Chapter 16

“The World is So Much Bigger”: Preservice Teachers’ Experiences of Religion in Israel and the Influences on Identity and Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Opportunities to experience diverse religious traditions while traveling abroad can create invitations to explore the role of religion in identity. This becomes important as teacher educators prepare preservice teachers for classrooms of increasing religious diversity. This study examined the impact of a two-week experience in Israel for three preservice teachers before, immediately after, and one year after the trip. The data suggests that purposeful inclusions of religious experiences, sites, and more importantly personal encounters with individuals of a variety of faiths can create occasions to reflect upon the role of religion in identity. The preservice teachers in this study, while each possessing unique perspectives, spoke to the impact of this experience upon their teaching in the classroom. The chapter concludes with suggested recommendations on how to incorporate religion while planning a trip with preservice teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Standing at the Western Wall in Jerusalem during Friday night prayers, conversing with two Muslim women about their experiences living in Israel, sitting beside the Sea of Galilee, discussing conflicts in Syria during a homestay with a Druze family, and visiting a Palestinian refugee camp in the West Bank were all moments when travel created a bridge connecting religion and identity. In this study, three Christian preservice teachers participated in a two-week trip to Israel as co-researchers with education department faculty members. The grant funded research study focused on issues of religion in public elementary schools in the United States and Israel. A two-week trip to Israel was designed to collect survey and interview data. Three preservice teachers acted as co-researchers in the initial study assisting in data collection and analysis. Simultaneously, these teacher candidates also agreed to participate in

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this study to examine how a travel experience to Israel impacted their own identities and subsequently impacted their teaching.

The chapter will provide a description of the trip including evidence demonstrating how this travel opportunity impacted preservice teacher identity both during student teaching and a year later when working as classroom teachers. Data will specifically explore the ways the trip influenced the understandings of the professional, personal, and religious identities of three preservice teachers. Suggestions of how to incorporate religious experiences while traveling abroad with students will be explored.

Results indicate that participants initially believed that this trip would strengthen their ties to their own Christian faith. However, all three participants described an unexpected increased sensitivity and awareness of the religious diversity of the world and eventually to the diverse identities of the children in their student teaching placement. In addition, a year after the trip, identities as teachers became more multifaceted and inclusive. While there were differences among the three participants, these findings suggest that teacher education programs should thoughtfully and intentionally consider religious identity when planning curriculum, and especially when organizing travel abroad opportunities for preservice teachers.

BACKGROUND

Teacher identities are shifting, multidimensional, and influenced by story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Gee (2000) conceptualized identities as situated and linked to performances in society. Schussler (2006) described factors of teacher identity as creating dispositions that provide a filter for understanding teacher knowledge and behavior. Through teacher dispositions ideas of good teaching are established and refined. These theories of good teaching and teacher dispositions are often based upon years observing teachers in action (Knowles & Holt-Reynolds, 1991). As a result, preservice teachers enter college teacher preparation programs with personal dispositions as well as institutional biographies influenced by their own schooling (Britzman, 1986). It is through the lens of teacher disposition, combined with their own positionality in regards to race, class, gender, and religion that can influence the type of teacher preservice teachers aspire to become.

Teacher preparation programs often explicitly seek to challenge teacher candidates to explore the personhood of a teacher. Teacher education curriculum frequently encourages critical consciousness by unpacking the connections between positionality, identity, and teaching (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). While race, gender, and class are often explored in teacher education literature, religious identity is infrequently addressed (Hartwick, 2012; Subedi, 2006; White, 2009). White (2009) explicitly connected the role of religion in the identity formation of preservice teachers noting, “Therefore as religion shapes how individuals and others construct personal identity, it follows that religion shapes how teachers construct their own identities” (p.863). This is important to address as, by and large, college students in the United States preparing to become teachers have been found to be the most Christian religiously oriented on campus and become more religious over their life time (Kimball, Mitchell, Thornton & Young-Demarco, 2009). The connections between teachers and religion are strong as classroom teachers were also found to be more religious than the general population (Slater, 2008).
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