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## Four Diverse Educators Chronicle Challenges in a Christian-Centered Society

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### Abstract

Culturally responsive teaching requires that students be perceived holistically and part of student culture is religious beliefs. The purpose of this research is to offer insight into experiences and understandings of four preservice and inservice teachers', from diverse religious backgrounds, Muslim, Judaism, Sikhism, and Mormonism, experiences and understandings as they studied and worked in colleges of education and elementary classrooms that are rooted in Anglo Christian traditions. We relied on aspects of critical multiculturalism and social identity theory to guide the qualitative case study. In this case study, we analyzed reflexive journals and interviews of four participants using withincase and cross-case analysis. Within-case and cross-case analyses included four themes: separation of church and state, teaching for equity and awareness, respect for religious diversity, and personal beliefs. These findings suggest teacher educators incorporate religious and spiritual issues into diversity discussions and continue to support preservice teachers' development of conscious self-awareness and culturally responsive pedagogy.

### Keywords

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Religious Diversity, Multicultural, CaseStudy, Constant Comparison, Within-Case Analysis, Cross-Case Analysis, Preservice and Inservice Teachers, Teacher Education

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## Four Diverse Educators Chronicle Challenges in a Christian-Centered Society

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*Culturally responsive teaching requires that students be perceived holistically and part of student culture is religious beliefs. The purpose of this research is to offer insight into experiences and understandings of four preservice and inservice teachers', from diverse religious backgrounds, Muslim, Judaism, Sikhism, and Mormonism, experiences and understandings as they studied and worked in colleges of education and elementary classrooms that are rooted in Anglo Christian traditions. We relied on aspects of critical multiculturalism and social identity theory to guide the qualitative case study. In this case study, we analyzed reflexive journals and interviews of four participants using within-case and cross-case analysis. Within-case and cross-case analyses included four themes: separation of church and state, teaching for equity and awareness, respect for religious diversity, and personal beliefs. These findings suggest teacher educators incorporate religious and spiritual issues into diversity discussions and continue to support preservice teachers' development of conscious self-awareness and culturally responsive pedagogy. Keywords: Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Religious Diversity, Multicultural, Case Study, Constant Comparison, Within-Case Analysis, Cross-Case Analysis, Preservice and Inservice Teachers, Teacher Education*

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Topics of religion and spirituality are often considered to be conversation topics to be avoided in social settings, and particularly educational contexts, which can serve to negate the essence of some people's lives. Meanwhile, many teacher education programs provide inadequate multicultural educational opportunities in order to prepare teachers to teach diverse student populations. Public schools and universities in the United States typically represent the general political and social milieu, which is mainly Christian. As a result, teacher education programs are mainly oriented implicitly around Christian beliefs. As noted by some scholars, the teacher and students' culture impacts teaching and learning dynamics (Grant & Ladson-Billings, 1997). Howard (2006) and Ladson-Billings (1995, 2009) propose that teachers must have an understanding of their own cultural identity and beliefs in order to understand and teach others. These beliefs can be addressed by involving students in critical multicultural pedagogy in their preservice and inservice teacher education programs. By helping these teachers better understand their own cultural identity and the cultures of those different from themselves, they can better understand and value the cultures of their students. In this study, we investigated religious identity, as an important aspect of a person's culture that we believe should be included in considerations of culturally responsive teaching.

Globally, other countries are addressing issues of minority concerns often related to religion. Sanders, Foyil, and Graff (2007) declared “there will be global shifts in the majority religion(s) in the next few years” (p. 169; Bishop & Nash, 2007). Daily global news events, such as Islamic factions of Sunnis and Shiite people in Iraq, cannot be understood without knowledge of differing religions. Sanders, Foyil, and Graff (2010) suggested that in order to counter religious violence worldwide, knowledge of other religions is needed to move thinking from personal, individual understandings of religion to “pluralistic” notions of religion. This is the goal of our research and promotion of culturally responsive teaching that includes study of various world religions.

To search for greater understanding of the influence of religion on learning in the classroom, we wondered whether teachers leave religious identities outside of the classroom and how religious identities may influence the students they teach. Therefore, we interviewed two inservice and two preservice teachers (n=4) from diverse religious backgrounds to gain insight into their understandings about how religion and spirituality impacted their lived experiences as learners and teachers in colleges of education and elementary classrooms that are rooted in Anglo Christian traditions. Ideas of multiculturalism and social identity theory helped us examine the topic of religion as an influence in development of culturally responsive teacher educators and consequently plan for increased success of students.

### **Review of Literature**

Limited literature exists that relates to the topic of religion and spirituality in classrooms and it may impact teacher identity, yet some scholars discussed relevant topics that expanded our thinking. For instance, certain scholars proposed curricula should include specific teaching of various religions in the classroom and should move beyond the “holidays around the world.” Additional research that enhanced our study includes: the call for conversations about religious perspectives in college classrooms, teacher beliefs about ideas of diversity, and research on hegemony of a Christian perspective in the majority of public classrooms. It is necessary to recognize religious and spirituality beliefs are a part of a teacher’s identity within an orientation toward diversity. These ideas contributed to our greater understanding that the influence religion and spirituality has on instruction and student success. While spirituality and religion are deeply connected, we believe it is important that people ascribed many different meanings to these terms. Tisdell (2007) states,

While religions do provide guidance on how to live a spiritual life from the perspective of that tradition, religions are also organized communities of faith, usually with an official belief system or written creed and codes of regulatory behavior. Spirituality, on the other hand is more about how people make meaning through experience with wholeness, a perceived higher power or higher purpose and does not usually focus on what a religious tradition’s official creed is. (p. 538)

### **Understanding Christian Privilege**

As a part of culturally responsive teaching (CRT), teacher educators need to be aware of the effect of Christian privilege in the college classroom (Brown, Wiggins, & Secord, 2008). Tisdell (2006), pointing out the shortcomings of CRT, stated that culturally responsive efforts to create a more equitable society through critical multiculturalism often addresses factors of culture such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability/disability, but rarely is the “role of spirituality in teaching” addressed “to challenge power relations” (p. 19). Blumenfeld (2006)

discussed the Christian influence on life in the United States. He presented public school practices that usually incorporate Christian practices and explained Christian influence in the history of the United States in areas not usually recognized. Blumenfeld (2006) and Schlosser (2003) demonstrated how Christian, maleness, and whiteness are perceived as the norms, therefore affording invisible advantages to the Christian individual similar to the White male, whereas non-Christian, non-White and non-male have less power.

### **Teacher Beliefs about Diversity**

Non-Christian students might experience difficulties, discrimination, and prejudice within schools. Subedi (2006) stressed the need to prepare teachers for increasingly diverse schools as most of teacher candidates and teachers are Caucasian, middle-class and may have limited understandings of religions other than the most-often-represented Christian orientation. Subedi found that preservice teachers intended to teach in settings in which they have lived and “were unwilling to engage in a serious self-critique of their beliefs, which were based on the logic that European American ways of knowing were regarded as normal, democratic, and free” (Subedi, p. 234). This default to what is comfortable can limit a teacher’s ability to connect with all students. The incorporation of discussions about college students’ cultural similarities and differences including religious orientation may provide the reflection on personal beliefs needed and contribute to tolerance and respect of diverse beliefs with peers. This increased tolerance may transfer to help teachers transcend the “myth of equality” (Allen & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2004, p. 207) and develop greater tolerance of diversity among their students and respect for them as individuals in what Allen and Hermann-Wilmarth (2004) refer to as the “cultural construction zones” (p. 214) of teacher education.

### **Specific Teaching of Religion**

The public school curricula changed when the Supreme Court asserted religious practices unconstitutional in state funded institutions (*Abington School District v. Schempp*, 1963; Dever, Whitaker, & Byrnes, 2001; *Engel v. Vitale*, 1962; *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 1968). This decision facilitated eliminating religious celebrations in schools, yet many schools continued to celebrate the traditional Christian holidays, such as Easter and Christmas, which can further marginalize non-Christian students. Holidays and celebrations offer interesting and relevant opportunities for students to learn about cultures different than their own and to develop awareness of how religion influences cultures. Dever et al. (2001) suggested that exploration of religion should occur throughout the school year and not be limited to December, a month in our society devoted to a mainstream Christian holiday. Other researchers agree with Dever et al. (2001), proposing students should learn about diverse religions in the classroom to develop respect for all students’ beliefs (Ayers & Reid, 2005; Dever, Whitaker, & Byrnes, 2001; Noddings, 2008). Ayers and Reid (2005) suggested: (a) teaching religion as a subject, not as a practice; (b) teaching without students attempting to agree or disagree with aspects of different religions; and (c) teaching about a wide variety of religions, but not describing any as better or worse than others. In order to do this well, they stressed that teachers must develop their own knowledge about diverse religions before attempting to teach about religions.

Likewise supporting classroom instruction about diverse religions, Noddings (2008) reasoned that informed people have a greater understanding of themselves and others, and hopefully, this would result in greater tolerance for people who practice different religions. Without knowledge of diverse religions, understanding of the potential hegemony of Christian privilege, and continued misconceptions about minority religions, possible silencing of non-Christian individuals can prevail.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Many researchers in the area of culturally responsive teaching stress the importance of having teacher education students first investigate their own culture that contains and perpetuates their values and beliefs (Gunn, Bennett, Evans, Peterson, & Welsh, 2013; Ndura, 2004; Nieto, 2000; Tisdell, 2006). To better understand how individuals develop a cultural identity, we turn to social identity theory. Social identity theory is the understanding that an individual becomes a member of a social group and within this group relates to similar identities based on categories (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000). Social identity theory includes the sociological and psychological components of self-categorization. Individuals identify with a self-identity and a group identity and might have several group identities. An individual's identity also can change according to the context of the situation. Self-identity and group identity often intertwine and overlap, which could result in complex understandings and interactions with other individuals. Many individuals choose their group identity based on their spiritual and religious beliefs, which might impact their self-identity or their interactions with individuals outside of their group identity. Therefore, identity theory can help us understand the beliefs and attitudes of preservice teachers.

## **Methods**

The three authors are dedicated to enacting culturally responsive teaching in our classrooms. We have incorporated this pedagogy through our university teaching and carried out research in the past studying how to support the evolution of preservice and inservice teachers from more individually centrist orientations, often deficit notions of minority groups, toward a stance of welcoming diversity and providing culturally sensitive learning experiences.

As university instructors, we have experienced the discomfort of some students in our university classes when they represented views of non-Christian religions. For example, fellow students were dismissive or critical toward students who wore the hijab as a part of their Muslim religion, some students were critics of others who missed certain classes to celebrate Jewish holidays, and a student who became irate and left class because her group was reading a children's book from Denmark that included a picture of God on earth. These situations present examples of religion causing discomfort among students that inspired us to study students' religious experiences within the Christian-centered classrooms.

We intended to acquire deeper understandings of preservice, students enrolled in college who were not teaching yet, and inservice, teachers who were already teaching in classrooms and working on advanced degrees, teachers' experiences, so our research focused on investigating meaning of participants' descriptions and examination of their experiences in detail and depth within sociocultural contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Patton, 2002). Therefore, we decided to utilize a qualitative design, in particular a multiple case study (Yin, 2003).

## **Multiple Case Design Study**

Our goal in this study was to explore "how" diverse religious and spiritual beliefs impacted preservice and inservice teachers' experiences in different educational contexts. Yin (2014) suggested case studies answer the "how" questions and focus on a phenomenon within a particular context. We wanted to share the stories of these preservice and inservice teachers through description and to understand how this aspect of their culture influenced their education and their students' education. Each participant, who represents a case, held spiritual or religious beliefs unique to their experiences either in a public school and/or a college of

education; we wanted to make comparisons within and across these cases and decided to utilize a qualitative design, in particular, multiple case studies.

**Participants.** We chose purposive sampling because we wanted to concentrate on “selecting information-rich cases” that “would illuminate the questions under study” (Patton, 2002, p. 230). In order to maintain this richness, we selected four specific cases to gain insights and understandings related to our research questions and investigate more in-depth their experiences in two educational contexts (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002; Teddlie & Yu, 2007). We considered less than four would not provide the maximum variation and richness needed to fully examine the research questions and more than four might decrease the richness. We chose participants with various religious beliefs that were different than beliefs in mainstream society (See Table 1).

**Table 1.** Participants: Four Diverse Educators Chronicle Challenges

Participants	Age in Years	Race/Ethnicity	Beliefs	Education	Teaching Experience	Teaching Location
Fatim	21	Palestinian American	Muslim	BA in Elementary Education from southeastern state	1 <sup>st</sup> year teaching	Islamic School in southeastern state
Lara	28	African American	Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints	BA in Elementary Education in southeastern state	Just graduated: preservice teacher	Childcare center in southeastern state
Dana	28	Eastern Indian, moved to U.S. at 9 years old	Sikh	Enrolled in MAT program	preservice teacher	In school
Lynn	40	Caucasian	Non-practicing, Jewish	Bachelors in Elementary Education	10 years teaching experience	Public school in southeastern state, middle to higher socioeconomic school, large majority of students Caucasian

We wanted to ensure to take into account all ethical considerations for our research such as important questions of privacy, confidentiality, and researcher power (Fontana & Frey, 2005). After our institutional review board’s approval, we asked preservice and inservice teachers, who were Susan’s and AnnMarie’s former students and colleagues, to participate in our study; prior discussions with these individuals suggested they might be interested in contributing to this research. We asked them to participate through email and then asked again on the phone. We provided information so all participants understood the research and then obtained signatures from the preservice and inservice teachers on the approved consent forms and assigned pseudonyms to provide confidentiality and protect their identity.

The two preservice teachers and two inservice teachers, who volunteered to participate, ranged from 21 to 40 years old. They had lived in different places around the United States, and one participant had lived in India for a short period of time. Participants were raised with diverse religious and spiritual beliefs: Islam, Christianity (Baptist-later converted to Mormonism), Judaism, and Sikhism. Only one participant had several years of teaching experience, while the other three had just begun their teaching career or were just finishing their education degree. All participants had experienced colleges of education and public schools in the United States.

## Data Collection

**Interviews.** In an attempt to achieve authentic dialogue and interactions, we chose an open-ended, semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A) (Silverman, 2010). Interviews offer us an approach to hear the story of the participants, to better see the participants' perspectives, and to reach shared meaning (Fontana & Frey, 2005; Patton, 2002). In order to provide a comfortable space, we allowed the participants to choose where they wanted to meet, either their home or the researcher's office. During this research, Susan and Ann Marie conducted the interviews with participants and transcribed the audio recordings.

We met with each participant one time, for approximately 60-90 minutes, recorded and transcribed each interview and then electronically sent the transcriptions to the participants to verify and check for accuracy, an aspect of member checking (Creswell, 1998; Stake, 1995). This type of feedback ensured the data represented the interviewees' perceptions and provided credibility and descriptive validity (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Interviews were carried out over a two-week period.

**Researcher reflective journal.** Each researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the process, which allowed for us to critically explore the data, develop deeper interpretations, and gain greater insight (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2004; Janesick, 1999). We discussed our individual notes and referred to them when writing the final report. The reflexive journals contributed to the trustworthiness and rigor of the study.

## Data Analysis

As qualitative researchers, we wanted to discover meaning from our data. In attempt to find this meaning, we utilized three different types of analysis: constant comparison, within-case, and cross-case. Cross-case analysis would enable us to compare and contrast participants' responses and then present a thorough description of each individual participant. Susan and AnnMarie developed initial analysis and categorized emerging themes while studying the inter-rater reliability of their analysis. Mary Lou then reviewed the data and discussed the chosen themes and categories.

**Constant comparison.** For our initial analysis, we chose constant comparison to discover themes within the data (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Susan and AnnMarie read the data a minimum of three times and highlighted parts of the data, then categorized the data into chunks, placing themes in brackets. We provide an example in Appendix B. We read and reread the data as we analyzed, coded, and then compared to previously identified categories. As peer debriefer, Mary Lou read the data and reviewed the analysis for credibility and thoroughness. We utilized a section of the data to determine the inter-rater reliability between Susan and Ann Marie's analysis and reached agreement at 92% (Marques & McCall, 2005).

**Within-case analysis.** After completion of the constant comparison process, we then used within-case analysis to deeply examine those themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We had



four individual cases in our multiple case studies and needed to look at each unit of analysis first.

**Cross-case analysis.** We wanted to make comparisons across these cases to enhance understanding and gain deeper insights into the possibility of our findings being relevant to other cases, so we chose to employ cross-case analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We could group the responses together to analyze and compare and contrast ideas, (see comments in parentheses Appendix B).

## Findings

We first present our findings from our initial within-case analysis of each participant and then communicate our findings from our cross-case analysis. We documented emerging themes within each individual case first. From the cross-case analysis, we discuss the four themes that emerged: separation of church and state, teaching for student equity, respect for religious diversity, and personal beliefs. All names used are pseudonyms to guard confidentiality (See Table 2).

**Table 2.** Within Case Findings

Code	Description of Code	Exemplar Quote
Teaching for Equity and Awareness	Preservice/in-service teachers suggested they wanted to make a difference and teaching is more than academic curriculum.	“Also to contribute to society that was very important also like I just didn't want to be just about me, me, me. I also want to give back and contribute in some way.”
Personal Beliefs	Preservice/in-service teachers discussed their beliefs and how that impacted their instructional decisions. In addition, they experienced individuals who failed to acknowledge or demonstrate a respect for their culture.	“I'd say it [religion] influences how I teach. It sets my mood, just being friendly.”
Separation of Church and State	Preservice/in-service teachers shared their support of separation of church and state.	“I do approve, there isn't as much [religious study] allowed in schools.”
Isolation	Preservice/in-service teachers experienced feelings of isolation.	“The teachers certainly didn't ask anything, acknowledge it, you felt very isolated. There weren't a lot of Indians in my neighborhood. They didn't know what my religion was.”
Belongingness and Community	Preservice/in-service teachers explained how family and religion provided belongingness.	“I think that is the only thing, one of the only things I love about religion- no matter which one you got to- afterwards is probably the best way to learn about the community- who is who, who is doing what, who should you know, how to develop contacts.”
Respect for Religious Diversity	Preservice/in-service teachers offered that teachers should respect of students' rights, make students comfortable, know students, and not object to others religious/spirituality within different contexts.	“For me I would either acknowledge all or acknowledge none,” and “You either not do it at all or you got to make sure that everyone is included.”

## Fatim

Fatim, a 21-year-old, Middle Eastern-American woman, is Muslim and was born in a southwestern state. Fatim's parents came to the United States from Palestine. She described herself as:

a religious person. I mean I still pray 5 times a day. I read you know regularly the Qur'an...I try to go to the Mosque as much as I can...I obviously dress in full abaya and hijab whenever I am in public.

Fatim explained that her dad is, "an Imam, like a leader of a mosque." As a child, she was encouraged to pray and read the Qur'an with her family. She had one-year teaching experience at an Islamic school in a southeastern state, and as a child, attended this school. This K-12 school offered an Islamic-centered environment and curriculum where the teachers were encouraged to talk about religion. Fatim explained the benefits of teaching at an Islamic school, "You know you want to instill the morals and ...you can obviously talk of God and relate everything back to God whether in science or whatever."

**Teaching for equity and awareness.** Fatim expressed her belief that she should educate her students about her differences. While interning in the public school system, she discussed her clothing.

I am not going to walk around and pretend that I'm...I look normal...they [her elementary students] obviously have questions of "Why in the world does my teacher dress from head to toe?" So, I did make it a point...to give an introduction at the beginning of every internship to explain to them why I dress like this. I don't want that to be lingering in the back of their heads, and then they come up with all these other assumptions for why I'm dressed. And it's a teaching opportunity...And a lot of them, it's amazing, like a lot of them had no clue...but what surprised me the most really was how open they were. And how like...especially the little kids, it was like, "Okay, that's nice. Now you can teach."

This teaching beyond the curriculum, with equity and awareness as her intention, crossed into her time in the College of Education as a preservice teacher. Fatim stated, "From my perspective, I'm not going to go through this College of Education being one of the only Muslims in the whole department and not let anyone know why I'm dressed like this or what Islam is." She sees herself as a person who wants to, "contribute to society ....I just didn't want to just be about me, me, me. I also want to give back and contribute in some way."

**Personal beliefs.** When she could, Fatim tried to teach people about her religion to provide a common understanding. She described a time when she went on an interview in a public school. "I went in with a sheet [of paper] because I try to be proactive when I can." This sheet provided the reader with basic information about Muslim religion: clothes, holidays, and dress (see Appendix C). I told the principal, "I am a very open person...if anyone has a question...."

Fatim discussed working and learning with non-Muslim colleagues. She suggested,

You can tell I am Muslim from a mile away. But for the most part, I wouldn't be able to differentiate [what religion other people own]...I'd just assume

people are Christian. I know that's not a good thing, but like it's always the default. It's like they're Christian until they tell you otherwise.

While Fatim is aware of the Christian-dominant culture and has friends from diverse religious backgrounds, she does distance herself from behaviors that conflict with her religious beliefs. She explained,

In college, I would hear about some of the girls' experiences, and I say like "do I really want to be associated with people like you?" And I even feel like would I want my child to have you as a teacher? Someone who just...who does this on their free time. And I guess maybe I'm wrong to be judging them..."

## Lara

Lara, a 28-year-old African American Woman, attended a Baptist church with her grandmother as a child in a southeastern state. As an adult, she moved to a different southeastern state and became a member of the Church of Jesus Christ Latter Day Saints. She stated,

I believe that Jesus Christ, only begotten son of Holy Father or God, and that he died for our sins. And I believe in plan of salvation that we are here on earth for a reason....pretty much...follow commandments, pay tithes, searching for a companion..."

At the time of the interview, she had graduated from a large southeastern university and was in the process of searching for a teaching position, while working at a childcare center.

**Teaching for equity and awareness.** Lara worked at a childcare center, and then she knew she would pursue becoming an educator. She expressed, "I liked being part of their lives and being a...a good positive influence and teaching...teaching them. Whatever it was because I realize as a teacher you're not only teaching them...you're not only teaching them the curriculum."

**Separation of church and state.** Lara shared, "I love the fact that church and state are like separated." However Lara acknowledged that her religion shapes her identity, "I'd say it [religion] influences how I teach. It sets my mood, just being friendly." She also mentioned that she needed to find an approach to handle, "subjects for like when the curriculum will...if it does switch up to something that I just even necessarily don't believe in. That is the only thing that I might have a problem with." Lara revealed that she had witnessed a good teacher model. Lara tells a story about a student asking her cooperating teacher if she believes in angels. Lara explained how the teacher looked at the child, and asked the child, "What do you think? And I was like...that's good. That's how I can respond."

## Dana

Dana, a 28 year-old Indian woman, now lives in a southeastern state. She was born in India and moved to a northeastern state in the United States when she was nine years old. Dana explained that she lived in an upper middle-class socioeconomic area and attended a good public school, predominately White and Korean with just a few Indians. She said, "Actually I didn't meet any Indians till I went to India- I was growing up in a totally different culture-completely." Dana shared aspects of the differences between cultures in the United States and India. Private tutors in the United States suggested students needed assistance or were

struggling in a content area, whereas in India, students commonly had tutors. Dana commented that the school system in India was more intense than in the United States.

**Isolation.** Some of Dana's early school experiences made her feel isolated. When Dana and her family came to the United States, the school placed Dana in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade instead of 4<sup>th</sup> in attempt to catch her up because she did not speak any English. This experience contributed to Dana's feelings of isolation. For example, she said, "I was hardly ever included. She [teacher] had no clue what to do with a student who didn't speak the language," and "it was really hard for me in class; I wasn't even given an opportunity to speak." Dana's parents did not allow her to speak English at home, especially after a teacher told her parents not to speak in their language at home.

Dana suggested the teachers who did not attempt to understand or recognize her culture demonstrated a lack of caring and produced this feeling of isolation.

The teachers certainly didn't ask anything, acknowledge it, you felt very isolated. There weren't a lot of Indians in my neighborhood. They didn't know what my religion was. At that point, I didn't have one teacher who knew what my religion was and even how to spell it, something that little. And it can really affect how a student behaves for the rest of the year. There is always a small part of them, like she doesn't care.

One of her teachers not only did not learn about her culture but also neglected to learn Dana's name. The teacher created a nickname to call Dana because she could not pronounce Dana's real name. In addition to this experience, Dana shared how the Christmas season caused her to feel isolated as well, "To me, it's a real issue because I always felt left out, during the holiday season." In addition, the students came back from the holiday break and only talked about the presents they received. She commented, "...I didn't understand why I didn't get presents...I remember lying, saying I got this Christmas present...because everyone talked about it...Everyone always went some place for Christmas, and I never understood that." Although Dana experienced isolation sometimes at school, she believed her family and religion provided belongingness.

**Belongingness and community.** Dana and her family expressed, "religiously we always went to [temple], my religion is Sikh, and primarily in the state of Jaba." Even when her family did not have access to a temple, they would practice the religion and continue with prayer. Religion or a temple provided Dana with membership in a community. She commented that it was "a huge family affair going to the temple. Someone would come to your house from the temple, or you go with them. It was a big social event, not just religion." She also stated,

I think that is the only thing, one of the only things I love about religion- no matter which one you got to- afterwards is probably the best way to learn about the community- who is who, who is doing what, who should you know, how to develop contacts.

At the time of the interview, Dana was enrolled in an alternative Master of Arts teaching program. She stated, "Now I am just confused. I was raised with one [religion], and my husband is another-of the Christian faith. I am not."

**Teaching for equity and awareness.** Dana's experiences of community and isolation influenced how she will develop her teaching pedagogy. She "would like to find ways to respect people's holidays, my students' holidays." Dana wants to create a classroom that does not isolate her students but is a community of learners. She also commented, "There are going to be the two sensitive issues for me are names and religion--how, like how I am not going to

pretend I know how to tackle that right now.” Dana is willing to figure out how to respect and be sensitive to her students’ needs and culture so they do not feel left out or isolated as she did in school.

**Separation of Church and State.** Dana suggested schools should maintain the separation of church and state. She commented, “I do approve, there isn’t as much [religious study] allowed in schools.” Dana experienced isolation because of teachers not knowing about her culture and students discussing a holiday that was not part of her religion.

## Lynn

Lynn, a 43 year-old Caucasian woman, grew up in a northeastern state but now resides in a southeastern state. As a child, her father held stronger convictions toward their Jewish religion than her mother. She attended Hebrew school but did not have a bat mitzvah. Lynn chose to no longer practice Judaism in middle school. She stated, “I didn’t like religion because everyone I liked hated each other. I had Jewish friends who were mad that I had non-Jewish friends, and my non-Jewish friends would say to me, ‘You’re Jewish, but you are cool.’”

Lynn returned to college when she was 30 to receive her education degree. At the time of the interview, she had been teaching for 10 years in an elementary school. She expressed that she is unsure of her current beliefs. “I just don’t know. I don’t want to buy into a book that was written when I wasn’t there, too many religions to buy into one.”

**Respect for Religious Diversity.** Lynn provided examples of ways the dominant mainstream religion impacted her in everyday experiences.

My mom worked for a company when my brother was a drug addict. My mom’s coworker told her, “Because you don’t believe in Jesus Christ- I think that is why this is happening [to her brother].” She wasn’t condescending to my mom- she was saying it matter of fact. My mother never talked to her again.

Lynn also provided an example during her husband’s retail store opening. Before it opened, they had a party with hors d’oeuvres and cocktails, mingling, and then a prayer.

It would bother me. There would be a priest, and people would be praying to Jesus- and all the department managers and their spouses- and it would bother me. What did Jesus have to do with opening this store, really? I did it [went] for my husband’s benefit.

**Teaching for equity and awareness.** Lynn discussed that while attending college, she learned about different cultures, which did not encompass learning about religions or sensitivity to different religions. When asked about religion in schools, Lynn shared ideas and stories of the holidays in public schools. “I think that most teachers think it’s okay to teach about Christmas because it’s the majority.” She revealed that she wants to make sure she demonstrates sensitivity to her students because she does not want to hurt anyone’s feelings or offend anyone. She explained that her students sit on the carpet, she asks about their beliefs, and then tailors her instruction to fit the needs of her class. “I do Christmas, Kwanzaa, and Hanukah- and any other religion that is celebrated in my class. If someone doesn’t do religion- I just don’t do it- I don’t want that child to be ostracized, it’s just not worth it.” Lynn also conveyed that her colleagues teach about Santa or make their Jehovah Witness students stand for the pledge and recite the words except “Under God.” She stated,

I don't think they have empathy towards others. They don't teach that in college. Just like my friends, you're Jewish but you are cool. I am 43, and I still have people say it to me. But now, I say what does that mean? When I was little I would think they didn't like me. Now it's just stupid.

### Cross-Case Analysis

We thought it was important to share the four participants' experiences and stories individually. However, we also believe examining the four cases through cross-case analysis provided even more insight and understanding into how the participants' religious or spiritual identity impacted their experiences within the public schools and colleges of education. After cross-case analysis, three major themes emerged: teaching for equity and awareness, respect for religious diversity, and personal beliefs (See figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Findings: Cross-Case Analysis

Teaching for Equity and Awareness	Respect for Religious Diversity	Personal Beliefs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making a difference</li> <li>• Teaching is more than the academics</li> <li>• Contributing to society</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students' rights</li> <li>• Knowing your students</li> <li>• Creating a comfortable environment</li> <li>• Sensitivity to differences, in particular religious</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How impacts instructional decisions</li> </ul>

**Teaching for equity and awareness.** This theme relates to making a difference and to the idea that teaching is more than academic curriculum. Fatim suggested she became a teacher for reasons of equity and awareness. She shared, “Also to contribute to society that was very important also like I just didn't want to be just about me, me, me. I also want to give back and contribute in some way.” In addition, Lara thought teaching was more than just a profession and said,

I realize as a teacher you're not only teaching them...you're not only teaching them the curriculum. You know because you're teaching them social skills, um...you know in some cases, yeah, you're definitely teaching them social skills, whether it's how to act, how to interact, how to treat others...

Lynn illustrated how teachers lacked empathy and understanding of students from diverse religious backgrounds. Dana demonstrated her awareness that religion is a complex issue in the classroom, “It makes you think, like, where is the line, where is the boundary.” Each

participant in some way discussed equity and awareness, and another theme similar to equity and awareness was respect for religious diversity.

**Respect for religious diversity.** This theme represents respect of students' rights, making a student comfortable in the classroom, knowing your students, and not objecting to others religious/spirituality within different contexts. All participants mentioned respect for religious diversity in their interviews. Dana discussed how she felt isolated and left out in public school because no one respected her religious background, and she planned to respect her students' beliefs. Participants suggested making students feel comfortable and included in the classroom as an important way to respect religious diversity. For example, Lynn shared, "If I have a child that doesn't celebrate, I just don't do it." Fatim mentioned, "For me I would either acknowledge all or acknowledge none," and "You either not do it at all or you got to make sure that everyone is included." Dana decided that 'knowing students' names' and religion were important ways for her to know her students and not isolate them, as she was in school. She said she would respect their religion, holidays and celebration.

The participants suggested teachers should know their students and listen to the students' voices. For example, Fatim shared:

That's why it's interesting to... You have to know your students because I know in one of them, one of mine was a Jehovah's Witness. And they don't do birthdays and a lot of things. And you know I never want... I never want to be the teacher, who when a kid grows up, it's like, "yeah, that's the one who I always had to sit out when they did this or I always had to get out of the classroom." And then you'll... but at the same time, I guess you... see that's the truth... it's like public school is... you either... it's hard to draw that line. You are either not do it at all or you got to make sure that everyone is included.

**Personal beliefs.** The four participants discussed their beliefs and how that impacted their instructional decisions. They mentioned experiences in which individuals failed to acknowledge or demonstrate a respect for their culture. Therefore, the participants made careful, reflective, and intentional decisions to respect their students' beliefs while teaching.

## Discussion

Our findings add to the literature concerning multicultural and diversity issues, especially because much research has neglected to address religious elements of culture in teacher education (Silverman, 2010; Subedi, 2006). This study also provides further insight into how religion or spirituality impacts teacher identity. Subedi (2006) stated that because our schools are rooted in American and Christian epistemologies, students embrace or come from religions other than mainstream Christianity "face difficulties in negotiating everyday school practices." (p. 227)

The participants demonstrated a culturally responsive pedagogy as their stories were undergirded with equity and awareness of diversity (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009). The goal of multicultural education and culturally responsive pedagogy is to encourage equity in schools and ensure all students from various ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups receive an equal education (Banks, 2001). Fatim said, "I also want to give back and contribute in some way." Fatim expressed her belief that differences should explicitly be taught in order to help create more understandings about diversity; this aligns with Noddings' (2008) ideas.

Another tenet of culturally responsive pedagogy was evident in the participants' own educational philosophy about classroom practice. The participants suggested how they would respect the students' religious diversity, listen to the students' voices, and create a safe

environment (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009; Morton & Bennett, 2010). For example, Lynn said she would listen to her students to decide on “religion that is celebrated in my class. If someone doesn’t do religion- I just don’t do it.” Other participants also mentioned they would either not have holiday celebrations or make sure they incorporate holidays of the students in their classrooms. Rychly and Graves (2012) stated that the images, posters, awards, bulletin board items, and the holiday celebrations that are used in the classroom are the hidden curriculum that teach students what and whom is valued in school.

Reflections recorded from the four participants confirmed that, in fact, religion was an important aspect of their lives. They explained how their religious beliefs were a part of their culture and influenced their comfort or discomfort in learning situations. It is our conclusion that incorporating explicit discussions of religious differences, perhaps through the use of age-appropriate children’s literature can provide a valuable contribution to the literacy experiences in elementary, high school, and college classrooms. Our participants seemed to appreciate the opportunity to address this topic and their reports helped us understand how to be better promoters of culturally relevant pedagogy, our goal in this research.

### **Limitations of Study**

Although the number of participants is often cited as a limiting factor, in this study, four participants provided valuable information about the experiences of non-Christian people in a Christian-dominated school system. What we do consider as limiting, however, are the religious denominations. The field of culturally relevant pedagogy would benefit from learning about other spiritual stances such as atheism, Buddhism, Hinduism, or Native American beliefs to name a few. As with any interview, this study is limited by what the participants were willing to share.

In qualitative research, it is essential to address researcher bias and a possibility exists that we might have affected the conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). It is important that we disclose that we have diverse religious beliefs that could lead to biases about the topic. Our religious beliefs contextualize our orientation toward religion, yet our dedication to culturally responsive teaching demonstrates our beliefs in social justice that includes the right to practice diverse religious beliefs while respecting beliefs of others. We are all biased toward practicing respect for multiculturalism and teaching with culturally responsive methods. We conducted the interviews in a place that the participants chose as one approach to limit researcher bias. Mary Lou, as part of the research team, maintained the role of a debriefer, who assisted during analysis in order to prevent biases interfering with interpretation (Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2008). Trustworthiness, rigor and credibility in qualitative research is addressed by triangulating data, in this case providing multiple informants, and using multiple viewers to analyze the data.

### **Generalizability of Findings**

Qualitative research can provide valuable information that may prove helpful for people in similar circumstances. In our study, we were interested in improving college instruction that would include knowledge about world religions within culturally relevant pedagogy in teacher education programs. The goal is that this would provide an example for teachers in K-12 education. Patton (2002) presented a broad discussion of generalizability that can help us view our work. By gathering thorough individual perspectives, analyzing emerging themes supported by a high inter-rater reliability rating, and divulging our biases, our findings could be expected to align with expected social occurrences that may generalize to situations with



similar settings such as public schools and universities in the United States. Thus, we hope our findings can enrich instruction.

### **Implications for Learning and Teaching**

The United States continues to become more diverse, and preservice teachers are likely to have classrooms of diverse students. The US Census Bureau (Ortman, & Guarneri, 2008) projects that by 2050, approximately 50% of the US population is projected to be non-White. As our nation becomes increasingly diverse, teachers will face new challenges and will need to embrace pedagogies that will help diverse students succeed in school.

Globally, some educators also explored the presence of religious education within schools (Cush, 2014). In Finland, Sweden, Zimbabwe or China, students might participate in non-confessional multi-faith education, which means about and from religion without practicing or prayer (Cush, 2014; Zilliacus, 2013). Some countries developed a curriculum that allows students to participate in courses about world religions or their religion, which is possibly the minority in the country they live. Although some countries include religious diversity in the curriculum, tensions still exist and negative and positive impacts occur. In Finland, Zilliacus (2013) found resource and quality issues occurred such as continued or reinforced stereotypes, limited textbooks or not enough qualified teachers to teach about diverse religions. However, many participants shared that the minority religions became more accepted. Internationally, some educators and governments recognize the necessity to not only embrace students' culture but also to provide opportunities for students to develop an understanding how to live in a global society with diverse religions (Cush, 2014).

Preservice teachers in the United States, the large majority being White, heterosexual females who come from Christian, middle-class backgrounds (Sleeter, 2008) may lack knowledge of religions other than their own. We suggest the on-going development of a "conscious self-awareness" with preservice teachers (Bennett, 2010). This term is built upon Villegas & Lucas' (2002) term sociocultural conscious where an individual recognizes biases and prejudices, develops an understanding of how one culture influences his or her perspectives, and becomes aware of how that affects other individuals. Preservice teachers need to look at components of privilege that they own (i.e., Christian, White, male, heterosexual, English as a first language, higher socioeconomic status) to develop a critical consciousness of its existence and how it impacts those with and without those privileges.

Teacher educators must include religion in the discussion about cultural differences and continue to further research religious diversity and education, nationally and internationally (Subedi, 2006; Zilliacus, 2013). Teacher educators also need to emphasize that religious and spiritual beliefs are diverse throughout the school's community, which include the principal, other teachers, staff and parents as well as the students. We no longer can ignore difficult topics because of fear or anxiety because these issues can negatively impact individuals. Our instruction in teacher education courses can model what we hope teachers will do in their classrooms. Teacher educators cannot provide knowledge about all cultures or religious backgrounds, but teacher educators can include religion in the discussion about cultural differences (Subedi, 2006).

### **Areas of Future Research**

As stated previously, this study only included four participants, which is a limitation. We would like to add to this data by interviewing a greater variety of students who represent a greater variety of religious orientations. We would also like to investigate what classroom teachers with at least five years of experience think about the various religions represented in

their classrooms and who live in various locations across the United States. We are interested in teachers' awareness of religion represented in their classrooms and how students' beliefs may be evident or impact their learning.

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## Appendix A

### Script for Interviews with Inservice Teachers/Preservice Teachers

We would like to thank you for your willingness to participate in our study. We appreciate your time. The goal of our research is to better understand your experiences in colleges of education and in the public schools and how those experiences were influenced by your religious or spiritual beliefs. From this information, we hope to better understand how to meet yours and other teachers' needs and learn better ways to prepare teachers to meet the needs of their students. If at any time you feel uncomfortable, please let us know and we can stop the interview. You also can choose not to answer any of the questions or withdraw from the study at any time. We think you could contribute significant insight and understandings into our study. We thought this because... [each participant will be different]

Do you have any questions or concerns? If not, we will begin.

- 1) How old are you? Where did you grow up/live now?
- 2) Describe your background: cultural, economic status, type of schools you attended, etc...
- 3) Tell your story of why you chose to become a teacher.
- 4)
  - a) Are you teaching/in school now?
  - b) How many years teaching experience do you have?
  - c) In what types of schools have you taught? What were the demographics? Why did you choose the school(s)? [If teaching several years, skip to question #]
- 5)
  - a) What type of university did you attend for teacher education? How would you describe the demographics of the university?
  - b) Describe the type of field experiences you had...i.e. were they helpful, sufficient, how well were you prepared, in particular to teach students from diverse backgrounds, etc...

- 6)
  - a) Describe how you were raised, such as your religious/ spiritual background.
  - b) How would you describe your religious/spiritual beliefs now as an adult? (Describe your religious or spiritual beliefs and how you came to these beliefs.)
- 7) What role do you think religion or spirituality play in the public schools or universities? How do you feel about that? Share an experience that might illustrate the point.
- 8) Explain how you think your religious or spiritual beliefs impact/influence on your teaching. Share experiences that might illustrate that point. *[Or in the future if not teaching]*
- 9)
  - a) Explain any experiences in the college of education that were impacted by religious or spiritual beliefs.
  - b) In what ways did your religious/or spiritual beliefs impact your education?
  - c) In what ways did other religious/or spiritual issues influence your education? *[To be asked to participants recently in colleges of education]*

That completes the interview. We will let you know as soon as we have finished typing up the interview. We will then send it to you in order for you to check and make sure we have what you meant to say. Again, we thank you for your willingness to participate.

## Appendix B

### Sample Data Coding

**Fatim:** Yeah, for the most part, they were pretty um...like I don't remember anyone like...and I made it a point to tell them ahead of time. Like, I wasn't just sitting there waiting for next week. In the beginning, I'd be like, "during this week, I'm going to have a holiday." That way, I took all the steps I need to take. So that way, now the ball's in their court. And almost everyone I think was very understanding. So... **[Personal Beliefs]**

**Susan:** I know I felt very privileged you and (Fatim: N...), yes, invited me to go and I couldn't go with you. And I really wanted to go, but...I thought...see I like...because that's the kind of relationships you should have with your students. Um...I'm putting my own thing in there. I probably shouldn't. Okay. Um...we did that and um...Okay. So I guess explain how you think your religious or spiritual beliefs might impact or influence your teaching. Um...so like in the future or this year, obviously you've talked a little bit about it, but is there anything else you would like to act to that, add to that, not act to that.

**Fatim:** Um, I think...If I were in a public school, obviously I wouldn't...religion wouldn't be something I'd bring into the classroom. I mean unless that were something we were talking about. Um...I don't think it would be a problem, especially with elementary. You don't really deal with...um...major issues that I guess you would like in middle or high school. Um...but I think for the most part, it'd be okay...I'm just trying to think...Well, I...I mean...Let's say December comes around, and it's all those holidays...I guess it would be...I...I...would kind of have to go out of my way I guess maybe...like for me it would either acknowledge all or acknowledge none. (Susan: Right). Acknowledge none is a lot harder because I know people always expect it's Christmas or it's...so um... **[Separation of church and state]** **[Respect for religious diversity]**\*\*\*People expect Christmas/Lynn's interview (Respect for religious diversity)

**Susan:** Your not supposed to be doing that.

**Fatim:** That's why it's interesting to... You have to know your students because I know in one of them, one of mine was a Jehovah's Witness. And they don't do birthdays and a lot of things. And you know I never want...I never want to be the teacher, who when a kid grows up, it's like, "yeah, that's the one who I always had to sit out when they did this or I always had to get out of the classroom." And then you'll...but at the same time, I guess you...see that's the truth...it's like public school is...you either...it's hard to draw that line. You are either not do it at all or you got to make sure that everyone is included. [Teaching for equity and awareness] [Respect for Religious Diversity]\*\*\*Not exclude students/Lynn's interview

## Appendix C

### Beneficial facts about Islam (Fatim's Information Sheet)

Basic belief: Muslims believe that there is only one god, Allah, and that the Prophet Muhammad was his last messenger.

The headscarf:

**What is it?** In Islam, Muslim women are required to dress in a modest manner, characterized by loose fitting attire that covers the entire body except the face and hands. The headscarf is called a *hijab*, and the long dress worn by many Muslim women, including myself, is called a *jilbab*. Muslim women are required to cover when in public and in the presence of men who are not blood-relatives. Muslim women do not have to cover in front of their husbands, fathers, brothers, uncles, grandfathers, nephews, and other women.

**Well, why do wear it?** There are many reasons and wisdoms behind why Muslim women cover. Firstly, it is a command by God. Secondly, it protects the honor and dignity of a woman. It also demands that a Muslim woman be respected and not subjugated. The hijab bases a woman's self-worth on what is on the inside rather than how she is perceived on the outside. Yes, it does get hot sometimes, but I have definitely gotten used to it :)

Muslims celebrate two major holidays during the year:

The Islamic calendar follows the lunar calendar.

1. Eid-Al-Fitr: the celebration that takes place after the month of Ramadan. It takes place on the first day of the 10<sup>th</sup> month of the Islamic/lunar year. This year, that date is estimated to be around September 10<sup>th</sup>.
  - a. Ramadan: the month in which Muslims fast (abstain from food and water) from sunup until sundown. Ramadan is the 9<sup>th</sup> month in the Islamic calendar. This year, that date is estimated to be around August 11<sup>th</sup>.
2. Eid Al-Adha: this holiday commemorates the willingness of Prophet Abraham to sacrifice his son as an act of obedience to God. Eid-Al-Adha takes place on the tenth day of the 12-month of the Islamic calendar. This year, Eid-Al-Adha is estimated to be on November 16<sup>th</sup>

### Prayers

Muslims pray five times a day, with times ranging from sunup to evening time. One of the five prayers is during the afternoon, so it is possible that during a planning period or after school, I may be performing my prayer.

*If you have any further questions, you are always more than welcome to ask!*

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