OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE AT SCHOOL:

PICTURE BOOKS, PRESERVICE TEACHERS, AND THE DISCOURSE OF RELIGIOUS (IL) LITERACY

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Abstract

This article examines the way 83 predominantly white, female preservice teachers (preservice teachers) at a large university in the U.S. Midwest and 133 predominantly white, female preservice teachers at a large university in the Southeast respond to the religious content of The Beautiful Lady/La Hermosa Señora (Mora, 2012), a new contemporary realistic picturebook about an American family's devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe of Mexico (Guadalupe); and Abuelito Eats with His Fingers (Levy, 1999), a realistic picturebook that show's another family's engagement with religious figures. This study is framed by Santa Ana's (2002) theory that an Anglo American Narrative underpins dominant U.S. social Discourses (with a capital "D"; Gee, 2008) and Shulman's (1987) and Grossman's (1990) theories that personal beliefs and subject-matter knowledge influence teachers' decisions. The data set offers a snapshot of the *kinds* of narratives and Discourses that preservice teachers embrace. The data indicate that even with increased subject-matter knowledge, some preservice teachers' dispositions toward the censorship of religious content in schools could inhibit their facilitation of multicultural literacy instruction.

Keywords: Literacy, Children's Literature, Religion, Teacher Education, Discourse

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1. INTRODUCTION

Are future literacy educators ready to teach religiously pluralistic students in a global community? Over twenty years ago, scholars like Harris (1994) suggested that teachers could advance religious pluralism by reading and discussing works of multicultural children's literature, which includes books about religious minorities among many other non-dominant groups. The recent #WeNeedDiverseBooks movement is a reminder that supporting access to diverse children's literature is critical. In the U.S., where a quarter (24.7%) of the public elementary school students have identified as Hispanic/Latino (Fry & Lopez, 2012), it is worthwhile to include in classrooms, for example, works of contemporary realistic fiction that affirm the historically and culturally steeped religious customs of many Hispanic/Latino American families. Two such books are Mora's (2012) picture book *The Beautiful Lady/La Hermosa Señora (Señora),* which includes the legend of La Virgen de Guadalupe of North America (Guadalupe); and Levy's (1999) *Abuelito Eats with His Fingers (Abuelito),* which acknowledges a grandfather's prayer ritual to Guadalupe and other saints/*santos.*

To foreground my research with books like *Señora* and *Abuelito*, I adopt Neuliep 's (2015) definition of culture as an "accumulated pattern of values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by an identifiable group of people with a common history and verbal and nonverbal code system" under which religion is a "microculture" of the common familial and community systems (p. xvi). As a microculture, religion not only influences the ways members of a cultural group formulate knowledge and derive meaning from life experiences (Murphy, 2007), it also influences the literacy and language practices of children and adults (Juzwik, 2014; Magaldi-Dopman & Park-Taylor, 2014; Rackley, 2014; Skerrett, 2013).

Considering the significant role religion plays in people's lives, in this article I examine the ways that 83 predominantly white, female preservice teachers at a large public university in the U.S. Midwest and 133 predominantly white, female preservice teachers at a large public university in the U.S. Southeast responded to the religious content of *Abuelito* and *Señora.* Although the multicultural education agenda urges teachers to advance "the pluralism (ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic, and gender, among others) that students, their communities, and teachers reflect" (Nieto & Bode, 2008, p. 44), U.S. teachers are often unprepared to serve Latino students (Gándara, 2008). Moreover, many Latinos have been concerned that the predominantly White teaching pool (84%; National Center for Education Information, 2011) is neither culturally competent nor responsive to Latino students (Pew Hispanic Center/Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004).

Thus, analyzing preservice teachers' responses to books like *Abuelito* and *Señora* is important because when teachers exclude text about certain cultural perspectives, the children belonging to those dismissed groups can become disenfranchised (Ladson-Billings, 1994). The possibility for disenfranchising children increas-

es when the vast majority of children's books published in the U.S. feature Anglo American characters (CCBC, 2014) and thereby limit the visibility of exceptional Latino literature in the marketplace from which libraries, schools, and teachers often select reading materials for youth (Diaz, 2013).

In the English/Language Arts classroom the unintentional marginalization of children's literature and materials about cultural and religious minorities is harmful not only to individual students, but to all children who are expected to become active citizens of a diverse society (Bishop, 1990). Active citizenship requires one to live with religions and cultural differences and to commit to the good of all members of the society (Hayne and Thomas, 2007). Committing to the good of society requires one's understanding that people's spiritual perspectives are usually influenced by their families, communities, culture, class, race, gender, and their historical and sociopolitical contexts of life (Noddings, 1993; Prothero, 2007).

This study analyzes the groups of Midwest (MW) and Southeast (SE) preservice teachers' understandings of the spiritual perspectives of two different U.S. families of Mexican heritage via the following research questions: a) Notionally, what is the likelihood that preservice teachers would employ children books presenting worldviews or spiritual ideas that differ from mainstream Anglo American culture? and b) How do preservice teachers' comments about the religious content of *Abuelito* and *Señora* align with common narratives about religion that underpin dominant social discourses?

2. BACKGROUND: LA VIRGEN DE GUADALUPE

In order to contextualize the religious content of *Abuelito* and *Señora*, I offer a brief overview of the role of Marian apparition legends in the colonization of the continental Americas. The nearly 500-year-old legend of La Virgen de Guadalupe (Guadalupe) is specifically associated with Spain's conquest of what is now Mexico and most of the U.S. With an objective to indoctrinate and thereby control the indigenous peoples of the Americas, Spanish missionaries destroyed ancient shrines dedicated to local deities and replaced them with chapels and churches honoring Catholic saints (Badillo, 2006; Poole, 1995). They also imported apparition stories of the Virgin Mary and other Castilian saints as part of the conquest. The historic Marian legend of the dark-skinned Virgin of Guadalupe correspondingly emerged. In the legend, Guadalupe appeared to a poor indigenous man name Juan Diego in 1531. She asked Juan Diego to convince the Spanish Bishop of Mexico to build a church in her honor atop Tepeyac Hill near Mexico City, which happened to be the very same location where the Nahua people honored the local goddess Tonantzin, Mother of the Gods (Anzaldúa, 1987; Badillo, 2006; Poole, 1995). In the legend, as proof of her existence, Guadalupe miraculously left her image on Juan Diego's *tilma* (cloak). Today, the tilma hangs in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, a destination for millions of visitors to Mexico City each year.

Instead of abandoning their spiritual heritage, many Indians of Mexico accommodated the reverence of Guadalupe as a secret means of honoring Tonantzin (Badillo, 2006). Accepted as Mary, the Catholic Mother of God *as well as* Tonantzin, the Nahua Mother of the Gods, Guadalupe crossed racial and cultural borders. She came to represent the mixed, *mestiza* identity of Mexico's people (Anzaldúa, 1987). What's more, Guadalupe evolved into a national and political figure whose image adorned the revolutionary banners of Mexicans' bid for Independence from Spain in 1810, and of Mexicans' call for Revolution in 1910. In the U.S., civil rights activist and labor leader, César Chávez carried a banner of Guadalupe while calling for the social justice, human rights, and fair labor practices and wages for agriculture workers. Today, Guadalupe's legendary image is part of popular culture and can seen across the continent.

Her likeness adorns private and public spaces in Mexico and the U.S. and is featured in U.S. children's books. Set in contemporary American homes like the stories of *Abuelito* and *Señora*, the illustrations of the following picture books also include images and/or statues of Guadalupe: *Friends from the Other Side* (Anzaldua, 1996), *Family Pictures* (Garza, 1991), and *In My Family* (Garza, 1996). Moreover, artist Susan Guevera includes the famous East Los Angeles, CA public-art murals of Guadalupe in her illustrations for *Chato's Kitchen* (Soto, 1995) and *Chato and the Party Animals* (Soto, 2002) as the stories are set in the same community. In short, the inclusion of Guadalupe's image in contemporary U.S. picture books reflects her significance to millions of North Americans of Mexican heritage.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 The Anglo American Narrative

As a context for this study, which sits at the intersection of North American history, Mexican culture, and the knowledge base of predominantly White pre-service teachers, I assume that there is a pervasive "Anglo American Narrative" in dominant U.S. social discourse, which is grounded in the notion that White identity is superior and perpetuates a set of criteria for non-Whites to demonstrate their allegiance to the dominant culture (Santa Ana, 2002). For example, in order to garner "membership" in mainstream American culture, persons of Hispanic/Latino heritage must: (a) present themselves as monolingual English speakers; (b) present themselves as White-identified by rejecting all "foreign" qualities associated with being from Latin America; and (c) try to become White is as many ways as possible, which includes accepting that racial hierarchy that ranks White superior to Americans of darker skin tone (Santa Ana, 2002). Persons who neither adopt the Anglo American Narrative nor sufficiently integrate themselves into the dominant sociocultural group are cast as "foreigners," "non-Americans," and/or "invaders" in the dominant U.S. social discourse (Chavez, 2008; Chomsky, 2007; Santa Ana, 2002). These and other dehumanizing labels have been reinforced by U.S. elected officials,

spewed across public radio airways, and maintained in the discourse of some news media outlets (Begala, 2012; Media Matters For America, 2012; National Hispanic Media Coalition, 2012).

3.2 Discourse with a Capital "D"

The Anglo American Narrative exists as part of a larger social Discourse. With a capital "D," social Discourses are unconscious and uncritical socially accepted ways of speaking/listening and writing/reading that are "*coupled with* distinctive ways of acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, dressing, thinking, [and] believing…" (Gee, 2008, p. 155, emphasis in original). Since Discourses are ideological in nature and advance the values and viewpoints of the social group they represent, they define who is an insider and who is an outsider to the social or cultural groups. Thus, in the dominant Discourse, the Anglo American Narrative serves to identify persons of Hispanic/Latino heritage as outsiders.

*Religious Discourse in the U.S***.** Alongside of the works of religious literacy and multicultural education scholars, the works of Chavez (2008), Gee (2008), and Santa Anna (2002) provide a context for addressing religious Discourse in the U.S. To begin, ignorance and intolerance of spiritual/religious worldviews other than one's own has long been recognized in mainstream Discourses (Noddings, 1993; Prothero, 2007; Nord, 2010). In fact, "religious illiteracy" is a norm by which Americans are not expected to be aware of religious traditions other than their own (Moore, 2007, p.3). As a result, successful participation in the dominant U.S. Discourse, which is associated with the distribution and acquisition of social goods such as money, power and status (Gee, 2008), has not historically hinged on participants' understanding of diverse religions traditions in history. Consequently, although the image of Guadalupe is one of the most renowned icons of North American history (Dunning, 2010), knowledge of Guadalupe's role in the Spanish Conquest is not required in dominant U.S. Discourse. Today, while the religious affiliations of the U.S. population are quickly diversifying, at least half (51 – 52%) of all adult Americans continue to identify with Protestant denominations of Christianity (Pew Research: Religion & Public Life Project, 2014).

In addition, some Americans, including some educators in public institutions, misinterpret the meaning of Separation of Church (religion) and State (government) in suggesting that is unlawful to foster religious awareness in public schools (Bishop & Nash, 2007; Escamilla & Nathenson-Meija, 2003). Highly publicized lawsuits and book bans associated with religious content in schools reflect underlying hostilities around the notions of religious awareness and pluralism in dominant U.S. Discourse (Nord, 2010). Hence, it is not surprising that some schools and educators are reluctant to acknowledge diverse religious perspectives in the public school classroom (Bloom, 2007; Fraser, 1999; Green & Oldendorf, 2005; Hayne & Thomas, 2007; Moore, 2007; Noddings, 1993). Nevertheless, as described by Associate Justice Tom Clark in the U.S. Supreme Court rulings for Engel v. Vitale (1962) and

Abington v. Schempp (1963), a comprehensive U.S. public education includes a *neutral* study about religions that is consistent with the First Amendment to the Bill of Rights and cultivates a pluralistic global citizenry. In a democratic society, *neutrality* "has to do with the (correct) response of the democratic state to diversity" (Taylor, 2011, p. 36). Grounded in the Court's interpretation of the Establishment Clause, public schools and universities are required to exercise neutrality—neutrality among religions and neutrality toward "any basic position, religious or nonreligious" (Taylor, 2011, p. 37). In other words, U.S. public schools are constitutionally obliged to "take religion seriously" by actually including, rather than excluding, religion and/or religious perspectives in the curricular conversation when relevant (Nord, 2010, p. 176).

*Discourse and Subject Matter Knowledge***.** Despite the Court's ruling, the myth that separation of church and state requires the explicit exclusion of religion from public schools reinforces the social tenor of religious illiteracy (Prothero, 2007). The strength of this myth corresponds with Chavez' (2008) and Santa Anna's (2002) observations that subject matter knowledge about Mexican-American history and culture, which is connected to the legend of La Virgen de Guadalupe, seems irrelevant to successful participation in the dominant U.S. Discourse. In 2012, the Tucson Unified School District in Arizona was featured in the national news for formally terminating its K – 12 Mexican American studies program and removing books from classrooms books that address the history and culture of Latinos and other subordinate groups in American society. The district's actions appeared to be aligned with the Anglo American Narrative, by which persons of Hispanic/Latino heritage are expected to reject their history and embrace dominant U.S. social values.

Just as ideology influences social group's perspectives (Gee, 2008), educators' subject matter knowledge informs the content they will teach, as well as the process and/or pedagogy by which they will teach (Shulman, 1987). Such decisions are likewise informed by teachers' beliefs and social Discourses (Grossman, 1990). The data set examined in this article offers a snapshot of the kinds of narratives and Discourses that were embraced by preservice teachers in different regions of the U.S. in response to two works of children's literature that feature contemporary Mexican American families and include religious content.

4. METHODS

4.1 Participant Selection

As part of a larger study (Dávila, 2012), I collected data from a pool of 83 public university undergraduate students in the U.S. Midwest who were enrolled in my *Introduction to Children's Literature for Grades K–8* (*Intro ChildLit*) course, a prerequisite for several teacher certification programs across the U.S. (MW Group). I also collected data from 133 public university undergraduate students in the U.S. Southeast who were enrolled in the five sections of *Intro ChildLit* that doctoral stu-

dents and I taught in the spring of 2013 (SE Group). Since the respondents were selected based on their availability (i.e., enrollment in *Intro ChildLit*), the findings of this study cannot be generalized. However, the same methods could be replicated with different populations. Each student provided consent for her/his comments and course work to serve as data for the study. To minimize bias, I assured participants that I would only analyze the data after their final grades were posted.

The assignments for *Intro ChildLit* followed a consistent structure. Prior to each class session, students read a picture book or novel of their choice from a weekly set of titles and electronically responded to open-ended pre- and post-reading questions. In class, students participated in literature study circles for their books, engaged in creative literary response exercises, discussed culturally responsive critical literacy pedagogies, and examined numerous children's books that corresponded with each week's theme.

4.2 Participant Demographics

During the first week of classes, the participants in both the MW group and the SE group completed an electronic, open-ended questionnaire about their racial backgrounds, reading habits and interests, and their previous exposure world religions. Across the MW and SE groups, the participants' racial backgrounds are consistent with the current demographics of US teachers in which 84% identify as white/Non-Hispanic women (National Center for Education Information, 2011). In terms of their exposure to world religions, within the MW group, 41% of the participants indicated that they had studied world religions while 59% had not. In contrast, in the SE group, 71% stated that they had studied world religions while 29% had not. Collectively, among those who had some background knowledge about world religions, nearly 60% had learned about world religions in their high school history classes. Others identified college courses (40%) and some additionally mentioned middle school (27%) and independent study (22%). Of note, nobody referenced a dedicated course on world religions.

4.3 Selection of Books

As mentioned earlier, the books for this study include religions content about La Virgen de Guadalupe (Guadalupe). In *Abuelito Eats with his Fingers,* Latina author Janice Levy tells the story of Tina, a monolingual English-speaking girl of Latino heritage, who must spend the day with her monolingual Spanish-speaking grandfather, Abuelito. As the story opens, Tina dislikes and rejects everything "foreign" about Abuelito, from his language, to his fried bananas, to his religious altars, candles, and statues in every room. She cannot wait to get out of his house. Her attitudes are aligned with the Anglo American Narrative (AAN) as she is already linguistically and culturally separated from her grandfather.

Nevertheless, Tina provides readers an in-the-moment first person description of her experience with Abuelito. She starts by telling readers how, "Abuelito lights candles and keeps little [religious] statues in every room," (p. 4). Later, Tina realizes that Abuelito is sad and draws a special picture for him, which he places on his altar beneath a framed image of Guadalupe. Tina then describes how her grandfather presented to her each of his religious figures: "*Los santos [the saints],* he says and introduces each saint with a little bow. Abuelito lights a candle. He closes his eyes and moves his lips. . . . I whisper a prayer. . . . When I open my eyes, the statues are in different places. Abuelito winks" (p. 18).

Through Tina's storytelling, readers meet the saints who are significant to Abuelito's prayer life and religious practices. They also witness Tina's transcendence of the Anglo American Narrative; not only does the young Latina begin to embrace her Spanish heritage language, she also begins to understand her grandfather's religiosity. As Tina starts to appreciate everything that she once thought was "foreign" about her grandfather, the story ends on a hopeful note that Tina and her family will not be victims of the Anglo American Narrative.

Winner of the 2013 International Latino Book Award for Best Children's Fiction Picture Book, *The Beautiful Lady/La Hermosa Señora (Señora)* is one of the few children's books to situate the apparition story of Guadalupe within the structure of a contemporary realistic story. Chicana author Pat Mora opens her story on the Feast Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe (December 12), inviting readers into Grandma Lupita's (Grandma's) warm modern-day kitchen where granddaughter Rose and friend Terry take a break from folding bright red paper roses. The girls stop to admire a statue of Guadalupe, which Grandma has prominently displayed. Curious Terry asks, "Who's that pretty lady?" (p. 3). Then, Rose prompts Grandma to tell the legend of Guadalupe just as she does every year.

After Grandma retells the story, Mora returns readers to the kitchen where Grandma's special rose-shaped cookies wait for Rose and Terry. The book validates that for many Mexican American children, Guadalupe is intertwined with their contemporary identity, culture, and spirituality. Moreover, Terry's curiosity offers an invitation to young readers to ask questions and learn about their peers' cultural worldviews and perspectives, which might differ from their own. In other words, *Señora* also offers a counter narrative to the Anglo American Narrative.

4.4 Data Collection

The corpus of data for this study was drawn from the open-ended questions that all of the participants in the MW and SE groups completed for homework as part of their *Intro ChildLit* courses. This article first considers the groups' responses to the general question: How likely would you select for your class lesson, a children's book that presents worldviews or spiritual ideas, that differ from mainstream American culture? Please explain your rationale.

Second, it examines the data were generated from the participants' responses to each of the books. Near the end of their *Intro ChildLit* course, the preservice teachers in the MW group independently read *Abuelito* as a homework assignment. Then, each responded to the question: "If you were to use *Abuelito*, how likely would you initiate a discussion about the meaning of the candles and statues in Abuelito's house? Please explain your rationale." The preservice teachers in the SE group listened to a read-aloud of *Señora* during a class session at the beginning of their course. Then, each independently responded to the question, "How likely would you read and discuss this book with your future students? Please explain your rationale." Last, this article analyses the data generated at the end of the SE term, after SE students met the author of *Señora,* Pat Mora, and learned about the significance of Guadalupe to Mexican American culture and history. Data were collected from a subset of 25 SE group members who re-read *Señora* and reconsidered the use of the book in their future classrooms.

4.5 Data Analysis

My analysis of the participants' written responses was informed by the characteristics of social discourses and narratives that privilege Anglo American identity (Chavez, 2008; Santa Anna, 2002). I employed Gee's (2011) concepts of Discourse as a "tool of inquiry" and "thinking device" to guide my analysis as I examined and coded the participants written responses to open-ended questions for emerging themes (Glesne, 2010). To ensure the validity of the data reduction and to safeguard against cognitive bias, I worked with a quantitative social scientist peer-debriefer in Sweden who studies human rights issues and wasn't at the time aware of anti-Latino narratives in U.S. Discourse. Table 1 features a sampling of the categories and codes we established to capture the MW and SE preservice teachers' views about reading and discussing *Abuelito* or *Señora* with children. The following Findings and Discussion section of this article also provides multiple excerpts from the participants' open-ended responses to each of the books. For additional information about the MW's responses to other works of Latino children's literature, please also see Dávila (2013, 2015).

Table 1. Sample Categories and Codes of the Data Analysis

OPENING QUESTION (both MW & SE): How likely would you select for your class lesson, a children's book that presents worldviews or spiritual ideas that differ from mainstream American culture?

88% ALL CODE: Participants would, theoretically, expose students to a children's book that presents diverse worldviews or spiritual ideas because they want to help the students become open-minded, well-rounded, and/or aware of the world around them.
REPRESENTATIVE RATIONALE(S): "*I think that it is important to teach kids about different worldviews and spiritual ideas. Teaching them these things will show them the different views and get to see that… there are many different ways of life and opinions in the world that we are living in."*

12% ALL CODE: Participants would not expose students to a children's book that presents diverse worldviews or spiritual ideas because they generally believe public schools should be religion-free zones.
REPRESENTATIVE RATIONALE(S): *"I feel this infringes upon my students rights. You shouldn't be force fed other peoples beliefs"*; and *"Bringing religion into the school is a very risky move. I could very easily lose my job if even one family felt offended or that I was impressing a religion on to their child."*

MW QUESTION A: If you were to use *Abuelito Eats with His Fingers* [with your future students], how likely would you initiate a discussion about the meaning of the candles and statues in Abuelito's house?

77% MW CATEGORY: Participants would either censor any discussions around the religious artifacts in Abuelito's house or establish strict conditions for initiating a conversation.

- 50% MW SUB-CATEGORY: Participants would censor discussions about the candles and statues for reasons such as, but not limited to:
  - 14% MW CODE: Religion is too risky for English Language Arts lessons.
    REPRESENTATIVE RATIONALE(S):*"Those candles and statues have to do with religion. Some parents may get mad at me the teacher for bringing up religious ideas that they do not want their kids to believe in;" "I would not want to bring up anything that could start up a religion debate in my classroom"*
  - 11% MW CODE: The candles and statues are not significant to the storyline.
    REPRESENTATIVE RATIONALE(S): *"I don't think I would discuss this aspect of the story because I don't think it is that important in the overall point of the story. I think students would get confused if I brought that up;"* and *"I wouldn't really talk about them much because there doesn't really seem to be a reason to."*
  - 7% MW CODE: Lacks subject-matter knowledge to discuss the artifacts.
    REPRESENTATIVE RATIONALE(S): *"I am not quite sure what the candles and statues have to do in the story or what they symbolize."*
- 27% MW SUB-CATEGORY: Participants would establish strict conditions for engaging in a discussion about the candles and statues such as, but not limited to:
  - 8% CODE: Provide only surface-level information to the students.

MW REPRESENTATIVE RATIONALE(S): *"I think it would be safe having a quick, light discussion;"* and *"I would also make the discussion brief and to the point so as not to cross any inappropriate boundaries."*

5% CODE: Respond only if students ask relevant questions.

MW REPRESENTATIVE RATIONALE(S): *"I don't think it would be necessary to discuss in the classroom unless a student had a question about it."*

23% MW CATEGORY: Participants would initiate a discussion around the candles and statues in Abuelito's house for reasons such as, but not limited to:

11% MW CODE: To foster students' cultural and/or religious awareness

REPRESENTATIVE RATIONALE(S): *"I think that it is greatly important to teach students about other cultures starting at a young age so that they can appreciate them over time. This would definitely include, but is not limited to, religious aspects of a culture;"* and *"I think it would be important for students to understand the meaning of why Abuelito would do this ritually throughout each and every day."*

7% MW CODE: To acknowledge the importance of the artifacts to Abuelito

REPRESENTATIVE RATIONALE(S): *"He prays for his loved ones through the statues and lights candles for both living and dead relatives;"* and *"It helps shows that… the grandfather thinks his family is very important."*

SE QUESTION A (beginning of term): How likely would you read and discuss *The Beautiful Lady/La Hermosa Señora* with your future students?

73% SE CATEGORY: Participants would either censor the book or establish strict conditions for reading and discussing the text.

54% SE SUB-CATEGORY: Participants would censor the book for reasons such as, but not limited to:

30% SE CODE: Religion does not belong in schools.

REPRESENTATIVE RATIONALE(S): *"This book is too geared toward religion, which is something we are working towards taking out of the classroom."*

17% SE CODE: Teachers should not discuss religious perspectives that are inconsistent with their students' beliefs.

REPRESENTATIVE RATIONALE(S): *"Children would feel like their religion was wrong because they were hearing about something different from their own;"* and *"I do not want to offend any of my students."*

19% SE SUB-CATEGORY: Participants would establish strict conditions for reading and discussing the book such as, but not limited to:

17% SE CODE: Only using the book with older students.

REPRESENTATIVE RATIONALE(S): *"It would depend on what grade I was teaching. I believe the older elementary students would be able to comprehend the story more then younger children would."*

8% SE CODE: Only using the book if Hispanic/Latino children are students.

REPRESENTATIVE RATIONALE(S): *"If I were to teach at a school with several Hispanic students, I would maybe read this book and discuss it with them."*

27% SE CATEGORY: Participants would read and discuss the book for reasons such as, but not limited to:

17% SE CODE: To foster students' general cultural and/or religious awareness.

REPRESENTATIVE RATIONALE(S): *"It is a great book for students, it highlights*

other cultures around the world and it has good pictures;" and "*It gives a window into a culture that many students may not know that much about."*

8% CODE: To promote Mexican history and culture.

SE REPRESENTATIVE RATIONALE(S): *"It shows the religion and cultural aspects of Mexico. Even though every student may not have Mexican heritage, or be of Catholic faith, it is important to show all different aspects of other countries, cultures and religions.*"

SUBSET-SE QUESTION B (end of term): Today, how likely would you read and discuss *The Beautiful Lady/La Hermosa Señora* with your future students?

72% SUB CODE: Participants would read and discuss the book with future students because learning about the historical significance of the Virgin of Guadalupe made a difference.

SE REPRESENTATIVE RATIONALE(S): "*It makes it easier to read the book because I do not feel as clueless about the subject and background information*;" and "*Originally, I was afraid to include a religious book. Now, however, I see how I can relate it to history*"

28% SUB CODE: Participants would not read and discuss the book with future students because religion does not have a place in public school.

SE REPRESENTATIVE RATIONALE(S): "*Mora has some really great books that do not involve religion and those are the ones I would read or bring into my classroom;"* and *"You can be a wonderful person, but still not write books that I can use."*

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Likelihood of Selecting Children's Books with Alternate Spiritual Ideas

In response to the prompt, "How likely would you select for your class lesson, a children's book that presents worldviews or spiritual ideas, that differ from mainstream American culture?," about 88% of all of the participants in the study said that they would be likely to select such a book. Based on the comments from both the MW and SE groups, the majority of preservice teachers would notionally select a book with alternative religious perspectives to help students to become "open-minded," "well-rounded," and/or "aware of the world around them." (i.e., "*I think that it is important to teach kids about different worldviews and spiritual ideas. Teaching them these things will show them the different views and get to see that… there are many different ways of life and opinions in the world that we are living in.")* In other words, they would see themselves using a children's book as a vehicle to help support their students' religious subject matter knowledge.

Conversely, 12% of all respondents would be unlikely to select such a book. Across both the MW and SE groups, those who would not entertain a book that includes diverse spiritual ideas were primarily of the opinion public schools should be religion-free zones (i.e., *"I feel this infringes upon my students rights. You shouldn't be force fed other peoples beliefs"*; and *"Bringing religion into the school is a very risky move. I could very easily lose my job if even one family felt offended or that I was impressing a religion on to their child."*). The latter responses show

that regardless of their geographic location in the U.S., some preservice teachers shared a common concern around keeping religion outside of school as not to impose on students' rights and teachers' responsibilities.

5.2 MW Group: Likelihood of Discussing the Religious Content of Abuelito

Although the majority of the MW group indicated that they would *select a children's book that presents worldviews or spiritual ideas that differ from mainstream American culture*, only 23% of the MW participants stated that they would likely initiate a discussion about the meaning of Abuelito's candles and statues in relation to *Abuelito Eats with his Fingers* (likely-group). In contrast, 50% of the MW group would not likely initiate such a discussion (unlikely-group), and 27% would only invite a conversation about the candles and statues under certain conditions (conditional group). The MW group provided a wide range of explanations to support their answers, including positive, negative, and conditional rationales. In the data analysis, each rationale was assigned a separate code. Consequently, a few of the preservice teachers' responses received more than one code.

Arguments for discussing the religious content of Abuelito. Of the MW group, 23% indicated they would likely discuss the candles and the statues. Within this likely-group, six (6) acknowledged the importance of the candles and statues to Abuelito's religious practices (e.g., *"He prays for his loved ones through the statues and lights candles for both living and dead relatives;"* and *"It helps shows that… the grandfather thinks his family is very important")*. Nine (9) other likely-group members stated that they would discuss the candles and statues to as a means to foster students' cultural and/or religious awareness (e.g.,*"I think that it is greatly important to teach students about other cultures starting at a young age so that they can appreciate them over time. This would definitely include, but is not limited to, religious aspects of a culture;"* and *"I think it would be important for students to understand the meaning of why Abuelito would do this ritually throughout each and every day."*) Similarly, the other four (4) preservice teachers in this likely-group indicated that the candles and statues are important artifacts of Abuelito's Mexican culture (i.e. *"The meaning of the candles and statues is a huge part of Mexican culture and if you are going to have books like this you need to talk to your students about the meaning of it"*). Together, the positive responses show that at least one out of five preservice teachers in the MW group would hope to cultivate the religious and/or cultural literacies of their students by discussing the artifacts in Abuelito's home.

Arguments against discussing the religious content. On the other hand, 50% of the preservice teachers in the MW group would not discuss the candles and statues in *Abuelito*. For example, 12 preservice teachers (14%) indicated that religion is too

risky of a subject for English Language Arts lessons (e.g., *"Those candles and statues have to do with religion. Some parents may get mad at me the teacher for bringing up religious ideas that they do not want their kids to believe in;" "I would not want to bring up anything that could start up a religion debate in my classroom"*). Their comments seem to reflect an underlying concern about initiating classroom discussions that could potentially have negative consequences such as offending parents and/or students. Six of the MW unlikely-group indicated that schools should be religious-free zones (i.e., *"Religion is not aloud in schools, so if they had questions I would tell them to go home and talk to your parents about that part of the story).* Like the participants in other studies (e.g., Bloom, 2007; Green & Oldendorf, 2005; Hayne & Thomas, 2007; Moore, 2007; Noddings, 1993), these group members believed that the Separation of Church and State prohibits any discussion of religion in public schools. Alternately, four different members of the unlikely-group indicated that they would not acknowledge the artifacts because it is inappropriate to discuss them with children (e.g. *"I wouldn't feel comfortable with discussing that with little children… [because] they probably wouldn't know what I was talking about."*) Their responses seem to reflect a presumption that young children would not appreciate that in the story, the statues and candles are significant to Abuelito. Another four un-likely group members also stated that they wouldn't address the artifacts but didn't provide any specific rationales.

Unlike their MW peers who were concerned about discussing religious content, at least nine members (11%) of the unlikely-group did not think the candles and statues were significant to the storyline (e.g. *"I don't think I would discuss this aspect of the story because I don't think it is that important in the overall point of the story. I think students would get confused if I brought that up;"* and *"I wouldn't really talk about them much because there doesn't really seem to be a reason to."*). For these preservice teachers, the candles and statues are irrelevant to a readers' understanding of the text. Similarly, six others indicated that they did not have the subject-matter knowledge to recognize the significance of the candles and statues (e.g. *"I am not quite sure what the candles and statues have to do in the story or what they symbolize."*). Therefore, they would not know how to discuss the religious artifacts in Abuelito's home with their students.

In addition, at least two preservice teachers of the unlikely-group indicated that since their personal belief systems prohibit them from acknowledging other religions, they would avoid any discussion of the candles and statures rather than exercise neutrality toward other faith traditions (e.g. *"I do not believe all religions are equal and I would not present them [Abuelito's] as such;"* and *"I am very grounded in my faith…I would still carry bias [against other faiths]"*). In short, the dataset reveals that half of the MW participants would overtly censor their discussion *Abuelito* for reasons that maintain the status quo of religious illiteracy among U.S. residents.

Conditions for discussing the religious content. The last contingency, the MW conditional-group (27%), would only consider discussing the religious artifacts in *Abuelito Eats with his Fingers* under specific conditions. For instance, two preservice teachers stated that they would first need to do some research before they could entertain the idea of discussing the importance of the candles and statues. Another pair would only consider the discussion with mature, older students, even though children in higher grade levels read picture books less frequently than younger students. Moreover, four preservice teachers (5%) indicated that they would only discuss the content in response to students' questions or comments (i.e. *"I don't think it would be necessary to discuss in the classroom unless a student had a question about it"*). In other words, unless there was explicit student interest, they would not include a conversation about the religious content. Furthermore, seven participants (8%) would only provide surface-level information (i.e. *"I think it would be safe having a quick, light discussion;"* and *"I would also make the discussion brief and to the point so as not to cross any inappropriate boundaries"*). By limiting the discussion and providing minimal information, these preservice teachers could pragmatically acknowledge that the candles and statues have significance and, at the same time, avoid any exploration into Abuelito's faith tradition.

In contrast to minimizing the discussion, at least five other MW group members would ask the students to share their own interpretations of Abuelito's beliefs and practices. For example, one would "*initiate a discussion by asking what students think the purpose of the candles and statues are in Abuelito's life*;" another would "*ask the class if they know why Abuelito would have candles and statues*." A different preservice teacher would invite students to define how Abuelito's family "*is different from their families*." One even suggested that since the book *"has enough similarities to White American culture… it could be used as a jumping-off point to look at both the similarities and the differences between the two cultures*." This last preservice teacher's comment reinforces the Anglo American Narrative by which White American culture is a standard for comparison. By inviting students to interpret Abuelito's faith traditions and to make comparisons to their own beliefs, there is a greater chance of elevating the teachers' and students' personal beliefs rather than cultivating the children's religious/cultural literacies.

To summarize, approximately one-quarter (23%) of the MW group would unconditionally discuss the candles and statues to help foster their students' religious literacies and cultural awareness. Conversely, most of the MW participants (77%) would either censor any discussions around the religious artifacts in Abuelito's house or establish strict conditions for initiating a conversation. Few would explore Abuelito's spiritual experiences in order to avoid a complicated discussion about religion. Some might inadvertently advance the Anglo American Narrative in their efforts to support students' personal responses to the book. Hence, this dataset points to a troublesome discrepancy between the preservice teachers' hypothetical interest in promoting books with diverse religious perspectives and their simula-

tions for actually discussing a book like *Abuelito Eats With his Fingers* with their future students.

5.3 SE Group (beginning of term): Likelihood of Discussing Señora

This next section examines the Southeast preservice teachers' potential censorship and accommodation of *The Beautiful Lady/La Hermosa Señora*, which focuses on Grandma Lupita's retelling of the legend of La Virgen de Guadalupe. At the beginning of their *Intro ChidLit* course, SE group members were asked how likely they would read and discuss *Señora* with their future students. At least a quarter of the preservice teachers (27%) would be likely to discuss the content. In contrast, over half (54%) would be unlikely to engage in such a discussion. One in five (19%) would discuss *Señora* under certain conditions. Like the MW group, the respondents in the SE group provided a wide range of explanations to support their answers. Many also included multiple rationales: positive, negative, and conditional.

Arguments for reading and discussing Señora. When asked to explain their rationale for reading and discussing *Señora*, 17% of the SE respondents thought the story could foster students' awareness of other religions and/or cultures (e.g., *It is a great book for students, it highlights other cultures around the world and it has good pictures;"* and "*It gives a window into a culture that many students may not know that much about"*). Alternately, it could promote multiculturalism (e.g.,*"I think that it is important to include stories from other cultures in your classroom in order to truly have a multicultural classroom"*). These responses support the development of children's cultural and religious literacies. Ten (8%) of the SE group suggested that the story specifically promotes Mexican history and culture (e.g., *"It shows the religion and cultural aspects of Mexico. Even though every student may not have Mexican heritage, or be of Catholic faith, it is important to show all different aspects of other countries, cultures and religions*"). Like the MW group, the affirmative responses of the SE group also seem to reflect the preservice teachers' eagerness to promote cultural and religious pluralism.

Arguments against reading and discussing Señora. In contrast to fostering cultural and/or religious pluralism, 30% of the SE group would censor the book due to their reservations about discussing religions at school (e.g., *"This book is too geared toward religion, which is something we are working towards taking out of the classroom*"). For them, like their counterparts in the MW group, school is a religion-free secular space. At the same time, 17% of the SE group would privilege the dominant religious views at school as not to deviate from students' beliefs (e.g., *"Children would feel like their religion was wrong because they were hearing about something different from their own;"* and *"I do not want to offend any of my students"*). These participants' comments illustrate that the introduction of alternative reli-

gious spiritual perspectives would be inconsistent with dominant Discourse that supports the norms of religious illiteracy. Therefore, censoring books like *Señora* would maintain the status quo.

*Conditions for reading and discussing Señora***.** Alongside of the negative responses, one in five of the SE Group members identified specific conditions under which they would consider reading and discussing *Señora* with their future students. Nearly 17% of the SE preservice teachers suggested that if they were teaching upper elementary (grades 3 and above), then they might consider the book (e.g., *"It would depend on what grade I was teaching. I believe the older elementary students would be able to comprehend the story more then younger children would"*). Paradoxically, it is less likely for students in the upper elementary grades to read as many picturebooks as the primary grades. Thus, the likelihood of reading *Señora* might be even lower with this condition. Moreover, approximately 8% indicated that if the book satisfied a curricular objective, then they would consider using it (e.g., *"The story would not be used in the classroom unless the class was studying different cultures"*). Another 8% stated that if children of Hispanic/Latino heritage were students in the school, then they might read and discuss *Señora* (e.g., *"If I were to teach at a school with several Hispanic students, I would maybe read this book and discuss it with them").* In other words, these preservice teachers would not introduce the book if they did not have Mexican students in their classes. Like the MW group, the majority of SE respondents (73%) identified explicit obstacles to actually including *Señora* in their future classrooms and making space for cultural and/or religious perspectives that might not be reflective of the dominant Discourse.

5.4 Summary of MW & SE Group Data from the Beginning of the Term

To summarize, across both the MW and SE groups, approximately one-in-four preservice teachers (25% overall) were eager to foster students' religious awareness and cultural pluralism through the picture books. Conversely, three-out-of-four preservice teachers (75% overall) highlighted specific conditions or barriers that would need to be addressed prior to their inclusion of the books in their classrooms. These participants' rationales are consistent with the concerns of practicing teachers in other studies, cited at the beginning of this article. Some subscribe to the myth that Separation of Church and State prohibits the discussion of religious worldviews in the classroom. Some fear opposition from parents and/or school administrators that could negatively impact their employment while others have neither the subject matter knowledge nor pedagogical expertise to guide conversations about religious content. Hence, the data presented here reinforce that the norms of religious illiteracy within the dominant Discourse can significantly influence teachers' pedagogical decisions around children's books with religious content. Unless the dominant Discourse shifts, some teachers might never select the

books, materials, and/or pedagogical approaches for their literacy lessons that could cultivate the kinds cultural/religious subject matter knowledge and language practices students need to truly engage in a pluralistic global society.

Furthermore, there is a remarkable contrast between the preservice teachers' responses to the abstract question, "How likely would you select for your class lesson, a children's book that presents worldviews or spiritual ideas, that differ from mainstream American culture?" and the concrete question, "How likely would you read and discuss *Abuelito* or *Señora* with your future students?"

As mentioned earlier, overall 88% of the respondents across both the MW and SE groups said that they would be hypothetically likely to select a book that presents a worldview that differs from the dominant US culture. Nevertheless, only a quarter (25%) would unconditionally discuss *Abuelito* or *Señora* in their future classrooms. One of the primary differences between the hypothetical and concrete questions relates to varying levels of abstraction or proximity to the actual religious content of the picture books. The first question allowed the preservice teachers to use their imaginations to simulate hypothetical discussions of children's books that present alternative perspectives to mainstream religious worldviews in the U.S. The second question required the respondents to engage with an actual work of realistic children's fiction that is steeped in Hispanic/Latino culture and religious practices. Having limited knowledge of Hispanic/Latino culture might have shifted some of the preservice teachers' perspectives on reading and discussing an actual picture book like *Abuelito* or *Señora*. To explore this hypothesis, the next set of data examines what happened after a sub-group of the SE preservice teachers had the opportunity to increase their knowledge of Spanish history and culture in Mexico and the U.S.

5.5 SE Group (end of term): Likelihood of Discussing Señora

At the end of the term, one section of the five *Intro ChildLit* classes (25 participants) learned about the historical and cultural significance of Guadalupe relative to Spanish colonialism in North America. They also attended a lecture by author Pat Mora, who discussed her life as a Mexican-American writer for both children and adults and highlighted some of her early acclaimed works. Two weeks later, the preservice teachers revisited Mora's picture book *The Beautiful Lady/La Hermosa Señora* and completed another short reflection survey. When asked, "Today, how likely would you read and discuss *Señora* with your future students?," 72% of the SE-subgroup respondents indicated that they would be likely to read and discuss the book because learning about the Spanish conquest in North America made a difference for them ("*It makes it easier to read the book because I do not feel as clueless about the subject and background information*;" "*Originally, I was afraid to include a religious book. Now, however, I see how I can relate it to history*"). Locating Guadalupe's legend and image in modern U.S. history and contemporary society was helpful for these preservice teachers in understanding why realist picture book

characters like Abuelito, and Grandma Lupita have statues and/or images of Guadalupe in their homes.

Moreover, being able to apply a historical rather than an explicit religious lens to the story might have alleviated some of the preservice teachers' fears about including a book like *Señora* in their future English Language Arts classes. In comparison to the data from the beginning-of-the-term responses to *Señora*, in which only 27% of all SE participants indicated that they would likely read and discuss the book with their future students, the end-of-the-term data suggest that the respondents' increased knowledge about the author and subject matter could inform their future pedagogical decisions (Grossman, 1990; Shulman, 1987). The more accurate background knowledge teachers have, the better equipped they might feel to justify their exploration of diverse religiously imbued cultural perspectives. Additional research is needed to further explore this hypothesis.

Nevertheless, despite the dramatic change in respondents' interest in using Mora's work of contemporary realistic fiction, 28% of the SE-subgroup still maintained negative responses. Incongruent with their increased subject matter knowledge, for these preservice teachers the new historical and/or author information did not ameliorate their positions toward the religious content in *Señora* ("*Mora has some really great books that do not involve religion and those are the ones I would read or bring into my classroom;" "You can be a wonderful person, but still not write books that I can use"*). In other words, no matter the historical/cultural relevance, the myth that discussions about religion are prohibited in public schools is so pervasive in the dominant Discourse that these preservice teachers would still reject this work of diverse children's literature.

This last set of data corresponds with Gee's (2008) theory that when educators are complicit with the narratives that underpin the dominant Discourse, they might also be complicit with the mainstream oppression (censorship) of minority cultural, social, and/or economic groups. By aligning with the dominant Discourse and censoring books and pedagogical practices that could cultivate students' respect and appreciation of cultural/religious diversity, some of the preservice teachers might, indeed, reinforce the oppression of minority groups. Deliberate or not, whenever teachers and schools are silent about diverse cultural and religious viewpoints in U.S. public schools, they inhibit future generations from developing the language skills and subject matter knowledge that are needed to combat cultural/religious illiteracy. Silence represents a form of institutional oppression. It privileges the nation's dominant cultural groups and challenges the core tenets of Separation of Church and State, which require the neutral treatment, not the censorship, of diverse religious and/or cultural perspectives in public education whenever relevant (Nord, 2010).

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This article began with the call to support youth in developing the civic virtue and cultural literacies to become engaged and informed citizens of a pluralistic global society. Nevertheless, the corpus of data presented in this article points to the reality that the narratives of the dominant U.S. Discourse, which can influence teachers' pedagogical decisions around teaching literacy and language practices, are not necessarily aligned with cultivating a pluralistic citizenry. At the same time, a subset of the data from the Southeast suggests that one way future literacy educators could support students' global citizenry is by expanding their knowledge about the historical, social, and/or cultural context of children's books that feature non-dominant views and perspectives. The books, *Abuelito Eats with His Fingers* and *The Beautiful Lady/La Hermosa Señora* could be resources for helping preservice teachers to consider the importance of religious literacy in working with an increasingly diverse population of U.S. public school families.

Given the findings, a primary implication of this study is that before preservice and/or practicing teachers might inadvertently or unconsciously censor diverse works of children's literature, they could benefit from learning about the actual neutrality requirement of the Separation of Church and State by which public school educators must, when relevant, include rather than exclude diverse religious perspectives in the curricular conversation, even in language and literacy classrooms. Preservice and/or practicing teachers could also benefit from increased subject matter knowledge about the significant principles, beliefs, and structures of major religions and/or cultures of the world. With adequate preparation and background knowledge, they might have the confidence and pedagogical savvy to act on their abstracted good intentions toward cultivating students' diversity awareness by selecting children's books for literacy and language instruction that could prompt meaningful conversations about varied cultural and religious perspectives. These implications align with Nord's (2010) stance that future public school teachers should have the college coursework to help them examine literature through religious and historical lenses as well as non-religious literary lenses. Thus, as I have suggested elsewhere (Dávila, 2015), we teacher-educators, researchers, and literacy and language education professionals must ask ourselves: What do we know about contemporary cultures and world religions? How do we know our assumptions about these cultures and religions are accurate? When and how do we explicitly model religious inclusivity in our instruction to preservice teachers? What kinds of institutional support and subject matter knowledge do we need in order to demonstrate neutrality in our treatment of varying viewpoints?

No doubt, it will be challenging to help teachers advance beyond the theoretical support of religious/cultural pluralism to practice the tenets of Separation of Church and State by exercising neutrality toward diverse religious perspectives in language and literature instruction. However, if we do nothing to expand educators' religious, cultural, and historical knowledge base, then we might never begin

to combat the norms of religious illiteracy that make a truly pluralistic global society implausible.

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