Articles

Negotiating Language Arts and Muslim Identity

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In this article, we present a case study of a sixth grade English Language Arts (ELA) teacher and her students at an American Islamic school. The perception in the literature is that schools are an important bridge for immigrants to engage with their adopted culture. We examined the curriculum and instructional practice of sixth grade ELA teacher Sarah El-Ahmed, who was teaching second generation immigrant Muslim children at Bright Star Muslim School (names are pseudonyms). We also examined the students' responses to the teacher's efforts to foster an Islamic identity orientation and integrate the beliefs and practices of Islam with those of the pupils' adopted home. Our findings suggest an appropriate level of teacher support can be transformative for meaning and identity and help solidify an Islamic perspective in an intersection between secular and spiritual worldviews. This study suggests that the teaching of literacy may extend to reading secular as well as sacred texts to accommodate the sociocultural needs of the students.

Keywords: English language arts, Islamic identity, literacy practices, reading, Muslim school

The United States is home to Muslims from a diverse range of indigenous communities and Muslim countries (McCluskey, 2018). Although Muslims in America face many challenges (Jackson, 2014; Elbih, 2015), including Islamophobia and anti-immigrant issues

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(Ghaill & Haywood, 2017), the Islamic community has worked hard to help its members assimilate a new life and culture (Barakat, 2018). This includes educating Muslim children to deal with what it means to be Muslim, American, and Muslim American (Khan & Siddiqui, 2017). Islamic schools in the United States therefore play a strategic role in helping Muslim students both deepen their faith and ease their integration into the fabric of America (Dangor, 2005; Davids & Waghid, 2016; Memon, 2011).

Despite this advocacy, the challenges facing Islamic schools have included issues related to financing, sustainability, professionalism, curriculum, and culturally relevant pedagogy. In addition, negative publicity and the growing discourse on violence linked to Islam (Boyle, 2006) have contributed to an increased level of scrutiny by education officials and policymakers, giving rise to questions such as "Do Islamic schools teach civic engagement?" and "Do Islamic schools teach students to be critical?" (Jasser, 2011). Despite challenges faced by Islamic schools in the United States, El-Atwani (2015) argues that they make possible a valuable multicultural education environment that teaches students how to develop themselves in different aspects of life while still maintaining Islamic traditions.

Research on identity (re)construction has received much attention particularly regarding its important contribution to students' learning and development. In considering identity, we align ourselves with Gee (2001), who defines it as "being recognized as a certain 'kind of person' in a given context" (p. 99), a process that includes language learning (Hirvela & Belcher, 2001; van Lier, 2007).

Zine's (2008) examination of the role and functioning of Islamic schools for a Muslim diaspora in Ontario, Canada is relevant to this study. Through a lengthy ethnographic analysis, she found that Islamic schools serve the community as safe places for the reproduction of Muslim identity and lifestyle and are pivotal in creating a counterculture that is an intersection between what is right according to Islam and what is accepted in the larger sociocultural context of Ontario society.

Moreover, there is a growing consensus in the literature that conceptualizes children's interaction with literacy (i.e., reading and writing activities) as a meaning-making practice (Glenn, 2018). Some have documented literacy practices in schools (Rodgers, 2014; Cardinale, 1999; Gutierrez, et al., 1999; Heer et al., 2016), faith-based settings like places of worship (Chao & Mantero, 2014; Garcia-Sanchez, 2014; Moore, 2008), and the significant role of home-literacy environments (Lily, 2011; Parlindungan, 2017; Wiseman, 2009). These studies suggest that interaction with literacy might be a

useful tool to learn language and culture because literacy is closely tied to larger sociocultural contexts and societal systems which change over time. Literacy connects children's identities and community heritage to the new world in which they reside (Heath, 2010).

Unfortunately, little is known about the teaching and learning of literacy in Islamic schools in the United States where students learn and develop general literacy skills and religious literacy (i.e., reading and writing activities in a sacred language) at the same time. However, current scholarship has demonstrated that faith or religious literacy activities (i.e., reading, writing, or memorizing sacred texts) in faith-based schools mediate students' interactions with print and digital sacred texts and other secular texts (Fader 2009; Lytra et al., 2016; Rosowsky, 2008).

In this study, we posed two questions:

1. How does Sarah El-Ahmed focus her teaching of language arts in her classroom at Bright Star Muslim School?
2. How do students respond to the teacher's attempt to implement a Muslim identity in school work?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We used Vygotsky's (1978) perspective on language learning to focus on how social interactions help people create meaning. For Vygotsky, learners actively construct meaning in interaction with others. Without denying learners as unique individuals, learning occurs in line with language development through social and cultural practices. Vygotsky maintains that language is not only a medium for learning but also learning itself. Children use language in the interaction of cognitive and social processes with their peers by presenting their ideas and experiences verbally in social learning environments.

The work of Lantolf and Thorne (2006) and Wertsch (1991) also underlines the importance of language and texts as they provide the opportunity for teachers to support student learning at points of difficulty. Learning may occur with the use of scaffolding language by teachers or knowledgeable adults when children are unable to solve the problem independently. Later, learners gradually internalize higher cognitive inputs that become thought. Learning happens first in the intercognitive process where children share their social speech and then moves to the intracognitive process where they use their private speech to problem solve (Wood,

1998). After that, children internalize higher cognitive inputs in which adult language is not merely appropriated but also transformed into their inner speech. That is how thinking and language develop according to Vygotsky (1978).

METHODS

We used a narrative case study because we were focused on the teacher and students' activity in their setting (Hammersley, 2013; Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). We chose a case study because it refers to a particular setting and time. We chose a narrative approach because we wanted to tell the story of one teacher and her students. We used the descriptive-holistic-analysis approach proposed by Barone (2011) to tell the stories of individuals (Creswell, 2014). For this study, the case is the teacher and her students in the ELA classroom.

Participants

We identified a teacher we knew named Sarah El Ahmed who was working in an Islamic school (all names are pseudonyms). She is 32 years old and has eight years' teaching experience. She is an American-born Egyptian who speaks English as her primary language and Egyptian-Arabic as a second language. She holds a graduate degree in pedagogy from an education program ranked among the top 25 in the United States and a state teaching license in the content areas she teaches. She was selected because of her teaching excellence and the authors' belief they would see appropriate pedagogic examples to help answer the research questions.

Sarah's students in this study are considered second-generation immigrants because they were born in the United States to one or two foreign-born parents. Most of the parents speak a language other than English at home. They come from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds and their parents hold varied nationalities. However, they speak, read, and write in English. After confirming Sarah's interest in continuing with the study, we completed our institution's review process and received written permissions from the school, the teacher, and the students' parents. We protected the anonymity of the participants by using pseudonyms. The participants were 20 sixth graders and their ELA teacher. Table 1 shows the teacher's demographic information.

Table 1. Demographic Information of the Teacher Participant

Characteristic	Information
Number of teacher participants	1
Age	32
Gender	Female
Teaching experience	8 years
Language background	• English as the primary language • Arabic as a second language
Cultural background	American-born with Middle East heritage
Educational background	Master's degree in middle childhood education (Licensed)
Current position at the school	• Middle school ELA teacher (grades 6–8) • Middle school lead teacher for social studies and ELA

Demographic information of the student participants can be found in Table 2 which was created based on a short questionnaire completed by the teacher. Some students spoke other languages, but all spoke English which allowed them to participate in the all-English classroom environment of the ELA classroom.

Table 2. Demographic Information of the Student Participants

Characteristics	Number of students
Total participants	20
Male students	5
Female students	15
Age range	11–12 years old
Language background	
• Somali	8
• Arabic	7
• Turkish	1
• Hindi	4
Parents' Country of Origin	
• Somalia	8
• Syria	4
• Egypt	3
• Turkey	1
• India	4

Data Collection

Based on Byrne's (2016) recommendations, we collected the following data:

Classroom Observations

The first author observed every 2-hour ELA class for the second academic quarter which ran from October 2018 to January 2019 and also took field notes during that time. About 50 observations totaling 100 hours of instruction were made. The class and teacher interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and coded.

Field Notes

Using Richardson's (2000) suggestion, the first author made observational, methodological, theoretical, and personal notes.

Teacher Interviews

Based on Kvale's (2007) work, the first author conducted two types of teacher interviews: two semi-structured hour-long interviews at the beginning and end of the quarter with in-depth questions about teaching approaches and curriculum and short 1–2-minute interviews before and after lessons focused on clarifying teacher activity. Interview questions are reported in Appendix 1.

Teacher and Student Work Samples

Based on Bretschneider, et al. (2017), we collected teacher and student work samples. Teacher texts included work or guide sheets given to students and written prompts such as questions written on the board. Sample student texts included completed work or teacher guide sheets with written student responses. Figure 1 is an example of a student response to a guide sheet.

Data Analysis

To examine the teacher's focus we first considered document analysis of the state's ELA standards, the school's published mission statement, the teacher interviews, and field notes from classroom observations. Data were transcribed using Duranti's (1997) transcription convention, and categories from audio transcriptions were also applied to field notes and classroom documents. A second level of coding looked for patterns or themes across the data. Borrowing from Saldana (2016), provisional and sub-codes were made. Concepts, description, and literary methods were subsequently coded. Finally, thematic codes were added.

Figure 1. Sample Student Text.

Initial codes like "vocabulary" and "power" were then sub-coded to, for example, "vocabulary = definition / ability to use" and "power = Islamic relations / hadith / expectations".

Concept Codes

Concept codes considered both the relationship between the text and the students and students' decision-making regarding the text. "Text = published/teacher made/student response" is an example.

Literary Codes

Literary codes included themes in classroom written materials. We applied multiple coding tags to data so we could track students' vocabulary engagement. Table 3 shows how the codes are used.

Table 3. Coding Development

First level Provisional Code	Second level Concept Code	Third Level Literary Code. Questions in . . .	Coding Category (for each of the 3 literary codes)	Operational Definition
Conversations	Questions	-Publications -Teacher Questions -Student Questions	Engaging	Questions that initiate conversation or that invite a member to contribute
Conversations	Questions	-Publications -Teacher Questions -Student Questions	Restating	Questions that utilize the students' words in a different way for better understanding
Conversations	Questions	-Publications -Teacher Questions -Student Questions	Clarifying	Questions that try to make a question or comment clearer
Conversations	Questions	-Publications -Teacher Questions -Student Questions	Leading	Questions that try to take the students somewhere or to bring them to a particular direction or understanding
Conversations	Questions	-Publications -Teacher Questions -Student Questions	Probing	Questions that dig deeper beneath the surface of the initial student response
Conversations	Questions	-Publications -Teacher Questions -Student Questions	Extending	Questions that push the conversation deeper without having a particular direction in mind

Each category that was relevant and related was grouped into a larger category, while some of the data that was not relevant in the first round of grouping was merged or omitted. Data were tabulated on a lengthy tracking instrument with headings like participant, observations, curriculum text, learning, student generated text or assignment, supports, and other opportunities. This approach supported the confirmation of categories across data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Position Aspects of Researcher

As a university professor, the second author had previously taught the case study teacher. The second author also supervised the project research and was the only non-Muslim involved with the study. Data gathering and coding were undertaken by the first author, so we were primarily concerned with faith aspects of his position. The first author shares the participants' religious beliefs and feels he has similar cultural values. He was born and grew up in a family practicing Islam, learned Arabic in secondary schools primarily to understand the Quran and develop basic reading skills. He also learned English as a foreign language in elementary school but never used it conversationally until arriving in the United States in 2015.

The first author had limited interaction with students and situated himself as an observer on the participant-observer continuum (Barone, 2011; Brooks, et al., 2014). He would make casual conversation with the students before or after to limit disruption during the class session.

Rigor

We focused on the degree to which the investigator's conclusions correctly portrayed the data collected (Bloor & Wood, 2006) to support rigor. This included member checks, peer debriefings, negative case analysis, and data triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A peer debriefing strategy was also used to establish credible data analysis. Peer debriefing involved asking peers experienced in qualitative data analysis to review several transcripts and discuss the coding process to check for emergent themes and ideas (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer debriefings were conducted with doctoral students in literacy who were engaged in qualitative research. Additionally, a university faculty member was included in the peer debriefing process.

There were 100 hours of observations made to enhance the depth of the analysis. We also checked with the teacher and learned that the curriculum and instruction in the second quarter were similar to other quarters. Based on these factors, we are confident as to the rigor of the study.

FINDINGS

Two themes emerged from the analysis:

1. The teacher focused on literacy learning and the school's religious mission.
2. The students were able to construct sacred meanings from both secular and sacred texts.

The Teacher's Focus on Literacy Learning and Religious Mission

Negotiating Standards, School, and Parental Demands

As a private institution, Bright Star Muslim School complies with the curricular and managerial guidelines established by the state. However, some practical adjustments have been made, such as additional lessons on Arabic, Islamic, and Quranic studies, and particular codes of conduct regarding Muslim teaching, to serve the specific needs of the school community. Ms. El-Ahmed explained that she integrates state standards with Muslim beliefs.

The state ELA standards are built on integrating skills through reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language strands. Since these standards relate to and complement each other, Ms. El-Ahmed usually develops her teaching by simultaneously integrating multiple standards in the lessons. For instance, the state standards in the reading strand put greater emphasis on comprehension, so that plays a facilitative role in the language strand. Based on field notes and a review of the syllabus and unit plans, Ms. El-Ahmed designs learning that situates students to engage in discussion about the text. She frequently fosters student-teacher, peer, small group, and whole class discussions about published writing students read and sometimes about students' writing.

Drawing on our codes related to vocabulary such as "ability to use," Ms. El-Ahmed further indicated that in order to understand a text, the students may require particular vocabulary and the development of fluency to facilitate comprehension. She explained:

> I explain to them [the students], you know reading is for comprehension . . . The meaning of text starts from the vocabulary . . . so they need to know the vocab first . . . but if anybody is reading and they are not fluently reading, it's harder for them to understand what they are reading . . . If they are stuttering or they keep pausing . . . they don't understand.

Ms. El-Ahmed normally focuses on vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension, though in some instances when focused explicitly on teaching vocabulary in a first or second period class, she may introduce some new words and have the students practice them with partners or in small groups.

Again, drawing on our analysis, we note that Bright Star Islamic School adheres to the beliefs and teachings of Islam. The expectation is that in the process of knowledge building the students should perform appropriate modes of behavior rooted in the Quran and the hadith. The Quran is Islam's holy book containing the words of God dictated to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) by the Angel Gabriel. *Hadith* are the recorded sayings of the Prophet constituting his daily practice, called the *sunnah*.

Ms. El-Ahmed explained that the parents of Bright Star Muslim School students did not want their children exposed to non-Islamic holidays and felt that most public schools fail to accommodate Muslim religious needs and practices:

> The parents that I have spoken to and that have expressed their feeling why they bring their kids to this school, it's mostly because . . . they don't want their child to go to a school where they celebrate . . . Christmas and other holidays that are not Islamic . . . So our school is pre-school through eighth grade, so they want their kids to grow up with Islamic values, and once they understand their religion, then they can go . . . make their own choice somewhere else . . . [In] public schools, there are a lot of things going on like un-Islamic behaviors. So, they don't want their kids to be exposed to that at such a young age.

Ms. El-Ahmed believed she could meet the parents' goals through a setting and pedagogical approach focused on study of the Quran and the hadith, their relation to secular texts, and the intersection between the two.

Developing Student Agency and Citizenship

Ms. El-Ahmed argued for students' agency in developing their identities rather than external power or control from parents or the school. She explained as follows:

> I actually had this conversation with our principal like a few weeks ago, and I was pushing for her to express to the other teachers, Islamic studies teacher, Quran teachers, everyone, that we need to incorporate more of the why things are not Islamic, you know. So, we are always saying, you know, it's *haram* [forbidden] to have a boyfriend, drinking alcohol, or partying, you know, why though? The kids know that this is not okay, or they know that the hadith or ayat in the Quran, but do they actually know what it means? How does it relate to them today? You know, so they can make that connection.

In addition to gaining agency in the identity development process, Ms. El-Ahmed also focused on citizenship and leadership skills in her classroom. She explained that:

> We want them to grow as role models and leaders of Muslim Americans, not just Muslim Pakistani, Muslim Egyptian. Muslim Americans living in America and be able to defend Islam or answer questions about Islam to people who may have questions, like sincerely asking why do you wear hijab? 'Because I have to', but why do you have to? So, we want them to grow up knowing how to answer specific questions and defending who they are if they need to.

As a lead middle school teacher, Ms. El-Ahmed used her position to negotiate with the principal her concerns on the importance of integrating Islamic knowledge and values in the curriculum. She said that:

> . . . We need to incorporate why things are not Islamic . . . and what the hadith and the Quran say . . . and how does it relate to them [students] today . . .

She wanted all teachers to engage the students to examine what is inscribed in the doctrinal texts and what is culturally acceptable in American social norms such as dating, consuming alcohol, and partying. She indicated that this conversation or curricular integration of secular and Islamic perspectives may create what Zine (2008) said is a counterculture that transforms the status quo of the Muslim students' identity into cultural capital and a change agent (Heffner & Zaman, 2007).

Using Discussion to Integrate the Curriculum with Islamic Values

In the classroom context, Ms. El-Ahmed integrated her ELA teaching with Islamic knowledge and values. She designed post-reading activities as a means of implementing her philosophy. The primary emphasis centers on self-understanding, self-representation, and controversy surrounding the concept of Islam in the society. For example, Ms. El-Ahmed explained her strategy of integrating Islam in her ELA class using Islamic-themed texts as follows:

> So, like you saw in the sixth grade I try to get themes and stuff from the book that we read and have them [students] connect them [themes] to Islam and how it connects to today's new world. So, like the group that said that 'the boy was praying at school and he was bullied, and there was a girl who was wanting to convert to Islam in the other group'. I try to connect it that way with whatever we are working in with the curriculum. How it relates to Islam and how it relates to them in real life. And then I brought in [a friend], Miss. X, to ask them questions based on her not being Muslim. So, she was asking them, in Islam you said this, this, and this, but why is it like this? So, they have to think like 'Wow, okay, why does Islam say that?' And I think that they do a great job with the hadith and things like that, and explaining the meaning of it.

Ms. El-Ahmed focused on deep levels of understanding applying ideas that could be identified through coding. Here we can see the focus was on

students building their own agency by applying ideas in authentic contexts like responding to classroom visitors. Student agency is crucial in learning because it embodies setting goals, evaluating, and taking responsible action to bring about change (OECD, 2022).

One of Ms. El-Ahmed's strategies for integrating Islam with the lessons was asking the students to create common themes found in texts, either written or spoken. They were then asked to find connections between those themes with Muslim values written in the Quran and the hadith with the current socio-cultural norms in which they are embedded. The students defended their arguments in a question-and-answer session led by a non-Muslim classroom guest. This discussion complemented the ELA lessons in which the students' learning of the secular texts was extended to the sacred texts. By secular texts, we mean commonplace stories and novels in the language arts curriculum that are not explicitly about Islam. In other words, this strategy is a way to mediate the students' understanding of the world through a Muslim lens that may broaden their perspectives about different socio-cultural practices and beliefs and may strengthen their own self-representation as Muslims.

Co-Construction of Meaning Between Reading Secular and Sacred Texts

The classroom discussion often revolved around Islamic knowledge and values and took place not only during reading but also in specific activities that connected reading and Islam. For example, Ms. El-Ahmed had her class read the book *Bud Not Buddy* (Curtis, 1999). The book tells the story of a young boy in Michigan during the Great Depression who is sleeping in a shed after living in an orphanage and escaping from a foster home. He is traveling on his own to find a musician named Herman E. Calloway whom he believes to be his father. Ms. El-Ahmed then assigned the students a small group project in which each group was assigned a theme derived from the book such as:

1. Discrimination and racism
2. Compassion and forgiveness
3. Knowledge and wisdom
4. Family
5. Helpfulness
6. When God closes one door, He opens another, or Opportunities

In this assignment, the students had to research Muslim perspectives for each theme. They then presented their themes and findings in the form of a "freeze frame," pantomime, or role play. They were graded based on their:

1. Group work
2. Individual work
3. Accuracy and relevant information
4. Clarity
5. Volume and confidence while presenting
6. Ability to support the claim

In one lesson, four students were working in a small group and talking about their project. This conversation was representative of many responses by students in the class.

Fatimah	:	Let's go over some hadiths. So, basically The Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, said that 'There is no superiority for an Arab over a non-Arab, nor for a non-Arab over an Arab. Neither is the white superior over the black, nor is the black superior over the white—except by piety.'
Husna	:	Is that about the racism?
Fatimah	:	Yeah, also discrimination.
Nuh	:	Did you guys add anything to the story? Because remember when how Ibrahim was trying to help, and . . .
Ibrahim	:	Let's see this one. We're going to also explain the hadith. 'The real patience is at the first stroke of a calamity' and then on the bottom of it write a problem.
Fatimah	:	So what is calamity?
Ibrahim	:	Calamity is like problem, so on the bottom write problem. Patience has to do with racism.

This short transcription reveals a number of thought processes. First, we see students grappling with vocabulary. Second, we see students considering religious instruction. Third, we see students trying to make connections to social problems, and fourth, we see them beginning to puzzle over creating explanations. The students take turns and begin a collaborative discussion of alternatives and evaluation. In this discussion they are trying to convey the meaning of the hadith and ensure that it is aligned with the meaning from secular texts.

After reaching a consensus about their presentation, the group performed a role play for the entire class in which a Muslim child was bullied by other students when he was praying in a public school. Ms. El-Ahmed then asked them a few questions relative to their performance and argument about the theme:

Nuh	:	[Introducing the characters]
Husna	:	So basically I hate him [pointing at Nuh—explaining the perspective of a character in the reading and not her own perspective]. I was like why is he praying at school, so I bullied him because he has different religion and . . .
Ms. El-Ahmed	:	So what was your theme?
Students	:	Discrimination
Fatimah	:	We have some hadiths about it.
Ms. El-Ahmed	:	Before you say the hadith, what does Islam say about bullying and stuff?
Nuh	:	Islam says that it's not okay to bully because they are a different race, or religion, or they believe in something else. It's still not okay. You should actually be having a nice talk about it. You should be able to share your differences to each other. The Prophet, peace be upon him, said: 'There is no superiority for an Arab over a non-Arab, nor for a non-Arab over an Arab. Neither is the white superior over the black, nor is the black superior over the white—except by piety.'
Husna	:	The Prophet, peace be upon him, said 'The real patience is at the first stroke of a calamity.'
Fatimah	:	So basically, what the hadith says is if someone is being racist to you or someone does bad things to you, you should not be backfired or something. You should remain calm and be patient. At the end of the day you'll be a better person.
Nuh	:	So basically, you know when bullying causes someone else to feel sad and alone, and actually make them angry. This is what we are doing. So, I was bullied right. And if someone was helping me, he will eventually get bullied too for being friends with me. So that's the consequences of being friends with the one who is bullied.
Ms. El-Ahmed	:	So what does Islam say about standards?

| Nuh | : | Islam says about standards—even if we were gang bullied, by standard, you should be helping other people even though they were being gang bullied, you know, discriminated, just because being a different race or different religion, they still should, you know. |
| Fatimah | : | Also, Islam says about if something bad happens, if you can't stop them by hands, then you should stop them with your tongue. If you can't stop them with your tongue, then you should pray for them in your heart. |

Here students apply knowledge about Islam discussed in the small group to the whole-class presentation where Ms. El-Ahmed further contests their arguments. Readers can see that Ms. El-Ahmed makes four carefully placed queries. Three of them are quite short and prompt students to move from one-word responses to higher order thinking that applies sacred values to a secular text. The coding scheme that identified clarifying and probing was especially helpful to identify this teaching technique.

DISCUSSION

Limitations

It is not possible to generalize from this study to other studies or, for that matter, beyond this classroom. Nevertheless, concepts developed in this study could be used for future research to determine applicability to other settings.

State Standards and School or Parent Viewpoints

Ms. El-Ahmed considered state standards and the viewpoints of the school and parents to support her students in developing deep levels of understanding that bridged secular and sacred texts with the goal of facilitating student agency in identity construction.

Ms. El-Ahmed was able to implement state standards in a way that aligned with the mission of the school and the parents' goals. She focused students' reading, writing, and responding, skills identified in the standards on secular texts, but was also able to support students in integrating Islamic knowledge and values through literacy activities or instructional tasks directed by her. This study extends the work of Zine

(2008) in that Ms. El-Ahmed did not focus on classroom interaction with text during literacy teaching. We found that classroom knowledge appropriation, in which the students' awareness of the world is obtained from secular texts, is filtered through the lens of Muslim beliefs and values inscribed in the sacred texts (Zine, 2008) and facilitated by the teacher's pedagogical techniques. Meaning-making practices connect student identities and their home culture to the new world in which they reside (Heath, 2010).

Ms. El-Ahmed structured the literacy events in her classroom so that students could make meaning based on texts and then extend that to deep levels of application. This mediation of language and talk about or around texts (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Wertsch, 1991) helped support identity construction through social relationships between the teacher and students and among the students in classroom conversations.

Developing Deeper Levels of Student Understanding

Ms. El-Ahmed's classroom changed when the discussion topic shifted from textual information to Islamic content. The student talk was extended and there was less control of turn taking from the teacher in discussing Muslim misconceptions compared with that of textual information. Although student talk was longer, the teacher nevertheless made carefully considered, often short clarifications and probes to support depth of understanding. One of the reasons was that the students held interpretive authority on the topic, derived from their prior knowledge and cultural proximity.

Reading secular texts through a religious lens may be a possible gateway for every member of the learning community to use both secular and spiritual knowledge as a legitimate way of knowing and understanding the world in a changing learning environment. In this way, knowledge may be produced, formed, and transformed in an intersection between secular and spiritual worldviews (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Shahjahan, 2005).

Developing Student Agency and Citizenship

All student participants in this study are considered second-generation immigrants born in the United States to one or two foreign-born parents, and most of them speak a language other than English at home. Since they have diverse cultural backgrounds (Bourdieu, 1977), reading texts that connect their identities and home cultures may help them better understand the new social environment (Heath, 2010) and

mediate comprehension (Drucker, 2003; Toppell, 2015). Furthermore, children's engagement with sacred texts in religious education practices strengthens the connection between language, literacy, and identity on a daily basis.

CONCLUSIONS

The major theoretical claims made in this study are that faith-based settings provide an opportunity for children's literacy development that intertwines religious literacy practices with the process of knowledge and identity building. Since this study's findings are not generalizable and may not be reflected in other contexts, readers need to evaluate the question "What is this the case of?" and examine the "inferential bridge" (Shulman, 1997, p. 14) between this and other cases.

This teacher's careful examination of what texts and classroom activities were options for students with diverse language and cultural backgrounds may be a fruitful approach for other teachers. Teaching literacy to students with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds requires selection of texts that address both the target culture and the students' own culture. The proximity between the two cultures represented in the texts may facilitate students' reading comprehension. Additionally, culturally relevant texts may mediate student understanding of the larger socio-historical contexts in which they reside. If the school is a religious school like Bright Star Muslim School, text selection could consider the schools' religious values so that students have opportunities to develop knowledge and identity which are aligned with their community.

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APPENDIX: EXAMPLE OF TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What informs (theory) your perspective of teaching and learning?

2. Describe your theoretical framework in teaching literacy.

3. Describe your instructional goals and how they align with the school, state, and national standards.

4. Are these goals what your students need?

5. What kinds of teaching strategies do you use? Can you describe?

6. Describe the types of difficulties English Language Learners (ELLs) face in your literacy class.

7. How do you define reading?

8. Describe how you see students as readers.

9. What are the criteria of successful readers?

10. How do you think assessment results influence children's attitudes toward reading and toward learning in general?

11. Can you give an example of the types of assessments you use on a regular basis? Why do you use these regularly? How do you use the results?

12. Describe the types of behaviors you would like to see in a student you consider an ELL.

13. What kind of support do you provide for ELLs? In what context?

14. Describe other opportunities that you think can help improve your ELLs' literacy development.

15. Do English monolingual students receive/need similar support? Why or why not?

16. What types of texts do you provide for all students?

17. Are there additional/supplemental texts for ELLs?

18. Do you consider text complexity in selecting text? Why (why not) and how?

19. Describe the kinds of discussions you have around texts with all students and ELLs.

20. What aspects of discussion do you think help ELLs improve their literacy? How? Give an example.

21.   What kinds of assignments do you design for all students?

22.   Are there additional/supplementary assignments for ELLs?

23.   Describe how these assignments are relevant to what you teach.

24.   Is there anything else you would like to discuss that has not been mentioned?