





# Interrogating Belief: Linking Religious Instruction and Children's Historical Fiction in Elementary Social Studies

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## ABSTRACT

Using critical literacy as a frame, this qualitative study evaluates how students think about religion, as Christians and in relation to non-Christians, in response to children's historical fiction. The study took place in a fourth and fifth-grade combined classroom at a private Christian school in a large city in the South for grades PK-12. During classroom instruction, fourth and fifth-grade students engaged in a fishbowl discussion meant to synthesize literature selections read over the course of the academic year, responding to a series of four prompts that centered on their Christian identity. Because it is a Christian school, discussion of religion and personal religious beliefs is an expected norm rather than a fearful or divisive topic. Responses in this study are indicative of how students might choose to talk about religion within their own faith groups and provide an example of how religious education is conducted at the elementary level in the U.S.

## KEYWORDS

Beliefs; classroom dialogue; historical fiction; critical literacies; religious literacy

## Purpose of the study

Throughout education research, there is a heavy emphasis on current and historical persecution and injustice as it relates to race. This often contentious but important topic is a recurring theme in social studies and literacy research as well as other education fields. Yet in these same spaces, scholarship that investigates teaching about religion is often limited or non-existent (Allen, 2024; Skerrett, 2014), despite research that shows hate crimes due to religion are second only to hate crimes due to race (Gunn et al., 2020) and the presence of elementary curriculum standards about religion in a majority of U.S. states (Allen, 2024).

Instruction about religion in schools can provide space for students to reconcile the way religion is presented with their own personal religious experiences (Skerrett, 2016), but the relationship between religion and schooling in the United States is complicated and nuanced. Though religious illiteracy has been found to be a widespread concern throughout the United States (Ellis & Marcus, 2019; Patrick et al., 2017), little research

has been conducted that critically analyzes what is actually happening in classrooms across the nation as it relates to religious education.

Research shows preservice teachers do not understand how and what to teach about religion and that many teachers choose to ignore teaching about religion at all (Graves et al., 2010; Saylor et al., 2022). Only recently have education scholars begun to consider the intersection of religious literacy and disciplinary instruction in elementary or middle school classrooms (Davila & Volz, 2020; e.g., Damico & Apol, 2008; McMillon & Edwards, 2008). With this uncharted variable in mind, this qualitative study uses a critical literacy frame to examine the relationship between private school students and instruction about religion as part of a summative discussion about historical fiction texts. Specifically, we ask:

1. How do students connect their personal faith with the children's historical fiction books they engaged with over the course of an academic year?

2. How do students talk about “others”—those outside their Christian faith—in concert with children’s historical fiction?

This case study highlights one example of how religious education is conducted at the elementary level in the U.S. and provides insight about the importance of incorporating instruction about religion in elementary social studies. Specifically, this example focuses on how students think about religion, personally as Christians and in relation to non-Christians, in response to children’s historical fiction.

### Theoretical framework

Critical literacy uses print and other media to analyze norms, rule systems, and practices of everyday life (Luke, 2012). It assumes a political orientation toward teaching and learning, and it explicitly aims to critique and transform dominant ideologies as first principles. As a skill, it is the ability to read texts in a way that is both active and reflective to better understand power, inequality, and injustice (Luke, 2012). Formally, Lewison et al. (2008) propose that “Critical literacy practices encourage students to use language to question the everyday world, to interrogate the relationship between language and power, to analyze popular culture and media, to understand how power relationships are socially constructed, and to consider actions that can be taken to promote social justice” (p. 3). Ultimately, through an exploration of critical experiences, critical literacy has the potential to help students develop ideas that change the world for the better (Luke, 2012).

However, despite these formal and assertive definitions, critical literacy is both a real and imagined moldable construction created by schools based on ruling class ideology (Freire & Macedo, 1987). The history of the development of critical literacy makes it more than just a way of evaluating the world around us and considering it through a different lens: critical literacy is also a contested term that can and has been improved by increased consideration of the learner’s worldview and the literacy they already have as a result of their interactions with the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Before a person can

read a physical text, they have already learned to read their world and their environment and are beginning to make sense of it. With an understanding of reading the world, reading the written word becomes more than just decoding letters. Ultimately, this reading defines who we are and how our social world is constructed (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). As a result, critical literacy should be approached as a discourse in which we must uncover the relational meaning and sacrificially listen to all those who are active within it (Allen et al., 2024).

### *Engagement with critical literacy in content specific instruction*

All students can benefit from a critical literacy framework. Though teachers often try to shelter young children from the injustice present in the world (Kuby, 2013; Nance-Carroll, 2021), engagement in critical literacy should start with children of young ages. Children think at a deeper level than most adults would expect them to be able to Vasquez (2004). Often, young children are not only capable of but also more receptive to questioning the rules that govern our society and have not fully accepted the social paradigms of their culture (Paley, 1992).

Critical literacy can be especially relevant in content areas, including social studies and when discussing religion in social studies or language arts instruction. The social studies classroom, where real-world issues are often at the forefront, is often the best place to address social issues, teach students to become critical consumers of information, and help them understand complex issues (Ciardiello, 2004; Soares & Wood, 2010; Wolk, 2003). Across multiple studies, researchers show how critical literacy can be embedded into social studies instruction at various grade levels to support the development of citizenship, foster historical thinking from multiple viewpoints, and encourage exploration of complex social issues.

Ciardiello (2004) models what critical literacy looks like as a combination of literacy practices and civic awareness that help students recognize the voices represented and omitted in history. Her work highlights how young children can be introduced to these ideas through stories of real

historical figures like Ruby Bridges. She also outlines a five-part framework that guides students to question texts, which she believes supports the development of compassionate, critically minded citizens. Soares and Wood (2010) extend this perspective by illustrating how even elementary students can thoughtfully engage with texts that address issues such as racism, and they stress the importance of teaching students to question an author's perspective or intentions. Similarly, Wolk (2003) describes how middle school social studies classrooms can become spaces for meaningful civic engagement through dialogue, media analysis, and the examination of marginalized voices.

In these social studies specific examples, the authors reaffirm that idea that students are capable of understanding and discussing complex social issues at a young age. Young learners can act as agents of democracy when given the tools and opportunities to do so through critical literacy practices (Ciardiello, 2004). Elementary students can comprehend and respond to serious social topics (Soares & Wood, 2010). However, there is also a lost opportunity to help students build critical literacy through incorporating instruction about religion in schools (Skerrett, 2014). Research that shows “engaging with religious literacies may build students’ critical literacies; moral stances; orientations toward, and skills in, open-minded, collective inquiry into matters that concern their learning communities; and reflective capacities, self awareness, and self knowledge” (Skerrett, 2014, p. 237), particularly when situated inside other disciplinary content areas (Noddings, 1993). However, there are few areas where religious perspectives are formally connected to critical literacy (Spector, 2007). Critical analyses of curriculum and pedagogy in both public and private schools may provide key insight into the thought patterns of evangelical Christians (Allen, 2023, 2024).

Teachers also benefit from learning about and applying a critical literacy framework to pedagogical decisions. Teaching for critical literacy is fundamentally different from traditional education; it requires a deliberate effort to help students understand the world around them and prepare to participate meaningfully in a democratic society (Wolk, 2003). In the book *Critical Literacy in*

*the Early Childhood Classroom*, Kuby (2013) reflects on her journey as a teacher and as a researcher, then examines specific moments of consciousness-raising in relation to her teaching experiences. As part of this reflection, she operationalizes a specific definition of critical literacy: an inquiry process that enables the deconstruction and reconstruction of texts while watching for indicators of power, position, and privilege (Kuby, 2013). It is this definition that ultimately guides the study presented here.

## Literature review

While critical literacy has been widely explored in the context of social studies and other content areas, its application to discussions of religion—especially in elementary education—remains underdeveloped. This gap is particularly striking given that students’ religious identities often shape how they interpret texts, engage with peers, and understand power and justice. In classrooms where religion is an explicit part of the curriculum, such as private Christian schools, this intersection becomes even more significant.

### *The intersection of religion and education*

The introduction of religious concepts in elementary school is necessary to lay the foundation for understanding more complex ideas about religion in secondary social studies classrooms (Hess, 2009; Libresco, 2018). Both elementary and middle school state social studies standards include content about religion (Allen, 2024). Though church and state are notoriously separated in public schools in the United States, religious beliefs still underlay and strengthen students’ classroom discussions (Sarroub & Schroeder, 2023). In classrooms, studies have demonstrated the ways in which instruction that addresses religion combines with religious identity as an important part of meaning-making and supports academic learning (Eakle, 2007; Skerrett, 2016). In a study about critically-literate citizenship Yoon (2020) described a conversation between a public school class of second-graders. During a discussion about racial segregation, Diego suggested “God decides which color we are” (p. 303).

In the unplanned conversation that ensued, students voiced opinions and counter perspectives, moving between languages and respectfully disagreeing with one another. There are also a limited number of examples of student populations using personal understandings of religion to interpret secular texts (e.g., Choi & Tinker Sachs, 2017).

While it might be surprising to hear of conversations about religion happening in public schools, they happen frequently in private religious schools. Schweber and Irwin (2003) investigated what fundamentalist Christian eighth-grade students learned about Jews while studying the Holocaust. In this setting, religious students' social worlds were deeply intertwined with the larger church community, and in this study, the classroom teacher teaches about the Holocaust using the book *The Hiding Place* as the primary text. Specifically, the teacher articulates that she uses this book to highlight the importance of the Holocaust in conjunction with "her identity as a Christian, and she hoped that learning about it would bolster her students' Christian identities" (p. 1701). However, the centrality of Christianity throughout the text hides narratives about Judaism and also stereotypes Jews throughout the text.

In a second study situated in a private Christian school, in a planned unit about Judaism, Allen (2023) found that third-grade students entered the classroom with preexisting ideas about the religion. These perceptions of other religions are often formed through media—books, television, and movies—or personal experiences, either with their own religion or from relationships with students from other religions. In contrast to Schweber and Irwin (2003), this study demonstrated how diverse text sets can act as a tool to develop students' knowledge about religions. Though some students entered the unit diminishing Jewish beliefs in support of their own Christian beliefs, by the end of the two-week study, even the most reluctant students appeared to move beyond attitudes of fear and othering. These two studies are especially important in conversations that highlight the importance of teaching about diverse religions given the dominance of Christian beliefs in public and private schools as they distinctly demonstrate that students are both ready for and

need to engage in discussion about religious topics to better understand the diverse cultures of others.

### ***Negotiating religious literacy in a predominantly Christian educational landscape***

Biblicist Christians—Christians who believe in the authoritativeness of the Bible and focus heavily on evangelism—represent the largest religious group in the United States (Juzwik, 2014). This Christian culture permeates not only private Christian schools but also public schools across the United States. School calendars privilege Christian holy days (Aronson et al., 2016; Heinrich, 2015). Standards documents are steeped in language and traditions that favor Christian perspectives (Burke & Segall, 2015). Overwhelming, elementary state social studies standards about specific religions prioritize Christian religions at a more than 2:1 ratio (two standards about Christianity for every one standard about all other religions combined) (Allen, 2024). In the face of the continued persistence of religious persecution, Islamophobia, antisemitism, and general ignorance about religions other than Christianity, studies that provide examples of how religious education is conducted at the elementary level in the U.S. in both public and private settings have the potential to provide insight about how and when to incorporate instruction about religion as part of a robust social studies curriculum.

Already, social studies instruction is often integrated with other content areas such as language arts (Demoiny, 2018). For example, the integration of historical fiction texts into social studies curriculum is sometimes used to help students think critically about the impact of decisions made by individuals within social and political contexts (Libresco et al., 2011; Lindquist, 2002). However, Skerrett (2014) suggests, "Religious ways of reading can markedly shape individuals' engagements with secular texts" (p. 235). Though three major religious belief systems—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—depend on literacy practices as part of engagement in worship, the emphasis is generally on memorization and recitation rather than comprehension (Sarroub & Schroeder, 2023). Christianity often limits individual textual interpretations, particularly for young students, thereby



restricting children's capacities to make meaning from religious texts (Skerrett, 2014). However, as Skerrett (2014) further describes, different traditions within Christianity have different comprehension expectations and engage with religious texts in varying ways. In more conservative or fundamentalist traditions, texts are often positioned as authoritative with little space for the reader to make interpretations (Heath, 1986). In less conservative congregations, church members may exhibit agency, negotiating meaning from the text and developing their religious beliefs individually (Heath, 1986). But regardless of the religious traditions students were familiar with, Skerrett (2014) suggests educational practices in schools related to instruction about religion were absent of critical reading or flexible thinking that allowed space for students to make individual interpretations of texts. In contrast, a critical lens, such as that provided by critical literacy, can be helpful in thinking about religion and worldviews (Shaw, 2020), even when applied to secular texts.

## Methodology

This qualitative study highlights one example of how religious education is conducted at the elementary level in the U.S. and provides insight into the importance of incorporating instruction about religion in elementary social studies. In the study, in order to think deeply about these ideas, we focus our attention on how students think about religion, personally as Christians and in relation to non-Christians, in response to children's historical fiction. The research questions considered in this paper are

1. How do students connect their personal faith with the children's historical fiction books they engaged with over the course of an academic year?
2. How do students talk about "others"—those outside their Christian faith—in concert with children's historical fiction?

## Participants

The study took place in a fourth and fifth-grade combined classroom at a mid-size private

Christian school in a large city in the South for grades PK-12. Because it is a Christian school, discussion of religion and personal religious beliefs is an expected norm, rather than a fearful or divisive topic. Though religion-related dialogue is often threatened by historical, religious, or political conflict (Vikdahl & Skeie, 2019), responses in this study are indicative of how students might choose to talk about religion when they are within their own faith groups. However, this site also provides a unique perspective among Christian schools. The school describes itself as "transdenominational," meaning it is not a part of and does not represent a single church or denomination. Though all families are required to sign a statement of belief that aligns with the Apostles' Creed, students in the school come from a wide range of traditions, including denominations that may be described as right-wing or fundamentalist and denominations that are considered left-leaning or liberal by members of the community. However, as described above, most of the families enrolled in the school could be labeled as evangelical or Biblicist Christians (Juswik, 2014).

The class included 16 students, 13 of whom (along with their parents) chose to participate in the study. While all students actively participated in the discussion described, only the responses of students who signed consent agreements are included in the findings. The teacher for this class, Mrs. Peterson,<sup>1</sup> earned her Bachelor's degree in English/Music from a small liberal arts college where a portion of her coursework focused on music education. She has a total of 13 years of classroom experience across all grade levels, including six years teaching music-related courses and seven years teaching elementary school. She also served as an elementary school principal at the same private school for a short period of time.

## Role of the researcher

Researcher positionality is often neglected in scholarly work connected to religion, yet religious identity does influence steps throughout the research process (Pavia, 2015). Given the nature and content of this study, it is important to describe the role and positionality of the research team in relation to the research. The first author

is a white, cisgender woman, raised in a Christian home, who continues to identify as a non-denominational Christian. A primary thread of her research relates to religious literacy within the field of elementary social studies. At the time this discussion was observed, she was an administrator at the school where the study took place, conducting research about discussion-based teaching strategies for her dissertation research. Previously, she was also a third-grade teacher in the same school and, as a result, she had previously taught several of the students in this particular class. In total, she was a part of the school community for six years. Because of her relationship with faculty and families from this school, she was able to gain IRB approval to both observe and record this class session from fellow administrators and parents. As part of the research process, all lessons observed were video recorded so that she would be able to re-watch them at a later date.

The second author is a white, cisgender woman who was raised in a charismatic Christian home. As an adult she has continued to identify as a Christian but has chosen not to be actively engaged in any specific Christian ideology. Her primary area of research focuses on literacy instruction and the importance of using children's picture books as mentor texts for interdisciplinary crosswalks in the elementary classroom to support social justice, diverse instructional methods, and inclusive practices. She promotes using children's picture books as an essential pathway for building empathy for others. As a former first grade teacher and reading specialist, she now teaches literacy and social studies methods courses to elementary preservice teachers. She watched the video recording of the discussion and, independent of the first researcher, coded her own observations for triangulation.

### **Context for the discussion**

This manuscript focuses on student engagement in a single classroom discussion that was itself part of a larger study. The larger study took place over the course of an entire academic year and was focused on the role of the teacher in classroom discussion. In contrast, data analysis in the

study presented here looks specifically at how students engaged in classroom discussion as it relates to religion. In faith-based schools, teachers are able to more explicitly lean into students' religious beliefs (Eakle, 2007; Kapitzke, 1995; Skerrett, 2014). In this lesson, we see an example of a teacher doing just that. During classroom instruction, fourth and fifth-grade students were asked to engage in a fishbowl discussion (Gonzalez, 2015) meant to synthesize literature selections read over the course of the academic year, responding to a series of four prompts that invite students to make connections between their academic learning and their personal religious beliefs:

1. What does it mean to conform?
2. In what ways have we seen people conform in our history and literature this year?
3. Where have we seen people not conforming in our history and literature this year?
4. Romans 12:12 tells us "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind." What do you think this verse means? Are there any examples of that in our books?

Table 1 provides a list of the literature selections read by the class throughout the school year prior to engaging in this discussion, but this discussion was the first time students were introduced to the idea of conformity. While there are many ways to enact fishbowl discussions, in this particular setting, the teacher chose to observe the activity from the outside but occasionally tapped in as an active participant. Each of the four questions was introduced individually and the teacher allowed about 15 min for discussion of each question before introducing the next one. Four students were seated in a central location while the rest of the class stood outside in a circle listening. After a student on the inside had spoken, students from the outside had the opportunity to tap in (replace that student) and join the conversation. The teacher gave each student three tokens that they could spend to tap into the conversation. Each student was required to participate at least once, but students were not allowed to enter the fishbowl more than three

**Table 1.** Historical fiction selections read during the year and included in the discussion.

Year	Title	Author	Summary of Text
1977	Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry	Mildred D. Taylor	Follows the struggles of the Logan family, an African American family in Mississippi during the Great Depression, as they confront racism and injustice. Through the eyes of young Cassie Logan, the story highlights themes of resilience, family, and the fight for dignity in a deeply divided society.
1964	Across Five Aprils	Irene Hunt	Follows the life of young Jethro Creighton as he navigates the challenges and heartache of the Civil War era in rural Illinois. As his family is torn apart by the conflict, Jethro learns about the complexities of loyalty, growth, and the harsh realities of war.
1974	The Hiding Place	Corrie ten Boom	Recounts the true story of Corrie ten Boom and her family's efforts to save Jews during World War II by hiding them in their home in Nazi-occupied Netherlands. As they face arrest and imprisonment, Corrie's emphasis on her faith illustrates the importance of love and forgiveness amidst suffering and persecution.
1961	Where the Red Fern Grows	Wilson Rawls	Tells the poignant story of a young boy named Billy and his deep bond with two hunting dogs, Old Dan and Little Ann, as they embark on adventures in the Ozarks. Through themes of love, loss, and determination, the novel captures Billy's journey of growing up and the profound impact of his dogs on his life.
1908	Anne of Green Gables	L.M. Montgomery	Follows the imaginative and spirited Anne Shirley, an orphan who is mistakenly sent to live with Marilla and Matthew Cuthbert, siblings who had intended to adopt a boy. As Anne transforms their quiet life in Avonlea with her vibrant personality and adventurous spirit, she learns about friendship, belonging, and the importance of finding a place to call home.

times. As a result, the participants of the final ten minutes of the fishbowl discussion were made up of students who had been reluctant to participate and typically did not speak up in classroom discussions as more talkative students had already spent all of their tokens. Of particular note, this discussion was the first time students in this class engaged in this specific discussion strategy.

### Data collection

Initial data collected and used in this study included observation during the enactment of the lesson, field notes recorded during the observation, and analytic memos that recorded initial impressions and captured key ideas, all collected by the first author. Both members of the research team watched video recordings of the discussion at a later date. While watching the videos, both created a second set of field notes, capturing any information that seemed relevant to the research questions for this specific study. Drawing data from multiple sources and notes from multiple perspectives (by both authors) helped triangulate and confirm study findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### Data analysis

Throughout the data analysis process, we engage in an inquiry, deconstructing and reconstructing the classroom discussion as a text, watching for indicators of power, position, and privilege that

emerge as students engage with historical fiction texts. Once armed with a full set of field notes and memos, using the qualitative data analysis methods outlined by Miles et al. (2014), both researchers read through the data multiple times and began the process of deductive coding using predetermined thematic codes (Saldaña, 2021). While the definition of critical literacy provided by Kuby (2013) serves as a framework to guide our thinking throughout the inquiry conducted in this study, we turned to the definition of critical literacy outlined by Lewison et al. (2008) to develop the following initial codes:

1. Questioning the everyday world
2. Interrogating the relationship between language and power
3. Analyzing popular culture and media
4. Understanding how power relationships are socially constructed
5. Consideration of actions that can be taken to promote social justice

We hoped these codes would be helpful in describing student responses that correlated with one of the two research questions because we were looking to consider student responses within the theoretical framework of critical literacy. Within these larger categories, we recorded exact phrases spoken by the students in an attempt to authentically capture student perspectives. Throughout the coding process, we sought to be “expansive” in “identifying any segment of data

that might be useful” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 204). We then looked to see how these codes might be narrowed in, primarily by grouping codes together into themes or categories to provide answers to the proposed research questions. Using a construct table (Miles et al., 2014), we paired the initial codes with student responses, and then we organized these pairs into groups that helped us answer our research questions.

In the findings sections, we present the results of this analysis grouped by the themes that ultimately emerged as part of the data analysis process. However, while our initial analysis was guided by a deductive framework using the five critical literacy practices outlined by Lewison et al. (2008), we also allowed space for inductive findings to emerge through close engagement with the data. Each researcher independently applied the five predetermined codes to excerpts from the transcript. As we reviewed these coded excerpts, we noticed patterns that pointed toward broader ideas not strictly tied to a single code (e.g., how students talked about conformity). These ideas did not replace our original coding structure but rather provided an interpretive layer that allowed us to better answer our research questions. Thus, our analysis represents a blended approach: deductive in our use of the critical literacy framework, but inductive in the way we interpreted and organized student responses to reveal deeper insights.

## Findings

In this section, we share the findings from our analysis of a classroom discussion in which students responded to literature selections read throughout the school year, including detailed descriptions of student responses to each of the four discussion prompts. Again, our analysis was grounded in the five critical literacy practices identified by Lewison et al. (2008): (1) questioning the everyday world, (2) interrogating the relationship between language and power, (3) analyzing popular culture and media, (4) understanding how power relationships are socially constructed, and (5) considering actions that can be taken to promote social justice. While these codes formed the basis of our deductive analysis,

we also remained open to inductive insights that emerged from student responses. Notably, patterns around how students understood *conformity*, how they discussed people outside their own religious group, and how they used Christian identity to frame ideas as “good” or “bad” became central themes across the discussion. In what follows, we present the findings organized first around the emergent theme of *conformity*, followed by analyses aligned with each of the two research questions.

### ***Understanding conformity: Interrogating the relationship between language and power (2)***

Although not directly tied to either research question, the concept of *conformity* was central to the classroom discussion and became a powerful entry point into students’ broader reasoning. When prompted to define the term, students initially referenced dictionary definitions, but quickly began to challenge and reinterpret these meanings based on their personal experiences and religious values. This early dialogue reveals how students grappled with the complexities of conformity in relation to authority, faith, and social expectations. These moments also illustrate key elements of critical literacy, particularly the (2) interrogation of language and power that led to the questioning of accepted social norms. In this section, we explore how students constructed and contested the meaning of conformity and how this understanding set the stage for deeper engagement with the historical fiction texts.

To start the conversation, one student, Rose, read the definition of conform from the physical dictionary available in the classroom. She read, “Be in accord. Act accordingly to the rules and customs,” then added her own commentary, “Okay, so it’s like to do what you’re told.” Naomi immediately disagreed. She suggested, “I think that it means to kind of bend to follow the rules or do what’s right even if it’s not what you originally planned to do before.”

Despite reading the definition directly from the dictionary, this interpretation was immediately questioned and continued to be contested throughout the conversation. After the second discussion prompt was introduced, “In what ways



have we seen people conform in our history and literature this year?”, students engaged in the following dialogue:

Theo: In *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, when TJ is going to cheat, but Stacey told him not to and took the cheat notes and got rid of them.

Elijah: Also in *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, when the Sims told TJ to do what they say, and TJ does it because he wants to be friends with them.

Jacob: How is that following the rules?

(long pause)

Beckett (from outside the fishbowl): True.

From this exchange, we can see that students have not fully agreed on the definition provided by the dictionary or interpreted by Rose and Naomi. Through these exchanges, students are (2) interrogating the relationship between language and power, a key action involved in critical literary (Lewison et al., 2008). Sometimes, students suggest, conforming involves breaking the rules to gain approval from others while others equate conformity to bending the rules toward justice.

Through this interrogation, at some point (with the help of the teacher who taps into the fishbowl as a participant during the exchange below), students move from connections that equate conformity with rules to the ideals associated with societal norms. One example that demonstrates this transition is when Beau brings up Jesus as an example of conformity:

Beau: I guess someone from history who conformed, well there's a lot of people who do conform, but a lot of people from the Bible, especially Jesus, conform... basically.

Mrs. Peterson: Did Jesus conform?

Beau: Well, in some instances, well, because conforming basically means following the law, what the current law is. But he also kind of breaks a law which about part of the law was not to preach the gospel. And also they said, he was saying he was Jesus, but he wasn't really breaking the law in that instance because he was telling the truth. He was factually fully God.

Mrs. Peterson: I like this theme of the Bible and specifically Jesus. So I'm going to get in. I don't know. I would say that Jesus was not seen as conforming.

Beau: He was technically.

Mrs. Peterson: He was not conforming to the traditions of the day and the expectations of the Pharisees.

Beau: He was conforming though to the law of keeping the Sabbath and stuff.

Mrs. Peterson: But was he?

Later, another student continues this line of thought:

Sarah: Also [Jesus] didn't conform, but the Pharisees, they did go by the Ten Commandments, but they kind of made up their own commandments. They came up with all these things to make it seem like they were following the Bible and really they were manmade. And like Rachel was saying, the Ten Commandments, no matter how much, they can't be improved on, so Jesus might not have been conforming to their idea of what the commandments were, but he did conform to the Bible. The Bible never says you can't do anything. He was actually doing what the Bible told you to, which is take care of poor and the sick through the community. And so if anything, he was doing it better.

At this point, about halfway through the hour-long discussion, students have transitioned from thinking about conformity as following the rules to following a set of expectations that can be set by any external force, be it your teacher, your classmates, your nation, or your religion. Conforming or not conforming, then, is unique to a distinct location in time and space.

Throughout the student responses below, it is important to keep in mind the ways students interrogated the relationship between language and power and, at different points in the conversation, they had both different and shared, accepted and contested understandings of what it means to conform.

### **Connecting personal faith with historical fiction: Questioning the everyday world (1) and understanding how power relationships are socially constructed (4)**

To address our first research question, *How do students connect their personal faith with the children's historical fiction books they engaged with over the course of an academic year?*, we examined student responses across all five critical literacy codes.

Students consistently demonstrated a willingness to interpret texts through the lens of their Christian beliefs, whether referencing scripture, identifying biblical themes in characters' actions, or critiquing historical decisions based on moral and religious frameworks. In this portion of the discussion, we found students demonstrated two key critical literacy practices: (1) questioning the everyday world by using their faith to examine moral choices and social norms and (4) understanding how power relationships are socially constructed by analyzing the roles of authority figures—both historical and biblical—and considering when it is appropriate to follow or challenge them.

As seen previously in their discussion of Jesus, the Bible, the Pharisees, and the Ten Commandments, overwhelmingly, students were unafraid to make connections between what they had read and their personal, Christian faith. After Mrs. Peterson introduces the last question, the students really lean into (1) questioning the everyday world:

Mrs. Peterson: The Bible actually says something about conforming, believe it or not. It says this, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind." So if the Bible is telling us not to be conformed to the world, what does that mean? And are there any examples of that in our books?

Rose: So it says not to conform to world leaders, right?

Mrs. Peterson: Don't be conformed to the world.

Rose: So conform to the world, as in the Bible does say, do listen to your authorities and it's good to do that, but that is not the highest commander. So don't necessarily conform to that, conform to the Bible because the Bible says that the people they chose to write it are [writing] the God-breathed word. So God gave them the words to say and write down. So because he did that, it means that the Bible is basically God's commandments. And so we should because God is not earthly; he's heavenly. So that means we should listen to what the Bible says over what our authorities say. If the authorities are saying things that do not conform with the Bible, conform to the Bible.

A few minutes later, Beau adds this:

You sometimes also don't want to listen to stuff with authorities because it could be bad if their laws could be not really good to follow. The Bible does say to

obey our authorities, but sometimes the authorities can also be wrong.

While the students in this classroom likely have favorable opinions about authorities, they are also thinking back to conversations about injustice throughout history and in the books they read to question the existence of the status quo. Here, they display an understanding of (4) how power relationships are socially constructed and then directly connect those understandings to their personal religious beliefs. Throughout the conversation, Thomas, Rachel, and Rowan also link scriptural ideas to specific references from the curriculum (including history, literature, and even spelling lists) that demonstrate the social construction of power relationships with law enforcement officials and the military:

Referencing *Across Five Aprils*—Thomas: I think another person that showed or didn't show, didn't conform, didn't conform was Eb, Jessica's cousin when he deserted from the army, the Union Army, because he was too scared. Cause he saw, didn't Tom, didn't Tom get shot? And he didn't want that to happen to him. He didn't want that to happen to himself. So he deserted the army so he wouldn't get killed... I think it was bad because you should stick with the army and if you stick with it, God will help you... He made a commitment to go and fight, but then he just abandoned it.

Referencing a previous week's spelling dictation—Rachel: Sometimes if we do break a rule, we're actually promoting a better rule. Which reminds me of one of the sentences in our spelling list actually, which I don't remember exactly what it was, but all of human laws are nowhere near as great as God's Ten Commandments. So we need to prioritize those and human lives no matter what the cops does.

Referencing *The Hiding Place*—Rowan: [The Nazis] wanted people to obey their laws of discriminating against Jews, but that would've been bad. And so sometimes it's okay to go against these bad laws that are bad. Not if you think they're bad, but if they really are bad.

The idea of laws being "really" bad was a recurring theme throughout the conversation. Building on Rowan's idea, students engaged in the dialogue below:

Naomi: You need to really, really be actually positive that it is a bad rule.

Beckett: Like in the United States, it doesn't just go through just one person, just the president. It's a whole Congress making this law. So you need to be sure that you are not the only person who thinks this law is wrong before you break it. So you need to get more people on your side. Like a group, like activists.

Throughout these conversations, students expressed a recognition of not only the way society is socially constructed but also what it takes to change that construction. In the next section, we will come back to the idea of activists in thinking about the way students talk about others.

Outside of authorities, they also engage with the key critical literacy skills of (1) questioning the everyday world and (4) understanding how power relationships are socially constructed by making connections between their day-to-day life and their beliefs. Specifically, they demonstrate critical literacy in their analysis of the negative peer and social pressures they read in books but also may experience, like cheating on tests, lying, or stealing, as Elijah shared in one of the initial examples, "Also in *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, when the Sims told TJ to do what they say, and TJ does it because he wants to be friends with them." This observation links to a later dialogue about peer pressure:

Tiana: If your friends are doing something and then [you] ask your parents to do that, and they say no, don't do it.

Thomas: If friends are sitting there, squashing bugs or something, killing wildlife or plants or something, unless it's weeds.

Rose: Doing something they shouldn't be doing.

Thomas: Yes. Then don't give into it just if you know it's bad, but your friends say, "It's fine; nobody will figure out what we did."

Tiana: You shouldn't conform to what your friends say.

In other cases, students see characters conform because of societal pressures. In *Anne of Green Gables*, Anne is an orphan and must navigate a tenuous relationship in the home she is placed in, which often leads to lying.

Rachel: With Anne, I tapped in, because there's one incident that really makes me think about how Anne does conform, because with the whole Anne, this brooch thing, Marilla told Anne, well what Marilla

was saying was she was convinced that Anne had taken it. So she told Anne that she couldn't go take a picnic until she confessed, which was kind of, well, when Marilla makes it decree, it's a law. It's a law. Anne hadn't taken the brooch and it was all a misunderstanding. But she decided to make herself look better and get something that she wanted. She would make up a story to get to go to the picnic in the end that didn't go well for her and a whole lot of other things happened. But just that incident.

Beau: Well yeah, she had more or less had to because until Marilla was found the brooch, then she would have to confess.

In this example, students suggest Anne's decision to lie is conforming and is a direct result of the socially constructed pressure she felt from Marilla.

### **Talking about "others": analyzing popular culture and media (3) and promoting social justice (5)**

Our second research question asked: *How do students talk about "others"—those outside their Christian faith—in concert with children's historical fiction?* While we initially defined "others" as individuals of different religious backgrounds, students interpreted this concept more broadly, including people with differing social, political, or moral views. While in many cases these were imagined others (either from the books students read or from historical events; e.g. Crisp & Turner, 2009; Findora & Hammond, 2021), in some cases they appeared to think specifically about people they knew. Their responses often reflected a binary moral logic rooted in their Christian identity, which framed "others" as either aligned with or opposed to biblical principles. In this section, we found the critical literacy codes of (3) analyzing popular culture and media or (5) considering actions that could be taken to promote social justice and lean into these to examine how students discussed ideas of justice, cultural norms, and moral conflict in ways that revealed their perceptions of insiders and outsiders. These insights offer a deeper understanding of how children in faith-based settings interpret difference and navigate conversations about inclusion, justice, and identity.

Data analyzed in this study was collected in May of 2021. Students in this class had been

attending school in person for all of the 2020–2021 academic year, and throughout the year, they had been subjected to varying absence and quarantine policies that necessitated attending class via Zoom on a case-by-case basis and multiple policies about wearing masks at school. These policies impacted their education experiences, and this impact was apparent in their conversation. In the middle of a dialogue about *The Hiding Place*, while discussing whether it was right for characters to defy policies in Nazi Germany by hiding Jews, students pivoted and started thinking about how people were defying government policies in the present culture, an example of (3) analyzing popular culture. Naomi started this conversation, by saying “people might think that wearing masks or something is bad, but just because you think so doesn’t mean that it is bad.” This sparked further dialogue about why laws (or policies) exist and whether they need to be followed:

Daisy: You can’t just say [wearing masks] is a bad law, therefore I’m not going to follow it.

Naomi: Yeah. “I don’t like breathing with masks on. I’m not going to wear a mask.”

Beau: You need to, if you want to change something, then you need others to agree with you. Otherwise, then you could have two groups of people who disagree and want to keep a law or want to get rid of the law. So you kind of will have this conflict. So you want to make sure that you have people on your side.

In this excerpt, students are situating those who are against masks as “others.” In her response, Naomi takes on the persona of someone who refuses to wear a mask and her voice clearly indicates her disdain for this group. While this “othering” does not relate back to student religious beliefs, they are connecting the historical books they read to their personal lives. As the teacher redirects students to the next immediate exchange, students again couple their religious beliefs with the historical fiction texts:

Mrs. Peterson: So the question is still where do we see people conforming in our literature books? Or in history? But let’s add where do we see people not conforming and which is good and which is bad?

Sarah: Betsie helped hide Jews in her house and it was good because it saved lives that would’ve been killed or had terrible things happen. But she did do

something good in God’s point of view and followed the law that’s “help one another” and “love your neighbor”, like what the Word says.

Beckett: In *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, TJ doesn’t conform really because, in school for example, the rules basically are just don’t cheat on test and don’t do bad things. But he keeps breaking the rules, which brings him in more and more trouble.

Elijah: Someone else who didn’t conform, but actually for a good reason in history was Rosa Parks because they told her to get off the bus, which was, if she did, she would’ve been conforming, but it would be for something bad. So she stayed on the bus and even though it wasn’t following the rules.

Tiana: Yeah, like, if she wouldn’t have done that, no one else would try.

This line of conversation shows students engaging in the critical literacy skill of (5) considering actions that can be taken to promote social justice through the introduction of Rosa Parks. Throughout the discussion students commonly labeled historical figures as activists and link biblical ideas with advocating for social change, primarily through conversations about the civil rights movement as seen here:

Beau: Someone from history could be Martin Luther King Jr. He was persistent and he would try his best to help.

Rowan: Yeah, I get what you’re saying. He would, instead of doing it Malcom X’s way, being doing a protest and being violent and bombing places, that’s breaking the law. He would do his protest and still get discriminated against but not do anything wrong technically.

Mrs. Peterson: Well, I kind of disagree with Beau... I do agree that conforming has to do something with Martin Luther King Jr. But does he actually conform to what is expected of black people at his time?

Jacob: So I also kind of disagreed with Beau because Martin Luther King Jr. did break the law. A LOT. But he didn’t do it violently like Malcolm X.

Later, referencing this conversation about Martin Luther King Jr as well as his own mention of activists recorded in the previous section, Beckett says:

Like I was saying earlier about being in a group—but not only do you want a group, but you want a good group. Ones that follow the Bible and that they’re not

only just seeking this one goal, but they're all willing to do it in the same way all together. If you're Martin Luther King Jr. and his group of activists, they were all punching towards [civil rights] and they all had a plan and they were all willing to do the plan for equal rights.

In this instance, Beckett is situating other Christians as being part of his group and others who do not follow the Bible as outsiders (unlikely to be included in his group). He then provides an example of Martin Luther King, Jr as a model, leading a group working together. By using this example, he seems to perceive Martin Luther King, Jr. as being the leader of the "right" type of group (as compared to Malcolm X), although it is unclear whether this is related to the two men's religious perspectives. Based on the recorded conversation, it seems more likely he is supporting peaceful protests over violent protests.

## Discussion

### *Engagement with religious identity*

Personal knowledge of religion clearly impacts how students engage as learners (Skerrett, 2016), and religious identity is an important part of meaning-making (Eakle, 2007; Skerrett, 2016). Yet, Skerrett (2014) suggests different traditions within Christianity engage with texts in varying ways, and the same could be said of students in this class.

Throughout the conversation, students struggle with defining conformity, but they do attempt to define this term. The same is not true of their use of the words "good" and "bad." Their definitions of these terms seem to be both understood and explicitly connected to Christianity and their personal belief system, and the teacher never problematizes this basic dichotomy. Students make connections between their readings and current events, particularly as it relates to wearing masks during covid. But though they criticize people who choose not to wear masks, people who refuse to wear them receive the same level of condemnation as cheaters, liars, and Nazis, and people who might want to change the "law" (or in this case, more accurately, a policy) are lumped into the same group as Civil Rights activists who fought for equal rights. There is no scale

to indicate how good or bad something is, and for these students, this level of criticality is enough.

Students use the language of "good" (as opposed to "bad") when discussing peer pressure and which groups to be a part of as well. If you are going to join a group, Beckett suggests, it should be "a good group. Ones that follow the Bible and that they're... seeking this one goal." Similarly, Thomas suggests if your friends want you to do something "don't give into it just if you know it's bad." Again, in these examples we see the way religious identity directly impacts the meaning students find in these historical fiction texts.

Ultimately, similar to findings presented by Choi and Tinker Sachs (2017), students used their religious beliefs and personal experiences to make sense of both religious and secular literature read throughout the year. However, it is not fully clear whether these connections were made of their own volition or if the nature of the prompts made these responses inherent. Sarroub and Schroeder (2023) suggest young people may be "motivated to read and comprehend complex religious texts because they [want] to apply them to their lives, endure challenges, find comfort, and connect with 'God'" (p. 211). In this case, potentially, students may have been motivated to make connections between their religious beliefs and secular texts for the same purpose.

### *Appearance of Christian beliefs*

Throughout student engagement with texts, their Christian beliefs came through strongly in what could be considered both positive and negative ways. First and somewhat unusually, findings in this study showed the teacher asking students to critically engage with those beliefs. Even though literacy practices are often an important part of religious worship (Sarroub & Schroeder, 2023), students are rarely asked for individual textual interpretations, restricting their ability to make meaning (Skerrett, 2014). However, in this case, Mrs. Peterson does more than allow students to engage in this way. She encourages their interpretations and even pushes students to think more critically. For example, by positioning Jesus as



someone who moved against societal norms and often did not follow the rules, she invites students to critique present day rules and authorities throughout the dialogue, considering for themselves whether the rules are “good” or “bad.”

Alternatively, student exposure to only Christian beliefs with little emphasis or only stereotypical emphasis on any other religion (in this case, a brief and stereotypical introduction to Judaism through reading *The Hiding Place*; described in more detail in Schweber & Irwin, 2003) is also limiting to students. In their analysis of this text, the only interpretation students ever mention is directly related to Corrie and Betsie, the two sisters who hid Jews during WWII. While students praise the sisters for defying the Nazis and recognize the oppression of Jewish people as wrong, the Jewish characters are never afforded agency in any way. Similar to findings presented by Schweber and Irwin (2003), the heavy focus on Christianity throughout the text ensured students would see themselves and bolster their own Christian identities while preventing students from engaging in any meaningful conversations about another religion. Because “religious ways of reading can markedly shape individuals’ engagements with secular texts or their literate engagements in secular contexts” (Skerrett, 2014, p. 235), here it seems the dominance of students’ Christian beliefs and their exposure to only these beliefs restrict their capacities to make meaning beyond their own religious context.

A focus on the Christian characters and neglect of the Jewish characters during the discussion of *The Hiding Place* also links to ideas of Christian privilege. Not explicitly discussing the fictional characters who might be classified as “others” further situates them as “others” who do not need to be discussed or assigned agency. While students do talk specifically about characters who were Christian, they never specifically mention the faith of any non-Christians. Privileging Christianity in this way is a form of bias and is an often hidden structural issue that needs to be addressed with both preservice and inservice teachers (Gao, 2015; Subedi, 2006). Teaching about diverse religions should be a fundamental aspect of social studies education (Allen, 2024), including understanding the beliefs, practices,

and cultural significance of various religious traditions. Teaching about diverse religions promotes cultural understanding, tolerance, critical thinking, and global citizenship. By fostering respect for religious diversity and promoting dialogue across religious and cultural boundaries, instruction about diverse religions has the potential to contribute to building more inclusive, peaceful, and harmonious societies.

## Implications

As we hint at in the final sections of our discussion, this study has implications for both teachers and teacher educators. This study provides one example of how religious education is conducted at the elementary level in the U.S., coupling the disciplinary areas of both social studies and language arts through the use of historical fiction. In the data presented here, we clearly see the ways students apply their personal religious beliefs to the way they interpret what they read throughout an academic year. As a result, it supports the inclusion of instruction about diverse cultures, including diverse religious beliefs, as part of a robust elementary social studies curriculum. However, teachers cannot teach what they do not know. Teacher educators should consider when and how they provide instruction about teaching religion as part of comprehensive preservice teacher education programs.

The study also provides an example of what discussions about religion may look like in a private, Christian school setting. Although their dominant Christian beliefs permeated the conversation, students were open and receptive to engaging in conversations about religion. Unfortunately, in this case, they were provided with a minimal amount of exposure to diverse religions. Though this study looks only at a private school setting, research throughout elementary social studies demonstrates that students are ready and able to participate in complex conversations about hard topics (Nance-Carroll, 2021; Paley, 1992; Vasquez, 2004). As a result, we encourage teachers to engage students in classroom discussions that allow space for their personal identities to emerge as part of social studies instruction.

## Future research

This study focused specifically on student actions and responses and did not explicitly consider the role of the teacher. Throughout the study, we saw students engaged in conversation, making religious interpretations of the texts with only minor interjections from the teacher. Despite this, the teacher played an important role that almost certainly impacted student engagement. For one, the teacher identified as a fellow Christian and agreed with the faith statement required by the private school, a fact that all students would be aware of. Because she had substantive knowledge of her students' religious beliefs, she was able to draw on that knowledge as part of her pedagogical decision-making. Two, the classroom teacher chose the questions the students were asked to discuss, intentionally making connections between their personal religious beliefs and their academic learning. Existing research shows that many Christian teachers enter the field with a missionary perspective (James, 2011; Oldendorf & Green, 2005; White, 2009), describing the ways they pray for and over their students and viewing the teaching profession as their calling (Logan, 2015). More research that considers the ways a teacher's personal religious beliefs (or lack thereof) impact their pedagogical choices should be conducted.

## Limitations

Though this study does offer empirical contributions about how students engage in instruction related to religion, there are several limitations. First, the students in this class are representative of a single class of students in a unique, private school setting. Their experiences are their own and are not generalizable to a larger population, even a wholly Christian population. Second, the study duration is a limitation. Data analyzed in this study is collected from a single discussion, although that discussion does include conversation about books read over the course of an entire academic year. Beyond this, student demographics were not collected as part of the study, making aspects of student engagement based on racial, linguistic, or socioeconomic diversity difficult to consider. In addition to the suggestions outlined above, further research should be

conducted in similar settings, but also in secular private schools, public schools, and with students of varying religions to better understand what is actually happening in classrooms across the nation as it relates to religious education.

## Note

1. All names are pseudonyms.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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