

Amplifying Religious Literacy Education through the Frameworks of Global Competence

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Abstract

Since the turn of the millennium, many individuals and groups, including Diane Moore, Stephen Prothero, the American Academy of Religion, and The National Council for the Social Studies, have advocated for better religious literacy education (RLE) in K-12 curriculum and public schools [1-5]. Despite these calls, RLE has yet to make significant inroads in K-12 curriculum and public schools. This paper aims to define religious literacy and RLE, provide current rationales for its inclusion in K-12 curriculum and public schools, identify barriers to RLE, and explore the potential of global competence in promoting RLE.

Keywords: Cultural Studies, Global Competence, Global Literacy, Intercultural Competence, Religious Literacy, Religious Literacy Education

1. Introduction

Since the early 2000s, numerous individuals and organizations, such as Diane Moore, Stephen Prothero, the American Academy of Religion (2010), and The National Council for the Social Studies, have advocated for the improvement of religious literacy education (RLE) in K-12 curricula and public schools [1-5]. Despite the urgency and rationale behind these appeals, RLE has yet to make substantial inroads in K-12 curriculum and public schools. The purpose of this paper is to explore the following questions. What is religious literacy and RLE in K-12 curriculum and public schools? What rationales are used to highlight the importance of RLE in K-12 curriculum and public schools? What are the barriers to RLE in K-12 curriculum and public schools? How is global competence a better rationale for RLE in K-12 curriculum and public schools?

2. Defining Religious Literacy

Post-9/11, the urgency of comprehending Islam and religion in general in K-12 public education was palpable. Warren Nord of the University of North Carolina and Charles Haynes of the First Amendment Center were pivotal in establishing the 'why' and a framework for RLE prior to 9/11. However, the cultural shock of 9/11 intensified the urgent need for RLE in K-12 public schools, making understanding the definition of religious literacy and, with it, RLE crucial to K-12 curriculum and public schools.

In November 2006, Diane Moore of Harvard Divinity School made a significant contribution to the discourse on RLE. Her rigorous definition of religious literacy, published in a World History Connected article, preceded her influential text, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education*, which provided a thorough understanding of RLE in K-12 public schools.

"Religious literacy entails 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" [6].

Moore's definition of religious literacy is rooted in disciplinary knowledge and concepts while it hints at disciplinary skills and tools. There is much to appreciate about this approach, rooted in inquiry, like much of current social studies education. There is also much to desire in this definition as well. With the language

of the disciplinary skills and tools being unspecified, a focus on disciplinary knowledge and concepts will likely result when applied in the classroom. Disciplinary knowledge and concepts are important but disciplinary skills and tools have more power especially through transference to interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary settings.

Following Moore's definition, Stephen Prothero of Boston University defined the term in his 2007 text, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't*, as follows: "Religious literacy refers to the ability to understand and use the religious terms, symbols, images, beliefs, practices, scriptures, heroes, themes, and stories that are employed in American public life" [2]. In deriving the definition, Prothero built on E.D. Hirsch's concept of cultural literacy found in his seminal text, *Cultural Literacy* (1987), but extended it to include religious doctrines and narratives, noting that religions are fluid and not fixed. As with Moore's definition, there is much to appreciate from Prothero's definition, but it also has the same challenge as Moore's. It is focused chiefly on disciplinary knowledge and concepts with even fewer specifics for disciplinary skills and tools than Moore's. Again, like the other definition, a focus on disciplinary knowledge and concepts will likely be the result in the classroom with the same disadvantage in the lack of transference.

In 2010, the American Academy of Religion in Schools Task Force, chaired by Diane Moore, published the *Guidelines for Teaching about Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States*. In the guidelines document, the task force defines religious literacy as follows:

"religious literacy is defined in the following way: the ability to discern and analyze the intersections of religion with social, political, and cultural life. Specifically, a religiously literate person will possess: a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices, and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions and religious expressions as they arose out of and continue to shape and be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts; and the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place" [3].

Of course, this definition draws heavily on Moore's work. As such, it receives the same criticism for being too unspecific in disciplinary skills and tools. These disciplinary skills and tools are important since they can be utilized in cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary ways.

The criticisms echoed above about the definition's lack of disciplinary tools and skills were addressed in the *Religious Studies Companion Document for the C3 Framework* (RSCD), published in 2017 as a supplement to *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History*, published by the National Council for

the Social Studies in 2013. The definition incorporates the exact wording of the AAR guidelines document, so it does not need to be repeated. In addition to the definition, the RSCD provides educators the subsequent disciplinary skills and tools needed to move RLE beyond disciplinary knowledge and concepts to a more portable definition that will help students better understand religions in the classroom now and in the future outside the walls of the classroom. The writing team for this document consisted of a group of educators from K-12 public schools, higher education, and nonformal education, including, not surprisingly, Diane Moore. The cultural studies method advanced by Religion and Public Life at Harvard Divinity School, headed by Diane Moore, becomes core to the disciplinary tools and skills with the addition of the belief, behaviors, and belonging framework adapted from Emile Durkheim's work in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.

3. The Importance of RLE

With religious literacy defined, the next question is: Why is it important? There are several responses to this question. At the end of the millennium, Warren Nord and Charles Haynes articulated reasons for including RLE in K-12 public schools in the text *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*. The first reason advanced by Nord and Haynes for the inclusion of RLE in the K-12 public school curriculum is the civic argument. Schools and students must have a common ground. Students must learn to listen to and respect each other on deeply held understandings. So, school curricula should reflect this inclusivity, in this case denoting the teaching of religious and secular ways of thinking [7]. Nord and Haynes also advance the constitutional argument for including RLE in K-12 public education. This rationale asserts that schools should maintain religious neutrality, being neutral among different religions, and remaining neutral between religion and nonreligion. Schools should not ignore religious perspectives of thinking and living and only teach secular views of thinking and living, which can be religiously contested [7]. Finally, Nord and Haynes provide a rationale for RLE rooted in the tradition of liberal education. In short, schools based on a liberal arts education model require that students be liberally educated. So, they must understand a good deal of the content and context of religions since liberal education is a long educational dialogue in which students listen to, reflect on, and think critically about various perspectives tackling life's most critical questions. Students should learn about and from religions to gain a deeper awareness, reflectivity, and understanding of themselves and others [7]. For Diane Moore, there are three complementary reasons for RLE that she details in *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*. First, a basic understanding of the world's religious traditions enables a more comprehensible understanding of the world's history and culture [1]. In addition, alternative religious perspectives provide ways to critique normative cultural assumptions [1]. And finally, knowledge of the world's religions is "essential to a functioning democracy in our increasingly pluralistic age" [1]. Furthermore, Moore connects RLE to combating prejudice, discrimination, bigotry, and racism, ending conflict, and promoting peace. According to Moore, although RLE does not always produce these results, "it will make

it more difficult for such bigotry and chauvinism to be unwittingly reproduced and promoted" [6]. For Stephen Prothero, RLE is most connected to civics in that "the primary purpose of such teaching [RLE] should be civic...this civic purpose should be to produce citizens who know enough about Christianity and the world's religions to participate meaningfully - on both the left and the right - in religiously inflected public debates" [2]. The NCSS articulated the need for RLE over the years well. In the RSCD, RLE is "not only characteristic of an educated person but is also absolutely necessary for understanding and living in a world of diversity" [4]. Then later, the NCSS articulates the need for RLE in their 2021 position statement titled, *NCSS Position Statement: The Study of Religion in the Social Studies Curriculum*, which states that RLE "provides students with the knowledge they need to think critically about the historical and contemporary world [and]. . . fosters the understanding of global contexts, encourages civic participation, and cultivates the skills needed to work collaboratively with diverse populations" [5]. From a general review of the literature, civic, constitutional, liberal education, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI), and worldview understanding currently explain RLE's underlying rationale for its inclusion in K-12 public education. The constitutional and liberal educational reasons of Nord and Haynes stand out as unique. In general, this civic reasoning or civic literacy rationale has gained the most traction as the best connected reason for RLE, although the results of that traction in K-12 public schools need to be assessed.

4. Barriers to RLE

With the definition of religious literacy and rationale for RLE in focus, what are the barriers to RLE in K-12 public schools today? The first barrier is that some educators in the United States misapply their understanding of the "separation of church and state" in their classrooms, excluding RLE from any breadth or depth. This barrier is one to which I can personally attest as a K-12 religious literacy educator engaged in the work with teachers in the classroom and at social studies conferences across the nation. However, developed and agreed-upon guidelines for teaching about religion in the school have been widely available to educators for a couple of decades, beginning with guidelines found in *First Amendment Center: Finding Common Ground*. These guidelines have been incorporated into other national documents on teaching about religion in K-12 public schools, *A Teacher's Guide to Religion in the Public Schools*, *The American Academy of Religion: Guidelines for Teaching about Religion in K-12 Schools*, *The National Council for the Social Studies: Religious Studies Companion Document to the C3 Framework*, *The National Council for the Social Studies: Position Statement: The Study of Religion in the Social Studies Curriculum*, *The Society of Biblical Literature: Bible Electives in Schools A Guide and The Bible & Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide*.

Another barrier is that pre-service and in-service teachers need more content knowledge to teach about religion in depth. A survey of 101 elementary, middle, and high school social studies pre-service teachers found that participants' knowledge of world religions needed to be improved [8]. Many educators need help

identifying basic religious facts, such as critical leaders, sacred texts, or events [8]. This lack of content knowledge even includes their own religious affiliation. Unsurprisingly, pre-service teachers' understanding of non-Western religions, such as the Indic or Dharmic religions, is not more comprehensive than just superficial knowledge [8]. Of course, these studies are focused on pre-service teachers. Still, they generally remain the same with in-service teachers as professional learning opportunities become more limited due to district and school demands on educators. Educators wanting more content knowledge for RLE in the classroom will most likely have to seek opportunities individually from institutions such as Religion and Public Life at Harvard Divinity School (HDS), Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, the Boniuk Institute for the Study and Advancement of Religious Tolerance, and the Interfaith Center of New York.

A third barrier to RLE is educator concerns over "pushback" from students, parents, or the community if they teach about religion in the classroom [8]. It is not an overstatement that K-12 education has been embroiled in the culture wars. In the past few years, news media stories about book bans, critical race theory, and DEI have been a recurring theme. DEI, in particular, can be related to RLE, making it a challenging topic for educators and a possible casualty in the culture wars in the K-12 public schools.

The final barrier is connected to curriculum and instruction. With the curriculum, the barrier is generally associated with textbooks. As Warren Nord details in his seminal text, *Religion and American Education*, textbooks need to provide more content and resources for teaching about religion. According to Nord, there are a couple of reasons for this lack of content and resources. First, religion can be controversial, and textbook publishers shy away from controversy in an effort to sell more books¹ [9]. In addition, Nord mentions that textbooks in social studies generally focus on political and social histories rather than histories connected to the cultural, intellectual, and religious perspectives of historical understanding [9]. With classroom instruction, the barrier is connected to current pedagogical practices in the classroom. With world religions in K-12 classrooms, the most coverage is provided to the "Big Five." This "Big Five" includes Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. As mentioned before, the coverage of the Indic religions will be more than likely superficial. Next, the coverage is usually separated from the curriculum, sometimes being taught individually or together as a lesson or unit apart from a course with a heavy emphasis on founders, sacred scripture, doctrines, and general beliefs, maintaining a focus on disciplinary knowledge and concepts [10]. From professional experience, I have seen many charts with these components completed by students dutifully in the classroom before moving on with the "rest of the course." This basic understanding of world religions applied to the K-12 public school classrooms across the nations over the past decades has been termed the *World Religions Paradigm* (WRP) [10]. The WRP can be criticized on many different points. First, it reflects Western Protestant values with its heavy emphasis on founders, doctrine, and regulating religion to the private sphere [10]. These developments come from the influence of 19th-century colonialism, imperialism,

rationalism, and male-dominated scholarship in which religious studies came to be a discipline. These developments became part and parcel of the developing curriculum, specifically textbooks and instruction of the early 20th century, as K-12 public schools grew and developed in the United States. In addition, this approach to religion is static and fixed, not recognizing change over time or the power dynamics within religious traditions. With the static and fixed nature of the WRP, religions are essentialized with the essence of “isms” that do not allow for agency or internal diversity within a tradition [10]. Finally, the WRP, if focused on the “Big Five,” fails to recognize other fast-growing religious traditions, including the Baha’i faith, Sikhism, and Jainism, while disregarding many indigenous spiritual traditions.

It is not the case that WRP is the only methodology used to teach about religions. The RSCD provides an improved framework for teaching about religion based on the cultural studies method advanced by Religion and Public Life at Harvard Divinity School and a belief, behaviors, and belonging framework adapted from Emile Durkheim's work in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. The first three points of the framework found in the RSCD are derived from the cultural studies method:

1. Religions are diverse and not internally homogenous. Understanding that religions are internally diverse challenges stereotypes and prejudices by deconstructing crude generalizations.
2. Religions are dynamic and changing, not static and fixed. There are multiple perspectives of a religious tradition interwoven in the period they occupy.
3. Religions are embedded in the culture, not isolated from them. Public and private spheres are in constant contact, not separated [4].

The second half of the 6-point framework is based on the 3Bs of The Religious Freedom Center of The Freedom Forum Institute derived from Durkheim's work. The 3Bs are beliefs, behavior, and belonging:

1. Religious beliefs, from theology, doctrine, and texts to values and ethics, guide and affect people's lives in various ways.
2. Religious behaviors, from sacred rites and rituals to habits and practices, affect their beliefs and experiences of belonging to religious communities.
3. Religious belonging to transnational communities of co-religionists or smaller racial, ethnic, familial, gender, sexual, and local communities of co-religionists affects a person's beliefs and behaviors [4].

If educators can convey the complexity of this interchange of beliefs, behaviors, and belonging from points four through six while incorporating the cultural studies approach from points one through three, students will be able to deeply understand the uniqueness of a lived religion. Lived religion explores “how doctrines, rituals, and texts may shape – and be shaped by – the practical concerns and political aspirations of historically specific, local communities [11]. Henry Goldschmidt of the Interfaith Center of New York states that the lived religion model takes religion out of “the rarified realm of doctrine and text and places it

instead within the give-and-take of a multicultural public sphere” [11]. Yet, despite the new framework, methodology, and advocacy on the part of NCSS and others, more needs to be done in the K-12 public school classroom to incorporate RLE.

Why are these barriers to RLE so challenging? First and foremost, it should be recognized that the current curricular rationales for RLE - civic, constitutional, liberal education, DEI, and worldview understanding - although worthwhile reasons, do not connect well in the field. Why is this the case? There is little in the way of curricular depth and frameworks to bring the rationales to praxis in the K-12 classroom. A curricular “hook,” reason, or rationale must have more depth to be able to incorporate RLE in the K-12 classroom more effectively. This improved curricular “hook” or rationale should be global competence.

5. Defining Global Competence

It would be best to define global competence before looking at the curricular depth found with global competence. Those in the field generally accept a few definitions. Fernando Reimers, Director of the Global Education Innovation Initiative at Harvard University, defines global competence “as the ability to interact effectively with people who speak different languages, believe in different religions, and hold different values” [12]. For the Asia Society and the Longview Foundation, nongovernmental organization (NGO) leaders in global competence advocacy, global competence is the “set of knowledge, skills, mindsets, and values needed to thrive in a diverse, globalized society....a toolbox that equips students to reach their career aspirations in a globally connected economy” [13]. Additionally, Yong Zhao, a Distinguished Professor of Educational Leadership & Policy Studies and Educational Psychology at the University of Kansas and a leading advocate of global competence, suggests that global competence involves “attitudinal and ethical dispositions that make it possible to interact peacefully, respectfully, and productively with fellow human beings from diverse geographies” [12]. While World Savvy, an NGO focused on providing K-12 professional learning on global competence, defines global competence simply as “the skills, attitudes, and behaviors necessary to thrive in an ever-changing and complex world.”(World Savvy n.d.) However, the most comprehensive definition has been provided by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development: Programme for International Student Assessment, or PISA for short. According to PISA, global competence can be defined as the ability to examine “local, global and intercultural issues, understand and appreciate different perspectives and world views, interact successfully and respectfully with others, and take responsible action toward sustainability and collective well-being and sustainable development.” (PISA n.d.) It is good to note at this juncture that “global competence, global awareness, global citizenship, global literacy, intercultural competence, international education, and global education are often used interchangeably” [13].

From the definitions above, global competence is not just about acquiring knowledge but using knowledge to develop attitudes and dispositions that allow for a more complete picture of the

world. Some of the significant contributors in the field of global competence, including Veronica Box Manila and Anthony Jackson, in the text, *Educating for Global Competence: Preparing Students to Engage in the World*, Harvard Project Zero at HGSE, the Asia Society, Heidi Jacobs, in the text *Mastering Global Literacy*, and PISA have categorized these attitudes and dispositions into four competencies.

1. Students should be able to investigate the world beyond their immediate local, framing problems and conducting well-crafted and age-appropriate research.
2. Students should recognize the perspectives of others and their own while explaining these perspectives clearly and respectfully.
3. Students should be able to communicate ideas effectively with diverse audiences, overcoming geographic, linguistic, ideological, and cultural barriers.
4. Students should be able to take action to improve conditions, seeing their agency in the world and participating reflectively. This empowerment of students to make a positive impact is a source of inspiration and hope for the future [14].

Other frameworks around global competence exist, including those from UNESCO, the U.S. Department of Education, and World Savvy. Despite their unique perspectives, they all converge on common themes of social-emotional, cognitive, and behavioral domains detailed as follows:

1. Social-emotional: Empathy, recognition of perspectives, and appreciation of diversity.
2. Cognitive: Understanding, critical thinking, and problem-solving global issues and trends.
3. Behavioral: Intercultural collaboration and communication, including using other languages while taking action of global importance [15].

This unity in diversity is a testament to the global education community's shared commitment to nurturing global competence.

6. Connecting Religious Literacy to Global Competence

Embedded within the competencies and familiar themes of global competence are many of the same attitudes, dispositions, and themes of RLE. For example, Diane Moore states that RLE, provides “citizens with the tools to better understand religion as a complex and sophisticated social/cultural phenomenon and individual religious traditions themselves as internally diverse and constantly evolving as opposed to uniform, absolute and ahistorical. Learning about religion as a social/cultural phenomenon also helps people recognize, understand and critically analyze how religion has been and will continue to be used to justify the full range of human agency from the heinous to the heroic” [6]. Within this statement are a couple of global competencies, including investigating the world and recognizing diverse perspectives. Another example is found in the *NCSS Position Statement: The Study of Religions in the Social Studies Curriculum*, which states that RLE should provide “students with the knowledge they need to think critically

about the historical and contemporary world. Moreover, the study of religion fosters the understanding of global contexts, encourages civic participation, and cultivates the skills needed to work collaboratively with diverse populations” [5]. Again, within this statement can be found several of the competencies of global competence, including recognizing diverse perspectives, communicating with diverse audiences, and taking action locally. In general, it is straightforward to see that the competencies of global competence are aligned with RLE. Thus, a curriculum connection can be established, making global competence another rationale for RLE in K-12 public schools. But how is global competence as a curricular reason for RLE better than previously detailed curricular rationales for RLE?

7. Benefits of Engaging RLE through Global Competence

There are numerous benefits to using global competence as the rationale for RLE. First, there are several frameworks provided by NGOs, governmental institutions, and institutions of high education. As mentioned previously, these frameworks converge on many of the same social-emotional, cognitive, and behavioral themes. They also provide many resources to support teachers and administrators working with global competence. These resources include websites operated by Asia Society, UNESCO, World Savvy, IREX, and Harvard Project Zero at HGSE. With the wealth of content resources connected to frameworks of global competence, there are also an assortment of professional learning opportunities provided by the United States Department of State, IREX, HGSE, the Asia Society, and state departments of education to help administrators, teachers, and students build professional capacity in global competence. These professional learning opportunities are conveniently located online and easy to access. In addition to professional learning, there are self-assessment matrixes for administrators, teachers, and students to self-reflect on their global competence like The Globally Competent Teaching Continuum (GCTC), which promises to impact teacher praxis of global competence through self-reflection. (The Longview Foundation and LEARN NC n.d.). Finally, in 2018, PISA implemented a global competence assessment based on the global competence framework forwarded by Project Zero at HGSE and the Asia Society. This new ten-item assessment on different intercultural and global learning activities provided data on global learning at schools and socio-economic gaps in global competence worldwide. (PISA n.d.) These resources for global competence play an essential role in helping teachers and school administrators develop high-level global competence in K-12 curriculum and public schools. With this in focus, it is logical for advocates of RLE to better connect it to global competence to enhance RLE with the resources and community of global competence. To do so, additional work needs to be done to amplify the natural connections between RLE and global competence, while also emphasizing global competence as one of the better rationales for the focus on RLE.

8. Conclusions

The current justifications for RLE in K-12 curriculum and public schools have not been very effective, partly because of the need

for deeper curriculum frameworks and resources related to the curricular rationales for including RLE in K-12 curriculum and public schools. A better approach would be to integrate RLE into global competence to amplify the rationale for its importance in K-12 curriculum and public schools. By integrating RLE into global competence, educators can elevate RLE by tapping into the wealth of resources and frameworks available for global competence while providing a compelling curricular rationale for its integration into K-12 curriculum and public schools [16-20].

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