledging ancestral religious minorities, particularly in Latin America, and establishing actions leading to dialog and interaction, considering the historical-social relevance of religious creeds. This is complemented by Merino (2010), who describes the situation of religious freedom in Latin America and states that some progress has been made in the field of theology, but that some unresolved matters remain, such as fostering inter-religious dialog based on respect for Christian identity.

Religious plurality is an emergent issue in churches with a strong influence on schools, whose discourse must initiate a process of adoption. In this regard, Essomba (2012) states:

The presence of religious manifestations and beliefs in public life is a reality that cannot be avoided [...] All religious traditions have an idea of education and a proposal of what it must be, and denying that voice keeps us from constructing a truly inter-denominational society (p. 190).

Within the Colombian context, religious plurality is recognized by law; at the educational level, diversity in religious matters is an issue that has yet to be comprehensively discussed. No educational proposals have been advanced that do not color religious lessons with the intentions of a given denomination. Hoping to create an inter-denominational society is a challenge: in schools, theoretical-practical proposals for interculturality are needed that acknowledge different identities and allow them to interact without annulling their cultural legacy and trajectory.

Considering the challenge posed by religious diversity and plurality in Colombia, the theologian Corpas (2013) advances some ideas intended to clarify what Religious lessons entail:

Religious education is not the same as faith education. The latter involves an intention based on the religious traditions of Catholic Christianity, while the former consists in presenting a general and universal view of the forms of religious experience and their corresponding forms of expression (p. 166).

Religious education is not just a pastoral and religious task, but also a social one; therefore, it must lead to the development of skills for communication and coexistence by means of a curriculum that integrates spiritual, religious, anthropological, and ethical dimensions with religious plurality. According to Roa and Restrepo (2014), «it is necessary to identify the emergencies of religious diversity [...] in order to rethink the curricular aspects of religious education in connection with its pedagogical and didactic constructs and to make it possible to acknowledge the other» (p. 105).

Methodology

The study was qualitative in nature and took the context of the participating schools into account: «the world is understood, experienced, produced by the context and by its processes; by the perspective of those who participate, by their senses, by their meanings, by their experience, by their knowledge, by their narratives» (Vasilachis, 2006, p. 28).

The relevance of social participants for qualitative research results in the use of various methodologies, including ethnography: «ethnographic research must be connected not only with our understanding of the world, but also with the application of its achievements in order to produce changes» (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1994, p. 30). Guber (2000) links three characteristic aspects of ethnography: approach, method, and text, which answer the questions “what?”, “how?”, and “what for?” in context research.

The ethnographic approach selected was microethnography, which Serra (2004) describes as a methodology that is usually employed in school contexts and which makes it possible to observe and study everyday life in specific classrooms. Upon the basis of this research perspective, the project was conducted in 26 educational institutions located in 7 municipalities of the north and south of the Cauca Department, Colombia. Six of these schools have their own curricular structures, that is, they have native curricula, while the rest of the institutions follow the unitary school model, which integrates several grades in a single classroom. The project included 26 teachers who worked with 156 4th and 5th grade students whose age ranged from 10 to 14 years.

Table 1
Methodological corpus

Universe	26 teachers and 156 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade students attending unity schools [multi-grade classrooms].
Type of sample	Convenience. Inclusion criteria: Religious Education as an obligatory subject, teachers specializing in religion, 4th and 5th grade students with clear religious options in the classroom.
Instrument types	Unstructured interviews. Analysis matrix for curricula. Participant observation forms and field diaries.

Data collection, in accordance with the proposed objectives, was carried out through unstructured interviews with the students aimed at identifying their religious beliefs. The matrix for analyzing curricula was created in order to examine the pedagogical and didactic aspects of Religious lessons. Observation forms and field diaries were used to reveal how Religious lessons were conducted in the classroom.

Unstructured interviews were used to engage in a conversation with 156 4th and 5th grade students who were selected at random, because the topic of religion is hard to discuss due to the plurality present in their schools.

These interviews generated dialogs with 156 students concerning their religious beliefs. In them, they were asked to state who/what they believed in, how they celebrated, what they thought about the various beliefs present in their classroom, and how they viewed Religious lessons. Given the circumstances, unstructured interviews were selected due to their flexibility and because they are not intended to provide standardized results (Valles, 2014).

In order to obtain more in-depth information about the educational, pedagogical, and didactic perspectives of religious education, a matrix was generated for analyzing the Religious Education curricula implemented in the 26 participating schools according to the guidelines set by Colombia's Ministry of Education. As pointed out by Woods (1987), document analysis is a pertinent alternative because it focuses on the concrete form of the projects and prospects of schools.

Observing Religious lessons was an important element in the process: «participant observation makes it possible to remember, at all times, that one participates in order to observe and observes in order to participate; that is, involvement and research are not at odds» (Guber, 2000, p. 24). The 26 teachers conducted participant observations of the activities carried out during the lessons, such as celebrations and rituals, and completed field diaries in order to link their pedagogical and didactic choices for orienting religious education.

Table 2
Objective, instruments, and analysis technique

Objective	To understand the links between the religious beliefs of primary school students and the curricular design of Religious lessons in a context characterized by religious and cultural plurality.
Instruments	Unstructured interviews Analysis matrix for curricula. Participant observation form and field diaries
Analysis technique	Atlas.ti tools. Categorization of information about religious beliefs and curricular aspects of religious education.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed with Atlas.ti, a processing tool employed to examine the unstructured interviews with the students, the observation forms, and the field diaries, considering that the teachers engaged in participant observation. Regarding the unstructured interviews, 156 of 520 students were sampled, a figure representing 30% of those enrolled in 4th and 5th grade in the 26 participating institutions located in 7 municipalities of the Cauca Department. In addition, these were the students whose participation was authorized via their parents' informed consent.

The typological variety of data analysis was implemented. According to Goetz and LeCompte (1987), it allows researchers to organize information into predetermined or objective categories based on the theoretical framework defined; in the case of the present study, pedagogical practice and religious plurality constituted a priori topics. Afterwards, subcategories emerged from a multiple triangulation process involving the information from the interviews, the documents analyzed, and the participant observations conducted by the teachers, which defined the religions present in the context, the participants' reasons for affiliation, their forms of worship and their reasons for attendance, and their perceptions and ideals associated with religious education, as well as the pedagogical intentions, methodologies, activities, and notions connected with the religious diversity of students and teachers.

Religious beliefs of school students in the Cauca Department

Unstructured interviews were conducted to identify the beliefs of 4th and 5th grade students. In the conversations, 66% declared that they were Evangelical Christian, 22.38% that they were Catholic, and 11% that they followed ancestral nasa or misak beliefs, two of the native groups of the region. When

asked about their reasons for believing, 83% stated that they were interested in the life and actions of Jesus, while 10% noted that belief brought them peace because they considered that believing in God could lessen violence in the region. Among those who voiced their belief in the spirits of nature, 6.6% of the population interviewed mentioned the importance of the traditions taught to them by their elders and the thewala for learning about their descent from Mother Earth.

Table 3
Religious beliefs and reasons for believing of primary school students in the Cauca Department

Religious beliefs	%	Reasons for believing	%
I believe in God - Jesus	22.38%	The actions of Jesus	83.4%
I believe in God - Jehovah	66%	I believe in God in order to have peace	10%
I believe in the spirits of nature	11%	I believe in the spirits, the teachings of my elders, and those of the thewala (native priest)	6.6%

The interview also covered the children's opinions on rites or celebrations through a discussion about the importance of worship. 76.3% of them expressed their interest in learning more about the Bible and 14% about the life of Jesus, which reflects the strong Christian influence in the Cauca Department. 9.7% of the native students stated that they enjoyed attending the Sakkelo, the native ritual for thanking Mother Earth for its gifts. It must be pointed out that, in some cases, a dual religious affiliation is observed, as some natives conduct their rituals and also lead Christian gatherings. 83% of them mention that they attend religious worship ceremonies because they spend time as a family and 7% because their father is the pastor.

Table 4
Summary of primary school students' views on rites

Importance of religious worship	%	Motivation for attending	%
Learning more about the Bible	76.3%	Spending time as a family	83%
Learning more about Jesus	14%	My dad is the pastor	7.4%
Participating in the Sakkelo	9.7%	Receiving health and food from Mother Earth and the spirits	9.6%

The unstructured interviews with 4th and 5th grade students covered some aspects of religious education. The first of them was their opinion of the lessons, and 59.6% expressed that they were good due to the activities conducted in them: drawing, group tasks, singing, and prayer. For 23.4% of the interviewees, the lessons allow them to get to know God better, while 17% stated that they learned to behave better. 9% of the children expressed that they would like Religious Education lessons to provide a space to learn more about their religion, and even that activities specific to their belief should be conducted during the lessons. 21.5% of the students stated that they would like to learn about other religions, while 69.5% did not express an opinion.

The participant observations conducted by the teachers referred to the children's attitude during Religious lessons. The participants point out that, according to people's imaginaries, student's behavior should be good; however, they describe situations marked by rejection, indiscipline, and [a lack of] acceptance. When dealing with misbehavior, the teachers reprimand the students by noting that the Bible encourages them to act differently.

Table 5
Summary of views on religious education and student attitudes

Notions regarding religious education lessons	%	Ideal Religious Education lesson	%	Attitudes
Good due to drawing and singing activities	59.6%	Having a space to learn about their religion	9%	Acceptance
Important to know God	23.4%	Knowing other religions	21.5%	Rejection
Fundamental to learn to behave well	17%	No opinion	69.5%	Lack of discipline

Religious education in context: curricular practices and perspectives

After identifying the children's beliefs and views on religious education, the teachers examined the curricular aspects of Religious lessons. Through the analysis of institutional documents such as the Institutional Educational Project (the curriculum of the Religion subject), pedagogical intentions were outlined. According to the information provided and the identity of Cauca Department schools, some of which serve mostly mestizo, afro-descendant, or native populations, 60.3% of the teachers agree that religious education must provide comprehensive education, while 25% express that they intend to develop students' values. 14.7% of the interviewees, who work in native schools, state that religious education should value the indigenous world view, which influences every dimension of a person but without splitting him/her, because he/she is an undivided whole.

In their field diaries, the teachers noted the actions of their pedagogical practice in the classroom. 63% of them state that the contents of Religious lessons for 4th and 5th grades are those suggested by the Colombian Episcopal Conference, which they identify as a good choice due to their organization and structure. 17.7% of the teachers, who work in native schools, continue implementing lessons about the nasa and misak world views in order to preserve the traditions of these peoples, a struggle spearheaded by the Regional Native Council of the Cauca Department [Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca, CRIC]. Only 19.3% of the participating teachers who belong to native schools attended by mestizo, afro-descendant, and native students combine Bible teachings with the indigenous world view. In this way, the children identify the ancestral traditions of their context and learn about some aspects of the majority religious practices of the region and the country.

Table 6
Pedagogical intentions of Religious lessons

Pedagogical intentions	%	Contents	%	Problematization	%
Comprehensive teaching	60.3%	Proposals of the Colombian Episcopal Conference	63%	Generating a positive attitude towards Religious lessons	76%
Value-based teaching	25%	nasa and misak world views	17.7%	Teaching values	14%
Teaching based on the indigenous world view	14.7%	Interaction between the native world view and the teachings of the Bible	19.3%	Taking ownership of the indigenous world view	10%

Pedagogical work and didactic interactions are other categories addressed based on the document analyses, observations, and field diaries generated by the teachers. According to the analysis of their Religious Education curricula, 76% of the institutions sought to elicit a positive response from students. This item was observed in schools with a diverse population. 10% of the teachers stated that taking ownership of ancestral values is an issue that problematizes the teaching and learning of the native world view; in addition, some teachers expressed that certain members of their institutions consider that religious lessons should be eliminated because their contents and structures alienate native ethnic groups.

According to the observation forms, methodological aspects for orienting religious education are not defined by 38% of the participants. 34% of the teachers implement the “proposal for the new school” generated in Colombia for rural areas through three types of basic, practical, and application-based activities, while 28% employ the methods specific to their creed. According to the participant observation forms and the field diaries completed, 64.3% of the teachers include reflective Bible study and prayer as part of their Religious Education classroom activities. 35.7% of them implement activities, singing, dramatic performances, drawing, and workshops in their lessons. The teachers employ written tests and presentations to assess student learning; in addition, they review students’ notebooks and consider their attitude in class.

Table 7
Pedagogical work and interactions between problematization and methodology

Methodology	%	Activities	%	Assessment
Undefined	38%	Bible study	64.3%	Written
New school	34%	Group activities - singing Performances - workshops	35.7%	Appreciation of attitudes
According to their creed	28%			

Understanding of religious diversity in school contexts

Religious plurality is acknowledged by children and teachers in the school contexts of the Cauca Department, given the presence of several cultures: mestizo, native, and afro-descendant. In our conversations with them, only 2% of the children mention diversity, while 90.4% do not understand the existence of so many religions. Only 9.6% state that their own creed is the true one.

In their field diaries, the teachers express that their beliefs are shared in the teaching-learning process: some are nasa or misak, others are afro-descendants with Christian Catholic, Pentecostal, or Evangelical beliefs, and some of them present Christian faith in their Religious Education lessons as a life choice. 60% of the teachers agree that it is correct to acknowledge religious diversity in schools, are aware of the cultural plurality of their region, and believe that inter-cultural and inter-religious dialog is relevant for working on fostering the values and peace that their region needs.

Table 8
Notions and praxis associated with religious diversity in school contexts

Children’s imaginaries	%	Student’s notions	%	Pedagogical actions	%
Those who believe in another god don’t know God	9.6%	Recognition of the values of other religious creeds	2%	Appreciation of religious diversity in the classroom	60%
Do not understand why there are so many religions	90.4%			Dialogs with the leaders of different religious communities	14%
		Do not recognize values	98%	Incorporation of Christian and ancestral rites	26%

Lastly, the observation forms completed by 14% of the [male] mestizo and native teachers working in native schools described some of the activities conducted in religiously diverse contexts. 26% of the teachers incorporate both Christian and ancestral rites. The female mestizo teachers perform aspersion rites before starting the class, invoking the spirits of nature to perform school activities, which depend on lunar cycles to determine what a student can learn. Afterwards, they invite the children to pray using the Bible to ask for Jesus' protection. The field diaries of 14% of the teachers mention activities intended to engage in a dialog with several religious leaders, who had demanded that the school provide a space to share their teachings. These activities resulted in a respectful conversation about the importance of the spiritual education of school students.

Discussion and conclusions

The research conducted on the relationship between religious beliefs and the Religious Education curriculum in the Cauca Department shed light on teacher work in rural contexts in Colombia and allowed them to analyze their teaching practice. In addition, it constitutes an opportunity to begin constructing environments where religious differences do not cause discord, but instead give people the chance to engage in a dialog within the school.

The Colombian Ministry of Education stresses the need to identify the criteria according to which teachers orient Religious lessons based on general aspects of the curriculum, in order to determine pedagogical intentions regarding comprehensive education, the topics of study proposed, the problematization of religious education in the classroom, the activities included in teaching-learning processes, the methodologies employed, and the competences required.

Acknowledging that there exist plural ways of believing is one of the essential tasks of Religion teachers. In this regard, the Colombian Episcopal Conference (2000) mentions that school students have religious assumptions inherited from their families that must be taken into account during the learning process. With respect to this, one of the necessary tasks, as Corpas (2013) notes, is to differentiate religious education from faith education: the former is a task for the school, while the other is one for the family and the churches. Nevertheless, it cannot be discounted that, in accordance with the curricula implemented by each school, a specific religious belief may be studied in detail and adopted.

Ancestral religious traditions and world views are perspectives that must be considered, because, in contrast with the Western world, religious beliefs are linked to the Earth and the spirits, which permeate political, social, cultural, and economic aspects of indigenous life. Orozco, Paredes and Tocancipá (2013), a compiler of native heritage, notes that:

The territory is a comprehensive, complex, and complete house, [...] its mountain ranges become windows and doors for ray light —the rays of the Sun— and a'te light —the rays of the Moon— to enter softly, controlled by tãaph —the clouds— and thus the nasa can plant and reap their food, guided by their mother, the Moon [...] here, during the full moon, seeds can engender their descent, but at the same time, this space is the big house where thinking and knowledge are preserved thanks to the nasa language. (p. 246)

Native authorities are struggling to rescue their traditions by means of their own kind of education, while encouraging interaction with some aspects of the Western world (UNICEF, 2010).

Interaction between students' religious beliefs and religious education is scarce. Teaching practice regarding the focus of Religious lessons is subject to teachers' beliefs, that its, the prospective of the Religion curriculum depends on their own religious experience. In addition, given the absence of a curricular proposal that takes plurality into account, teachers adopt the alternative provided by the Colombian Episcopal Conference's curricular guidelines due to their clear structure, although some participants point out that it can be implemented based on a different perspective. The participating native education schools display some degree of openness in their curricula, because they integrate the educational approaches of their world view with the Christian one.

Guidelines for plural religious education involve a direct connection between the curriculum and teaching practice; according to Gimeno (1988), its structure should not only follow institutional

parameters, but also other pedagogical traditions that require research and intervention in order to suit contextual needs. Curricular norms in Colombia provide an outline for the teaching of all school subjects in primary and secondary education, also determining general guidelines for ethnic populations through ethno-education and afro-descendant studies. Therefore, it is necessary to work to clarify the position of diversity and plurality in the school. With respect to Religious lessons, it is crucial to overcome the mistaken and proselytistic attempts by some stakeholders to influence the development, the acquisition of knowledge, and the religious experience of families and religious communities.

Religious lessons taught from a perspective of religious plurality, based on the theology of religious pluralism, may help address the issue of religious diversity. This alternative should allow students to learn about and appreciate other religious beliefs, thus leaving behind certain notions that brand some religions as “superior” and others as “inferior”.

In the case of the native peoples of Latin America, it is necessary to acknowledge their beliefs as a religion. Irrespective of the historical trajectory of their beliefs, each people is unique, and belief systems determine the lives of civilizations; therefore, the first step to be taken is to respect religious experiences regardless of their geographic and geopolitical position.

The teachers who challenged their own teaching practice in terms of religious education guidelines and recognized the importance of analyzing their pedagogical work responded in two ways to their experience: they started to become aware of the cultural diversity that was clearly defined in the curricula of their schools due to their multi-ethnic nature and identified some of the requirements of religious education in connection with its curricular structure, which cannot be limited to a single religious creed and requires a solid pedagogical basis. According to Roa (2015):

The path towards the acknowledgment of the diverse is not easy; precisely, an educational approach is needed in which the other is regarded as complementing and not hindering the relationship. Other views and perspectives enrich and do not impoverish us when we live our own experience fully, with no fear of being invaded --when the encounter is fueled by sharing (p. 134).

Religious plurality is a circumstance present in the life of societies and a concern for some religious creeds that requires attention not due to a loss of followers, but in connection with the establishment of dialog and interaction based on respect for divergent points of view; «it involves the cultivation of values and an extremely realistic knowledge of the context» (Alemany, 2000, p. 256). The theology of religions, or the theology of religious pluralism, promotes a reconciliation among religious creeds that takes several perspectives into account: exclusive, inclusive, kingdom-centric, and plural. Nevertheless, it is necessary to apply these approaches more extensively in order to attain inter-religious dialog, which is not only the premise of religions, but also the inter-cultural educational position of UNESCO, which considers that religious education contributes to civic education.

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