

Histlexia Observed in Training Pre-service Social Studies Teachers to Teach World Religions

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The process of teaching world religions is fraught with dispositional and pedagogical concerns for pre-service teachers. To address these issues, middle grades pre-service teachers were asked to integrate an inquiry-based approach while considering their own histlexia, which we define as an inability to articulate positions. The findings of this study suggest that pre-service teachers can benefit from inquiry-based methods in planning and teaching religion and other controversial topics in the middle grades. Doing so causes pre-service teachers to become aware of their own biases and pedagogical needs when preparing to teach their future students.

In the United States, as in other countries, religion plays a fundamental role in daily cultural exchanges. As higher education faculty, we encourage our pre and in-service teachers to be considerate of all students (Barry, 2005). According to Smith (1990), the United States is the most religiously diverse country on earth, a fact which occurred to me while speaking with one of my students about a topic in our "Educational Social Issues" course. The student was defensive about matters of faith and found that the discussion on the recognition of multiple faiths was a notion that repudiated his beliefs. In fact, he became so passionate about his position that he began yelling and had difficulty calming down, so I could address his concerns regarding the history of religion in schools. When I mentioned the Supreme Court's ruling on a number of cases regarding religion in school, he became even more agitated. The cases include *Florey v. Sioux Falls School District* 619 F2d 1311 (8th Cir. 1980), *Stone v. Graham*, 449 U.S. 39, 42 (1980), and *School District of Abington Tp., Pa v. Shemp*, 374 U.S. 203, 225 (1963). The cited cases discuss the outcomes of decisions regarding the Establishment Clause and deal with the rights of citizens in school settings. In each instance, the court upheld the religious rights of the individual.

This paper focuses on approaches in social studies methodology courses in how to make certain that all religions receive equitable treatment within the school environment. The challenges and rewards of integrating multiple faiths in teaching world religions will be discussed in addition to the specific techniques used to teach controversial topics. Our study indicates that an environment that encourages respect for multiple perspectives creates an active learning classroom that inspires engagement. Further, exploring concepts of *histlexia*—a term created by one of the research members—that translates to a disconnect between historical learning and application. For our research purposes, we characterize *histlexia* as a "condition" of sorts. For example, in

our methods courses, we routinely encounter pre-service teachers who are unable to articulate their positions on historical events and consequently become extremely defensive, thereby displaying what we consider to be symptoms of *histlexia*.

Statement of the Problem

The meaning of the "establishment of religion" clause in the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment is currently being debated in the educational arena. Some prominent Roman Catholic and Protestant groups insist that the Establishment clause means that the federal government may not give support or special privileges to a single church (Butts, 1950). Historical friction among various faiths has rendered the current educational curriculum as Protestant in outlook. Similarly, in the southern part of the United States, all remaining single establishment churches (other than Protestant) became multiple establishments or were wiped out prior to the enactment of the First Amendment. The 1776 Constitution of Maryland and the 1778 Constitution of South Carolina, contained elaborate provisions for multiple establishments that were not Protestant (Butts, 1950). However, legal measures at the state level were used to ensure the dominance of a single denomination. As the U.S. expanded, the Constitution allowed for multiple denominations. The question arose regarding how to ensure the predominance of a single faith. As the main belief system, Protestantism provided a ready interconnectivity between the Protestant faith and the public education system.

According to Butts, the best protection for religious freedom is to make matters of public policy by getting consensus from people of all faiths without regard to religious sanctions—the essence of the separation of church and state principle (1950). Measures to separate religion from education (*Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* (2002), *Lemon v. Kurtzman* (1971), *Engel v. Vitale* (1962), have long existed, but there has not been a concerted at-

tempt to treat all religions equally. Consequently, the American educational system has not, until recently, considered world religion courses a necessity.

To help pre-service teachers better understand world religions and address their histlexia, I included a world religions assignment in my social studies methods course in the spring of 2012. From the initial classroom meeting, when we started discussing world religions, the student mentioned earlier became visibly upset. He raised his hand and I called on him. He then launched into a very long, irate speech concerning his thoughts about his faith and what he referred to as “non-believers’ faiths.” After I allowed the student to air his grievances, I explained that by presenting another culture’s religions or other cultures’ religions did not mean that I was devaluing his religion. To my surprise, many of the students agreed with the student’s objections stating that they were, “defending their faith.” As I began a general overview of world religions, the same student mentioned that he was tired of having to discuss different religions. He pointed out that he was sure that the whole purpose of my class was to persuade all of the students to become atheists. Another student asked about my religion. Another student wanted to know which church I frequented. I informed them that my personal beliefs were not relevant to the dialogue at hand. I noticed students having their own conversations with dismissive body language, e.g., eye rolling, slouching, as they made dismissive remarks. It was the first time in eight years that the world religions lecture aroused strong reactions from students. I talked to another professor about the students’ objections. On one hand, we do not want to be perceived as criticizing the students’ beliefs, but we are responsible for preparing our pre-service teachers to teach multiple social studies subjects and students of different faiths. We wondered how these pre-service teachers would respond to students of diverse faiths and how they would teach about diverse religions, if they were called upon to do so. The two researchers set out to create an assignment to help address these concerns.

Framework for World Religions Project

The following academic year, the social studies methods professors devised a unit on world religions as a response to the students’ outcry and *histlexia*. The curriculum was not designed to criticize any particular faith, but rather to prepare them for their teaching placements. After two weeks of lessons built around understanding different religions (PEW Research Center, 2013), (see Appendix A), for my class, I asked the students to present their views concerning what they had learned. My main goal was to avoid their expounding upon their own religions, but instead to make them more knowledgeable about others. I therefore mandated that they act as research scholars for a specific religion; the students were assigned geographic regions. We selected Africa, Southwest Asia (Middle East), and Southern and Eastern Asia, using 7th Grade Georgia Performance Standards for Social Studies (2012). Each group of four teacher candidates was required to study one main religion from their respective regions, using primary sources e.g., letters from religious leaders, interviews with religious leaders, and religious books. When the units were completed, the teacher candidates were asked to participate in pre- and post-project discussions about their work. The first aspect of the theoretical framework for this assignment is according to Waks (1985):

In the emerging age we will require religious formulations that greet with critical respect the achievements of the scientific rational mind, even as they point beyond rational thinking

to the great mystery. And we will require religious practices that are demonstrably useful in assisting a linkage with the mystery, and the living of a life that derives from it, a life transcending narrow personal, social, religious, and national boundaries, and materialist values such as greed and domination (p. 276).

The students were responsible for providing descriptions of different faiths from all over the world. We examined the positive and negative aspects of each religion from a historical perspective. Kunzman (2006) wrote, “Ethical Dialogue involves cultivating empathic understanding of unfamiliar ethical perspectives and then engaging in thoughtful, civic deliberation in light of this understanding” (p. 6).

As mentioned earlier, religion and education have always coexisted in the United States. During the eighteenth century, Protestants taught citizens how to read for the primary purpose of being able to read the Bible. There were other purposes as well. Protestants of Scottish extraction, for instance, believed that the working classes needed to be literate to create a productive society (Kaestle & Foner, 1983). During the nineteenth century, the values of liberalism began to permeate the American culture, focusing on concepts associated and derived from liberty and equality. One facet focused on religious freedom. Protestant Christians used schools as a means to perpetuate their faith in future generations (Eck, 2001). Protestant Christian leaders also feared that governmental agents could use the educational system to impose their secular views on future generations. Failing to see the cognitive disconnect, the Protestant Christians used methods of indoctrination to prevent the secular influences of the government (Miller, 1995). This was not only an attempt to maintain the superiority of the Protestant faith but it prevented other religious views—both secular and non-secular—from permeating the school system. In fact, teaching other religions in public schools is a relatively new initiative. Lester and Roberts’ (2009) research on Modesto California stated:

Modesto has always struggled with the challenges posed by diversity. Over the past 40 years, the town has made room for an array of immigrants, including Buddhists, Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims. Five evangelical Christian ‘megachurches’ with over 2500 members have sprung up alongside mainline Protestant and Catholic denominations and a flourishing Jewish community. Overt incidents of religious prejudice have been rare, but the cultural divide bred mutual suspicion (p.188).

In 2008, Modesto chose to become the first public school district in the U.S. to require all high school students to take an extended and independent course in world religions. The class has not been the subject of lawsuits or complaints by parents and has gained acceptance among all of Modesto’s religious groups. Since no other public school district in the U.S. offered a course on world religions, Modesto had to create one. A well-functioning democracy ensures that all of its citizens feel included so that they trust one another and can contract freely in the marketplace and participate in politics to make collective decisions (Putnam, 2000). The rationale for interconnectivity between faiths allows for a process of understanding and communication. Gunn (2009) furthers this argument by stating that the role of religion in public schools is an incredibly controversial topic. Along with other debatable social issues, the subject offers various views on fairness in the school system, while sparking emotions and questions of allegiance.

As Smith (1990) explained, the battle over morals and character development conflicted during the start of the twentieth cen-

tury when Protestants and Catholics were debating which religions would hold a dominant space within the public education system (McClellan, 1999). This is the first evidence of religious duplicity in the public schools. The goal was never to insist that other religions were not of value, but to launch a proxy war by promoting only the Protestant viewpoint—a pattern which excluded other religions from school systems. Additionally, Benda and Corwyn (1997) found the practice were more prevalent in the southern states—a construct that endures.

Elifson, and Hadaway (1985) noted that during the twentieth century the primary means of implementing Protestant views was through the social studies programs within public schools. In 1916, The National Education Association (NEA)'s Committee on the Social Studies was founded to identify basic principles that should be taught in social studies courses. In addition, there are remnants from the 1916 Committee to Restructure Secondary Education (CRSE) that recognize the need for social control, the Protestant work ethic, and the significance of all work. Based on the Common Core State Standards Initiative [CCSSI] 2012), the concepts of citizenship are interchangeable with Protestant views.

According to Willingham (2010), during the 1970s, the Supreme Court mandated that the United States had to honor different faiths in its school systems. A number of measures were created to protect religious minorities in a Christian-based environment (1917-1962). However, during the 1980s and 1990s, the Court reversed some of its early decisions and decided that a more pluralistic approach was needed. In addition to creating confusion, stakeholders interpreted the Court's decisions as a pretext to portray religion in schools as only Protestant (Bijsterveld, 2000). The discussion of what was appropriate school curriculum generated forums for political leaders to question and reaffirm their own religious views.

A strong movement toward advancing conservative values (and curriculum) in schools began in the twenty-first century. In 2009, Texas created a number of measures that challenged many of the Supreme Court's 1970s rulings. Despite concentrated efforts to maintain the Protestant religion's influence in the school system, Horne (2003) concluded that a classroom where religious diversity is honored encourages children to develop and preserve their own cultural identities. According to Haynes and Thomas (2001), a cursory view of other religions can give students the impression that the religious life of humankind is inconsequential or trivial.

Within the framework for teaching world religions, The National Council for Social Studies (NCSS, 1998) advised that an understanding of other faiths is important in our increasingly connected, globalized society. Merryfield (2013) suggested that social studies students needed to develop an interest in people and cultures different from their own. Merryfield recommended using the Durham, Ferrari, and Santoro template (2008) outline: (a) the school's approach to religion is academic, not devotional; (b) the school may strive for student awareness of religions, but should not press for student acceptance of any religion; (c) the school may sponsor study about religion, but may not sponsor the practice of religion; (d) the school may expose students to a diversity of religious views, but may not impose any particular view; (e) the school may educate about all religions, but may not promote or denigrate any religion; and (f) the school may inform the student about various beliefs, but should not seek to conform him or her to any particular belief. A summary of their key guiding principles states: (a) teaching about religions and beliefs should be provided in ways that are fair and accurate and are based on sound scholar-

ship; (b) teachers should have a commitment to religious freedom that contributes to a school environment and that fosters protection of the rights of others; and (c) teaching about religions and beliefs is a major responsibility of schools, but the manner in which this teaching takes place should not undermine or ignore the role of families and religious or belief organizations. From the framework provided, we believe our pre-service teachers need to have the knowledge, attitude, and skills to teach about religions and beliefs in a fair and balanced manner. Further, they should possess subject-matter competence and the necessary pedagogical skills so that their interaction with students is sensitive and respectful. An illustration of this process is explained by Passe & Willox (2009):

Students encounter both the data of religious traditions and the theories employed to study them without any pretense of neutrality on the part of the teacher or of assigned sources. They are thereby invited to become active, self-reflexive subjects in the process of interpretation, ideally conscious of the limits of these or any practices of comparative inquiry and empowered to challenge the hegemony of any interpretive position – including, again ideally, those adopted for the construction of the courses themselves (p. 177).

Inquiry Learning

The goal for this project called for a social studies curriculum that included teaching world religions. Darling-Hammond (2010) outlined four aspects that are essential for creating citizens of the future: manage one's own work, solve problems, gather information, and create the desire and ability to design new products. We also examined Morris's (2003) work on intelligence to probe existential and metaphysical questions more deeply. The argument is that most scientists reject creationism based on scientific rationale; however, presenting this account should not dissuade students from their views. But it raises the question: What is faith and is faith based on science and reasoning? Morris provided a logical stance to allow students to preserve their respective faiths by encouraging them to make their own choices. In short, the decision about what to believe lies with the individual, which is a construct that we (methods professors) encourage our pre-service teachers to recognize.

Foundations of Faiths

The next aspect of preparation was by far the most challenging. By exposing the pre-service teachers to diverse views of multiple faiths by examining the philosophical theists, students would understand the basic terminology for exploring faith within an intellectual framework. Students considered the following from Noddings (2006):

The survival of maximally counterintuitive concepts in the imagistic-mode depends largely on the high-arousal property of various exercises-events such as revivals. Obviously, high arousal contributes to wide variation on how people interpret the concepts, and so we may find concepts upheld vigorously even though they are poorly understood (p. 259).

This view offers a framework of recognition for diverse views. A student may view himself or herself as a Protestant, but may not realize the main tenets of his or her faith. The question becomes how to mediate a framework for common objectives regarding different faiths? Diversity in education is not a new concept. We do not acknowledge a lack of recognition. Jones and Sheffield (2009) painted a picture of diverse groups and the role they play in communities:

They, too, make decisions about political issues and political candidates in the light of deeply held commitments, commitments that guide their thinking about career and educational paths for their children and the rules and guidelines they institute when children start dating (p. 4).

By examining early religious theorists such as Pascal and Kierkegaard, the pre-service teachers were provided with a language and a rationale for faiths' foundations. Within Kaestle and Foner's (1983) work, much of the philosophical foundation for American schools is built upon a Protestant framework; consequently, other groups in the school system may feel marginalized. In Noddings (2006) framework, she encourages students to study foundations of faith, myths, women's roles, hell or damnation, and morality. All of these social aspects offer a broad view of faith. We explore the value in discussing these themes within teaching about diverse faiths.

Myths

Myths can be explored in multiple contexts. A handful of pre-service teachers in my methods class see myths as children's stories; in addition, they viewed accounts from the Bible to be associated with myths. Some students operated under a framework that all events in the Bible were facts. When asked to draw accounts from other faiths, such as Hinduism, they referred to those events as myths. Within myths, we explored symbols, unnatural acts, miracles, and the lessons associated with the myths. In Noddings (2006) context:

First, of course, is the understanding that many religion stories are in fact myths and have tremendous power. But students should also be invited to consider what the main themes of some important myths are and how those have been interpreted. Are they for example, reasons to question some interpretations? Are there political as well as religious dimensions to the myths and their interpretations (p. 264)?

Myths can be used to present positive and negative aspects of human nature. They can also be used for subjugation or for liberation. Are there certain groups that benefit from selected myths today? Are there groups that are hurt by certain myths? The pre-service teachers were encouraged to explore these questions.

Gender Roles

A question of theoretical consequence is: How are we viewed within a particular faith? What are gender roles for women? Are women used as symbols of hope or foolishness? Noddings (2006) explained:

There are lovely accounts for both Jewish and Muslim women, and these, too, should provide material for discussion. Despite oppressive and continued lack of recognition, many women have found deep spiritual satisfaction without leaving patriarchal institutions (p. 270).

Within the project, students were encouraged to closely explore gender roles. What did they learn about women and how they were viewed and treated? Are women portrayed as heroic or passive? Are there conflicting messages regarding the role of women within the religion they were examining? Do women hold equal footing with male figures in the religion they explored?

Hell or Damnation

Within Smith's (2002) study, he interviewed high school students regarding their religious views. When the question of damnation was explored, he found that students had a fundamental

misunderstanding of the role of hell within a religious framework. What would qualify as hell within different religious views? What would constitute punishment or eternal damnation within a given faith being examined?

Morality/Spirituality

Aspects of self-interest, reason, kindness, citizenship, and other aspects associated with positive human nature were discussed within the tenets of different faiths.

Within Noddings's (2006) design:

Possibly the most important thing for students to learn is that many atheist, deists, and agnostics are good people—good defined as our conventional system or morality describes it. These are people who would not kill, steal, rape, inflict unnecessary pain, or ignore the suffering of their neighbors (p. 275).

Providing the students a context for fair treatment was paramount within the discussion. It was important to let the pre-service teachers know that their faith is respected and to open a door for dialogue regarding the inclusion of other faiths. Most fitting is Noddings' account, "But no child should be made to feel foolish or stupid—either for her failure in mathematic or her religious beliefs. Our democracy depends on bringing our children together, not alienating them" (p. 276).

Research Methods

Site Description

In order to evaluate the attitudes of future social studies teachers on the inclusion of global religions into the curriculum, the research team devised a case study that involved visiting a middle school in a rural city in the southeastern United States. This was accomplished through preparation, observation, reflections, and then break-out sessions. The study took place during the spring of 2012 and consisted of 24 (n=24) pre-service social studies middle grade teachers.

Classroom Preparation

In order to ensure that the pre-service teachers would be able to teach their religion units, the researchers provided a two-week course preparation on most major religions within the United States. Pre-service teachers were assigned to work together in groups of four and were required to create their own units (six lessons and an informal assessment).

Data Collection

To avoid atheoretical constructs, the researchers implemented the tenets of Yin. According to Yin (2003), creating a case study is built around the following principles: a study question; its propositions, if any; its unit (s) of analysis; the logic linking the data to the propositions; and finally, the criteria for interpreting the findings. One of the main mechanisms within qualitative research is to establish test validity. We constructed validity by establishing operational measures for the concept being studied (Appendix B); by having a pre-group discussion; completing the units (Appendix C); informal assessment (artifacts); and participating in a post-class group discussion to gather evidence. Internal validity was established by examining the causal relationship whereby certain conditions were shown to lead to other conditions, as distinguished by spurious relationships. We used member checking as another form of internal validity by having a colleague read the surveys and the manuscript of the pre- and post-course,

and by having the student members check their responses. One researcher also acted as the classroom professor who conducted the study. While the other member acted as a peer reviewer and provide her own assessments of the pre-service teachers responses to help triangulate the data being evaluated. Thus, offering various perspectives on pre-service teachers responses.

Member Checking

Member checking was performed to embody the authenticity as constructed by the participants (pre-service social studies teachers). Once we had completed the analysis of the data, the students were invited to the computer lab to review statements and to check for the accuracy and comprehensiveness of our findings. This included my notes, significant themes, and a copy of the in-class pre- and post-class group discussions. The students also received a copy of the peer researcher's notes and themes, as well as a copy of the session. The students were allowed to address any concerns raised by checking the data collection process.

The Lincoln and Guba (1985) member checking system is a proven method for establishing credibility. The researchers specify that this method gives the participants the opportunity to assess the adequacy of the data. If the students had concerns with the data collection, they had the right to remove their responses from the study. The students could also correct errors and address what they may have viewed as a wrong interpretation. They were also provided additional information about our thoughts on the data collection process. All this was to ensure that the participants had a sense that the data were accurate and reflected their views.

Data Analysis

The researchers analyzed the transcripts of all the discussions and units by blending the analysis methods (Yin, 2003). The stages of analysis are (a) unit analysis and (b) pre- and post- class discussions.

Results

This study was conducted with pre-service teachers who began their religion units by stating a perceived lack of connection between their interests and the assignment. They did not know why they were completing the units on different religions. During our initial class discussions, the pre-service teachers articulated their concerns about teaching different religious topics. Although the pre-service teachers agreed that students should learn about other religions, they expressed concerns about parental or community objections. Furthermore, they could not draw on any substantive religious teaching experiences. As one student said, "It is fine to discuss this in class, but how do we teach this to the children without offending them?" All of the pre-service teachers expressed anxiety about blending theory with practice. Many pre-service teachers observed that exploring theory in our methods class was contradictory to their future classroom environments.

To address their concerns, we discussed hypothetical children's reactions and how to respond to them. The student teachers also realized that there is potentially varied response to the assigned topics. Student A shared:

I have heard of teachers being fired for numerous superficial reasons. I do not want to start my first year by being fired. I would prefer to wait a few years and establish myself in the community before I explore controversial topics.

The pre-service teachers' trepidation was discussed in relation to their future students. Pre-service teachers repeatedly expressed

worries about their future students' ability to understand various religious concepts, and what they thought their students could or could not understand. Student E noted:

Some religious issues are controversial, like different gods, death, and how women are treated. It might be a developmental issue. Maybe middle school students are not ready for these types of discussions. These types of courses are usually reserved for college.

Another concern was that students were not developmentally ready for this type of dialogue. Student B said, "Right. They're not going to get it, so don't bother. They'll understand when they are older." Student F added:

In our rural areas, very few students are exposed to diverse religions. You know, they have been sheltered. Why would we try to destroy what the community has created for a reason?

Once again, the pre-service teachers referenced future student readiness as a chief barrier during our initial discussion. Student Y offered another interpretation of the anticipated course in her response:

I am not originally from here; (the South). I grew up in a very diverse community in Chicago. This type of avoidance must be a southern thing. You guys keep saying the kids aren't ready. Have you talked to the kids? Are you the ones who are afraid? I'm a Christian; I know I'm not required to say it, but I have Muslims friends, and we talk about our differences all the time. We always have friendly exchanges. I am not a Muslim, but I have a better understanding of the religion.

Because pre-service teachers often have limited involvement with children, these types of discussions are thoughtful and allow for realistic dialogue concerning our teaching. Student G added:

I feel that discussing other people's faith is not as effective as having a person of that faith discussing it. I am not sure if I can present Buddhism in an unbiased way. I'm a Christian, and I just don't believe in that stuff. It might be better for me to bring in an expert on Buddhism. I would be upset if a student went home and told their parents they wanted to be Buddhist after my class.

Articulated frustrations included future students' concerns, lack of experience with diverse religions, and fears of their own religion being maligned.

When the pre-service teachers were asked to compare characteristics of their religion to another, we discussed how to teach students of various faiths. Student D affirmed:

If I am teaching a Muslim student, he needs to understand that I have no concern with him, but the people who attacked us on 9/11 were Muslims. That is a fact. I would share with him my concerns about a religion that would encourage people to act in such a way.

Student Y recounted:

Those people were fanatic monsters. We have fanatics, too. I think we need to separate the religion from the individual who commits harmful acts. I think those people could use anything as a justification to hurt people. It is not the religion; it is the people misusing or misinterpreting the religion.

Student S:

This type of teaching seems to help. You said that we select for ourselves what to believe. Our students will do the same. I think we have to respect their right to choose their faith. I also think you (the professor) have to respect our right to disagree with their decision.

Student B:

Aren't we getting into a place where everyone is right? That is what it seems like to me. Where do we stop? Do I have to accept the fact that I think other religions are misguided? Do I have to teach those students that follow a misguided faith? Yes. Does it matter? No. My job is to teach the standards, not to worry about my students' faith.

When the discussion of hell was introduced, the pre-service teachers gladly shared that in order to enter heaven, one must believe in God. The professor then asked, "If Hitler believed in God, would he not go to heaven? Would an agnostic who tirelessly fought for human rights and claimed no wealth for himself and was living a Christian lifestyle but did not believe in God, be consigned to hell?" The overwhelming response from the pre-service teachers was yes (N=20). When I asked if their students who did not share their faith would be subjected to hell as our hypothetical example, the answers were mixed. Over half of the pre-service teachers refused to answer the question. Those who did answer (N=8) provided a general response. Student B replied, "That is for God to decide."

The discussion reflected real concerns from the pre-service teachers about teaching students of diverse religions. The pre-interviews offered us a chance to examine the pre-service teachers' perceptions of teaching the religion units. We were also able to examine the methodology that the students would utilize.

Pre-service Teacher's Unit Analysis

Heuristically, the units urged pre-service teachers to reflect on their pedagogical approaches. After the week-long religion units were completed in our rural middle school location, we returned to the classroom to discuss our experiences. Several students commented that their responses would have been more complete if they had been allowed to teach a unit on a topic of their selection. Student K felt more comfortable teaching about geographic features than engaging in discussion about multiple religions—even though examining religions is required within the geography standards. Student Y noted:

I was able to separate the unit from my faith. I created a unit on Buddhism. I had no issue creating lessons to help examine the history of the religion and its founders. I created assessments that were factually based and critical thinking assignments that were also grade appropriate. I see myself as having three responsibilities. My first responsibility is to my Lord and Savior, my second is to my family, and third is my work. I had no issue maintaining my faith and teaching about another religion. I think if it had been expressed earlier that this assignment was not designed to question our faith, I think more students would have been more open to it initially.

Student R observed:

It was interesting to me that all of us did know enough to build our units and present them in class. We knew that some religions overlapped and some were completely different, and they related to differences, and how we still have differences based on our religions. This was not as controversial as I had originally thought it would be.

The concerns of pre-service teachers around knowledge base and the limitations of their thinking abilities were absent from the units. Instead, many participants suggested the possibility of building similar units on topics that they may not be as familiar with. Student M explained:

My group was assigned Christianity. I thought this would be fairly easy for me, as a Christian, but the more research I conducted, I found that I had a number of ill-conceived ideas about my own faith. The historical methods that we were required to use in class really helped me to better understand my faith. I feel like I can replicate what I did for myself and use it to teach about other religions.

Additionally, positive feelings from the unit analysis were discussed. This framework established an inquiry approach to learning that would be used throughout the semester. However, several groups failed to explain how ideas such as religious tolerance, multiple perspective, and inquiry were added into their units. The chance to work with classmates was important for self-reflection and collaboration. By comparing units with their peers, they came to appreciate the pedagogical approaches of examining other religions. From our unit analysis, it became clear that student background was a determining factor vis à vis their openness to teach about other religions. As student G related:

Each student will have a different understanding of religion based on his or her background. Some of us have more exposure to different faiths. It seems that the people who have traveled more are more open to teaching about other religions.

Almost all of the pre-service teachers (N=21) demonstrated a willingness to use an inquiry-based approach and saw the unit as a beneficial exercise.

Post-Project Discussion

In many ways, the project was structured and imposed various limitations on participants' inquiries. For example, they were limited in the nature and number of critical thinking questions to ask; the kind of materials they could use; and even the procedures they would undertake. The goal was to create an inquiry experience for the pre-service teachers. The primary objective was not to have the pre-service teachers teach about another religion but to provide them with the skills necessary to teach in a critical and reflective manner.

The researchers found that the student had a number of advantages. The pre-service teachers eventually found that they could teach about diverse religions without compromising their own religious views (N=24). In addition, they were able to select appropriate questions and materials for their students. One concern of the project was the dissonance between the pre-service teachers' views and those of their future students. The pre-service teachers (N=18) tended to project their views onto their future students. Having the pre-service teachers take ownership of their discomfort was a recurring intention.

It is the researchers' stance that the project described here played a role in the pre-service teachers' professional development. Students were required to think and to be reflective. The pre-service teachers were taught to follow standardized models and to observe their own conclusions about their instruction implementation. As student S articulated:

I would be interested to see how students from urban areas would approach this assignment. Obviously from my lack of experience in traveling, I could not speak to the experiences a well-traveled person would use to teach this subject matter.

For this student and others, the lack of exposure to other cultures (N=20) was a concern. Many students expressed that they have not traveled outside of their native state. A majority of students have stayed in a twenty-mile radius for most of their lives. This assignment caused them to

compare their views with those who have traveled more extensively. The framework allowed them to build inquiry units and skills for addressing diverse cultures.

Conclusions and Implications

Teachers' personal beliefs can act as barriers once they are placed in a classroom (Tabachnick & Zeichner, 1991). Without reflection, teacher candidates may rely on their assumed beliefs which further contributes to their *bistlexia*. New models need to be implemented—starting with a training model that stresses the transmission of knowledge and improvement of content-based teaching skills—to a model of evolving and reflective self-understanding. Teacher candidates need to reflect on how personal understanding affects their teaching, beliefs about students, and their roles in a larger community. In a sense, our institution requires students to analyze school contexts, but in isolation of the political and social ideologies that inform school constructs. Without critical analysis, future teachers may not have the tools to think about how to equitably teach all learners. Villegas (2007) said, “Dispositions are tendencies for individuals to act in a particular manner under particular circumstances, based on their beliefs, a pattern of behavior that is predictive of future actions” (p. 373). The students' responses to the in-class questions showed that the majority can implement the inquiry approach effectively. However, their lack of exposure to diverse cultures is troubling. As Justice (2007) illustrates:

The conclusion to be drawn from these definitional complexities is not that a cut-and-dried use of the term religion must be found but rather that discourse about religion is very difficult and requires that on any given occasion we be aware of the issues that are being raised and clear about how such terms are being used (p. 263).

This study is an attempt to foster the agency and empowerment of all teachers. According to Mirra and Morrell (2011), teachers should create a new paradigm where they engage with the local communities, become producers of knowledge, and work collectively with their students. We encourage all teachers to be critical agents. The researchers used a small-scale study to explore what might promote inquiry and limit bias in teaching. Our experience suggests that it can be done by engaging pre-service teachers in a task that challenges their assumptions about teaching while utilizing a framework that expands their current knowledge. We allowed them the opportunity to expand their views and the necessary skills to achieve their educational objectives.

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Appendix A

Breakdown of the Major Religions in the United States

Religions	Percentage
Main Category Christians	78.4%
Subcategories of Christian Faiths	
Catholics	23.9%
Protestants	51.3%
Other religions	
Jews	1.7%
Hindus	0.4
Buddhists	0.7
Muslims	0.6
Native American spiritual traditions	0.3
Unaffiliated	
Agnostics	2.4%
Atheists	1.6%

Appendix B

In Class Discussion Questions

Following questions were included in the group interviews:

Pre Assignment Discussion Questions

General Background Information

1. Where were you born? Did you grow up in a rural or urban area?
2. How old are you?
3. Have you studied other religions before?
 - a) If so, please list any previous experiences.
 - b) If asked, would you feel comfortable teaching about other religions? Talk about one religion you are familiar with.
4. Which religion do you feel most comfortable teaching?
5. Do you have any friends or family members who practice a religion different from your own? Who? Tell me about each one.
6. What are the benefits of studying other religions?

7. Are there any drawbacks to studying other religions? If so, could you please describe them?

8. Please compare and contrast your religion's norms with another religion's norms.

Post Assignment Discussion Questions

9. When you think about teaching about other religions in middle school, what images come to mind?

10. Looking back in retrospect during high school, what religious topics were covered? Which was most important and why? Which was the least important and why?

11. In your opinion, please describe three middle school classroom activities related to learning about diverse religions? As you describe the activities, talk about, how they helped you better understand religion, if possible? If yes, how? If not, why not?

12. If hired to teach a world's religion course, would you feel comfortable teaching that course?

- (a) Which approaches would you use in your teaching?
- (b) What additional support would you need?

Appendix C

Framework for the Units

