Interfaith Education for All

Theoretical Perspectives and Best Practices for Transformative Action

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Living together in the midst of diversity is an issue of pivotal importance all over the world, in particular for people involved in the education of the younger generation. The search intended in this publication is to find the means to go beyond mere tolerance of differences. Education as envisioned in this book engages learners in active citizenship and enables pupils and students – young people – to transform their social environment. Learning about the other, and – to a certain extent – appreciating the other's perspective, together with acquiring dialogical skills are key elements for learning to live together with people from different cultural backgrounds and with diverse religious and secular worldviews. Hence, faith development, dialogicality and citizenship are central themes in this publication.

This book brings together the latest insights and 'best practices' available in the fields of religious education from around the world, which are reflected upon by distinguished scholars in the field. The input provided by the three parts of this book will give every educator further food for thought, be it in the classroom, at home or in leisure activities.

The diversity approach of this book is mirrored in the composition of the team of editors. Duncan Wielzen is a theologian with research interest in religious education in plural societies; Ina Ter Avest is a psychologist with a focus on the intersectionality of psychology, culture and religion. The focus of both editors is on (inter)faith education, its implication and further development.

Sense Publishers

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All chapters in this book have undergone peer review.

Printed on acid-free paper

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PROLOGUE

Interfaith Education for All: A Global Imperative

In communities around the world people struggle to find positive ways to establish a shared commitment to community, cooperation, mutual understanding, the respect for the rights of others and the corresponding responsibilities that we each share as global citizens amidst a sometimes-dizzying array of diversity. There is no power greater than education to develop the future cadres of citizens, scholars, professionals, and public servants, essential to cohesive and vibrant societies. But not just any education. Education that transforms students into global citizens is one that aspires to be that place where diverse identities and points of view are brought together in a common task deepening understanding of self, other, and the World that leads to positive social relations. Education that embraces diversity is not a place of a particular ideology nor theology but rather that place where a diversity of all viewpoints becomes the central ingredient of a vibrant learning community. It is in such a place that educational experiments show us how human beings whose identity is so often forged along lines of difference can take up responsibilities and craft together a common life.

As multicultural education emerged into the mainstream at the end of the 20th century as a response to the increasing cultural diversity of communities around the world, religious diversity was largely absented from this paradigm. Religious and spiritual identity was rarely seen as a significant identity factor in the same ways as ethnic or national identity. Seen as antithetical to a secular or religion-specific learning environment, interfaith education that engaged the diversity of beliefs as an essential element of preparation for life in diverse communities was largely absent. However, the rise of religious identity as a recognized factor of social relations (all too often seen in a negative way as leading to social fragmentation and intergroup violence), thrusts religious diversity into the educational arena. Too often the answer to the conundrum of engaging diversity in education (especially religious and spiritual diversity), has been to mute particularist voices in favour of a single normative identity, whether this be religious, nationalistic, or secular in nature. This reaction to the complexity of religious diversity in society continues in today's political world whether it be debates over school curriculum, dress, or national identity. But gradually an educational experience has been envisioned that offers students the experience of reconstructing themselves in ways that make them better at seeing religious diversity as a resource rather than a barrier to healthy and peaceful human community.

In *Interfaith Education for All: Theoretical Perspectives and Best Practices for Transformative Action*, the authors take us on a journey of discovery through the

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NAZATUL AKMAR MOHD. MOKHTAR

8. HIKMAH PEDAGOGY

*Promoting Open Mindedness, Tolerance and Respect
for Others' Religious Views in Classrooms*

INTRODUCTION

Ensuring good relations among the different races, ethnics and religions is one of the primary aims of a multiracial and religious country like Malaysia. This forms the basis of a harmonious and successful nation, where education is the avenue to achieve this aim. The purpose of this chapter is to describe how a particular pedagogy known as Hikmah pedagogy was able to promote open mindedness, tolerance and respect for different views among secondary school students, which are imperative for a peaceful Malaysia. This chapter is based on a research that attempts to examine how Hikmah pedagogy can be practised in Malaysian classrooms with the original aim of enhancing students' critical thinking skills.[1]

THE CHALLENGES OF A PLURALISTIC COMMMUNITY IN MALAYSIA

Malaysia is a diversified country, consisting of about 60 percent of the majority *bumiputera* (which literally means 'sons of the soil,' i.e. Malays and other indigenous communities, such as *Iban, Kadazan, Dusun* and *Dayak*). Thirty percent of Malaysians are Chinese, while the remaining 10 percent constitutes the Indian community. The Malays are all Muslims and speak Malay language, while other *bumiputera* communities in the two Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak are followers of different religions and speak different ethnic languages. Besides that, most Malaysian Indians are Hindus and speak Tamil, whilst the religious and language backgrounds of the Chinese varies from Christianity, Buddhism to Confucianism for religions, and Cantonese, Mandarin and Hokkien for languages. The religious, ethnic and language plurality in Malaysia exists within and across ethnic groups, with the exception of the Malay community. Due to this high diversity of ethnicities and religions in Malaysia, there has been a continuous effort to promote harmony, integration and unity amongst the various communities through its education system as a tool for social cohesion. However, the different types of school that are available in Malaysia may hinder the realization of this aim (Ishak, 2002).

Malaysia has inherited a unique system of education since British colonization during its pre-independence time, in the form of three types of primary schools funded by the government. The first type is the national school that uses Malay

language, i.e. the national language as the medium of instruction, which is attended largely by the Malays. Secondly is the national type (Chinese) school that uses Mandarin as the medium of instruction, while the third type is the national type (Tamil) school where Tamil is used as the medium of instruction. Furthermore, Malay language is only taught as a subject in the national type schools. Even though, national type school students are expected to be bilingual, the lack of using Malay across the curriculum has made this quite difficult, which has compelled the Ministry to prepare different standards of Malay language exam paper for Year Six primary school examination for the national and national type schools. Moreover, the different types of schools may adopt the same national curriculum and standardized examination, but social engagement and integration amongst the various communities are very minimal since most Chinese and Indians would send their children to the respective national type schools.

Apart from the different types of schools, another challenge is "Malaysian politics that is characterized by the ethnicity," which is also closely associated with religions in Malaysia (Ishak, 2002, p. 102). For instance, "the Malays may be politically dominant, while the non-Malays, particularly the Chinese are considered as economically superior" (ibid., p. 107). The extent of both ethnics' superiority has created a tension where the "Malays are more concerned with maintaining their identity and strengthening Malay-Islamic practices as well as improving their economic gains, while the Chinese perceived these as a threat to their culture and language" (ibid., p. 109).

In the effort to alleviate the tension, education can still be used as the means to unite Malaysians, particularly through its curriculum. Subjects such as Islamic Education taught to the Malays, Moral Education taught to the non-Malays, and Civic and Citizenship Education (CCE) for all students are taught at the primary and secondary schools in Malaysia. Through these subjects, knowledge about the multi ethnics, cultures and religions in Malaysia are taught to the students. However, the lack of understanding and integration between the ethnics and religions indicates that the aim to achieve peace and harmony is still far from reality. Perhaps, this could be due to the emphasis on students' achievement and performance in schools rather than the development of values amongst the students. An alternative pedagogy that is worth to be examined is Hikmah pedagogy that has been modelled after the philosophical inquiry approach (Lipman, 2003) that has the potentials to create a community of inquiry in the Malaysian classrooms.

RECASTING PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY IN THE MALAYSIAN CONTEXT: HIKMAH PEDAGOGY AND COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY

Teaching about religion differs in terms of the audience or students. If the teaching of religion is done on its followers, then it would be in a confessional manner (Hand, 2006). However, if students consist of non-followers, then the teaching of religion is not only done in a non-confessional manner, but it should also be culturally accurate and sensitive. This is because different religions may diverge pertaining to specific traditions, practices and issues. So, opening up a classroom to discuss various and diverse point of views may be challenging as a practice and also to the students who are entrenched in dominant ideas, yet it can be an important step to a better understanding of views about "other religions" (Phelps, 2010, p. 193).

Hikmah Pedagogy for Malaysian Classrooms

Philosophical inquiry is a pedagogy that has potentials in creating a community that inquires about a particular issue (that may be sensitive or controversial) in a classroom, while observing differences and exchange of views used in the Philosophy for Children program (P4C). P4C was introduced by Matthew Lipman in the early 1970s as a form of philosophy in action in the classroom (Hashim, Hussien and Imran, 2014). Lipman believed that philosophy was the appropriate tool to trigger and develop children's natural curiosity through the teaching and learning process. It can also help to develop children's higher order thinking emphasising on critical, creative, ethical and caring thinking. Lipman introduced a philosophical thinking programme for primary students through a series of novels (with accompanying manuals) whose main characters are children that experience and share different aspects of philosophical thinking (Nikolidaki, 2010).

The P4C programme has grown and expanded, in terms of its methods and materials such as text, picture, artwork, poster, video, music etc. One of the aims of P4C is to develop and establish a Community of Inquiry (CoI) in the classroom. The CoI encourages students to independently think and consider different answers to the questions raised. Furthermore, students learn not to hastily assume that there is only one right answer to an issue. Instead, students learn that it is quite impossible to arrive at one final answer, since some answers can be considered as better than others based on their evidences or argument (Benade, 2011).

Considering the multiracial and religious context of Malaysia, the Centre for Philosophical Inquiry in Education, which is now known as Centre for Teaching Thinking (CTT) at the International Islamic University Malaysia has remodelled Lipman's approach to include religious and ethical values relevant to the Muslim and Malaysian society, and later named it as the Hikmah Programme.

Hikmah is originally an Arabic word, which literally means wisdom but bears the same meaning in Malay. The Hikmah pedagogy as a method of teaching thinking can either be done as a 'stand-alone' approach or infusion. Stand alone is an approach where a thinking programme is taught outside the school curriculum with its main objective focusing on the development of thinking skills. Meanwhile, infusion is an approach that integrates the development of thinking skills in a subject. Infusion approach considers the mastery of the content and the development of thinking skills as its objectives. For instance, in an English class, the teacher would plan to enhance students' thinking through materials that focus on students' language skills. The choice of either adopting a stand-alone or infusion approach is usually decided by the type of curriculum of an educational system. In the Malaysian system of education, the tight curriculum and limited

time of the schooling system does not allow the introduction of stand-alone, so infusion is regarded as the best and more practical approach for teaching thinking.

Recent studies have shown that Hikmah pedagogy is the most 'natural' method of improving students' thinking skills because it aims to establish a 'community of inquiry' (CoI) (Othman & Hashim, 2006; Abdullah, 2009; Juperi, 2011; Hashim et al., 2014). In other words, Hikmah is a pedagogy that can help create a community in the classroom that learn to inquire and question with the purpose of engaging in deep thinking and arriving at a better understanding of an issue collaboratively.

Community of Inquiry (CoI) in Malaysian Classrooms

In some studies, CoI is referred to as 'Community of Philosophical Inquiry' or CoPI (Hannam & Echeverria, 2009), and 'Collaborative Philosophical Inquiry' (Millett & Tapper, 2010). The aim of a CoI is to groom a group of students who "listen to one another with respect, build on one another's ideas, challenge one another to supply reasons for otherwise unsupported opinions, assist each other in drawing inferences from what has been said, and seek to identify one another's assumptions" (Lipman, 2003, p. 20).

A CoI involves a group of people who actively think together in order to increase their understanding and appreciation of the world. It is a journey of moral and philosophical exploration. It is an environment where students are given the opportunity to discuss critically, creatively and collaboratively their own selective ideas and concepts which they find worth pursuing. In the Malaysian context where students are usually devout followers of a particular religion, the moral and philosophical exploration that they experience will consequently bring their religious beliefs to the foreground of the discussion. The discussion is a dialogical one because each student contributes to the classroom discussion on an equal footing. When this happens, the elements of listening to others' views, empathy, respect, friendship, and thinking cooperatively are present throughout the dialogical discussion, in which the students do not necessarily have to arrive at an answer. More importantly, the discussion must provoke deeper understanding of the complexities of the issues and disagreement is common and allowed, so long as it is done in a subtle way, in the pursuit of finding the truth.

What the CoI does in a classroom is that it challenges students' unquestioned opinions and views and compels them to think beyond conditioned and stereotyped views to form a meaningful reaction to specific issues in the real world. In such situation, students have to think independently and for themselves. The exchange of views in the CoI also enables students to re-examine their views through logical analysis and revise them when necessary.

In a CoI classroom, teachers acting as facilitators must be good listeners, open-minded, and skilful questioners who can challenge opinions and responses in order to bring the discussion to a deeper and higher level. The classroom environment must be emotionally and intellectually safe to enable participants to reason and reflect upon the issue discussed without the influence of any authority.

Basically, there are five stages of CoI, first is the offering of a stimulus, which can be in many forms such as a text, poster, or video. The stimulus contains values and issues that students will engage in and question. Students are seated in the shape of a circle or horseshoe and face each other. This type of seating signifies the equal status and rights that each member of the CoI possesses. Then, in the second stage, students take turn in reading aloud the text. This is where students begin to discover the meaning of the stimulus. Next, in the third stage, students construct the agenda collaboratively by generating questions based on the text. Questions contributed by students are acknowledged by writing down each student's name at the end of the question. In this sense, the agenda of the CoI is mapped according to students' interest and what they consider important. Students guided by the teacher will, in the fourth stage, categorise the questions and then decide, which category will be discussed first. The discussion, in the fifth stage, ensues with the deliberation and attempt to answer the questions. This fifth stage consists of articulation of agreements and disagreements, and quest for better understanding of the meaning and concepts in the stimulus. Some of the behaviours that are usually observed among members of the CoI are questioning each other's views and reasons, building on another's ideas, countering others' claims, highlighting consequences of another's idea, using specific criteria when making judgments, and supporting one's claim with appropriate evidence.

It is through this process of CoI that members develop open mindedness, when they are able to accept criticisms, welcome the other side's views, tolerant to differences of opinions, while respecting others and their rights. Engaging in the CoI also enables the members to enhance their reasoning skills when they are asked to provide examples and counter examples, uncover underlying assumptions, draw suitable inferences, and evaluate judgments. However, the success of creating a CoI depends on the teacher's own thinking skill and disposition. To acquire and master Hikmah pedagogy, the teacher needs to engage in a CoI before s/he can create and facilitate one. It is for this reason that when training teachers in Hikmah pedagogy, teachers have to be involved in a CoI for an extended duration of time until they can conduct the CoI by their own.

The characteristics of a CoI exemplify a democratic classroom. A democratic classroom requires a teacher to facilitate the classroom discussion and empower students to think and express their 'voices.' Developing students' reasoning abilities, acknowledging their ideas and teaching them to value their friends' opinions that are different from theirs promote students to cooperate and work with each other to achieve a common goal in the class. It also encourages the students to understand the importance of working and 'living' in harmony through tolerance, respect and open mindedness.

The importance of creating a democratic classroom through a CoI using the Hikmah pedagogy in subjects such as Islamic Education, Moral Education, and Civic and Citizenship Education (CCE) is that it enables students to understand and become more tolerant of other people's views and religions' practices. Although teachers often face the challenge of helping students to practise what they have learnt in their lives such as learning to be more understanding and tolerant in a

multi religious society, Hikmah pedagogy through its dialogues in the classroom, may resolve this matter when students encounter differing views and learn to respect them.

TOWARDS PROMOTING OPEN MINDEDNESS, TOLERANCE AND RESPECT FOR OTHERS: HIKMAH PEDAGOGY IN THE MALAYSIAN CLASSROOMS

Hikmah pedagogy is most useful when dealing with subjects that require students to act on and practise the knowledge that they acquire, particularly subjects that deal with values, beliefs and practices such as Islamic Education, Moral Education, and Civic and Citizenship Education (CCE). Using Hikmah pedagogy as an infusion approach is also useful and productive in a class that is attended by students of different ethnics and religions. This is due to the nature and process of inquiry that will involve and engage all students in the class. The examples that are presented to elucidate on the three important characteristics for a harmony and peaceful Malaysian society are based on a collection of published (Hashim et al., 2014) and unpublished studies (Abdullah, 2009; Juperi, 2011; Hamzah, 2015; Ab Wahab, 2015) on Hikmah pedagogy conducted and supervised by members of the Centre for Teaching Thinking. Studies cited here were done in several subjects such as Islamic Education, CCE, English and Malay Language.

Open Mindedness

Hikmah pedagogy can help Muslim students to become more conscious of their faith. Hamzah (2015) studied how Hikmah pedagogy has helped in improving students' inquiry skill and have better understanding of Islam in the teaching of Islamic Education secondary class. Hamzah (2015) found that "Hikmah pedagogy has helped Muslim students to better understand Islam, its principles and practices, compared to the traditional method of learning" (Hamzah, 2015, p. 51), because students are more conscious of the reason and wisdom behind every practice that they have and are required to perform. Apart from that, Ab Wahab (2015) also conducted a study to examine Hikmah pedagogy and how it improves Islamic Education students' thinking skills. In his interviews with the students, he found that learning Islamic Education using Hikmah pedagogy has helped them to be more open minded and tolerant, "students were more open to different views, improved their communication skills, became more cooperative, strengthened their bonding with their teacher, became more creative and their self-confidence increased as compared to the conventional class method of learning Islamic Education" (Ab Wahab, 2015, p. 71).

On the other hand, a good illustration to explain students' open mindedness was highlighted in a study done by Juperi (2011). One of the Islamic Education topics that she taught was on 'preserving the sanctity of the mosque.' In that particular lesson, few of the questions raised by the students were, "Is it just Muslims who can build mosques? What about non-Muslims? Can a non-Muslim enter into a mosque?" (Juperi, 2011, pp. 43-44). These questions provided an opportunity to the Muslim students to explore the rights and practices of non-Muslim in Malaysia. It is important for them to understand Islam and Malaysian views of religious freedom. Some Muslim students felt challenged when they see places of worship of other religions larger than the mosques. But living in a multiracial country, the teacher was able to point out about the right to have a prayer place for the Muslim and non-Muslim. The teacher also emphasised on the point that the places of worship for other religions may be larger in size than the mosque, but the mosques were higher in number. Using Hikmah pedagogy, the teacher was able to develop tolerance amongst the students by way of more knowledge and better reasoning.

In one of our recent studies (Hussien, Hashim, & Mohd. Mokhtar, 2016), the CoI was introduced in a CCE class to examine the extent of reasoning and democratic classroom that it can promote. One of the significant findings that the study found was how CoI was able to open students' mind to others' views. A good case in point is derived from one of the CCE lessons on the topic of places of worship. During the discussion, a student shared his feeling and experience travelling abroad to a non-Muslim country when he faced difficulty in looking for a place to pray. He mentioned that there were countries that provided a space for worship for all religions. Since Christianity was the official religion of the country where he travelled, there was the symbol of a cross in that space, so he raised the issue of whether a Muslim is allowed to pray in such a room. This was debated and the discussion led to another recent issue regarding a "protest by Muslim demonstrators who forced a church to take down its cross for fear of posing a challenge to Islam and swaying the faith of young Muslims" (Menon, 2015). Some students in the class realised that they held views that were mostly emotional rather than founded on Islamic principles and values. This discovery was an eye opener for them since they realised that many beliefs and views that they have were actually constructed by society and not part of the Islamic teachings. Such issues may be perceived as controversial and sensitive, but they are important to be discussed openly if the aim of a peaceful Malaysia is to be achieved. As one student, Farah (pseudonym) said, "I feel a lot more open-minded to other's opinions instead of like, oh no you're wrong. Let me think about it first, let me see what is his opinion and from what aspect (FGI 10-10)" (Hussien et al., 2016).

Tolerance and Respect for Others' Religious Views

Learning to be tolerant is another fundamental characteristic that CoI inculcates. Tolerance makes it possible for understanding and respect to take place particularly when it involves differences of opinions. Tolerance and respect are two values that are closely related and may be dependent upon each other. Yet they are different where the former concerns one's ability to accept others' views or 'stand' others' behaviours even if he or she finds them disagreeable. Meanwhile, respect is a feeling that concerns one's consideration or admiration of someone or something.

In the twelfth lesson of CCE, on the topic of 'A Democratic Government: Leadership,' two questions contributed by the students on 'differences' were, "Why are there differences amongst members of a community?" and "Why is it

difficult to accept differences?" Such questions helped students to uncover the root of many problems that have caused misunderstandings and tension amongst the different religions and ethnics.

A discussion was initiated by the questions posed by students, but eventually students moved from merely answering questions by providing examples and unsupported reasons, to countering examples and providing reasons based on their own experiences. Lessons soon became 'sharing moments' as students collaboratively define or clarify ill-defined concepts. In one of the Malay language classes observed, the discussion revolved around the concept of fasting as one of the practices among the different religions in Malaysia. Comparison was made between Islam, Hindu and Buddhism. It was a surprise to see a number of Muslim students who were not aware of the fasting practices observed by the other religions. The discussion then extended to the dietary restrictions in the different religions. It was interesting to note that all students were aware of these differences. A Chinese student shared her story of how she prepared separate food for her Indian and Malay friends during her birthday party. She also mentioned that she used paper plates and cups because she understood the concept of Halal in Islam. A Malay student also mentioned how she made sure that there was vegetarian food for her Indian and Buddhist friends during her *Eid* Open House.[2] The understanding about food choices amongst the different religions signifies the tolerance that is practised among students of various religions.

Another basis for CoI to realise its aim is actually respect for others' views, since a good discussion and exchange of views can only be ensured once members of a community learn to respect each other's views. For instance, a student from the CCE class expressed her views on Hikmah pedagogy as being successful in developing feelings of respect for each other. She admitted that she learned to understand and respect others' opinions even when she disagreed with them. She also mentioned that she has realised that there were no wrong or right answers, just different perspectives (FGI 14-14) (Hussien et al., 2016).

Examples discussed have shown the potentials of Hikmah pedagogy and CoI in enhancing students' reasoning and also opening up their mind, making them more tolerant and more respectful of others' religious views. Hikmah pedagogy can be practised in various subjects through infusion. Practising it in a heterogeneous class would be more beneficial because it allows students to share their differing views and experiences.

CONCLUSION

This chapter discusses the challenges that Malaysia face in ensuring peace and harmony amongst its multi ethnics and multi religious society. Hikmah pedagogy and CoI champions elements of a democratic classroom where students are empowered through the development of their independent thoughts and voices. Excerpts from various studies were cited to reflect how three characteristics, namely open mindedness, tolerance and respect for others' views, which are

fundamental for a highly diversified society like Malaysia, were developed through Hikmah pedagogy and student engagement in CoI.

Like any democratic classroom, the success of the pedagogy and CoI actually lies in the teacher's ability and skill to create an active and student focussed classroom. Teachers also need to be creative and critical when selecting an appropriate text or stimulus to initiate the discussion. A stimulus that is used in a CoI needs to include issues and questions that students can raise. It should also be relevant to the topic of the lesson. More importantly, teachers act as a facilitator who guides and probes students to further elaborate and question their own claims, while ensuring that the discussion remains dialogical. Thus, Hikmah pedagogy can only be successful if the teacher possesses a critical disposition before s/he can exercise it on his/her students. The teacher also needs to first be open minded, tolerant and respectful of her/his students' views before s/he can encourage her/his students to do so. If such a teacher can be moulded, then the future of Malaysia would be bright because she will be built by critical, creative and ethical individuals.

NOTES

[1] The result of the funded research is one research report, two unpublished Masters and one PhD dissertation, of which this chapter has cited. However, this chapter only draws out a small aspect of the research, i.e. the aspect of Hikmah pedagogy and its potential to foster good inter faith relations in Malaysian pluralistic society.

[2] In Malaysia, the concept of Open House is an occasion where the host will open their house to guests during particular religious celebration like *Eid Fitri* for the Muslim, Chinese New Year for the Chinese and *Deepavali* for the Hindus.

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9. HIKMAH FOR INTERCONVICTIONAL DIALOGUE IN BELGIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, much attention has been given to intercultural and interreligious dialogue in general. Until now, however, less focus has been devoted to pedagogical models that support interreligious dialogue through (Islamic) religious education (RE) in schools. An important question in this regard is: How can a pedagogical model support teachers toward creating and strengthening dialogue between pupils of different religious and convictional backgrounds? Based on Lipman's Philosophy for Children (P4C) model, Hashim (2012) developed the Hikmah model. This model contributes to cognitive, social and affective competences such as critical and reflective thinking, communication and social skills.

The aim of this chapter is threefold. The first paragraph briefly describes the constitutional framework in which in Belgium/Flanders education takes place, including the complex Flemish RE system. The second paragraph describes the Hikmah model, starting with Lipmans' P4C model as foundation for the Hikmah model. The third paragraph explores the praxis of RE in Flemish primary schools and provides examples of possible practical pedagogical and didactical implementations of this model in Flemish primary classrooms. Some examples of how teachers can develop interreligious competences such as respect and dialogue as well as how to stimulate and strengthen the interreligious dialogue in primary Flemish private and public schools are presented.

THE BELGIAN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

Belgium is a federal constitutional monarchy with the separation of church and state. Since 1988 education has been a regional responsibility, governed and administered by the Flemish, French and German Communities. Article 24[1] protects the freedom of education and the rights of parents to make choices regarding the education of their child. The first paragraph stipulates that the Communities must provide neutral education i.e. an education which respects philosophical, ideological or religious freedom of choice on the part of parents. While any person or organisation can start a school, the vast majority of schools in Flanders and Brussels ruled by the Flemish Community today, are still Catholic. However, alongside these Catholic schools there are also public schools. Based on article 24 §2, these public schools have to organise two hours[2] a week of funded religious education.