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Religious influences on the growth of literacy practice

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Introduction

Religious influences on the growth of literacy practices are well documented and span more than a century of research ranging from disciplines such as social and cultural anthropology to sociology to language and literacy studies in education. Intellectuals known across disciplines such as Benedict Anderson, Lila Abu-Lughod, Pierre Bourdieu, Jonathan Boyarin, Clifford Geertz, Michaela de Leonardo, Shirley Brice Heath, Alan Peshkin, Claude Lévi Strauss, and Brian Street broke new ground in the 20th century in connecting literacy to religious literacies. In recent years, the work of contemporary language education scholars such as Huamei Han (2018) as well as English education and literacy scholars such as Juzwik et al. (2022) have illuminated the nexus of education, literacy, and religious expression in an

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intellectual and academic milieu that has typically espoused secularly-minded scholarship. This chapter explores contemporary research in the 21st century that suggests that researchers' questions about religious influences on literacy practices has shifted over time and is also indicative of scholars' own changing reflective stances toward the impact of religious literacies in education.

Language and literacy learning

Organized religion creates cultures around rituals that are maintained and passed from generation to generation. As ancient religions have evolved into the 21st century, many have seen a shift to more modernized practices. The current scholarship on language and literacy practices within religious contexts focuses on religion as a way to foster social communities by linking the ancient rites of the religion to everyday life.

Several studies have examined the literacy practices within religious groups, especially concerning the three major belief systems: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. All three religions require literacy practices to be fully engaged in the worship services. The use of prayers, recitation, and singing are all examples of ways religious communities engage in literacy practices. The focus in these kinds of practices is not comprehension, but rather, rote memorization (Baquedano-López, 2008; Moore, 2015; Rosowsky, 2013). Many young people attend Qur'anic and Hebrew schools or a Christian Sunday School to engage in the memorization of ancient religious texts like the Qur'an, Torah, and Bible. The comprehension of text is secondary to the fluency and oral expression of reading/ speaking the text because the meaning is orally communicated by religious leaders.

Other studies suggest that students who engage in literacy practices are exposed to a wider variety of genres and forms of language that are not present in public school systems today (Baquedano-López, 2008; Papen, 2017; Rosowsky, 2013). The understanding of students' religious literacy practices is important for educators to know because many students are engaged in a wider variety and more difficult texts than what is available in schools (Rackley, 2014; Papen, 2017). The comprehension of ancient religious texts is secondary to

their memorization because its purpose is to allow for more engagement in the worship service and build a sense of community among church members.

Research on both immigrant and native religious groups shows a strong relationship between religious rituals and community. Learning to perform and participate in the rites of worship creates a community that many immigrants seek when adjusting to a new country and culture. Immigrants are especially susceptible to the pulls of religion as a community. In Han's (2011, 2014) pioneering research on Chinese immigrant conversion to Christianity, she found that the participants were originally seeking a community of English speakers in which to practice communicating in English. The participants of the study found the local community college English classes too formal but enjoyed the informality of conversational English through Bible study. While they were not interested in converting to Christianity, the couple in Han's (2011, 2014) study became hyper-involved in the church because of the inclusion of their own cultural practices within the religious customs. By code-switching each member of the community was given a voice and felt empowered to use it (Han, 2011, 2014).

The use of religious schools as a counterbalance to the public school curriculum is another facet of religious literacy research that has emphasized community ways of knowing over individual comprehension of the text. In Rackley's (2014) study on literacy practices of Latter-Day Saints and Methodist youth, he found that even within a commonly known religious Christian sects, there can be cultural differences. Through his analysis of religious texts, he found that Methodist youth engaged in a culture of interpretation that created meaning through small group discussion. On the other hand, the Latter Day Saints youth engaged in a culture of listening, where the interpretation was given to them by elders in the church. Understanding the teaching and interpretation of religious texts is informative for developing a more nuanced understanding of the connections to public school pedagogy that bridges the out-of-school literacy practices with the requirements of academic language (cf. Sarroub, 2001, 2002, 2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2009a, 2009b).

Although religious practices are entrenched in ancient rituals, a recent trend in the research is showing a change in the ways young

students are learning Ancient Arabic and Hebrew. Children's attendance at Arabic and Hebrew schools is an important cultural aspect of both religions because the ancient language is such an integral part of worship services. In Moore's (2015) study on West African Muslim families, she discovered that more families were choosing the French-speaking public schools over traditional Islamic day schools. Instead, their children were learning ancient Arabic by attending night classes. This approach to religious language learning is described as a counterbalance to the privileged French-speaking public school. This new way of learning has also shown an uptick in girls' attendance compared to boys in Muslim schools (Moore, 2015). In the same vein, Sarroub (2005) showed that Yemenis and Yemeni Americans in Michigan chose to send their children to public school during the week and to "Arabic School" at the local mosque on Saturdays and Sundays.

In 2019, Rosowsky revisited her primary field site and research about the sacred language practices of Mosque schools in northern England. In her original study (2008), she found that most students and families of the Mosque schools were first- or second-generation immigrants from the same country with the same home language, primarily Urdu. Twenty years later, Rosowsky (2019) saw a shift in Qur'anic study in English, the common language of the more diverse population of the schools. With an influx of immigrants from many parts of the world, and the establishment of a stronger multi-generational community, the use of the English language is an imperative tool for interpersonal communication within the Islamic school classroom (Rosowsky, 2019).

Literacy practices among the three major religions- Christianity, Judaism, and Islam-are important to maintaining the ritual practices of worship. The scholarship in this area demonstrates a prevalent emphasis on the decoding and fluency of religious print texts over comprehension and interpretation. Students of sacred languages are not asked to develop their own understandings of the text, but rather, to recite them as members of a faith-based community. There has also been a shift to maintaining institutional religious memberships and bridging the sociocultural practices of youth with the literacy practices of their religions.

Identity construction via literacy, language, and religious practices

Religion, or lack thereof, is an important aspect of individual identity. While church and state are fiercely separated in the United States, especially regarding public schools, religious beliefs often undergird students' classroom discussions. This section explores recent scholarship about the links between individual identity, religion, and public institutions, and it addresses how religious literacy practices are being used to build community among immigrants and US-born populations. This section also highlights research about how young people utilize religion to negotiate religious, social, and cultural spaces.

Bigelow (2008), for example, studied the intersection of immigrant identity and religious practices within public institutions such as schools. As immigrants in a new dominant culture, Somali youth struggled with the racialization of being seen as Black and not African, while dressing in a hip-hop style and adopting the African American vernacular English along with the standard variety to fit into the social aspects of school. Despite this conformity, Somali teens wrote, "Somali," "Muslim," or "Other" on forms for school that indicate racial categories.

Choi and Tinker Sachs's (2017) case study focused on how multilingual students negotiated their identities when reading multicultural literature. Four male participants from India, Uzbekistan, and Korea participated in Saturday morning book clubs that met for five months. Two of the boys identified as religious—Muslim and Hindu—and the other two identified as atheists with no religion. The young men used their religious knowledge gained from their home lives to create nuanced understandings of the multiethnic literature they were reading. The researchers documented how differing perspectives about religious beliefs became a source of tension among the boys as they naturally drew on their religious identities to make meaning from the text. These studies are important in understanding of religious literacy because they demonstrate the ways multilingual youth use religion to interpret texts secular literature. It also shows the importance of teachers allowing various religious perspectives into the classroom to foster dialogue and understanding among participants.

Research such as Han's (2007) ethnographic case study provides a lens into a different educational setting for adults. She followed one Chinese immigrant couple, Grace and Timothy, as they navigated their new life in Toronto, Canada. Han outlines the couple's settlement in Toronto as being traumatic for the newlyweds. Timothy and Grace struggled to find meaningful work and make it financially in Canada. They found a community in the evangelical Christian group that they joined and used expressions such as "God's plan" to make sense of their experience and find calmness. At the heart of this study is the gender and language shifts of Grace and Timothy that occurred through their involvement in the evangelical Christian group. Han (2007) found that Grace took on a dominant and outspoken role in private, often keeping a steady job to keep the family afloat. However, Timothy took on a more dominant role in group conversations, especially in the church's English language classes. Han's findings suggest that immigrant women tend to be particularly vulnerable to gender stereotypes despite the efforts at gender equality in Western liberal democracies.

According to Han (2007), evangelical churches in Canada utilize English language classes to build community and connection among immigrants, and by the same token, there is the expectation that they will convert to Christianity despite any desire to do so before encountering the group. However, Han's (2011) research explored the participants' sense of "otherness" via normalized racial and structural discrimination as a reason for their interest in finding community through Chinese nationalism, and thus, saving their country through Christian evangelism. Despite the hardships encountered during their settlement in Canada, Chinese immigrants were able to find a positive identity within the evangelical Christian community.

In her case study (Reyes, 2009) followed one high school Latina girl, Zulmy, for 10 months at school and in her home to explore how she negotiates her religious identity in a public space, such as school. The main source of data came from Zulmy's science scrapbook which she crafted for the biology club, and, which, incidentally, had very little to do with science, but rather, it included reflections on her religion and her relationship with the material world. Reyes (2009) concluded that Zulmy's religious identity is complex and sometimes contradictory. For example, one entry was an inspirational poem about "God"

and the next page was a visual that sent the message: “I love Mickey Mouse, a symbol of American consumerism.” Through this scrapbook, Zulmy made sense of the different facets of her identity by integrating the pieces of her religion, culture, language, and relationships into one artifact. One could hypothesize that the scrapbook could be what Sara Ahmed (2010) calls a “happy object,” in that its significance drew on contemporary media and religious texts that helped Zulmy make sense of her world.

Recent scholarship has also focused on Christian religious identity of US-born citizens in public schools. Research in this subfield, which has roots in the pioneering work of Alan Peshkin (1986) in an evangelical Christian community, calls attention to the importance of studying this population because of the emphasis placed on their beliefs and values in US politics. For example, Juzwik’s (2014) critical review of the Biblicism tradition in American Christianity argued that Biblicism, a belief in the authoritativeness of the Bible is a literacy event because it requires the reading and interpretation of complex religious texts. Juzwik suggested that researchers should study this population because it includes the largest religious group in the United States, one that develops strong identities as Biblicist Christians and focuses heavily on evangelizing to transform lives. The emphasis on proselytizing and conversion is problematic in religiously pluralistic settings such as public schools, and Juzwik noted that research further research offers a deeper understanding of their literacy practices for evangelization. With a more optimistic view than that of Peshkin (1986), Juzwik argued that gaining insight into evangelical Christian religious literacy practices, dialogue across ethical differences can be promoted to gain a broader view of the world.

In 2015, Juzwik and McKenzie’s qualitative study included both a teacher and student who self-identified as evangelical Christians. Sam, the teacher, conducted a “This I Believe” essay writing unit wherein he invited students to explore their own beliefs and morals while hearing from others who may be ethically different. Charlie, an evangelical Christian student in Sam’s class, saw the unit as an opportunity to honor “God” and “His” word through his own literacy practices. The findings from this study indicated that there are differences even among members of the evangelical Christian belief. For example, Sam, the teacher, was older and more accustomed to discussion that

included different viewpoints and ideologies. Charlie, the student, on the other hand, has not learned to participate in or value cross-faith dialogue. Ultimately, Juzwik and McKenzie (2015) argue that educators ought to take the religious roots of students into account and develop avenues in the classroom to engage them in dialogue.

However, there has been a limited number of studies that explore the interactions of youth religious beliefs, literacy, and motivation. Rackley (2016), in turn, contributed to the development of religio-cultural theories in literacy studies. In his qualitative study of Latter-day Saint and Methodist youths' motivation for reading complex, religious texts, the findings revealed that the young people in both religious groups were motivated to read and comprehend complex religious texts because they wanted to apply them to their lives, endure challenges, find comfort, and connect with "God."

Using a multiliteracies framework, Skerrett (2014) examined how religious literacies are used to make sense of the secular literature that students read in class. Using a qualitative case study design, data was collected over one year in Ms. Campbell's ninth grade classroom. The students in the study were members of a diverse high school in the southwestern United States, and many of them self-identified as Mexican or Mexican American. The findings suggest that, with the teacher's support, students were able to draw on their religious literacies to analyze and evaluate the secular literature read in class and within their academic writing. Skerrett also found that tensions arose during class discussions that involved religious identity, but there was a strong sense of community based on shared values and empathy for others that helped students navigate through these tensions with their teacher, who also understood their more nuanced religious viewpoints.

In another study about evangelical Christian students and their interactions with a secular literacy curriculum in the United States, Weyand and Juzwik (2019) pointed out that literacy education in midwestern public schools was developed according to evangelical Protestant print literate norms, and therefore, evangelical Christian literacy practices have been excluded. This study focused on an evangelical Christian young man's responses to a community-based curriculum that required him to intern with a traveling college campus preacher.

Jeremy, the student participant, was given the opportunity to publicly identify as a Christian and justify his beliefs using Biblical scripture. This dialogue was evidence of his willingness to share his faith with others by inviting discussion, and thus, scrutiny of his beliefs. In turn, it demonstrated a readiness to understand others and their views. This was something that Jeremy was not open to doing prior to the internship. Like Charlie (Juzwik and McKenzie, 2015), Jeremy is another example of students adapting curricular goals for their own religious exploration and identity development. Further research is needed to fully examine young people's religious-related decisions and literacy practices in school spaces, especially those of historically minoritized groups who face discrimination (cf. Mir and Sarroub, 2019; Sarroub, 2001, 2002, 2005).

Wynter-Hoyte and Boutte (2018), for example, contributed a qualitative case study that focuses on Melissa, an African American girl in the third grade as she navigated the literacy worlds of church and school. The authors implemented Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) as a framework as well as a post-structural identity theoretical perspective that instantiates identity as non-static, pluralistic, and adaptable to one's environment. These frameworks illuminated interaction and learning differences across church and school settings. At church, Melissa's literacy practices were predominantly communal, i.e., praying for one another and sharing testimonies. The church community also embraced African American Vernacular English (AAVE), such as the call and response speech pattern within the services. Other examples of communal practices included small group instruction for the children wherein they engaged in a close reading of the Bible and role-playing biblical stories. Melissa's classroom literacy practices, modeled by her African American teacher, focused on individual learning. There were few peer interactions and the lessons focused on standardized testing skills. Melissa navigated both institutional literacy practices seamlessly and was able to participate successfully in both environments. Wynter-Hoyte and Boutte pointed out that ways of participating in literacy activities in the church setting could be a resource within a school to activate communal and multiple literacies to benefit all students and help develop stronger relationships between students and teachers.

Power via literacy, language, and religious practices

While religious beliefs are an important aspect of many individual's identities and sense of belonging, it is institutions that systematically wield power and often for their own gains. This section explores the relationship between religion and power and the impact it has on people's lives as they implement their political and social agendas. Baquedano-López (2004), Hsiao et al. (2018), and Kim (2019) explored the ways in which church groups use the English language as a source of evangelizing new members and acculturating them to the dominant culture. Other researchers have studied this dynamic in China, which is experiencing rapid migration (Wang, 2018; Wang and Froese, 2019). Lastly, Shaw (2019) and Vikdahl and Skeie (2019) explored religion and power in European Union countries that required religious education as a part of their overall curriculum and the inclusion of dialogical activities in the classroom.

Baquedano-López took an in-depth look at a Catholic religious education program in Los Angeles, California serving Mexican immigrant families as they eliminated the Spanish-based class (*Doctrina*) in favor of "English-only" instruction. The church resided in a working-class neighborhood of mostly Mexican and Central American immigrants that were fluent in both English and their native language(s). Families enrolled their students in the *Doctrina* program because of the cultural connection and emphasis on the Spanish language. Even though the program was much larger than the English-only class and served well over 100 students, it was eliminated from church programming. The Latinx leaders of the *Doctrina* class resisted the insistence on English-only by continuing to conduct classes in Spanish, an alternative third space. Baquedano-López (2004) used de Certeau's strategies and tactics to describe the phenomenon that took place at this church. The church leaders implemented an English-only policy as a strategy to diminish the influence of the Spanish language and culture, while the Latinx leaders disregarded this policy by continuing to utilize the language as a connection to the community and culture, thus demonstrating the nexus of religion and power and the ways in which marginalized people subverted the dominant.

In their three-year ethnographic research of Chinese immigrant families, Hsiao et al. (2018) studied a Christian church after-school

program, in which they found startling differences between the experiences of working-class and middle-class Chinese immigrants and their relationships with the church. The working-class Fuzhunes-Chinese families were concerned about the pressure to convert to Christianity but saw the program to improve their children's performance in school, especially in learning English. On the other hand, middle-class Chinese families could choose whether to participate in religious or non-religious educational opportunities as a tool of integration. While all Chinese immigrant children in this study socialized into Christianity at varying degrees, the class status of the family determined in which activities they could participate. The middle-class Chinese families, both Christian and non-Christian, saw church activities as social gatherings, whereas the working-class Chinese families who resisted Christian norms lost an opportunity to acculturate into society, and thus, were "othered" by the dominant norms of the Protestant Christian community.

In non-US settings such as North Korea and South Korea and the European Union, power dynamics are at play in the context of English language and literacy learning. For example, Kim (2019) explored missionary English teaching sites and the access to power and privilege they hold for minority population participants through the political economy of language and society. The main purpose for missionaries in this economy is to convert non-believers to Christianity, whereas the top priority of the North Korean students is to learn English to gain education credentials, so English serves as a currency for career advancement. Evangelical Christians in South Korea used English as a tool to evangelize North Koreans. More research into this phenomenon can provide us an opportunity to understand "the dominant ideologies and power relations of the larger society" (Kim, 2019, p. 21) for which Han (2018) argued in her initiative to build a subfield focused on religion and language acquisition.

Research in the European Union context offers a more expansive view of religious literacy integration in curriculum. Shaw (2019) studied European Union countries that are required to provide a religious education curriculum to their students. The educational model suggested in drew on data from a national study of educational stakeholders' views in Great Britain. Shaw used Dinham and Shaw's (2017) framework as the tool to develop quality religion and

worldview literacy instruction for students using the strands: category, disposition, knowledge, and skills. The data from stakeholders suggested broadening the category of religion and worldview to include the informal-the lived social and political experiences of individuals to gain “authentic representations of religion and worldview” (Shaw, 2019, p. 5). Similarly, disposition of religion and worldview literacy promoted self-awareness and intercultural understanding toward religion instead of a preconceived set of principles of tolerance and respect. The knowledge strand asked students to consider the relationship between the religious and the secular and engage in dialogical practices to understand the complexity of religion and belief as it is constructed by individuals. Finally, the skills associated with religion and worldview literacy, discernment, meant the ability to self-examine one’s own beliefs and worldviews while also engaging in dialogue about someone’s religion or belief with grace and sensitivity. Shaw advocated for a critical lens when thinking about religion and worldviews. She also suggested that religious education classes be used to not only educate students in the major world religions but also as an opportunity to gain self-awareness and understanding of students’ beliefs and worldviews.

Using a comparative case study design, Vikdahl and Skeie (2019) analyzed religion and dialogue within education in London, England; Hamburg, Germany; Stockholm, Sweden; and Stavanger, Norway. While each country has distinct curricular goals, all case studies fit into the European research project “Religion and Dialogue in Modern Society” (Weisse, 2010). The findings from this cross-case analysis showed that while students like engaging in religion-related dialogue at school, they found it to be difficult to understand a broader view outside of their own personal opinions and beliefs. Students also indicated being insecure about sharing their own religious beliefs, especially if they differed from those of the majority, and feared social consequences from their peers. Teachers found that religion-related dialogue was threatened by “historical, religious, and political conflicts” (Vikdahl and Geir, 2019, p. 124). Also, the emphasis on curricular standards, learning goals, and assessments restricted dialogical practices in the classroom. Implications from this study suggest that dialogical practices are not just a teaching tool for students, but a set of skills they need to make sense of the world in which they live.

In turn, Wang (2018) provided insight into the largest ethnic minority group in China, the Hui, and their experiences migrating from rural to more urban areas in northwest China for economic opportunities. Almost 100% of the Hui identify as Muslim which has caused conflicts for them in the new urban setting. The participants in this study included fifteen seventh and eighth grade students who had moved to the region within the past five years. Through narrative stories, semi-structured interviews, and field observations, Wang (2018) found that all the participants distinguished themselves by their multiple identities but placed their religious identity of Muslim above the rest. Other findings point to an incompatibility of secular culture and religion. Religious symbols are not allowed in Chinese public spaces, including schools, therefore, students were not able to wear traditional Muslim clothing, nor were they given time to pray during the school day. Since pork is the main meat consumed in the region, Muslim Hui found eating out difficult. The fasting obligation during Ramadan made it challenging for students to concentrate on their schoolwork and many admitted to not participating the whole month.

The implication of the study is for schools in this region to develop more culturally relevant pedagogy practices to help students integrate their religious beliefs into the secular classroom and to become more adept to the urban environment in which they are living. School accommodations for Muslim students who fast and cannot eat pork is also relevant as it was in Sarroub's (2005) ethnography of a high school in Michigan that was the academic home of a large Yemeni and Muslim population and whose administrators implemented inclusive accommodations in the cafeteria and classrooms. The conflict the participants experienced in northwest China adapting to the dominant Han culture while also wanting to maintain their religious beliefs and customs is a good example of power dynamics that involve both religious and rural population minorities. This scholarly research is imperative for understanding ways in which institutional powers weaponize religion to further minoritize people.

Additionally, Wang and Froese (2019) analyzed data from the 2010 Wave of the China General Social Survey to better understand the relationship between education and religious tolerance in China. The survey data concluded that education was the largest variable in determining religious tolerance among Chinese citizens. The more

education an individual attained, the more open they were likely to religious diversity. At the same time, Chinese respondents noted that religious institutions are dangerous and should be socially and politically regulated so that they do not influence the decisions of the government. The researchers recognized the harsh religious laws in place in China and concluded that highly educated individuals may be reluctant to share their religious beliefs openly and honestly. Therefore, the openness to religious practices and the skepticism of their secular influence needs to be examined more fully using a qualitative research design. Wang and Froese acknowledged the people's fear in responding to the survey and even alluded to the example of Muslim re-education camps implemented in rural China that may have contributed to less than forthcoming survey response.

The research about power via religion, language, and literacy demonstrates the symbiotic, political relationship that religious institutions have with schools and government to maintain their status. The English language classes (Kim, 2019), safety and academic support (Hsaio et al., 2018), and formation of a cultural community (Baquedano-López, 2004) provided by these religious institutions disguise their intent of assimilation according to Protestant cultural norms. This is contrasted by the research in China (Wang, 2018; Wang and Froese, 2019) involving religious individuals living in a country that does not openly recognize nor accept religious practices in any setting, private or public. Shaw's (2019) aforementioned research and dialogical framework offers an in-between option for accommodation and education in such settings.

Practices in the classroom that engage religious literacies pluralistically

The world in the 21st Century is more interconnected than ever before, but the religious differences continue to foster tension and conflict within governments and communities. Scholars continue to advocate for religious pluralism despite the shift of leading democracies to a more nationalist worldview (Lockley-Scott, 2019). In 2010, the European Union published a report on the effectiveness of the religious education (RE) requirement in European public schools. The

conclusions of the study demonstrated a need for schools to make a place in their curriculum for dialogue and discussion about religious and non-religious worldviews (Weisse, 2010). Strengthening the religious and cultural dialogue would promote intercultural understanding, respect for otherness, and coexistence in a democratic society (Weisse, 2010). The lofty goals outlined in the report were met with obstacles when individual school systems attempted to implement the practices within their own classrooms.

For many European RE teachers, the purpose of the compulsory class was to provide students with a comprehensive view of the world's major religions to create citizens prepared to participate in a democracy (Liljestrand, 2016). In a small study of nine RE teachers in Sweden, Liljestrand (2016) found that the educators struggled to determine whether democratic citizens were created by focusing on the similarities or differences of the religions studied. The findings suggested that individual teachers' approaches to RE were situated within "how they define themselves as teachers when certain issues are explicitly addressed" (Liljestrand, 2016, pp. 328–329). Niemi et al.'s (2019) study supported the notion of reflexivity being a major factor in individual teacher's approaches to RE. In a survey of 181 Finnish pre-service and practicing teachers of world religions, the results showed that younger, less-experienced teachers favored an approach that called more attention to differences by providing students with religious exemptions from certain school activities, gender-based grouping when necessary, and spaces to pray at school (Niemi et al., 2019). Older teachers, on the other hand, tended to lean toward similarities as they attempted to show tolerance and acceptance but did not go so far as to make accommodations for those students (Niemi et al., 2019).

Currently, the practices surrounding religion in the classroom are unique to the beliefs and values of the teachers and the geographical regions in which they teach. The US recognizes the diversity of religions and cultures within the country and attempts to preserve equity among all groups by maintaining a clear and strong division between church and state. The numerous court cases surrounding the legality of public displays of religion in schools demonstrates the resistance to any kind of education or dialogue on the topic of religious diversity within classrooms (Bindewald et al., 2017). In recent

years, Canada began following the US model and secularized its public schools to better accommodate diverse student population (Binde-wald et al., 2017). The result of a lack of RE in US and Canadian public schools has been “high rates of religious illiteracy” (Patrick et al., 2017) among its student populations. Richardson (2017) and Patrick et al. (2017) argued for RE classes in public schools because they offer the skills required for opening dialogues among religious and secular worldviews and give minoritized religions the space for recognition within their communities (Davila, 2015; Patrick et al., 2017; Richardson, 2017; Vallerand, 2018). Living in a diverse and democratic society requires more from citizenship education courses than the teaching of tolerance; it must also focus on respect and coexistence (Patrick et al., 2017; Weisse, 2010).

While the scholarship shows a need for public schools to embrace RE, the how-to is a little more ambiguous. Lockley-Scott (2019) and Vallerand (2018) both advocated for the implementation of religious dialogue in UK and US schools, respectively, as a way to decrease cultural tensions and explore their own identities, but the nationalistic worldview recently adopted by Great Britain and the US has not been conducive to religious pluralism (Lockley-Scott, 2019; Vallerand, 2018). Before religious dialogue can take place in the classroom, the political context of the nation state must be more open and inclusive of diverse and multiple worldviews. Additionally, teachers require on-going professional development opportunities to be more confident in engaging their students in controversial topics (Davila, 2015; Lockley-Scott, 2019; Richardson, 2017). Without professional development and practice, RE teachers may end up doing more harm than good (Davila, 2015; Dinham and Shaw, 2017; Lockley-Scott, 2019; Vallerand, 2018).

The navigation of the landscape between religious and secular worldviews in public schools is a bit like an obstacle course. The scholarship supports the need for all people of democracies to learn the cultural values and beliefs of the religions that are prevalent in their communities, but a nationalistic political climate fosters fear of outside, minority populations (Dinham, 2017; Juzwick, 2014; Patrick et al., 2017; Richardson, 2017; Vallerand, 2018; Weisse, 2010). Instead, teacher education programs ought to include tools for engaging

pre-service teachers in pluralistic dialogue in their classrooms such that they are better prepared to participate in the democratic societies they will inherit (Davila, 2015; Dinham, 2017). A glimmer of hope that religious pluralistic ideas can come to fruition appeared in Addai-Mununkum's (2016) multi-case study wherein he observed the pluralistic practices of three schools affiliated with different religions. The results show that despite the diverse religious backgrounds of the students at each school, the Muslim school demonstrated more evidence of engaging in a dialogue with Christians than the Christian schools showed to their Muslim students. The focus on moral education and learning from one another set the Muslim school apart from the other two religious schools and allowed all students to feel and be welcomed in its space (Addai-Mununkum, 2016).

Western democracies could learn from the Muslim school in Ghana, Africa. The impact of religious literacies in education should not be a taboo topic in public schools. Rather teacher preparation programs and professional development workshops should consider providing teachers the tools necessary to engage young people in critical conversations focused on religion, multiple world views, and a diversity of perspectives grounded in historically, sociologically, anthropologically, linguistically informed practices that are accurate and factual. The current nationalistic climate and Islamophobia that is rampant across the world could be snuffed out with an open-minded approach to critical conversations and education surrounding religious literacies (Mir and Sarroub, 2019). As the 21st century continues to unfold, a less insular approach to inquiry in language and literacy studies about the influence of religious literacies could potentially offer new questions and answers such that people do less harm to one another, and young people learn to talk and argue democratically. As Durkheim (1912) pointed out, religion is the product of human activity, not divine intervention, so scholars and educators can study it as such and help teachers be more confident in engaging with their students to better understand religious literacies in society.



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