

Article

Preservice Teacher Views on Critical Religious Literacy to Counteract Epistemic Injustice in Teacher Education Programs

Erin Reid 

Department of Education, St. Mary's University, Calgary, AB T2X 1Z4, Canada; erin.reid@stmu.ca

Abstract: While there has been growing scholarly interest in the role of religious literacy in K-12 teacher education, scholarship on how preservice teachers understand religious literacy as an aim of social justice-oriented education remains limited. This empirical case study of one teacher education program in a Canadian university examines the perspectives of preservice teachers and how they view critical religious literacy (CRL) as a means of addressing the potential harms of religious illiteracy. Using empirical data collected in personal interviews and focus groups, this qualitative case study employed philosophical analysis centered on a theoretical framework that includes the concept of epistemic injustice. The data show that preservice educators feel unprepared to engage with religiously diverse students, to navigate issues related to religious diversity, or to respond to the potential epistemic harms of religious illiteracy, such as exclusion, discrimination, or polarization. As such, this paper contends that to reduce the potential epistemic injustices related to religious illiteracy in their programs and in K-12 classrooms, teacher educators ought to include CRL as an educational aim in preservice teacher education.

Keywords: religious literacy; teacher education; preservice teachers; epistemic injustice



Citation: Reid, Erin. 2024. Preservice Teacher Views on Critical Religious Literacy to Counteract Epistemic Injustice in Teacher Education Programs. *Religions* 15: 677. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15060677>

Academic Editor: Roberto Cipriani

Received: 7 December 2023

Revised: 19 May 2024

Accepted: 23 May 2024

Published: 30 May 2024



Copyright: © 2024 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

In increasingly diverse and pluralistic societies such as Canada, the task of ensuring that our K-12 educators are equipped to engage with and effectively support the students in their classrooms is complex. For several decades now, this complexity has been noted in the field of multicultural education, such as Lisa Delpit (1995), James A. Banks (Banks and Banks 2004; Banks 2006), (Gloria Ladson-Billings 1994; Gillborn and Ladson-Billings 2004), and (Ratna Ghosh 2011; Ghosh and Galczynski 2014). This scholarship has sought to articulate the need for teacher educators to respond to a diversity of race, language, and culture in the K-12 classrooms. When it comes to discussions of religious diversity or the religious identities of K-12 students, or of the educators themselves, until recently, attention has been limited. In the past decade, there has been a small but growing body of scholarship that has noted this gap, and scholars have pointed to the potential harms of ignoring religious identities in K-12 classrooms, such as religious bullying (Chan 2021), religious discrimination or the failure to disrupt religious stereotypes (Aronson et al. 2016; Guo 2015; Patrick 2015).

With rapidly increasing numbers of immigrants to Canada, K-12 schools face numerous challenges related to their important task of promoting civic engagement and values. These newcomers bring a vast array of diverse religious identities, values, beliefs, and practices, leading to potential disagreements, misunderstandings, or simply tensions in Canadian public schools. With a growing focus on teaching for social justice-oriented citizenship in many Canadian K-12 school contexts, teachers are increasingly being equipped to navigate and respond to issues surrounding inequity and oppression (Scott et al. 2022; Smith and Warrican 2021; Westheimer 2015). While teaching for equity, justice, and inclusion is surely an important skill, if religion is ignored as an aspect of this work, we cannot hope to address the ills of religious stereotyping, discrimination, or even religious

extremism. As is so often the case, ignoring issues or sites of tension in the classroom is rarely an effective way forward. And while the capacity to address issues related to religious diversity is arguably important for all K-12 teachers, social studies educators are even more in need of training that equips them to navigate the potential tensions that religiously diverse students may bring into their classrooms.

Given prevalent assumptions about religion in the public sphere in a pluralistic, secular society such as Canada, it is perhaps no surprise that K-12 educators have had a strong tendency to steer clear of conversations about religious diversity that are deemed too sensitive or difficult (Moore 2007; Anderson et al. 2015). However, there is good reason to push back against these underlying and generally unspoken assumptions. First, if we fail to acknowledge or engage with students' religious identities because we assume that religious identity is personal and private, we cannot hope to be truly inclusive educators, particularly not ones who are committed to promoting equity, justice and inclusion as a part of a robust social justice-oriented education (Aronson et al. 2016; Soules and Jafralie 2021; Subedi 2006; White 2010). In addition, if educators unwittingly encourage and value secular views over religious or spiritual ones, they contribute to supporting and maintaining a kind of 'hidden curriculum' that devalues the role of religious or spiritual beliefs or perspectives (Anderson et al. 2015; Hartwick 2015; Gardner et al. 2017).

Ignoring religion in Canadian classrooms also runs the risk of supporting and maintaining widespread Christian privilege that is pervasive in K-12 schools, as well as in the broader societal context. This Christian privilege is largely invisible due to its hegemonic nature, but it is easily seen by considering which holidays are part of the school calendar, when the weekend is scheduled, or even what foods are on offer in the cafeteria (Guo 2015; Joshi 2020). While these examples are so prevalent that they may seem innocuous, for those belonging to a religious minority, they become another reminder of their marginalization ((Blumenfeld et al. 2009a, p. 196). In addition, Christian privilege in Canadian K-12 schools serve to benefit those students who belong to the majority group; whether they consider themselves practicing Christians is irrelevant, as they still experience the benefits of normalization.

One important approach to addressing the significant challenges of religiously diverse K-12 students is to nurture in students those critical democratic educational aims aligned with social justice-oriented citizenship, such as the ability to question authority, engage in critical thinking, and stand up to oppressive systems and structures, such as religious discrimination. Fostering the abilities to critique oppressive systems or institutions is a complex but necessary task for educators who want to thoughtfully teach the history of Christian governed residential schools, for example. But promoting critical democratic aims can also aid K-12 teachers themselves who may be more likely to advocate for students requesting accommodations to celebrate a religious holiday (Blumenfeld et al. 2009b; Blumenfeld and Jaekel 2012; Joshi 2020). However, given the predominant lack of attention to religious identities in current teacher education programs, there is a strong need to strengthen K-12 teachers' understanding of this topic.

The following article presents a philosophical analysis of a small empirical case study of preservice teacher perspectives on the role of critical religious literacy (CRL) to address the current lack of religious literacy among K-12 educators and teacher education programs in the Canadian context.

2. Background

In recent years, a growing body of scholarship has been investigating issues related to religious literacy in public education. From Diane Moore's seminal 2007 work, *Overcoming Religious Literacy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education* in which she advocated for religiously literate public-school educators, and Stephen Prothero's (2007) book *"Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't"* which brought these ideas into popular public discourse, religious studies scholars have been concerned with the lack of understanding of religious differences across societal sectors.

These US-based theoretical contributions for greater religious literacy laid the groundwork for the burgeoning interest in religious literacy amongst educational scholars, spurring scholarship on issues related to religious literacy and K-12 teacher education globally (Seiple and Hoover 2021), including Europe (Hannam and Biesta 2019; Kuusisto et al. 2017; Niemi et al. 2020; Rissanen et al. 2016; Ubani 2018; von Brömssen et al. 2020), the UK (Conroy 2016; Dinham and Francis 2015; Jackson 2004; Jackson and Everington 2017; Shaw 2020), Australia (Burritt 2020; Halafoff et al. 2020) and Pakistan (Ashraf 2019).

Focusing on North American contexts, early empirical studies examining religious literacy and teacher education include Subedi's (2006) qualitative study of 50 preservice teachers' beliefs and practices related to religious diversity, demonstrating a concerning lack of understanding or engagement with religious difference. Moreover, studies such as Soules and Jafralie's (2021) review of teacher education programs concluded that there few teacher education programs provided mandatory training in religious difference or religious literacy. Relatedly, Aronsen et al.'s 2021 document analysis of 70 preservice teachers' reflections on their engagement with issues related to the intersection of race, religious diversity, and Christian privilege demonstrated the wide range of learning responses and understandings of these intersectional issues. Recent empirical studies such as Lester and Chan's (2022) investigation of best practices in equipping teachers with the skills to teach religious literacy or Soules and Pagnoni's (2023) examination of teacher motivations for participating in professional development for greater religious literacy have helped focus the call for increasing religious literacy in teacher education programs. However, empirical studies investigating preservice teacher's views on the role of religious literacy as an educational aim remains limited, specifically in a Canadian or rural contexts, such as the one wherein this study is situated.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. (Critical) Religious Literacy

The concept of religious literacy (RL) that has been in scholarly use across a variety of scholarly disciplines, but this work draws primarily on definitions put forth by educational scholars such as Moore (2007, 2014) and Chan et al. (2019), who highlight social, cultural, and political dimensions of understanding religious identities, beliefs and practices. Moore's definition for the American Academy of Religion describes RL as

...the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses. Specifically, a religiously literate person will possess 1) a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts; and 2) the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place. (Moore 2007).

Thus, RL is an important tool that can help equip K-12 educators navigate some of the challenges posed by religious diversity and create classrooms that are truly inclusive and allow students to bring their whole selves. Here, however, I extend the term RL to Critical religious literacy (CRL) to explicitly address the forms of religious discrimination and intersectional epistemic harms and injustices that may be perpetuated by religious illiteracy. While this framework is addressed in depth elsewhere¹ for the purposes of this article, my conception of CRL builds on previous definitions by proposing an explicitly critical engagement with understanding the way of religious traditions "...may either benefit from, or are oppressed by, existing power dynamics on personal, institutional, and systemic levels" (Reid 2022).

3.2. Epistemic Injustice and Religious Diversity

Miranda Fricker's concept epistemic injustice (2007) has recently been applied to a wide variety of fields (Godbee 2017; Thomas et al. 2020). To date, however, there have been few attempts to apply epistemic injustice to the domains of religion and education (Mercer 2022). This article mobilizes Fricker's notion of *testimonial injustice* to examine the epistemic harms experienced by religious individuals and communities who face credibility challenges because of their religious or spiritual affiliations. Fricker defines *testimonial injustice* as the unjust discrediting of someone due to their religious beliefs. For instance, discrediting a student's classroom input because it is informed by their religious or spiritual identity exemplifies *testimonial injustice* because it undermines their role as a creator of knowledge. Of course, as philosopher Ian Kidd (2017) points out, religion and public education will always be 'tricky' due to the complexities of expressing religious perspectives in public education and the possibilities for different interpretations of those religious sentiments, leading to potential epistemic injustices. Moreover, as Gaile Pohlhaus (2017) highlights, dominant groups might exhibit 'epistemic arrogance', believing their experiences universally represent reality (p. 18). Frequently, this occurs when the dominant group explicitly rejects religious beliefs as a valid form of knowledge. However, these harms do not have to involve overt dismissal or rejection of the religiously identified; rather, they may more frequently occur whenever there is an underlying suspicion of the validity of the religiously identified through what philosopher Kristie Dotson (2011) has described as an 'epistemic silencing'. This epistemic silencing may be subtle and take the form of teachers quietly encouraging those students who express non-religious perspectives over students who express religious or faith-based perspectives, resulting in those religiously identified students feeling devalued and unheard compared to the non-religious students. Thus, the failure to include CRL within teacher education programs in pluralistic societies is arguably a hermeneutic injustice of collective misunderstanding, perpetuating the harms of religious illiteracy.

3.3. Study Overview

Employing a qualitative case study method, this paper examines the experiences of eleven preservice teachers' perceptions of the role of CRL as an educational aim in one Canadian teacher education program in the Prairies. To this end, this study posed the following research questions:

1. What are preservice teachers' views on the role of CRL as an educational aim in teacher education and schools in Canada?
2. What are preservice educators' beliefs about the need for K-12 teachers to be religiously literate?

3.4. Research Design

This research employs a Normative Case Study (NCS) methodology (Thacher 2006; Reid and Levinson 2023) that uses empirical qualitative data collection methods to generate normative theory with the aim of informing policy, curricular, and programmatic decisions in teacher education. NCS was attractive because, as a scholar seeking to make normative suggestions about teacher education, it allowed me to apply philosophical analysis to concrete empirical cases, offering a way to develop rich theory-informed contributions.

4. Participants and Procedures

4.1. Participants

The eleven participants in this study were recruited at the same faculty of education in one medium-sized Canadian university on the Prairies using a variety of recruitment strategies, including sending recruitment messages out on the departmental listserv, posting invitations on student association social media pages, and using posters throughout the university itself. In addition, a number of participants were recruited through someone who had already been recruited suggesting them as potential participants using the snowballing

technique. I successfully recruited a total of 11 preservice teacher participants, with the majority being female (10 female; 1 male) and religiously or spiritually identified.

Of the four major religious or non-religious affiliations indicated by the participants, a significant portion identified as Christian, with four of the eleven participants claiming this identity. Given the location in semi-rural Canadian Prairies, this was unsurprising, as was the fact that all the Christian preservice teachers were white females. However, as seen in Table 1, even within the Christian-identified preservice teachers, there was considerable variety within what are arguably relatively conservative traditions (Baptist, Canadian Reformed, and Latter-Day Saints).

Table 1. Summary of preservice teacher participants by religious affiliation.

Religious/Spiritual Affiliation	Number of Participants
Baptist Christian	1
Canadian Reformed	1
Latter Day Saint (LDS)	2
Muslim	2
Earth-based religion	1
Agnostic/Questioning/Spiritual but not religious	4

There was religious diversity within the two Muslim preservice teachers as well, with one (Zahra) belonging to the Sunni branch, and the other (Arzina) belonging to the Ishmaeli branch of Islam. While Zahra wore a hijab and Arzina did not, both were racialized. The five remaining participants identified in a variety of ways, from following an Earth-Based religion (Heather), to being spiritual but not religious (Isabella), questioning (Hannah, Ashley), or agnostic (Gabe). For two of these participants (Heather and Gabe), religion was not a significant part of their family life growing up. The other two (Isabella and Ashley) had been part of conservative religious communities and decided to take a different path as adults.

In Table 2, I present pseudonyms and brief profiles of each of the eleven participants in this study conducted in the fall of 2019.

Table 2. Profiles of preservice teacher participants.

Participant	Profile
Taylor	A fourth-year female student who identifies as Baptist Christian but who spent many years as a youth in the Middle East.
Arzina	A fourth-year female student who is part of the Ishmaeli Muslim community.
Kayla	A fourth-year female student who is part of the Latter Day Saints (LDS) community.
Ashley	A fourth-year female student who was raised in a conservative Protestant Christian community but currently identifies as questioning.
Emma	A fourth-year female student who is part of the Latter Day Saints (LDS) community.
Isabella	A fifth-year female student from Ireland. She was raised Catholic but identifies as agnostic.
Heather	An After-degree program mature student who identifies as a follower of Earth-Based religion.
Zahra	A fourth-year female Muslim student who was born in the US but raised in the UAE.
Hannah	A fourth-year female student who was raised in a small conservative Protestant Christian group, but now considers herself agnostic or questioning.
Sarah	An After-degree program student who was raised and educated in a conservative Protestant Christian religion (Canadian Reformed Church).
Gabe	A fourth-year male student who identifies as ‘spiritual but not religious’.

4.2. Procedures

Participants were contacted via email and invited to participate in a one-hour individual interview on campus and a one-hour focus group with other participants. Eleven preservice teachers participated in individual interviews and seven participated in the focus group. Individual one-on-one interviews provided an opportunity for the participants to reflect on and share their perspectives about religion and religious identities in a safe environment, while the focus group provided an opportunity for the participants to share their views with their peers and engage in dialogue about issues of religion. All interviews were recorded with permission. Interviews were then uploaded to NVivo 12 and codes, and patterns were categorized in four overarching themes: (1) religion is tricky; (2) religion as a source of harm; (3) We're not equipped! Religious illiteracy in teacher education; (4) CRL to counteract the harms of religious illiteracy. This paper presents findings from the fourth of these main themes: CRL to counteract the harms of religious illiteracy. To ensure all participants were working with the same understanding of the term CRL, all interviews began with an introduction of foundational terminology, including CRL and citizenship.

5. Results

5.1. CRL Can Counteract Harms Resulting from of Religious Illiteracy

This theme was constructed from the responses participants gave when asked why and how CRL could be useful to them as teachers. Responses were varied, but participants all spoke of how greater CRL could serve as an antidote to a range of perceived harms. These responses were organized into the following subthemes: (1) counteract religious stereotyping, discrimination and microaggressions; (2) counteract harm of excluding non-religious identities; (3) counteract political polarization; (4) counteract harm through promoting dialogue.

5.2. Counteract Religious Stereotyping, Discrimination, and Microaggressions

All preservice teacher participants expressed the belief that becoming more religiously literate would be an important aim of their teacher education program. They indicated that they felt ill equipped to navigate instances of religious discrimination, stereotyping, and bullying in their classrooms. It is no surprise that those who had experienced living in communities with religious diversity or living in a community in which they were part of a religiously marginalized group had an immediate strong understanding and belief in the need for religious literacy. For example, as an Earth-Based religious practitioner living in a rural LDS community, Heather was a witness to her child's experiences with religious discrimination in her school. Similarly, growing up in a Muslim-dominant country in the Gulf region, Taylor had experienced what it is to be a religious minority. This experience provided her with an openness to religious diversity that she found lacking when she returned to her parent's rural Canadian prairie home. She noted,

I lived in the Middle East. I met Muslims all the time. And then I came home. I came here and people would tell me all sorts of weird things that Muslim people did. [And I would think] Well, what Muslims have you met exactly? What are you talking about?

This awareness of diversity within religious traditions allowed Taylor to develop a deeper understanding into the pervasiveness of religious discrimination. Tellingly, she went on to note how the media is problematic as this is where most people gain exposure to religious diversity. This view was echoed by Heather who voiced concern about Islamophobia based on stereotypes in the media, noting "They've [religious people] been painted as negative, like the idea of the Ku Klux Klan as the representative of Christianity. But that's how people are painting Muslims now."

Heather and Taylor were not the only participants to point to stereotyping and discrimination as issues experienced by the religiously marginalized. For those participants who were themselves part of a religious minority and racialized, there were immediate connections made between the lack of religious literacy in the general population and the

discrimination they experienced in their daily lives. For example, Zahra, the one participant who wore a hijab, was keenly aware of how religious illiterate the general population is. She noted how "...everything we know about religion nowadays mainly comes from the media, which is the worst source to learn anything because it's a subjective opinion and full of biases." Here, Zahra is pointing to how not only is the lack of education about religious diversity a problem, but also how religious minorities are portrayed in the media. As she noted,

I think we do talk about religion, but we only talk about religion negatively. It's discussed. But I think we're too busy talking about what we hear on TV. You know, like Islam, you hear about that a lot, but you never hear about it positively. So, we *are* talking about it. We're just talking about it the wrong way.

Mitigating the potential harms created by religious illiteracy amongst educators by implementing more CRL into teacher education curriculum is clearly articulated by Zahra when she noted, "... if we implemented it [CRL] in our curriculum, then that will not only educate people on the religion, but it also *eliminates hate deeply embedded in our society based on not knowing*." Indeed, it is apparent that as a visible racialized Muslim woman, Zahra's experiences living in semi-rural city on the Canadian Prairies granted her a deeper understanding of the issues facing those racialized religious minorities such as herself. She commented

...If there was a spectrum it would be Dubai [on one end] and this city would be at opposite ends and I experienced many, many [acts of discrimination]. I had very bad experiences targeted towards my faith. I was very racialized. I would sit in class. ... I was in one of my first classes at the university [and I sat] next to this guy. ... He got up and changed spots. And this was common. This happened a lot...the staring. It was hard to make friends. It was really hard to feel welcome.

The student's act of switching seats when Zahra sat down beside him is an example of what has been described as a form of microaggression. According to Sue et al., microaggressions are those "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults that potentially have harmful or unpleasant psychological impact on the target person or group" (2007, p. 273). Indeed, the deliberate act of switching seats communicates clearly to Zahra that she is being excluded because of her identity. The regular occurrence of those incidents creates a heavy burden on recipient, in this case Zahra, one of the hallmarks of a microaggression. Arguably, these experiences also align with what Chan (2021) has described as religious bullying, wherein the perpetrator seeks to disempower those they see as inferior due to religious aspects of their identity. Moreover, facing discrimination on the triple axis of religion, race, and gender, Zahra's experiences are a clear example of how Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991) accurately describes the heavier burden to carry for those with these intersectional identities. As Zahra goes on to explain,

I have no choice whether or not people know I'm Muslim because I wear the hijab. And not just students, administrators, other teachers. And that comes with a huge responsibility because I shouldn't have to be responsible for representing an entire faith. Because that's not my job.

Zahra's lived experiences of religiously based discrimination positioned her well to develop insights into how teaching for religious literacy could serve as a powerful means of mitigating harms created by religious discrimination, noting that "... if we had world religions [as a course], maybe that would not just make students more comfortable, but it would make teachers like me more comfortable teaching a class." Again, as a preservice teacher who is also a visible religious minority, Zahra understands how including CRL in teacher education is necessary to equip those teachers to educate for CRL themselves. She notes how the benefits of including CRL in teacher education programs impact not only the students in their future classrooms, but also themselves as K-12 teachers. Finally,

Zahra notes how including CRL in teacher education will serve to relieve those religiously marginalized preservice teachers, and their students, of the burden of having to advocate for themselves and their communities:

People who are as a visible religious group like me -- wearing the hijab -- people know I'm Muslim. And especially with what's going on in the media right now, you are going to have to constantly advocate for yourself and defend yourself just constantly against stereotypes. . . .

Another place where participants experienced religiously motivated microaggressions was in their practicum placements. In institutions in smaller cities with connections to rural communities, such as the one in this study, preservice teachers are frequently placed in rural schools for their practicum placements. In the area in which this study occurred, these small towns are often mostly white and conservative Christian communities, posing another layer of challenges for those who do not share those identities. For example, Arzina, who like Zahra is racialized and a devout Muslim, spent one of her placements in a majority white conservative Christian town. She too, encountered microaggressions as she describes in the conversation between her and a school custodian when he asked her if she was Muslim:

And so, he was like, "Oh, so do you pray five times a day? Who's covering you when you're not there?" I was like "Actually we only pray three times a day. So, it's a little bit different, I guess. But we have our own traditions and values." And so, he was like, "Oh, so you are not one of the *true* Muslims?"

While Arzina was quick to point out that she understood that these comments were not spoken with the intention of harm, her story highlights the unequal burden that is placed on the marginalized to educate the other when they encounter this sort of microaggression. Certainly, it is noteworthy that this moment came to mind when I asked Arzina about her experiences feeling marginalized or excluded due to her religious identity.

This sense of being marginalized as a Muslim in her practicum placement was echoed by Zahra who noted that not only did she experience discomfort at being at a school with a small number of Muslims, but that the few Muslim students at the school suffered as well:

So, one hundred percent it [ignoring religious identities] has a negative impact because it's part of your student's identity and they're not going to start that conversation. Because why would they? Because if they do, that's getting them feeling more different. So, it's that fine line between [being] inclusive and making people feel different.

Indeed, without education about how to engage effectively with religiously diverse students, educators may unintentionally harm their students through a lack of religious literacy. These harms related to religious diversity are complex in that there is a potential for harm on two fronts. First, in their efforts to treat everyone equally, they may engage in the harm of 'misrecognition' wherein they do not fully recognize and value the diverse aspects of their students' identities. Second, there is also the potential that they further marginalize a student belonging to a religious minority by asking them to represent this aspect of their identity. For students who may already feel excluded and 'different' than the majority, this may serve to increase their feelings of marginalization (Guo 2015; Ipgrave 2010; Moore 2007).

One intriguing finding from this study is that it was not only the Muslim or non-religious participants who experienced this form of marginalization or harm. This unintentional exclusion or 'othering' was also experienced by white Christian preservice teachers from one denomination or tradition working in a school that was in a community predominantly affiliated with a different tradition. This was the case for Taylor, the Baptist preservice teacher, who was placed in a Catholic school, as she describes below:

I ended up in a district where religion actually was part of. . . [the curriculum]. The school still felt really weird because the school was Catholic. My teacher was definitely not, so I was in a weird position. . . .

Although there was no requirement for Taylor to teach religion from the Catholic tradition, the fact that the school was infused with religious teachings that did not align with her own deeply held beliefs was a source of discomfort to her. Adding to that was that the teacher she was placed with was not Catholic and had little regard for religion. While those uncomfortable circumstances did not prevent Taylor from finishing her practicum, it was an ongoing source of tension for her. Significantly, one of her main concerns with the situation described above is that it was never addressed by the field service team or in any of her classes. Rather, preservice teachers were simply placed in a practicum in a religious school with no discussion of what that might entail, leaving Taylor to navigate this challenging situation with no support.

5.3. Counteract Harm of Excluding Non-Religious Students

However, the potential harms of excluding students based on their faith identities was not limited to those who identified as religious. They were also experienced by those who identified as agnostic or spiritual but not religious. In speaking about the possibility of brining religious literacy into the K-12 education system, Sarah commented the following:

If we're bringing religious dialogs into classrooms, I wonder how we could do it in a way where students who don't really have any religious or spiritual upbringing feel included in a part of the conversation. . .that they have a voice as well.

Interestingly, it was Sarah, one of the most religiously conservative and devout participants in this study, who brought up this concern about attending to the identities of those non-religiously affiliated. As someone who grew up in a homogenous religious community, and who received all her education in private religious schools in her own tradition, she demonstrates a keen sense of the importance of belonging, one of Marcus' *Three Bs Framework* (2018). Her awareness of these tensions related to religious and non-religious identities in educational contexts highlights the importance of including non-religious identities in conversations about religious literacy in our schools. Indeed, as scholars have noted, for a CRL framework to be truly inclusive and effective, it must attend to those who belong to a wide spectrum of non-religious identities (Reid 2022). Moreover, her comments underscore the unique challenges for preservice teachers in similar rural communities in the Western Canada and other milieus.

5.4. Counteract Polarization

Participants described ways in which not being religiously literate or having the skills to discuss religious issues in the classroom could lead to increase a sense of alienation or being 'othered' which in turn, could serve to increase polarization in communities. They discussed how when there is a complete failure to engage with an aspect of someone's identity, that may lead to those students who do not feel recognized for their religious identities to distance themselves from those who do not belong to their community even more, leading to increasing levels of polarization. For example, in describing the ways that CRL could serve to better equip preservice teachers, she notes that mere tolerance of the 'other' is not enough:

But now I think like there needs to be that one more step, which is what I feel like they focused on us. And it's like cultural integration and actually embracing other people around you and not the idea of 'us and them' kind of thing, but just being us, which I think is important in schools.

This understanding that CRL can be a powerful tool for educators to help address increasing levels of polarization across global contexts (Henry 2021) is echoed by Heather, who mentioned, "...if you don't talk about politics and you don't talk about religion, then people are just going to sit in their own camps all the time." In a similar vein, in describing the impacts of religious illiteracy in educational contexts, Ashley stated, "I think

there's a fear in people but it's because of those either stereotypes or they don't have the education. . . And then that creates that like divide for sure."

5.5. CRL for Facilitating Dialogue

One of the most salient subthemes found within both the focus group discussions and personal interviews was that of recognizing that CRL can serve as a powerful tool to facilitate dialogue amongst preservice teachers and their practicum students. Indeed, many responses from preservice participants describe the perceived benefits of drawing on CRL as a pedagogical approach to mitigate the kinds of harms created by a lack of religious literacy—both within their teacher education programs and their practicum classrooms. Notably, almost all participants described the experience of having a space to focus on issues related to religious identities in educational settings as refreshing or new—something they had not experienced before, particularly not within a higher education milieu.

As an example, Heather spoke of how, as a result of participating in this study, she had begun to open herself up to having conversations with others from religiously different backgrounds:

I have initiated a lot more conversations. I've actually had really good feedback. I had a great conversation with a Mormon this morning who's in my class. He was just like, "this is great, we do need to talk about it!" And it was a surprising reaction. And then other people start talking about it and the questions start being asked. . . it was this really open discussion.

Arguably, Heather's engagement with this study, and in particular her exposure to CRL as a conceptual framework to engage with religious diversity, equipped her with vocabulary, skills, and attitudes to initiate and navigate conversations that would have been difficult in the past. In her interviews, Heather described the difficulties she and her family had experienced living as religious minorities (Earth-Based practitioners) in a community that is predominantly LDS.

It was not only Heather, who considers herself very progressive and open-minded, who spoke of an improved capacity for engaging in dialogue about religious differences. Sarah, perhaps the most religiously conservative participant, also discussed how her thinking had changed because of being exposed to CRL, stating, "I've been thinking about ways I could become more religiously literate. And one of the things I was [thinking of] doing was actually visiting different churches and like maybe some mosques." For someone who was raised and educated entirely within one conservative Christian community until her teacher education, this indication of openness to understanding religious difference is significant. This openness to speaking about religious difference with others was echoed by Ashley, as she described her experiences in the focus group:

Now that I got to talk to Heather and Taylor and hear their knowledge about it [CRL], it makes me think about. . . my lack of knowledge about it and how I do have fears and insecurities about religious literacy in the classroom. But talking to these ladies, they kind of change things. . . you know, I was thinking about what I said in the interview with you. And now I'm thinking more. I'm trying to figure all that out, but it's super cool for me to hear different people's perspectives and experiences.

As someone who had had negative experiences growing up in a conservative religious community, Ashley came into the interview process somewhat hesitant about the topic, although she was curious enough to sign up to participate in this study. Her comments above underscore the power of having the space to discuss issues related to CRL as in the focus group dialogue. Hearing others' views about religious differences had a powerful impact on some, such as Ashley, who came away with an openness to consider religion as a valuable aspect of identity.

5.6. Discussion

Unfortunately, racially and religiously motivated hate crimes have increased significantly across Canada, from 530 police reported cases of religiously motivated hate crimes in 2022 to 886 in 2021 (Statistics Canada)². With the Gaza–Israel conflict re-igniting and erupting in October 2023, these religiously motivated hate crimes have sky-rocketed, with worrying implications for teachers across all levels of educational institutions (Global News, 11 November 2023)³.

In educational settings, religious discrimination and stereotyping, and religious bullying continue to present serious challenges that may be linked to a deficiency in CRL (Burritt 2020; Chan 2021; Walker et al. 2021). With mounting evidence of these challenges faced by religious minorities in K-12 schools, the imperative for teacher training programs to equip educators to counteract these issues has taken on new urgency (Gardner et al. 2017; Soules and Jafralie 2021). The findings from this research corroborated the numerous challenges stemming from a lack of CRL, broadly speaking. Intriguingly, this study also revealed instances where religiously identified preservice teachers faced intra-religious discrimination, as in the Latter-Day Saint student who felt out of place in a Catholic school environment. Given these complexities, there's a compelling argument for integrating CRL into teacher education to ensure all educators are prepared for diverse religious and non-religious students.

Yet, this integration presents challenges. For teacher educators, an effective CRL approach must do more than impart religious fundamentals, such as key dates, terms, and factual information. To sidestep contributing to religiously linked epistemic injustices, educators must consider hermeneutical perspectives, including how religious or spiritual insights contribute to knowledge formation. A comprehensive CRL approach, encompassing reflections on intersecting power dynamics, offers an alternative. As Kidd suggests, truly understanding a religious perspective demands placing it within a wholistic context, "...rather than isolating it from its supporting context of thought and sensibility, thereby consigning it to unintelligibility" (p. 392).

Moreover, it is worth considering Polhaus' notion of 'fractured epistemic trust' in this discussion because it describes how even when religious identities are tolerated in the classroom, if this space is permeated by an underlying epistemic distrust, it cannot provide a brave space for students with religious perspectives to fully express themselves (in Kidd et al. 2017, p. 19). Arguably then, epistemic injustice, whether it is in the form of blatant exclusion or subtle erosion of trust, leads to what Polhaus terms as "willful hermeneutical ignorance", referring to a conscious choice to overlook certain facets of our world by not equipping oneself with the necessary knowledge to understand them deeply (p. 17). Within teacher training, sidelining spiritual or religious viewpoints both reduces epistemic trust and deprives preservice teachers (and consequently their K-12 students) of opportunities to critically assess power dynamics and oppression associated with religion.

6. Conclusions

This research contributes to ongoing scholarship on the role of RL in both K-12 and teacher training in pluralistic societies such as Canada. Educator religious illiteracy can be viewed as a form of epistemic injustice towards students with religious affiliations; thus, promoting CRL in teacher training becomes crucial in its capacity to serve as a counter-measure against unintentional biases, prejudices, and other harmful effects of religious illiteracy. While integrating CRL as a framework within teacher education programs is obviously not without challenges, equipping the new generation of preservice teachers with the skills, knowledge, and opportunities to practice fostering dialogue that engages deeply and effectively with religious diversity is arguably more important than ever in the complex classrooms of the contemporary Canadian context.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by McGill University and University of Lethbridge (McGill University protocol code: 247-1118, approved 30 November 2018; University of Leth-bridge: protocol code: 2018-123, approved 10 December 2018).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in this study.

Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors on request.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ The justification for the necessity of my proposed CRL framework is the focus of my forthcoming book.
- ² <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3510006601> (accessed on 24 April 2024).
- ³ <https://globalnews.ca/news/10085826/montreal-israel-hamas-conflict-violence-jewish-schools/> (accessed on 24 April 2024).

References

- Anderson, Derek, Tanya Cook, and Holly Mathys. 2015. Religious Beliefs, Knowledge, and Teaching Actions: Elementary Teacher Candidates and World Religions. *Religion and Education* 42: 268–88. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Aronson, Brittany, Tasneem Amatullah, and Judson Laughter. 2016. Culturally Relevant Education: Extending the Conversation to Religious Diversity. *Multicultural Perspectives* 18: 140–49. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Ashraf, Muhammad Azeem. 2019. Exploring the Potential of Religious Literacy in Pakistani Education. *Religions* 10: 429. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Banks, James A. 2006. *Race, Culture, and Education: The Selected Works of James A. Banks*. London: Routledge. Available online: <http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip064/2005033743.html> (accessed on 19 April 2024).
- Banks, James A., and Cherry A. McGee Banks. 2004. *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education*, 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. Available online: <http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/toc/wiley041/2002156022.html> (accessed on 19 April 2024).
- Blumenfeld, Warren J., and Kathryn Jaekel. 2012. Exploring Levels of Christian Privilege Awareness among Preservice Teachers. *Journal of Social Issues* 68: 128–44. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Blumenfeld, Warren J., Khyati Y. Joshi, and Ellen E. Fairchild. 2009a. Christian Teachers and Christian Privilege. In *Investigating Christian Privilege and Religious Oppression in the United States*. Leiden: Brill, pp. 133–49. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Blumenfeld, Warren J., Khyati Y. Joshi, and Ellen E. Fairchild. 2009b. Christian Privilege in the United States: An Overview. In *Investigating Christian Privilege and Religious Oppression in the United States*. Leiden: Brill, pp. 1–22. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Burritt, Amanda M. 2020. Religious World Views, Diverse Classrooms and Curriculum. *Religion & Education* 47: 153–69. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Chan, W. Y. Alice. 2021. *Teaching Religious Literacy to Combat Religious Bullying: Insights from North American Secondary Schools*, 1st ed. London: Routledge. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Chan, W. Y. Alice, Hiren Mistry, Erin Reid, Arzina Zaver, and Sabrina Jafralie. 2019. Recognition of Context and Experience: A Civic-Based Canadian Conception of Religious Literacy. *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 41: 255–71. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Conroy, James. 2016. Religious Education and Religious Literacy—A Professional Aspiration? *British Journal of Religious Education* 38: 163–76. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Crenshaw, Kimberle. 1991. Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review* 43: 1241–99. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Delpit, Lisa. 1995. *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*. New York: New Press.
- Dinham, Adam, and Matthew Francis, eds. 2015. *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice*, 1st ed. Bristol: Bristol University Press. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Dotson, Kristie. 2011. Tracking epistemic violence, tracking practices of silencing. *Hypatia* 26: 236–57. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Gardner, Ryan S., Kate Soules, and John Valk. 2017. The Urgent Need for Teacher Preparation in Religious and Secular Worldview Education. *Religious Education* 112: 242–54. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Ghosh, Ratna. 2011. The Liberating Potential of Multiculturalism in Canada: Ideals and Realities. *Canadian Issues*, 3–8.
- Ghosh, Ratna, and Mariusz Galczyński. 2014. *Redefining Multicultural Education: Inclusion and the Right to Be Different*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press.
- Gillborn, David, and Gloria Ladson-Billings. 2004. *The RoutledgeFalmer Reader in Multicultural Education*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Godbee, Beth. 2017. Writing Up: How Assertions of Epistemic Rights Counter Epistemic Injustice. *College English* 79: 593–618. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Guo, Yan. 2015. Pre-Service Teachers and Muslim Parents: Exploring Religious Diversity in Canadian Public Schools. *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education* 9: 189–204. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Halafoff, Anna, Andrew Singleton, Gary Bouma, and Mary Lou Rasmussen. 2020. Religious literacy of Australia's Gen Z teens: Diversity and social inclusion. *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 41: 195–213.

- Hannam, Patricia, and Gert Biesta. 2019. Religious Education, a Matter of Understanding? Reflections on the Final Report of the Commission on Religious Education. *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 40: 55–63. [CrossRef]
- Hartwick, James M. M. 2015. Public School Teachers' Beliefs in and Conceptions of God: What Teachers Believe, and Why It Matters. *Religion & Education* 42: 122–46. [CrossRef]
- Henry, Andrew M. 2021. Religious Literacy in Social Media: A Need for Strategic Amplification. *Religion & Education* 48: 89–101. [CrossRef]
- Igrave, Julia. 2010. Including the Religious Viewpoints and Experiences of Muslim Students in an Environment That Is Both Plural and Secular. *Journal of International Migration and Integration/Revue de l'integration et de La Migration Internationale* 11: 5–22. [CrossRef]
- Jackson, Robert. 2004. *Rethinking Religious Education and Plurality: Issues in Diversity and Pedagogy*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Jackson, Robert, and Judith Everington. 2017. Teaching Inclusive Religious Education Impartially: An English Perspective. *British Journal of Religious Education* 39: 7–24. [CrossRef]
- Joshi, Khyati Y. 2020. *White Christian Privilege: The Illusion of Religious Equality in America*. New York: New York University Press.
- Kidd, Ian James. 2017. Epistemic injustice and religion. In *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*. London: Routledge, pp. 386–96.
- Kidd, Ian James, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus. 2017. Introduction to the Routledge handbook of epistemic injustice. In *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*. London: Routledge, pp. 1–9.
- Kuusisto, Arniika, Saila Poulter, and Arto Kallioniemi. 2017. Finnish Pupils' Views on the Place of Religion in School. *Religious Education* 112: 110–22. [CrossRef]
- Ladson-Billings, Gloria. 1994. *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*, 1st ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers. Available online: <http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy0706/94010316-b.html> (accessed on 5 May 2024).
- Lester, Emile, and W. Alice Chan. 2022. *Equipping Educators to Teach Religious Literacy: Lessons from a Teacher Education Program in the American South*. London: Routledge.
- Mercer, Joyce Ann. 2022. Epistemic Injustice and Religious Education. *Religious Education* 117: 1–3. [CrossRef]
- Moore, Diane L. 2007. *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education*, 1st ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Moore, Diane L. 2014. Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: Expanding the Boundaries of Religious Education. *Religious Education* 10: 379–89. [CrossRef]
- Niemi, Pia-Maria, Anuleena Kimanen, and Arto Kallioniemi. 2020. Including or Excluding Religion and Worldviews in Schools? Finnish Teachers' and Teacher Students' Perceptions. *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 41: 114–28. [CrossRef]
- Patrick, Margaretta L. 2015. A call for more religious education in the secondary social studies curriculum of western Canadian provinces. *Curriculum Inquiry* 45: 154–75. [CrossRef]
- Pohlhaus, Gaile. 2017. Varieties of Epistemic Injustice 1. In *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*. London: Routledge.
- Prothero, Stephen R. 2007. *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—And Doesn't*, 1st ed. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Reid, Ellis, and Meira Levinson. 2023. Normative Case Studies as Democratic Education. In *The Cambridge Handbook of Democratic Education*. Edited by Douglas Yacek, Johannes Drerup and Julian Culp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 129–45. [CrossRef]
- Reid, Erin. 2022. Considering the Role of Critical Religious Literacy in Canadian Teacher Education Programs. Ph.D. dissertation, McGill University, Montréal, QC, Canada.
- Rissanen, Inkeri, Elina Kuusisto, and Arniika Kuusisto. 2016. Developing Teachers' Intercultural Sensitivity: Case Study on a Pilot Course in Finnish Teacher Education. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 59: 446–56. [CrossRef]
- Scott, David, Jennifer Tupper, and Jessica Gobran. 2022. Framing Citizenship and Citizenship: Formation for Preservice Teachers. *Democracy & Education* 30: 2.
- Seiple, Chris, and Dennis R. Hoover. 2021. *The Routledge Handbook of Religious Literacy, Pluralism, and Global Engagement*, 1st ed. London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group. [CrossRef]
- Shaw, Martha. 2020. Towards a Religiously Literate Curriculum—Religion and Worldview Literacy as an Educational Model. *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 41: 150–61. [CrossRef]
- Smith, Patriann, and S. Joel Warrican. 2021. Critical Awareness for Literacy Teachers and Educators in Troubling Times. *Literacy Practice and Research* 46: 2. [CrossRef]
- Soules, Kate, and Gayle Pagnoni. 2023. Understanding Educator Motivations for Participating in Religious Literacy Professional Development. In *Religion, the First Amendment, and Public Schools*. Edited by Aaron Bodles, Elizabeth Bellows, Elizabeth E. Saylor, Sohyun An and Lisa B. Buchanan. Charlotte: Information Age Publishing.
- Soules, Kate, and Sabrina Jafralie. 2021. Religious Literacy in Teacher Education. *Religion & Education* 48: 37–56. [CrossRef]
- Subedi, Binaya. 2006. Preservice Teachers' Beliefs and Practices: Religion and Religious Diversity. *Equity & Excellence in Education* 39: 227–38. [CrossRef]
- Thacher, David. 2006. The normative case study. *American Journal of Sociology* 111: 1631–676. [CrossRef]
- Thomas, Alik, Ayelet Kuper, Benjamin Chin-Yee, and Melissa Park. 2020. What Is 'Shared' in Shared Decision-Making? Philosophical Perspectives, Epistemic Justice, and Implications for Health Professions Education. *Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice* 26: 409–18. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

- Ubani, Martin. 2018. When Teachers Face Religion in Public Education. Case Examples from Finnish Public Education. *Journal of Religious Education* 66: 139–50. [[CrossRef](#)]
- von Brömssen, Kerstin, Heinz Ivkovits, and Graeme Nixon. 2020. Religious Literacy in the Curriculum in Compulsory Education in Austria, Scotland and Sweden—A Three-Country Policy Comparison. *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 41: 132–49. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Walker, Nathan C., W. Y. Alice Chan, and H. Bruce McEver. 2021. Religious Literacy: Civic Education for a Common Good. *Religion & Education* 48: 1–16. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Westheimer, Joel. 2015. *What Kind of Citizen?: Educating Our Children for the Common Good*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- White, Kimberly. 2010. Asking Sacred Questions: Understanding Religion's Impact on Teacher Belief and Action. *Religion & Education* 37: 40–59. [[CrossRef](#)]

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.