

## **An introduction to this special issue of *Social Studies Research and Practice* on religion's place in the social studies**

Religion's presence permeates across the globe influencing millions of people on a daily basis. Politicians use religion to shape policy, families use religion to celebrate customs and millions of other individuals use religion on a daily basis to both find solace and guide them in their decision making. Religion is everywhere and impacts the lives of all human across the globe. Citizens from all countries and of all backgrounds need to be exposed to various religions from an early age so they have better chances of developing into citizens who can effectively participate in our global pluralistic society that heavily relies on religion to function.

No more viable place exists for exposure to the world's wide range of religions than in the pre-Kindergarten-12 classroom. Despite the often-homogenous nature of many classrooms, such environments frequently offer students more diversity in terms of views and beliefs than do students' families, religious institutions, sports teams or friend groups (Gutmann, 1999; Hess, 2004). The classroom, therefore, has the potential to provide students with opportunities to learn about and speak with individuals of different religious backgrounds in a controlled and supportive environment.

Within the context of the K-12 school system, there perhaps exists no content area better suited to engage students in inquiry and experiences with diverse viewpoints on various religions than the social studies. The social studies is essential to a powerful curriculum given all of the opportunities it provides students to understand the world around them through conversations on culture, current issues and events and the ways in which humans interact (Parker, 2015). Further, the social studies aim to promote reform-oriented, tolerant citizens capable of entering into a democratic, pluralistic society (NCSS, 2014).

Despite the potential to engage students in discussions on religion (and other forms of culture) teachers in both the social studies and in other content areas more often than not choose to avoid the inclusion of religion into their pedagogical practice. Avoidance occurs for a variety of reasons including – though certainly not limited to – a fear of offending students or parents, a lack of knowledge regarding specific religions or concern about showing bias (Marks *et al.*, 2014; Moore, 2012). Avoiding speaking about religion does a disservice to students and, subsequently, society as it can perpetuate a consistent problem of ignorance, intolerance and misinformation regarding various religions (Moore).

Though research exists on the place of religion in education, there is limited scholarship exploring religion's place in both the social studies classroom and the preparation of social studies educators. This special issue seeks to explore these topics by collecting and disseminating work from scholars and practitioners within the field of social studies education. To that end, the authors within this special issue of *Social Studies Research and Practice* seek to provide educators at all levels of the social studies with scholarship on how to best incorporate religion into their pedagogical decision making that is applicable, accessible and unique.

At the K-12 level, specifically, Matthew Hollstein and Todd Hawley, Cory Callahan and Janie Hubbard, Dan Shepherd and Jay Shuttleworth and Scott Wylie have contributed phenomenal pieces connecting the teaching of a religion to other topics that could be integrated into the K-12 social studies curriculum (terror, the Civil Rights Movement, the institution of slavery and sustainability, respectively). Each of these four pieces effectively provides an alternative outlet for incorporating religion into the social studies curriculum



while simultaneously creating opportunities for students to think critically and meaningfully about religion's place in society. Likewise, Heidi Torres and Margaret Gillikin, Kodi Hubbard and Joy Stapleton have written important pieces about integrating religion into a K-12 social studies classroom by placing an emphasis on literature and student engagement. These two articles take a practical approach to provide classroom teachers with ways to use literacy to elicit curiosity and guide questioning about religion's place in society.

Several pieces within this special issue also extend to those who work within higher education. Kimberly Logan and James Hartwick, Colton Ames and Sarah Brooks all contributed scholarship exploring the importance and value of educating preservice teachers about how to incorporate religion into the K-12 classroom. These pieces focus on what teacher educators can do in their social studies methods courses as a means for preparing future teachers to feel confident about incorporating religion into their pedagogy. While each of these three articles approaches the topics of social studies education and religion differently, they all emphasize the need for preservice teachers to be prepared to consider ways to teach about religion upon entering into the field as a practicing educator.

Collectively, the purpose of this special issue of *Social Studies Research and Practice* is to motivate both teacher educators and classroom teachers to integrate religion into their pedagogical decision making, providing unique strategies for effectively doing so regardless of the level in which they teach. This set of articles aims to continue the conversation about how religion can be incorporated into the social studies in ways meaningful and engaging for K-12 students.

**Cynthia Szymanski Sunal**

*Curriculum and Instruction, University of Alabama,  
Tuscaloosa, Alabama, USA, and*

**Rory P. Tannebaum**

*Education and Community Studies, Merrimack College, North Andover,  
Massachusetts, USA*

### References

- Gutmann, A. (1999), *Democratic Education*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
- Hess, D.E. (2004), "Controversies about controversial issues in democratic education", *Political Science & Politics*, Vol. 37 No. 2, pp. 257-261.
- Marks, M.J., Binkley, R. and Daly, J.K. (2014), "Preservice teachers and religion: serious gaps in religious knowledge and the first amendment", *The Social Studies*, Vol. 105 No. 5, pp. 245-256.
- Moore, J.R. (2012), "Teaching about religion in social studies: the first amendment and academic freedom", *Social Studies Research and Practice*, Vol. 7 No. 2, pp. 86-97.
- NCSS (2014), *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies state Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History*, National Council for the Social Studies.
- Parker, W.C. (2015), "Social studies education eC21", *Social Studies Today*, Routledge, pp. 13-24.