

Lessons Learned from Teaching Teachers how to Teach about World Religions

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Abstract. This quasi-experimental comparative case study compared 22 elementary pre-service teachers' (PSTs') 7th-grade lessons on world religions to the lessons developed and taught by a cohort of 26 PSTs. The PSTs from Cohort 1 received no instruction or course readings related to teaching about world religions; whereas, the PSTs from Cohort 2 were assigned six articles to read and spent one hour of in-class time learning about teaching world religions. Lesson plans, teaching observations, focus group interviews, and reflection journals served as data sources, which were coded for core themes. Classical content analysis was used to tabulate incidents of PST behaviors related to the core themes. PSTs from Cohort 1 exhibited greater lack of knowledge and awareness of world religious, used biased language, lacked solemnity and sensitivity, made more assumptions and generalizations, and even exhibited outright promotion of Christianity. This study suggests that elementary social studies teacher educators, by spending only an hour of methods class time on the topic, can help their PSTs to avoid common missteps in their teaching about world religions.

Keywords: World Religions; Teacher Education; Field Experiences; Elementary Education

1. Introduction

"Diversities relevant for pedagogical missions transcend demographic traits and include less discernible, but equally consequential, differences in ideological perspectives, social class, values, religious beliefs, and the like" (Tienda, 2013, p. 471)

Nearly all states include world religions in their social studies standards, typically at the upper elementary or middle-school level (Douglas, 2000). Recently, a collaboration of 15 professional organizations working on national social studies standards released *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History* (www.socialstudies.org/c3). The C3 Framework is part of the Common

Core Standards movement, which despite ongoing controversy, has been adopted by more than 40 states. Unlike previous national and state curriculum frameworks, the C3 Framework does not specify the teaching of world religions, but neither does it specify the teaching of any topics, including particular wars or time periods.

Instead,

The C3 Framework is centered on an Inquiry Arc. By focusing on inquiry, the framework emphasizes the disciplinary concepts and practices that support students as they develop the capacity to know, analyze, explain, and argue about interdisciplinary challenges in our social world. (p. 6)

Throughout the C3 Framework, world religions is included in suggested examples for teaching boundaries and conflict, diffusion, socializing agents, and limits of government. Understanding world religions is integral to the rise in globalization and is still very much a necessary element of schools' social studies curricula. "One's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion" (*School District of Abington Township, PA v. Schemp, 1963*).

2. Purpose of the Study

Globalization, curricular pressures, and general consensus compel teachers to teach students about world religions (Anderson, 2004; Passe & Wilcox, 2009). Consequently, if learning about world religions helps to foster tolerant and knowledgeable students who can reason intellectually about world events, our schools must have teachers who are competent at teaching world religions (Wexler, 2002). Furthermore, if we desire effective classroom teachers of world religions, we must adequately prepare new teachers for the task.

Despite the consensus among social studies educators that world religion should have a place in the curriculum, there is little published research on how teachers actually approach the topic and even less research on how PSTs learn about teaching world religions. A need exists to learn more about how emerging teachers plan for and deliver lessons on world religions. What's more, it is imperative that teacher educators better understand how to prepare teachers for a curriculum and society that demands young people who comprehend the history of world religions and their role in the world today.

This study is a follow-up to a previous study (Anderson, Cook, & Mathys, 2013) that investigated how 22 elementary pre-service teachers (PSTs) at a mid-sized Midwestern public university designed and taught lessons on world religions to 7th-grade students. This paper compares those PSTs with a subsequent PST cohort whose elementary social studies methods course addressed the findings from the initial study. In contrast to the first cohort, the 26 PSTs in Cohort 2 were provided with specific readings and guidance on how to teach about world religions. This

study sought to determine if designating a nominal amount of time during a methods course specifically toward addressing the teaching of world religions would impact the PSTs' Christian bias, lack of solemnity, and preparedness for student questions and comments.

3. Teaching About Religion

Religion's place in public schools has been both contested and established. Issues like school prayer, teachers' and students' expression of their religious beliefs, religious artwork and signage, as well as preferential treatment of student religious organizations are just some of the disputes related to the Establishment Clause, which requires separation between church and state. On the other hand, the courts, as well as professional education organizations, have long maintained that teaching about religion should be part of the standard public education curriculum.

Institutions serve a vital role in society, and religion is arguably the most influential institution in history. The National Council for the Social Studies (2009) recommended that schools teach students how institutions were formed, extended, governed, and changed over time. Guidelines for teaching about religion issued in 1995 by the US Secretary of Education noted that the institution of religion may be studied from historical, comparative, literary, and artistic perspectives. Passe and Willox (2009) recommended that social studies teachers take an anthropological approach to teaching about world religions, with an emphasis on comparative religion in order to promote global harmony and economic progress. Others have suggested that religion can be used as a springboard for teaching about past indiscretions such as nationalism, imperialism, and colonialism (Risinger, 1993).

Despite the potential for study of world religions to provide students with insight into our cultural differences and common values, the topic receives scant coverage in US classrooms. One reason is that social studies has become marginalized over the past decade due to increased emphasis on mathematics and English-Language Arts (Anderson, Cook, & Mathys, 2014; Boyle-Baise, Hsu, Johnson, Sierrere, & Stewart, 2008; Burroughs, Groce, & Webeck, 2005; Center on Education Policy, 2008; Good et al., 2010; Leming, Ellington, & Schug, 2006a, 2006b; Lintner, 2006; Rock et al., 2006). More specifically, mandatory testing in math and ELA has implored teachers in states without standardized tests in social studies to spend substantially less time on social studies instruction (Au, 2009; Fitchett & Heafner, 2010; Heafner, Lipscomb, & Rock, 2006; Wills, 2007).

Another reason why so many teachers choose to avoid the subject is simply that teaching about religion is hard. Teachers are expected to remain neutral and unbiased, while also tolerating their students' varied religious views, including students' right to express their religious beliefs in their writing, art, and other school work (Black, 2003). Teaching about religion must be academic and in no way

devotional, yet a daily glance at the news will reveal tensions between teachers' free-exercise claims and violations of the Establishment Clause. From teaching Intelligent Design in science classes to teaching the Bible as historical fact, teachers commonly struggle to balance personal ideologies with constitutional obligations (Schaeffer & Minberg, 2000).

Researchers have uncovered a number of missteps teachers make in teaching about religion, though separating missteps caused by lack of teacher knowledge from those stemming from teacher bias is not easy (Anderson et al., 2013). Ample research suggests teachers' knowledge of religions is insufficient (Anderson et al., 2014; Oldendorf & Green, 2005; Prothero, 2007; Ribak-Rosenthal & Kane, 1999; Subedi, 2006; Waggoner, 2013). Lack of knowledge not only keeps teachers from teaching the subject, it often leads to improper or insensitive treatment of world religions. Religious illiteracy is not only widespread, it "fuels prejudice and antagonism" (Moore, 2010, p. i).

Often teachers' biggest mistakes in teaching about religion come not from acute classroom incidents but rather from grand curricular oversights where teachers are left with such limited time to teach about each world religion that students gain only ephemeral perspectives on each religion replete with stereotypes, oversimplifications, and the impression that religions are ancient relics (Douglass, 2002). What's more, teachers often exhibit syncretism, or the combining of multiple religious beliefs and practices, often with the intent of promoting inclusion (Passe & Wilcox, 2009). Despite their best intentions to show students that many of them share similar existential and philosophical beliefs, teachers should focus on awareness of others' religions, though not necessarily acceptance (Douglass, 2002).

4. Teaching How to Teach About World Religions

Even though world religions is well-established in state and national standards for social studies, teachers tend to avoid the topic (Black, 2003; Evans, 2007, 2008; Graves, Hynes, & Hughes, 2010; Oldendorf & Green, 2005; Passe & Wilcox, 2009; Wexler, 2002; Zam & Stone, 2006). PSTs' lack attention to world religions is attributed to their lack of knowledge (Ayers & Reid, 2005), as well as to their lack of preparation from their university coursework (Douglas, 2001). Overall, it appears as though elementary and middle school teachers are ill-equipped to teach about world religions (Passe, & Wilcox, 2009).

The type and number of methods courses offered by teacher education programs vary widely, nearly all of which merely scratch the surface of what teacher educators would like to cover as they help to prepare future teachers. Social studies methods instructors, like teacher educators in other disciplines, lack the desired time to teach their curriculum thoroughly. Arguably, social studies methods courses have even more relative scarcity of time compared with other content areas since "social studies" encompasses four pillars: history, geography, civics, and economics. Consequently, it is likely that PSTs will not receive specific instruction on teaching

world religions during their methods courses. What's more, the vast majority (94% of 342) of social studies teacher educators reported that they should not include the topic of teaching about world religions in their social studies methods courses (Zam & Stone, 2006). In short, teachers are not likely to be taught how to teach world religions during their teacher education nor are they likely to see colleagues teaching world religions effectively, if at all, throughout their careers.

5. Methods

5.1 *Background of the Field Experience*

The PSTs in this study were in their final semester prior to student teaching. As part of a field-intensive undergraduate cohort model, the PSTs were required to work in teams to create and deliver lessons to classrooms of public 7th-grade students over a four-day period. Each PST was the lead teacher for at least one lesson in each subject. This study focused on the PSTs' social studies lessons.

As this field experience has become enculturated for both our teacher education program and our partner middle school over the past several years, the cooperating teachers have identified the specific Grade-Level Content Expectations, or standards, they want the PSTs to teach each semester. For each Fall semester over the past few years, the cooperating teachers have assigned our PSTs to teach three (of the 83 total) standards related to world religions, which fall under the following theme: "Explain how world religions or belief systems of Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism and Islam grew and their significance" (http://michigan.gov/documents/mde/SSGLCE_218368_7.pdf (p. 62). Incidentally, conversations with the cooperating teachers have revealed that they have asked the PSTs to teach those particular content standards because they would rather not teach world religions themselves.

5.2 *Comparing Cohort 1 and Cohort 2*

This quasi-experimental comparative case study compared how two cohorts of PSTs taught lessons on world religions. The cohorts, who participated in the field experience in successive semesters, were demographically similar; and, with the exception of instruction on teaching world religions, both cohorts learned the same curriculum during the course.

The comparative case study allowed us to examine the PSTs in an authentic context, using multiple forms of data to increase the breadth and depth of our understanding (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994). By observing developing teachers practice their craft of whole-classroom teaching and by interviewing them about their experiences afterward, we were able to gain thorough and holistic insights. Case studies allow for a detailed and contextual analysis (Cohen, Manion,

& Morrison, 2011). When teaching can be studied in authentic classroom contexts, richer description and analyses are possible (Yin, 1994).

As described in an early paper (Anderson et al., 2013) on the lesson planning, teaching actions, and reflections of the 22 PSTs from Cohort 1, very little time or direction was given to the PSTs during their social studies methods course in order to help them teach world religions to 7th-grade students. There several reasons why course time was not designated to preparing PSTs for the task. In a grand sense, the three-credit elementary social studies methods course leaves too little time to address most social studies topics PSTs will teach when they become in-service teachers. Second, the methods course contains several field experiences, so time spent in preparation for those episodes would come at a cost of having to reduce the number of field experiences. Third, the course is designed to focus on teaching K-8 social studies generally, integrating the four pillars of history, economics, geography, and civics. Finally, it is important to note that the course is a methods course, not a content course. Accordingly, course concepts include pedagogical skills such as writing objectives, differentiating, scaffolding, higher-order questioning, and assessment.

After studying how the Cohort 1 PSTs planned, delivered, assessed, and reflected on their world religions lessons, we wanted to see if providing another Cohort's PSTs with some guidance about teaching world religions might reduce their number of missteps. Time constraints were still a barrier, so we limited Cohort 2's instruction about the teaching of world religions to one hour of class time and one hour of assigned outside-of-class reading.

First, the 26 PSTs from Cohort 2 (12 and 14 PSTs per section) were assigned to spend 60 minutes reading from a list of six articles about teaching world religions (see Appendix 1 for links to the six articles). The PSTs were then asked to come to next week's class with three "take-aways" and one question derived from reading the articles. During the following week's class, 20 minutes were allocated to PSTs working in groups of 3-4 to share their take-aways and questions. Next, 10 minutes were allocated for whole-class discussion. Finally, we spent approximately 30 minutes going through a PowerPoint presentation of our initial study, complete with findings and recommendations.

5.3 Data

For Cohort 1 we collected an exorbitant amount of data, including pre- and post-interviews of the PSTs' lesson-plans, one or more lesson observations of each PST, their students' written work, their reflection papers, and post-teaching focus-group discussions.

For Cohort 2, we (in conjunction with three other faculty members) observed each PST teach at least one social studies lesson. Each observer was given a list of the common errors made by the PSTs from Cohort 1 (see Table 1). Observers were

directed foremost to look for incidents of the PSTs making similar errors and to document those instances on a form provided. Additionally, we lead post-lesson focus group interviews with the PSTs, and we analyzed their required reflection papers.

Our primary data source consisted of our observations of the PSTs' lessons, and we used a phenomenological approach to situate the researchers as participant observers (Moustakas, 1994). Because the observers were themselves experienced teachers and certainly harbored their own personal religious beliefs in some form, we used note taking, member checks, and iterative conversations to bracket our assumptions and to challenge each other about our suppositions and interpretations (Cresswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009).

The common missteps identified from the previous study served as first-cycle codes from which we sought to develop further conceptual understanding through second-cycle coding methods (Saldana, 2009). Using the core themes from the initial study, we tabulated the frequency of PST incidents of each theme using classical content analysis (Titscher et al., 2000). Next, we associated each corresponding incident with its text excerpt. Finally, we used elaborative coding to refine and expand on our preconceived constructs until all of the PSTs' actions, comments, and reflections were represented a theme or subtheme (Auerbarch & Silverstein, 2003).

6. Results

Through this study we sought to determine if PSTs who received a small amount of specific instruction and readings about teaching world religions exhibited fewer mistakes in their lessons when compared with a previous cohort of PSTs who received no specific instruction on teaching world religions. A previous study (Anderson et al., 2013) found that PSTs from Cohort 1 used biased language, made assumptions and generalizations, and lacked solemnity and sensitivity. Furthermore, those PSTs failed to explain to their students that the topic of religion stemmed from mandated state content standards. Students in Cohort 2, however, portrayed far fewer of the behaviors of their predecessors (see Table 1).

Table 1. Incidents of Religious Insensitivity

Incident:	Fall 2012	Fall 2013
Language Subtleties	25	6
Assumptions	10	1
Generalizing	10	2
Lack of Solemnity	8	1
Lack of Awareness/Sensitivity	3	0
Proselytizing	2	0

6.1 *Language Subtleties*

The most common incidents of religious awareness for Cohort 1 were the most subtle. We counted 25 incidents of PSTs making slight, yet distinct verbal differences between how they referred to Christians and how they referred to non-Christians. The PSTs regularly prefaced their references to religious adherents with “Followers of . . .” for non-Christians but did not for Christians. For example, one PST said, “Followers of Judaism use a religious text called the Torah.” That same PST went on to say, “Christians have the Bible.”

During the second cohort’s lessons, however, we observed only 6 incidents of PSTs referring to Christians differently from non-Christians. The PSTs regularly used the plural proper names such “Hindus” and “Buddhists”. Interestingly, all six of the incidents from Cohort 2 under this category involved PSTs’ failure to use the term, “Jews” when they referred to other religious adherents accordingly. For example, in one lesson on religious symbols, a PST asked, “Who can tell me what the Hindu symbol is called that represents the three worlds, the three major gods, and the three scriptures?” Later in the lesson, the PST asked, “Who can tell me one of the main symbols of Judaism?”

During post-teaching debriefing sessions, the PSTs commented on how maintaining language consistency was difficult for them. One PST commented, “I remember from the PowerPoint in class about how last year’s group only used “Christians” but not the other religions’ regular names, and I wanted to make sure I didn’t do that, but it was hard.” One PST addressed specifically her discomfort over using, ‘Jews’: “I can’t really explain it, but I have such a hard time saying ‘Jews’.”

6.2 *Outright Assumptions*

Cohort 1 made a number of presumptive statements related to students’ knowledge of Christianity. For example, PSTs made statements like, “You guys know a lot about Christianity, right?” and, “You already know a lot about this.” Our observations of Cohort 2 revealed only one such incident, a PST who, when going over a timeline of the six religions, stated, “Well this one will be easy for you: When did Christianity begin?”

Related to this theme was the prevalence of 7th-grade students who made Christian-centric comments and the PSTs’ general disregard of those comments. For example, during the first year, one PST was showing a short online video about the diffusion of religion when several students cheered as the geographic footprint of Christianity grew. In her post interview, the PST recognized the students’ bias but dismissed their actions as normal, stating, “It’s just what they know.” In several other instances with Cohort 1, we observed students dominating class discussion with information about Christianity while the PSTs did not limit their comments, which clearly created a Christian-dominant atmosphere. During year 2, students still attempted to share information and biblical stories, but the PSTs were, for the most part, willing and able to limit conversation and to keep student comments directly

on topic. During a focus group interview with PSTs from Cohort 2, one PST remarked, “I am glad we learned how to stop kids from rambling, and not just because of talking so much about Christianity, but in general. That’s a good skill to use when kids ramble about anything.”

6.3 Generalizing

PSTs lack content knowledge about world religions (Anderson et al., 2013, 2014; Ennis, 1994; Oldendorf & Green, 2005; Subedi, 2006). Associated with that lack of knowledge is a corresponding lack of nuance, which often presents through stereotyping and generalization. Because many PSTs know little about religions other than Christianity, they often make generalized statements about followers of other religions. For example, at least 10 times a PST from Cohort 1 made blanket statements like, “Buddhists meditate” and “Followers of Hinduism don’t eat meat.”

Cohort 2 learned that fewer than 50% of Hindus are vegetarians and that many Buddhists do not meditate daily, just like many Christians do not pray daily. Accordingly, we witnessed PSTs making comments such as, “Meditation is a central component of Buddhism”, and “Hinduism teaches compassion for animals, which is one reason why a lot of Hindus don’t eat meat.” Likewise, after explaining how she tried to avoid using the collective pronoun “they”, one PST commented, “I remembered how we read about trying not to portray that all people of a particular religion are the same. Just like how there are so many different types of Christians, there are that many different types of Hindus and Muslims.”

6.4 Lack of seriousness and solemnity

Despite the prioritization of the National Council for the Social Studies principles for “powerful and purposeful teaching” into their social studies methods courses, PSTs who want to avoid the boring recall-based teaching for which social studies is known, often take a “food, festivals, and fun” approach to their social studies teaching (NCSS, 2009). We observed eight times during Cohort 1 where PSTs “trivialized world religions into a study of surviving rituals, customs, and dress, and cookery” (Douglas, 2001, p. 10).

With the best intent, eight PSTs used skits and simulations in attempt to engage students with the topic they were teaching. For example, one PST had her students make paper boats that they connected to a slanted string to simulate the Buddhist procession of Boun Awk Phansa, during which celebrants send lighted and decorated banana ornaments down rivers to pay respect and to ask for blessing. In another instance, a PST lead the class in a skit of the Islamic Festival of Sacrifice, Eid al-Adha, during which the students simulated the sacrifice of a cow and the distribution of 1/3 of its meat to friends and family and 1/3 of the meat to the poor.

Those PSTs sought to make their teaching enjoyable for their students, but as a PST from Cohort 2 remarked after reading an assigned article on teaching about world religions, “None of us would ever consider doing skits on some Christian event like

communion or Jesus rising from the dead, so we shouldn't act out scenes from other religions either." We categorized one Cohort 2 PST's lesson as lacking seriousness and solemnity because she led the students in a meditation exercise during which the students were acting quite silly. Although the PST mentioned how Buddhism teaches that meditation is part of the path toward Enlightenment, she never corrected the students' flippant behaviors or explained how meditation is a solemn spiritual practice.

On the other hand, four of the eight PSTs who taught lessons on Hinduism led students in yoga simulations, which we did not place under this theme. There has been much debate nationally lately about whether yoga is considered an unconstitutional religious ritual when teachers lead their students in yoga exercises, either through physical education classes or in the regular classrooms. The PSTs we observed using yoga as part of their lessons simply used yoga as "energizers" and transitional activities, which they did not connect to the Hindu religion, other than to make a brief statement that yoga originated in ancient India and has roots in some early branches of Hinduism and Buddhism.

6.5 Lack of Awareness and Sensitivity

Another byproduct of the PSTs' lack of knowledge of world religions, as noted above, were the PSTs' lack of awareness of some fundamental customs. Two PSTs from Cohort 1 cluelessly included pictures of Muhammad in their PowerPoint and Prezi presentations on Islam. When this was pointed out to each PST during their post-lesson conference, neither one had any awareness that many Muslims consider the visual representation of Muhammad to be a violation of Islamic law. In another instance from Cohort 1, a PST made a glib comment about Jewish dietary regulations, stating:

In the Jewish religion many people still follow these old rules about food. Their leaders have determined that certain foods based on what they contain or how they're made are called, 'kosher'. They foods aren't really any different than regular food, but they follow their religious teachings.

None of the observations of Cohort 2 revealed any such example of a lack of awareness or sensitivity.

6.6 Blatant proselytizing

In two instances during Cohort 1, we witnessed PST exhibit a Christian bias that extended beyond mere ignorance and subtlety. One PST, who told us in his post-conference that he taught Sunday School at a Protestant church, admitted that his lesson on Christianity was "a little be on the preachy side." At one point, while the students were taking notes on his lecture, he told them, "Christianity was founded when Jesus died for your sins". Another PST's lesson extended beyond teaching about Christianity into teaching how Christianity might improve students' lives. He had students search through local newspapers to locate and explain how the Ten Commandments shaped the functioning of our civil society. It might be worth

noting that both PSTs who blatantly promoted Christianity in their lessons were male, even though only 6 of the 43 PSTs were male.

6.7 State Content Standards

As we mentioned earlier, most states, including Michigan, have state-level social studies content standards that explicitly include teaching about world religions. Even though all the PSTs derived their specific lesson objectives from Michigan's Grade-Level Content Expectations, none of the PSTs from Cohort 1 shared the state standards with their students. Consequently, students questioned the PSTs about the lessons, at times challenging the PSTs about the legality and appropriateness of their lessons. For example, one PST remarked, "Several kids asked if it was legal for us to be teaching religion in school." Several PSTs admitted that they did not handle it well when confronted by students. One PST said, "I didn't really know what to say. I just told them that this is what our professors told us to teach."

Three PSTs noted that the atheist students were the most vocal about their lessons.

One PST commented:

This one kid said, 'I don't believe in god and don't really want you trying to teach me religion', so I just told them, 'We aren't preaching to you or trying to get you to convert to any religion. We're just trying to expose you to life outside of (this city)'.

During their social studies methods course in the lead up to the field experience, Cohort 2 PSTs learned about the critical comments from students during Cohort 1's experience, and they were advised to post the Grade-Level Content Expectations they would be teaching in each subject throughout the week. Only one PST from Cohort reported any negative comments from a student, to which she told the student, "Look up at the sheets we posted. The State says we have to teach about this."

7. Limitations

There are a number of limitations of this study. Foremost are the threats to reliability and construct validity due to the number of different observers of the PSTs' lessons. We do not know if each observer accurately documented the PSTs' words and actions. In addition, we lack assurance that two or more observers would have documented the same phenomena. Though we did not conduct interrater reliability checks, there were a few instances when two or more observers sat in on the same lessons, which allowed for discussion leading to informal interrater agreement. Furthermore, because we compared the lessons and teaching actions of two different cohorts of PSTs who taught different 7th-grade students, we do not know the extent to which other variables impacted the phenomena. Certainly, we intend for this study to be descriptive but not generalizable.

8. Discussion and Conclusion

Omitting study about religions gives students the impression that religions have not been, and are not now, part of the human experiences. Religions have influenced the behavior of both individuals and nations, and have inspired some of the world's most beautiful art, architecture, literature, and music (<http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/religion>).

Learning about each other's religious beliefs and orientations deepens our respect for and understanding of one another (Douglass, 2002).

Yet, despite what is to be gained from studying how religions originated, grew, and influenced society, teachers regularly avoid the subject (Ayers & Reid, 2005; Glanzer, 1998; Marty & Moore, 2000; Rogers, 2011; Wright, 1999; Zam & Stone, 2006). Without specific instructions or readings on teaching world religions, the PSTs in our study exhibited their lack of knowledge and awareness of world religions in several ways from biased language, lack of solemnity and sensitivity, assumption-making and generalizing, and even some instances of overt promotion of Christianity. Because there is little research on how teachers actually teach world religions in their classrooms and even less on how PSTs construct and realize lessons about world religions, this study holds potential to help teacher educators prepare future teachers for a vital topic that is found in nearly all state's social studies content standards.

Our previous research (Anderson et al., 2013) revealed that elementary PSTs, who were predominately Christian, exhibited a number of biased actions in their teaching of world religions as a result of their lack of lack of world religions and their lack of awareness of how their personal beliefs and culture might bias their teaching. Recognizing that teachers lack knowledge of world religions and tend to avoid teaching the subject is an essential step, but does not solve the problem, however.

Complicating the issue is teacher education programs' avoidance of teaching future teachers how to teach about world religions (Zam & Stone, 2006). We have much to learn about why teacher educators avoid preparing their PSTs to teaching world religions, even though many of PSTs will get teaching positions that include social studies content standards about world religions. Certainly, one reason includes elementary social studies teacher educators' daunting task of preparing PSTs to teach history, geography, civics, and economics for grades kindergarten through 8th (Adler, 1991). Methods instructors teach pedagogical knowledge, content knowledge, and pedagogical-content knowledge (Grossman, Wilson, & Shulman, 1989; Gudmundsdottir & Shulman, 1987). Consequently, methods instructors have time only for a small fraction of the subject-area content and methods that the PSTs will be certified to teach. In this study, a minimal amount of course time spent on general advice and pitfalls to avoid related to teaching world religions had a notable impact on the amount of insensitive and biased comments and actions in teachers' lessons. Further research should be conducted with other teacher education programs.

Teaching about world religions is not easy. Teachers should present historical and contemporary information in a way that is accessible to adolescent learners without oversimplifying (Norton, 2001). While most students come to school with some construction of religious teachings, comparisons between different religions and their prophets and leaders is unfeasible and ill-advised (Douglass, 2001). What's more, due to the deep personal connection between religions and students, teachers should avoid simulations and role-playing activities when teaching about world religions (Nord & Haynes, 1998). Instead, teachers should use primary source documents when teaching about world religions (Douglass, 2001; Nord, 1990). Most importantly, teachers need to be aware of their inherent biases most of which are unconscious.

This study suggests that social studies teacher educators can have an impact on how PSTs teach world religions, even if the teacher educators devote a relatively small amount of methods course time to the topic. Certainly, more research in this area is needed, but this study suggests that an hour of time in a methods course and a few assigned readings might eliminate many of the pitfalls of teaching world religions -- a topic that is regularly avoided and marginalized, at society's peril. As

Haynes and Thomas (2001) proclaimed:

Failure to understand even the basic symbols, practices and concepts of the various religions makes much of history, literature, art and contemporary life unintelligible. Moreover, knowledge of the roles of religion in the past and present promotes cross-cultural understanding essential to democracy and world peace. (p. 90)

And, as Douglass (2002) asserted, "All of us as citizens have the responsibility to learn about one another so that we can unite in positive social conduct" (p. 32).

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