

Building Bridges, Co-Creating Knowledge: Preservice Teachers Navigating Worldview and Equity in Practicum

Abstract

Research Overview

With increasing cultural and religious diversity in K-12 classrooms and rising political polarization, preservice teachers (PSTs) face complex challenges navigating their personal worldview identities alongside professional expectations for inclusive practice. This pilot study explores how PSTs with diverse worldview identities (religious, spiritual, secular) negotiate practicum placements in faith-based and secular contexts.

Purpose of Study

This paper draws on a 2025 pilot study examining preservice teacher identity formation across faith-based and secular practicum contexts to interrogate the meaning and function of religious literacy in teacher education. I conceptualize religious literacy not as the accumulation of discrete knowledge about traditions, but as a critical, relational, and contextually responsive practice that enables educators to interpret, engage, and navigate religious and non-religious worldviews within pluralistic classrooms.

Using qualitative data from interviews and focus groups, the study explores how preservice teachers make sense of their own beliefs and those of others, often revealing tensions shaped by institutional norms, perceived professional risks, and uneven power dynamics. Findings suggest that religious literacy “works” not as a measurable competency alone, but as a dialogic capacity evidenced through increased reflexivity, reduced essentialism, and greater pedagogical confidence in addressing religious difference.

The paper further argues that religious literacy must, at its core, be critical, as it is inseparable from questions of power: whose knowledge is legitimized, which identities are silenced, and how secular and faith-based spaces differently regulate religious expression.

In this way, critical religious literacy (Reid, 2024) emerges as a key approach for navigating the complex terrain religious pluralism in educational contexts.

It is well established that teachers' identities and beliefs shape their professional identities and practices (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Moreover, educational scholars have examined how teachers' own religious beliefs impact their willingness or ability to engage with religious diversity (Blumenfeld & Jaekel, 2012; Hartwick, 2015; Gellel & Buchanan, 2011; Nelson & Yang, 2023). Indeed, some scholars have noted that K-12 educators in secular school settings often feel a need to hide their own religious or non-religious identities from their students and colleagues (Hartwick, 2014). However, little is known about how preservice teachers' religious or non-religious identities impact their experiences in faith-based vs. secular K-12 practicum placements. As preservice teachers transition from learners to professionals, their identity formation is complex, particularly in practicums where personal values intersect with institutional expectations (Tran & Dee, 2023). These interactions present unique challenges and opportunities in both faith-based and secular schools that remains underexplored.

Research Methods

Using a mixed-methods case study design, this pilot study engaged a group of second-year PSTs (N=12) in a Canadian teacher education program during Fall 2025 practicum placements. Data collection included: (1) a quantitative survey measuring worldview identity salience, identity congruence with practicum context, equity engagement, and professional wellbeing; (2) semi-structured interviews and focus groups exploring critical incidents, identity negotiation strategies, and support needs. Participants represented varied worldview identities and were placed across faith-based and public school contexts. Thematic analysis identified patterns in navigation strategies, while correlational analysis examined relationships between identity congruence and professional outcomes.

Results and Discussion

Preliminary findings reveal significant identity work occurring at the intersection of worldview commitments and equity practice. PSTs experiencing identity dissonance—

misalignment between personal worldview and institutional context—reported employing diverse navigation strategies including compartmentalization, selective disclosure, values negotiation, and mentor-seeking. Notably, several PSTs in faith-based placements reported pressure to adopt particular religious identities to enhance employment prospects, raising authenticity concerns. Survey data indicated negative correlations between identity dissonance and both teaching efficacy and wellbeing. Equity-related topics, particularly LGBTQ2S+ inclusion, emerged as primary sites of tension regardless of placement context. PSTs expressed desire for explicit preparation addressing worldview diversity and contested equity terrain, yet most reported minimal program support for these navigations.

Implications

These preliminary findings suggest teacher education programs must explicitly address worldview diversity as integral to professional identity development. Practicum preparation should equip PSTs with strategies for navigating identity-equity tensions while maintaining authenticity and professional ethics.