

Spring 3-22-2019

## **Perceptions of Public Middle School Teachers About the Influence Their Personal Religious Beliefs Have on Their Professional Lives as Educators**

Matthew Edward Brooks  
*Concordia University - Portland*, matchu313@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/cup\\_commons\\_grad\\_edd](https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/cup_commons_grad_edd)



Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Secondary Education Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Brooks, M. E. (2019). *Perceptions of Public Middle School Teachers About the Influence Their Personal Religious Beliefs Have on Their Professional Lives as Educators* (Thesis, Concordia University, St. Paul). Retrieved from [https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/cup\\_commons\\_grad\\_edd/291](https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/cup_commons_grad_edd/291)

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Concordia University Portland Graduate Research at DigitalCommons@CSP. It has been accepted for inclusion in CUP Ed.D. Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSP. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@csp.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@csp.edu).

Spring 3-22-2019

# Perceptions of Public Middle School Teachers About the Influence Their Personal Religious Beliefs Have on Their Professional Lives as Educators

Matthew Edward Brooks  
*Concordia University - Portland*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.cu-portland.edu/edudissertations>

 Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Secondary Education Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

---

## CU Commons Citation

Brooks, Matthew Edward, "Perceptions of Public Middle School Teachers About the Influence Their Personal Religious Beliefs Have on Their Professional Lives as Educators" (2019). *Ed.D. Dissertations*. 292.  
<https://commons.cu-portland.edu/edudissertations/292>

This Open Access Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Theses & Dissertations at CU Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Ed.D. Dissertations by an authorized administrator of CU Commons. For more information, please contact [libraryadmin@cu-portland.edu](mailto:libraryadmin@cu-portland.edu).

Concordia University–Portland  
College of Education  
Doctorate of Education Program

WE, THE UNDERSIGNED MEMBERS OF THE DISSERTATION COMMITTEE  
CERTIFY THAT WE HAVE READ AND APPROVE THE DISSERTATION OF

Matthew Edward Brooks

CANDIDATE FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Mark Jimenez, Ed.D., Faculty Chair Dissertation Committee

Donna Brackin, Ed.D., Content Specialist

Aaron Cooley, Ph.D., Content Reader

Perceptions of Public Middle School Teachers About the Influence Their Personal Religious  
Beliefs Have on Their Professional Lives as Educators

Matthew Edward Brooks

Concordia University–Portland

College of Education

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the College of Education

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in

Teacher Leadership

Mark Jimenez, Ed.D., Faculty Chair Dissertation Committee

Donna Brackin, Ed.D., Content Specialist

Aaron Cooley, Ph.D., Content Reader

Concordia University–Portland

2019

## Abstract

Teacher beliefs can encompass a variety of influences such as the individual's view of the world and self, perspective on classroom experiences, and personal values. This qualitative case study explored how a teacher's religious beliefs, in particular, may have influenced their professional practice. This study was based on the conceptual frameworks of Mezirow's transformative learning theory, and Fullan's framework of teacher as agent of change. Each participant engaged in the transformative learning process by having the opportunity to think about and reflect upon their belief systems and how those might influence their professional practices as educators. Drawing from qualitative data from a reflective questionnaire, a student-teacher relationship rating scale, interviews, classroom observations, and reflective journals, this study found that participants did indeed perceive their religious beliefs to influence their professional practice. Data showed that participants' religious beliefs influenced their professional practice through their relationships with their students, through curricular choices, and by how they managed student behavior and classroom management. Participants' general philosophy of teaching, why they entered the teaching profession in the first place, along with being able to persevere through difficult times, was also influenced by their personal religious beliefs. This in-depth qualitative study will provide a resource for teacher education programs who seek to prepare prospective teachers to adequately address all of the challenges they will face. Additionally, this study will allow teacher education programs to intentionally and systematically talk about how teacher beliefs, particularly religious beliefs, may influence one's professional practice.

*Keywords:* teacher beliefs, teachers' religious beliefs, reflective thought, transformative learning theory, teaching pedagogy, agent of change

## **Dedication**

When this journey began some four years ago I never could have imagined the roller coaster ride I would go on. Not only was I embarking on this new journey, but my family and I had just made the commitment to become foster parents as well. To you God, it was always done in Your strength and wisdom, and ultimately for Your glory. To my wife, thank you for your unconditional love and support. You had to endure the ups and downs and for that I am forever thankful that you stuck by my side. To my son, thank you for allowing me to appreciate the little things in life. Your prayers at night and soccer games on the weekend got me through the difficult times. Getting to be a dad to a wonderful son like you has been such a blessing. To my mother, you have always supported me in everything I have ever done. I couldn't have done this without. Thank you for your love and encouragement, especially during the difficult times. And to all of the friends and family that supported me along the way. Thank you for listening to my frustration and wiping away the tears when needed. I love you all.

## **Acknowledgments**

I acknowledge fully well that this journey in finishing my doctorate degree would not have been possible without the help and support and many people. Thank you Dr. Mark Jimenez for challenging me to become the researcher and thinker I was destined to become. With your support and guidance I know truly well what it is to be able to see things from different perspectives which only made this process that much easier. To my committee members, thank you for the time you dedicated to ensure that I would reach my full potential. To my colleagues, I appreciate the time and energy you dedicated towards completing my doctorate degree. I learned so much from each and every one of you. You are all true friends! To all of the students at Concordia that I had the pleasure to meet. I became a better writer because of many of you. I never could have imagined how blessed I would have been to meet such wonderful scholars.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	ii
Dedication .....	iii
Acknowledgments.....	iv
Table of Contents .....	v
List of Tables .....	viii
Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
Background, Context, History, and Conceptual Framework for the Problem .....	1
Statement of the Problem .....	3
Purpose of the Study .....	3
Research Question.....	4
Rationale, Relevance, and Significance of the Study.....	4
Definition of Terms.....	5
Assumptions .....	5
Limitations .....	6
Delimitations .....	6
Chapter 1 Summary.....	7
Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	8
Introduction .....	8
Study topic.....	8
Context .....	9
Significance.....	9
Problem Statement .....	10



Organization .....	11
Conceptual Framework .....	11
Review of Research Literature and Methodological Literature .....	14
Review of Methodological Issues .....	22
Synthesis of Research Findings .....	25
Critique of Previous Research.....	26
Chapter 2 Summary.....	27
Chapter 3: Methodology .....	29
Research Question.....	30
Purpose and Design of the Study .....	30
Research Population and Sampling Method .....	31
Instrumentation.....	32
Data Collection.....	34
Identification of Attributes .....	35
Data Analysis Procedures.....	36
Limitations and Delimitations of the Research Design.....	37
Validation, Credibility, and Dependability .....	39
Expected Findings .....	39
Ethical Issues.....	40
Chapter 3 Summary.....	42
Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results.....	43
Introduction .....	43
Description of the Sample.....	44

Research Methodology and Analysis .....	45
Methodological Grounding .....	45
Methodological Research Design.....	46
Methodological Strategies.....	47
Data Analysis .....	57
Summary of the Findings .....	64
Chapter Four Summary .....	70
Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion .....	72
Introduction .....	72
Summary of the Results .....	72
Discussion of the Results .....	76
Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature .....	84
Limitations .....	86
Implication of the Results for Practice, Policy, and Theory .....	87
Recommendations for Further Research.....	89
Conclusion.....	90
References.....	92
Appendix A: Informed Consent Form .....	97
Appendix B: IRB Approval Letter.....	99
Appendix C: Reflective Questionnaire .....	101
Appendix D: Statement of Original Work .....	102

## List of Tables

Table 1 <i>Participant Years of Experience</i> .....	44
Table 2 <i>Questionnaire Responses</i> .....	48
Table 3 <i>Code Words Assigned</i> .....	58
Table 4 <i>Themes Created from the Coded Data</i> .....	59
Table 5 <i>Code Word Count Within Each Thematic Category For Each Participant</i> .....	60
Table 6 <i>STRS Results for Participant A</i> .....	61
Table 7 <i>Measures of Central Tendency for STRS Results for Participant A</i> .....	62
Table 8 <i>STRS Results for Participant B</i> .....	62
Table 9 <i>Measures of Central Tendency for STRS Results for Participant B</i> .....	63
Table 10 <i>STRS Results for Participant C</i> .....	63
Table 11 <i>Measures of Central Tendency for STRS Results for Participant C</i> .....	64
Table 12 <i>Mean Scores from STRS for Participant A,B,C</i> .....	64

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Teacher beliefs act as intuitive screens that filter new information. Teacher beliefs can encompass a teacher's view of the world and self, their perspective on classroom experiences, and their personal values such as religious beliefs (Talbot & Campbell, 2014). Since a person's beliefs are rather complex and may consist of different clusters, studies have begun to look at how those belief systems are perceived to influence the professional practice of educators (Chan & Wong, 2014). Teacher's religious beliefs in particular, impact their entire worldview, and hence, these beliefs may have a more pervasive effect on their professional lives (Hartwick, 2015).

This study sought to explore how religious beliefs are perceived to influence a teachers' professional practice which may include: their general philosophy of teaching, their motivations for entering or continuing in the profession, and their cultivation of relationships with and among students, among other things. This study sought to add to the meaningful conversations concerning teachers' religious beliefs that have already begun. Even though research has been done on teachers' religious beliefs and how those are perceived to influence their professional practice, previous research has relied heavily on general constructs such as self-reporting teacher surveys, which portrays beliefs as being isolated and static (Talbot & Campbell, 2014). By employing an in-depth qualitative research study, the data helped to add to the conversation about the influence of teacher beliefs on the professional practice of teachers.

### **Background, Context, History, and Conceptual Framework for the Problem**

Mezirow (1991) and his transformative learning theory provided the context in which to explore participants' worldviews, beliefs, and presuppositions. Thinking about how one thinks, reflecting upon the art of reflection, and being conscious of being conscious, are vital steps

within transformative learning process. According to Freeman and Johnson (1998) teachers enter the classroom with prior experiences and hold certain personal values and beliefs that inform their knowledge about teaching and shape what they do in the classroom. The presuppositions teachers hold help to define their reality and what they believe is true (Mezirow, 1991).

The conceptual model of Pianta's (1999) three-factor Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) measures teacher perception with respect to their relationship with their students. Relationships between teachers and students play a prominent role in the development of student's academic, social, and emotional competencies throughout their entire educational career (Pianta, 1999). Exploring teacher perceptions of their relationships with their students can potentially help gain a better understanding of how a teacher's beliefs may influence their professional practice, which includes teacher-student relationships.

Fullan's (1993) framework of teacher as agent of change is guided by the notion that teachers should affect positive, constructive change in their classrooms. He believed that teaching is at its core a moral profession, and, therefore, teachers cannot divorce their classroom influence from their morality; they are one in the same. Fullan (2007) also reiterated the importance of combining moral purpose with the ability to lead others towards a culture of change. Donaldson (2007) furthered this sentiment by stating that teachers draw on their relationships and their strong sense of purpose to help colleagues explore, share, and improve their teaching practices.

Past research findings have provided insight into the impact of teachers' personal lives on their professional lives. Hartwick (2015) and White (2010) both found that teachers' religious beliefs affected their relationships with their students. A sense of calling and a strong connection to God were found to be contributing factors to the connection to the personal relationships that

educators formed with their students. This coincided with Fullan's (1993) notion of educator as agent of change. The participants in these studies could not divorce their classroom influence from their religious beliefs; they were one in the same. Participants were seen as being capable of leveraging their moral purpose as Christians in order to build meaningful connections and relationships with their students (Hartwick, 2015; White, 2010). Also, four themes emerged from a review of the literature that suggest that religious beliefs influences the professional lives of the participants by: viewing their role as teacher as a sense of calling, through their relationships with their students, through their instructional practices and use of classroom resources, and by how they managed student behavior and classroom management (Baurain, 2012; Hartwick, 2015; Kang, 2015; White, 2010).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The research demonstrated that teacher beliefs, particularly religious beliefs, merit further exploration as part of research on teacher beliefs (Baurain, 2012). Talbot and Campbell (2014) called for future research in this area including in-depth narrative inquiries of individual teachers that explore the connection between teacher beliefs, actual practice, and the relationship between the two. This study sought to add to the existing research in this manner by expanding upon what has already been done. By employing an in-depth qualitative research study, hopefully the data added to the conversation surrounding the influence of teacher beliefs on the professional practice of teachers.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore teacher beliefs, specifically teachers' religious beliefs, and how those beliefs are perceived to influence their professional lives as educators. Even though research has been done on teachers' religious beliefs and how those are perceived

to influence their professional practice, previous research has relied heavily on general constructs such as self-reporting teacher surveys, which portrays beliefs as being isolated and static (Talbot & Campbell, 2014). By employing an in-depth qualitative research study, the data helped to add to the conversation about the influence of teacher beliefs on the professional practice of teachers.

### **Research Question**

Through this research study, I asked the following research question:

1. How do public middle school teachers perceive their personal religious beliefs influence their professional lives as educators?

### **Rationale, Relevance, and Significance of the Study**

Teacher beliefs have emerged as the primary factor influencing a teacher's behavior (Talbot & Campbell, 2014). Even though extensive research has been done on teacher beliefs, religious beliefs specifically, have not been a huge part of the conversation (Baurain, 2012; Kang, 2015). Nelson (2010) pointed out that less than 2% of conferences at the National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME) focused on religious identity and beliefs. Furthermore, the American Education Research Association (AERA) conference showed a similar pattern with the percentage of sessions related to religion and education were less than 1% (Nelson, 2010). Baurain (2012) argued that religious beliefs should be part of academic conversations and research about teacher beliefs. Kang (2015) furthered this sentiment by stating that research on the religious beliefs of public school teachers is still scarce. While misconceptions surrounding the separation of church and state has led to many educators (and researchers alike) avoiding religion in schools altogether (Passe & Willox, 2009; White, 2009). Thus, according to Kang (2015), an examination of teachers' religious beliefs and how those are perceived to influence their professional lives is warranted.

## **Definition of Terms**

**Teacher Beliefs.** An integrated product of multiple sources such as one's religious beliefs, academic and general knowledge, personal experience, and political ideologies (Chan & Wong, 2014).

**Teacher Perceptions.** The understandings and thoughts a teacher carries about an issue (situation, student, or idea) which are shaped by their background knowledge and life experiences (Baurain, 2012).

**Instructional Episodes.** Classroom observations in which a researcher seeks to identify a consistent response or behavior from the teacher being observed (Talbot & Campbell, 2014).

**Reflective Thought.** The process of thinking about and reflecting upon one's belief system (Mezirow, 1991).

**Teaching Pedagogy.** Specific ways teacher beliefs are manifested in the classroom such as, the nature of the student-teacher relationship, instructional practices, use of classroom resources, and styles of classroom management (Talbot & Campbell, 2014).

## **Assumptions**

The STRS has been widely used as an indicator of the quality of the student-teacher relationship (Pianta, 1999). Based on the strong evidence of validity of results it is assumed that the STRS was a reliable source of data. Also, it is assumed that the participants were truthful in their answers and responses throughout the duration of the study. The answers and responses given by the participants were their perceptions and gave an accurate picture of how they view their own personal religious beliefs to influence their professional practice as educators.



## **Limitations**

Chapter 3 discusses the limitations of this study's methodology. However, since both the self-reflection survey and the STRS employed self-reporting techniques, the responses collected only gave each participants' perception, which may or may not be an accurate description of reality. Social desirability bias, in which a teacher might seek to inflate their scores, posed limitations (Hartwick, 2015). For example, participants may view their relationships with their students as being that of a positive one as reflected in the results of the STRS, when in actuality that might not be the case.

In order to reduce threats to internal validity, survey instruments with established validity were selected. The STRS has been widely used as an indicator of the quality of the student-teacher relationship (Pianta, 1999). Estimates of reliability for this instrument ranged from 0.76–0.92 within each subscale and .89 for the Total scale score. Also, the STRS and its subscales showed strong evidence of concurrent and predictive validity (Pianta, 1999).

In order to ensure trustworthiness of results a thorough transcript review was conducted mutually between both researcher and each of the participants. Examining the field notes and transcripts allowed participants the opportunity to elaborate on what they viewed as the connections between their religious beliefs and their professional practice. Also, participants had the opportunity to explore the connection (if any) between their perceptions and actual practices through the instructional episodes and follow-up interviews that occurred.

## **Delimitations**

The study focused solely on Christian educators. Since the major themes that were found are not unique to Christianity, findings are viewed as being non-exclusive. Thus, educators of other faith backgrounds (or none) might seek to practice these themes and values in their

professional lives (Baurain, 2012). Even though the data that was collected from this study cannot be generalized to include all educators, it does bring to light how religious beliefs might influence their professional lives.

Also, the sample size only included female educators from one middle school which made this research study not generalizable to include all Christian educators or any other educator. The research process which allowed participants the opportunity to reflect upon their belief systems may be transferable nevertheless but at the reader's discretion. With that being said, by being given the platform in which to reflect upon their beliefs systems through the various methodological approaches utilized in this research study, participants were motivated to leverage such an opportunity to become better educators.

## **Chapter 1 Summary**

This in-depth qualitative study explored teacher beliefs, specifically teachers' religious beliefs, and how those beliefs are perceived to influence their professional lives as educators. This study is presented in five chapters. Chapter 1 introduced the topic, described the problem that will be addressed, and provided the reader with an overview of the research. As stated in Chapter 2, this study is based on the conceptual frameworks of Mezirow's transformative learning theory, and Fullan's framework of teacher as agent of change. In Chapter 3 I will detail the methodology and research design that was used in the study. In Chapter 4 the results of the study will be documented. Finally, Chapter 5 will include a discussion of the results as well as a conclusion.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction

Since teaching is such a personal journey, studies have begun to look at how teacher beliefs affect the professional lives of teachers. Teacher beliefs, which can encompass an individual's view of the world and self, their perspective on classroom experiences, and their personal values (such as religious beliefs), act as intuitive screens that filter new information (Talbot & Campbell, 2014). Teachers' religious beliefs in particular, impact their entire worldview, and hence, these beliefs may have a more pervasive effect on their professional lives (Hartwick, 2015). The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore teacher beliefs, specifically teachers' religious beliefs, and how those beliefs are perceived to influence their professional lives as educators.

### Study topic

A person's worldview is an integrated product of multiple sources such as one's religious beliefs, academic and general knowledge, personal experience, and political views (Chan & Wong, 2014). Since a person's beliefs are rather complex and may consist of different clusters, studies have begun to look at how those belief systems are perceived to influence the professional practice of educators (Chan & Wong, 2014). Teacher beliefs and their perceived influence on the professional lives of participants were first discussed. The perceived effect religious beliefs have in particular on the professional lives of teachers guided the research.

One main research question was explored during this qualitative study:

1. How do public middle school teachers perceive their personal religious beliefs influence their professional lives as educators?

## **Context**

In reviewing the literature, many studies have found that personal life factors such as personal traits, interests, beliefs, and experience, influenced the professional lives of educators (Pajak and Blasé, 1989). Religious beliefs in particular, have been found to influence the professional lives of educators (Baurain, 2012; Hartwick, 2015; Kang, 2015; White, 2010). The literature review sought to explore religious beliefs within the realm of research pertaining to teacher beliefs with the intent of bringing attention to an area that has been relatively unexplored within research circles. Since the major themes found in each of the research studies are not unique to Christianity, findings are viewed as being non-exclusive (Baurain, 2015). Thus, educators of other faith backgrounds (or none) might seek to practice these themes and values in their professional lives (Baurain, 2015). Even though the data collected from these studies cannot be generalized to include all educators, it does bring to light how religious beliefs might influence their professional lives.

## **Significance**

The research demonstrated that teacher beliefs, particularly religious beliefs, deserve to be explored as part of research on teacher beliefs (Baurain, 2012). Talbot and Campbell (2014) called for future research in this area including in-depth narrative inquiries of individual teachers that explore the connection between teacher beliefs, actual practice, and the relationship between the two. This study sought to add to the existing research in this manner by expanding upon what has already been done. By employing an in-depth qualitative research study, hopefully the data added to the conversation surrounding the influence of teacher beliefs on the professional practice of teachers.

This in-depth qualitative study provided a resource for teacher education programs who seek to prepare prospective teachers to adequately address all of the challenges they will face. Additionally, this study allowed teacher education programs to intentionally and systematically talk about how teacher beliefs, particularly religious beliefs, may influence one's professional practice (Nelson, 2010). By having meaningful conversations about how religious identity fits into the broader picture of society and community, prospective teachers can become more aware of how their religious identity may influence their professional practice.

### **Problem Statement**

Even though legal boundaries have been set, many unanswered questions remain on how teachers' religious beliefs play a role in shaping the professional practice of educators (Burke & Segall, 2011). Even though research has been done on teachers' religious beliefs and how those are perceived to influence their professional practice, previous research has relied heavily on general constructs such as self-reporting teacher surveys, which portrays beliefs as being isolated and static (Talbot & Campbell, 2014). According to Talbot and Campbell (2014), examining teachers in action allows the researcher to observe specific ways that beliefs are manifested in the decision-making process within the classroom. Teacher surveys reflect teachers' perceptions but limit the researcher from exploring the connection between those beliefs and actual practice. By allowing participants to see their beliefs within the context of their practice, they were able to reflect upon their actual practices and the connection between those practices and their religious beliefs. Since beliefs cannot be directly observed or measured, but instead must be inferred, it is important to be able to explore the connection between actual practices and the stated beliefs (Talbot & Campbell, 2014). In this particular study, beliefs were manifested in actual practice

through the way in which participants viewed student motivation, and in seeing the teacher's role as facilitator (Talbot & Campbell, 2014).

## **Organization**

This literature review first sought to identify sources pertaining to teacher beliefs and educators. A great deal of literature pertaining to teacher beliefs and educators was returned. In order to narrow the parameters of the search, key words shifted to narrower topics that were pertinent to this study. Key words such as, teachers' religious beliefs, and teachers' religious beliefs and professional lives, were explored. The literature review is divided into the following sections: Introduction, Conceptual Framework, Review of Research Literature and Methodological Literature, Review of Methodological Issues, Synthesis of Research Findings, Critique of Previous Research, and Summary.

## **Conceptual Framework**

There are three theoretical frameworks guiding this study. First, Mezirow (1991) and his transformative learning theory provided the context in which to explore participants' worldviews, beliefs, and presuppositions. Thinking about our thinking, reflecting upon our reflection, and being conscious of being conscious, are vital steps within transformative learning process. This study intended to engage each participant in the transformative learning process by allowing them to think about and reflect upon their belief systems. Participants sought to find truth by deconstructing that which has been taken for granted by reflecting upon what they believe and why (Mezirow, 1991). According to Freeman and Johnson (1998) teachers enter the classroom with prior experiences and hold certain personal values and beliefs that inform their knowledge about teaching and shape what they do in the classroom. Truth can be found by looking at how each participant understands experience. The presuppositions they hold help to

define their reality and what they believe is true (Mezirow, 1991). By examining their beliefs systems, the participants not only participated in the transformative learning process, but examined how those beliefs affect their professional lives in the classroom as well.

Second, the conceptual model of Pianta's (1999) three-factor Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS), which was designed to measure the nature of the teacher-student relationship, was utilized to measure teacher perception with respect to their relationship with their students. Relationships between teachers and students play a prominent role in the development of student's academic, social, and emotional competencies throughout their entire educational career (Pianta, 1999). Pianta (1999) designed the STRS to contain three dimensions which include conflict, closeness, and dependency. The conflict subscale measures the degree to which a teacher perceives his or her relationship with a particular student as being negative or conflictual. The closeness subscale measures the degree to which a teacher experiences affection, warmth, and open communication with a particular student. While the dependency subscale measures the degree to which a teacher perceives a particular student as being overly dependent upon him or her.

By allowing participants the opportunity to reflect upon their perceptions related to the quality of their teacher-student relationships, they were able to reflect upon the results and how those may have interacted with their religious beliefs. Exploring teacher perceptions of their relationships with their students helped gain a better understanding of how participants' religious beliefs may influence their professional practice, which included teacher-student relationships. The STRS was also used as a reference point in comparing teacher beliefs and actual practice, and the connection between the two.

Third, the notion that teachers should affect positive, constructive change in their classrooms is guided by the framework of teacher as agent of change. Fullan (1993) correlated a teacher's ability to enact positive change with his or her moral purpose. He believed that teaching is at its core a moral profession, and, therefore, teachers cannot divorce their classroom influence from their morality; they are one in the same. This study sought to explore whether or not participants perceive themselves as agents of change, which can be categorized as part of their belief system, and whether or not those beliefs influence their professional practice.

Fullan (1993) defined moral purpose as making a difference by bringing about meaningful change. According to Fullan (1993), educators need to make moral purpose more explicit by acquiring the necessary tools to engage in change productively. Moral purpose within the context of teaching is the ability to be aware of the needs of every student. Educators become change agents by being conscious of the needs of their students which cause them to develop better strategies for accomplishing their moral goals. Fullan (1993) called for an explicit set of goals and skills of change agents to be set and taught within educational circles. Fullan (1993) argued that teacher professionalism should integrate moral purpose and change agency as part of best teaching practices. Fullan (1993) saw four core capacities for building greater change capacity: personal vision-building, inquiry, mastery, and collaboration. Personal vision-building examines why teachers came into teaching in the first place. Inquiry, which is an ongoing process, internalizes norms, habits, and techniques for continuous learning. Teachers as change agents then are life-long learners in constant reflection (Fullan, 1993). Mastery involves gaining a deeper understanding, being exposed to new ideas, formulating new mindsets, and gaining the skills needed to be an effective change agent (Fullan, 1993). Lastly, the ability to collaborate is one of the core requisites of being a change agent.



Johnson and Donaldson (2007) also emphasized the need to empower teachers to become change agents by outlining five critical support systems. These capacities are: having a shared vision, autonomy and trust, structures to support teacher teaming, release time, and external networks. A shared vision requires the vision to be developed collaboratively and allows teachers to advocate for change that is responsive to the vision. Autonomy and trust implies that teachers are trusted to make decisions and empowered to lead change efforts within a school (Johnson & Donaldson, 2007). Structures to support teacher learning refers to professional learning communities that are be created where teachers can share, collaborate, and facilitate meaningful conversations that lead to change efforts. Teachers who are given release time are allowed to engage in their work as change agents, while staying grounded in their role as teacher as well (Johnson & Donaldson, 2007). Lastly, teachers need to be able to capitalize on external networks which will help bring new ideas and perspectives to the school, furthering the change effort.

### **Review of Research Literature and Methodological Literature**

**Teacher beliefs and professional practices.** According to Philipp (2007) beliefs are understandings about the world that are thought to be true. Beliefs act as a lens that affect one's view of the world which can also lead toward a particular action as well. A person's beliefs are rather complex and may consist of different clusters, some more deeply held than others (Chan & Wong, 2014). One's worldview is an integrated product of multiple sources such as one's religious beliefs, academic and general knowledge, personal experience, and political ideologies (Chan & Wong, 2014).

Teacher beliefs have emerged as the primary factor influencing a teacher's behavior (Talbot & Campbell, 2014). Teacher beliefs can encompass a variety of influences such as the individual's view of the world and self, perspective on classroom experiences, personal values

(such as religious beliefs), and opinions ranging from personal identity, pedagogical methods, subject content, and student learning (Gill & Hoffman, 2009). Past research findings have provided insight into the impact of teachers' personal lives on their professional lives. Pajak and Blase (1989) surveyed 200 teachers and found that participants perceived aspects of their personal lives as influencing professional lives positively. Thirteen personal life factors were found to influence the professional lives of the participants. These included factors such as, personal traits, interests, beliefs, and experience. Participants believed that their own interests positively influenced their professional lives. Teacher knowledge and varied experiences broadened that of their students as well (Pajak & Blase, 1989). Pajak and Blase (1989) also found that participants identified their own religious beliefs as having a positive influence on their professional lives. Participants were perceived to have caring relationships with students, and were seen as understanding, accepting, patient, and trusting as a result of their spiritual beliefs. Teachers saw themselves as positive role models for students to emulate as well.

**Connecting teacher beliefs to professional practices.** Even though many studies have found that teacher beliefs influence their professional practice, without analyzing and gathering data between the stated belief and the teacher practice, the inference made between belief and practice may not be as strong as first realized (Talbot & Campbell, 2014). Palak and Walls (2009) attempted to explore how teachers used technology in their classrooms. The study sought to find out whether or not the use of technology would indeed lead to more student-centered learning. However, Palak and Walls (2009) found that personal beliefs about learning played a more influential role in shaping instruction than the technology itself. Even though teachers had certain beliefs about the use of technology, those beliefs did not lead to more student-centered learning as first assumed.

Talbot and Campbell (2014) sought to explore how a teachers' collection of beliefs influences teachers' behavior in the classroom, by looking at a 2nd grade teachers' beliefs, their actual practices, and the connections between the beliefs and observed practices. By using instructional episodes from one single participant, Talbot and Campbell (2014) created data about beliefs, practices, and the connections between the two that were grounded in specific examples. The in-depth qualitative study that was employed allowed the participant the opportunity to explore beliefs that may not have previously been shared or recognized by the teacher. The participant was also able to recognize the specific ways that beliefs influenced their decision-making process (Talbot & Campbell, 2014). Beliefs were manifested in actual practice through the way in which the participant viewed student motivation, and in seeing the teacher's role as facilitator (Talbot & Campbell, 2014). Previous research has relied heavily on general constructs such as self-reporting teacher surveys, which portrays beliefs as being isolated and static (Talbot & Campbell, 2014). Talbot and Campbell's study allowed the participant to be a reflective participant, with the ability to see their beliefs within the context of their practice.

**Teacher's religious beliefs and the separation of church and state.** Even though extensive research has been done on teacher beliefs, religious beliefs specifically, have not been a huge part of the conversation (Anderson, Mathys, & Cook, 2015; Baurain, 2012; Kang, 2015). Nelson (2010) points out that less than 2% of conferences at the National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME) focused on religious identity and beliefs. Furthermore, the American Education Research Association (AERA) conference showed a similar pattern with the percentage of sessions related to religion and education were less than 1% (Nelson, 2010). Burke and Segall (2011) pointed out that contemporary manifestations of Christianity in public schools have gone absent in most educational literature, which helps to support Nelson's claim (2010).

Misconceptions surrounding the separation of church and state have led to many educators (and researchers alike) avoiding religion in schools altogether (Passe and Willox, 2009; White, 2009). The First Amendment to the Constitution states that, “congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof” (U. S. Constitution). This “Establishment Clause” does not prohibit the teaching of religion, but specifically states that our government may not promote or endorse a religion, nor may it stop people from freely practicing their religion. Thus, the state must be neutral with regard to religion (Passe & Willox, 2009). Despite the separation of church and state though, religion remains an ambiguous topic in U.S. public schools (Berry, 2010; Burke & Segall, 2011, Glanzer, 1999; Hill, 2008). Even though legal boundaries have been set, many unanswered questions remain on how religion plays a role in influencing the professional practice of educators (Burke & Segall, 2011). The issue of religious expression in U.S. public schools has presented a dilemma for many school officials (Beekley, 2013). Beekley (2013), in examining a case study surrounding legal issues within a high school, postulates that religious liberty in public schools is an important issue for educators and is worthy of time and discussion. While Bindewald, Rosenblith, and Green (2013) point out some schools have begun to prioritize religious goals over civic obligations which can undermine the notion of a public education. Hansen (2018) calls for the promotion of autonomy in public schools when dealing with topics such as religion.

Also, there are invisible and visible remnants of Christianity in the U.S. public school system that have gone unexplored (Berry, 2010; Burke & Segall, 2011, Glanzer, 1999; Hill, 2008). Even though it is assumed that religion has been removed from public schools, remnants of Christianity remain and have become a natural fabric of our country (Berry, 2010; Burke & Segall, 2011, Glanzer, 1999; Hill, 2008). According to Burke and Segall (2011), to assume

schools have become entirely secular would be a mistake. Examples highlighted include, the use of our current school calendar, which centers on the Christian faith, and the way in which schools are organized. According to Burke and Segall (2011) U.S. public schools shouldn't just accept the calendar based on familiarity and convenience despite its connections to Christianity, without reflecting upon how this affects students within each school. Teachers in public schools have a moral and legal obligation to defend their students' religious identities by reflecting upon their own religious beliefs (Allgood, 2016).

Just as remnants of Christianity remain and continue to influence U.S. public schools, teachers' religious beliefs also have been found to influence their professional practice. Baurain (2012) argues that religious beliefs should be part of academic conversations and research about teacher beliefs. Kang (2015) furthers this sentiment by stating that research on the religious beliefs of public school teachers is still scarce. According to Kang (2015), an examination of teachers' religious beliefs and how those are perceived to influence their professional lives is warranted.

**Teachers' religious beliefs and professional practices.** Since religion is such a personal journey, studies have begun to look at how religion affects best practices of public school teachers (Baurain, 2012; Hartwick, 2015; Kang, 2015; White, 2010, 2014). Four themes emerged from the research findings that suggest that religious beliefs are perceived to influence the professional practice of public school teachers (Baurain, 2012; Hartwick, 2015; Kang, 2015; White, 2010, White, 2014). First, participants in each of the studies were found to view teaching as a sense of "calling" (Baurain, 2012; Hartwick, 2015; Kang, 2015; White, 2010). In a study of public school teachers in Wisconsin, Hartwick (2015) explored teachers' beliefs in God and how it affects their teaching practice. Almost 60% of teachers surveyed felt that they had a sense of

calling to become a teacher in the first place (Hartwick, 2015). Many of the participants were found to directly connect their belief in God and his will to their professional lives. White (2010), who sought to answer how participant's religious beliefs impact their teaching practices, used case studies of six different teachers in order to explore this possible relationship. The participants in the study were found to have a higher calling which was the reason they chose to become teachers in the first place.

Baurain (2012), who surveyed 23 members of the Christian Educators in TESOL Caucus (CETC), found that many respondents felt motivated to teach by the fact that Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) learners tend to be among the have-nots of the world. One of the respondents in Baurain's (2012) study encapsulated this view of teaching as a "calling" by reporting that some participants believed that by displaying Christlike characteristics in the way they behaved and treated others, that they would then encourage their students and colleagues to examine their beliefs and hopefully point them to Christ.

While Kang (2015), who examined the nature of spirituality among early childhood teachers and its potential relationships with their sense of efficacy in teaching, found that participants felt called to teach and perceived that God had a purpose for them which included becoming a teacher in public education. The participants believed that they had been called to the profession of caring for disadvantaged students, and that the sense of "calling" indeed seemed to influence the participant's commitment to their work (Kang, 2015).

Second, each of the studies also found that the participants' religious beliefs influenced their relationship with their students (Baurain, 2012; Hartwick, 2015; Kang, 2015; White, 2010). Hartwick (2015) found that there was a positive correlation between a participant's sense of calling and their perceived relationships with their students. The more participants felt a sense of

calling, the more personal their relationships were felt with their students. The author found that the closer participants felt to God, the more likely they felt connected to their students as well. Hartwick (2015) noted that participants treated students as unique individuals, gave students personal attention, cared about their well-being, and emotionally extended themselves to students.

White (2010) also found that the participants' religious beliefs in the study affected their relationships with their students. Participants in White's (2010) study indicated that the relationships they develop in life, especially those sustained in their religious communities, are what give their life purpose. Each participant valued the role classroom community played in their interactions with their students, and felt that without knowing each other through community, academic learning would not be maximized (White, 2010). Participants saw community as more than just getting along with each other, but instead stressed the importance of trusting others, knowing others, and therefore knowing about oneself as a person and as a learner (White, 2010).

Baurain (2012) reported that participants paid close attention to student goals, needs, backgrounds, and motivations. Participants were said to be willing to whatever they could for their students and saw them as intrinsically valuable human beings that should be respected (Baurain, 2012). Finally, Kang (2015) pointed out the respondents in the study intentionally attempted to apply religious moral values in their treatment of their students. Participants were found to be willing to do the small things for their students, which included regularly praying for them (Kang, 2015).

Third, Hartwick (2015) and White (2010) found that there was a strong correlation between participants' belief about God and their instructional practices and use of classroom

resources. Hartwick (2015) concluded that since the majority of teachers surveyed considered themselves Christians, it would be safe to assume that Christianity might show up in some fashion in the classroom. The content that a teacher chose to teach, and the pedagogical approaches they used, corresponded to and reveal much about the deeply held convictions and beliefs of each of the participants (Hartwick, 2015). White (2010) also found that there was a strong correlation between a teachers' belief about God and their use of classroom resources. According to White (2010) teachers have the power to control the degree of how religion becomes integrated into the content in which they teach. Teachers that practiced religion daily, were found more likely to allow students opportunities to share experiences as well (White, 2010). Participants adopted a reconstructionist approach to the classroom and enacted social action with and for their students (White, 2010). Critical thinking was promoted in each of the participant's classrooms where students could interpret the meaning of content and apply it to various situations. One of the participants studied the Bible in an "expositional" manner, where they read the Bible, understand what it says, think about what it means, and then apply it to their everyday life. This participant used the same "expositional type" of instruction (observation, interpretation, and application) in their classroom. When analyzing subject matter content or reading texts, the participant utilized instruction in a similar manner (White, 2010).

Lastly, White (2010, 2014) found that the participants' religious beliefs impacted how participants managed student behavior and how they viewed classroom management. Participant's religious beliefs, particularly their perspective on eternal salvation, human responsibility, sin, and forgiveness, impacted how they managed student behavior (White, 2010). Furthermore, the concept of externally imposed consequences aligned with certain participants' religious beliefs that un-repent sin will result in an eventual consequence, while proper



behavior and good deeds supported grace and the eternal reward of heaven (White, 2010, 2014). Also, participants were found to possess the ability to identify discrimination and promote equitable learning opportunities for all students, which influenced how certain participants viewed classroom management (White, 2010).

### **Review of Methodological Issues**

The survey design of each of the studies varied from a qualitative research methods approach where surveys, questionnaires, and interviews were conducted, to an in-depth quantitative analysis of the data. A mixed-methods research design was also used in one of the studies as well. Within several of the studies, classroom observations helped contextualize each case and helped each researcher describe how pedagogies were enacted in the classroom (White, 2010). In-depth interviews were conducted which helped situate the life story of the participants within larger historical and institutional contexts of religion and school (White, 2010). Even though legal boundaries have been set, many unanswered questions remain on how religion plays a role and should play a role in U.S. public schools (Burke & Segall, 2011). Interview transcripts and observational field notes were then coded for deductive and inductive themes (White, 2010). With that said, the studies reviewed had a number of methodological issues which were related to survey bias, self-selection and sample size.

**Survey bias.** Hartwick's (2015) study of public school teachers in Wisconsin had various limitations. By employing survey research, the responses collected only give a teacher's perception which may or may not be an accurate description of reality. Hartwick (2015) reported that there may have been some social desirability bias in some of the responses as well. A teacher could have inflated their scores of themselves in relation to the spiritual characteristics they were asked to self-assess. Baurain (2012) also employed a survey research method by

administering an open ended questionnaire to 23 members of the Christian Educators in TESOL Caucus (CETC). Even though the process of data analysis included sorting codes into topically related groupings, and identifying main themes, similar limitations arose. Baurain (2012) explains that some of the respondents may have felt pressured to secularize their thoughts and expression by suppressing their unique Christian beliefs. External academic peer pressures and other factors may have influenced the language and words each respondent decided to use while responding to the questionnaire.

**Self-selection.** Self-selection by participants can challenge claims of generalizability in conducting survey research. General constructs, such as self-reporting teacher surveys, have drawn criticism since beliefs have been portrayed as being isolated and static (Talbot & Campbell, 2014). Based on this study, Baurain (2012) cautions one not to generalize the findings to include all former Christian Educators in TESOL (CETC) Caucus or Christian ESOL teachers. Participants had the freedom to choose which questions to answer and whether or not to participate in the study at all. Even though the data collected from this study cannot be generalized to include all Christian educators, it does bring to light how spiritual and religious beliefs might influence and interact with their professional lives. Kang (2015), who conducted survey research with a group of elementary public school teachers, also faced limitations. The high religiousness of the sample may be due to the survey method employed. Kang (2015) postulates that those who perceived themselves as not being religious probably didn't have any interest in returning the survey, thus inflating the data.

**Sample size.** The sample size in Hartwick's (2015) study resembled statewide and nationwide data in terms of professional characteristics, but not in terms of educational attainment and racial composition. The sample size was much more educated than state and

national averages. Just like the state of Wisconsin, the sample size was quite racially homogeneous. With that said, other than denominational differences, the sample appears to be roughly similar to the national population regarding religious characteristics (Hartwick, 2015). All of the survey participants of phase I of Kang's (2015) study were female. Since teaching primary grades is a female dominant profession, it may be presumable that high religiousness may be a distinctive feature of primary school teachers in general. White's (2010) study was limited to six participants, all of which were elementary school teachers. Half of the participants were Christian while the other half were Jewish, creating an additional complex variable for such a small sample size. Nelson's study (2010), which only included two participants, was even narrower in scope. Generalizability becomes that much more difficult with such a small sample size.

Even though several studies have been done that explore teachers' beliefs and how they influence their professional practice, further studies that utilize an in-depth qualitative research approach are required. A qualitative research method that engages each participant in the transformative learning process by allowing them to think about and reflect upon their belief systems through constant reflection is needed. Two studies from the research had such an approach. Nelson's (2010) research approach was a narrative inquiry into the lives of the participants which included written reflections, a self-assessment, in-depth interviews, and classroom observations. While Talbot and Campbell's study allowed the participant to be a reflective participant, by allowing them to see their beliefs within the context of their practice through the use of instructional episodes. My study seeks to follow the in-depth qualitative research designs of these studies by taking an in-depth look at each of the participant's religious beliefs and how those are perceived to influence their professional practice.

## **Synthesis of Research Findings**

**Teacher knowledge and religious beliefs.** The research identified within this review of literature indicated several key facts regarding why teacher beliefs matter. Pajak and Blase (1989) found that personal life factors positively influenced the professional lives of the participants. Also, four themes emerged from the research findings that suggest that religious beliefs influences the professional lives of the participants by: viewing their role as teacher as a sense of “calling”, through their relationships with their students, through their instructional practices and use of classroom resources, and by how they managed student behavior and classroom management (Baurain, 2012; Hartwick, 2015; Kang, 2015; White, 2010, 2014). White (2010) pointed out that religion enters the classroom through “integration of content, through children’s religious expression, and through teachers’ religious experiences” (p. 52). Evidence exists that such beliefs impact how teachers conceive of and implement curriculum and instruction, and the materials that they use (Baurain, 2012; Hartwick, 2015; Kang, 2015; White, 2010). In terms of instructional materials, there was a disparity between those educators who reported a belief in God and those that did not as well (Hartwick, 2015).

Hartwick (2015) and White (2010) both found that teachers’ religious beliefs affected their relationships with their students. A sense of calling and a strong connection to God were found to be contributing factors to the connection to the personal relationships that educators formed with their students. This coincides with Fullan’s (1993) notion of educator as agent of change. The participants in these studies could not divorce their classroom influence from their religious beliefs; they were one in the same. Participants were seen as being capable of leveraging their moral purpose as Christians in order to build meaningful connections and relationships with their students (Hartwick, 2015; White, 2010). The findings from the research

justify further inquiry into Fullan's (1993) notion of educator as agent of change, and call for an in-depth qualitative research study that explores an educator's religious beliefs and whether or not they perceive themselves as being agents of change.

**Teacher education.** White (2010) suggested that professional development opportunities be made available to teachers to support best practices in the classroom. White (2010) also stressed the importance of addressing how teachers' and students' dispositions impact social and academic contexts of learning in the classroom. White (2010) postulated that establishing a professional development model will help support effective learning opportunities that take into account teachers' and students' religious convictions and how these impact academic and social contexts of learning in schools. Burke & Segall (2011) urged teacher education programs to address the same issue by postulating that religion should be addressed in teacher education by exploring how it may impact both the personal and institutional levels of education. Since the research findings suggest that an educator's worldview and religious beliefs impact their practice, Burke and Segall (2011) argued that further reflection in teacher education programs about the origin of those worldviews and religious beliefs and their impact in the classroom is necessary. Hartwick (2015) furthered this sentiment by suggesting that teachers acknowledge the impact religion has on their beliefs and actions, which could be done through deliberate reflection in teacher education programs and professional development sessions as well. Thus, teacher education programs have the potential to develop ethical leaders that ground their worldview in more than just self-interest (Eckert, 2014).

### **Critique of Previous Research**

The review of the literature supported the view that beliefs in God and conceptions of God support and permeate the entire belief system of an individual (Hartwick, 2015). The more

central teachers' beliefs about God, the greater the impact they will have on their entire worldview, and hence, the stronger or more pervasive of an effect these beliefs may have on their professional life (Hartwick, 2015). The associations reported in Hartwick's (2015) study follow this pattern and support this position through a detailed Chi-square quantitative data analysis. The process of analysis for the other qualitative studies relied on finding deductive and inductive themes. The validity of such data was tested by conducting a thorough transcript review which allowed participants the opportunity to elaborate on what they viewed as the connections between their religious experience and their teaching identities. Further research, that utilizes an in-depth qualitative research approach while engaging participants in the transformational learning process through a critical reflection of their beliefs, is warranted.

Since the major themes found in each of the research studies are not unique to Christianity, findings are viewed as being non-exclusive (Baurain, 2015). Thus, educators of other faith backgrounds (or none) might seek to practice these themes and values in their professional lives (Baurain, 2015). Even though the data collected from these studies cannot be generalized to include all educators, it does bring to light how spiritual and religious beliefs might influence their professional lives. Thus, future research is called for, including parallel studies in other disciplines and religions, as well as case studies and narrative inquiries of individual teachers in diverse contexts (Baurain, 2015).

## **Chapter 2 Summary**

Beliefs systems act as a lens that affect one's view of some aspect of the world or as dispositions toward action (Philipp, 2007). Research studies have begun to look how teacher beliefs influence their professional practice. Since teacher beliefs can encompass a variety of influences such as the individual's view of the world and self, perspective on classroom

experiences, and personal values, this study seeks to explore religious beliefs in particular and how those are perceived to influence the professional lives of educators (Gill & Hoffman, 2009). This study sought to explore how religious beliefs are perceived to influence their professional practice which may include: a teachers' general philosophy of teaching, their motivations for entering or continuing in the profession, and their cultivation of relationships with and among students, among other things.

This study sought to add to the meaningful conversations concerning teachers' religious beliefs that have already begun. Even though research has been done on teachers' religious beliefs and how those are perceived to influence their professional practice, previous research has relied heavily on general constructs such as self-reporting teacher surveys, which portrays beliefs as being isolated and static (Talbot & Campbell, 2014). Based on this review of literatures, which developed a unique conceptual framework using Mezirow (1991), Pianta (1999), and Fullan (1993), there is reason to believe that exploring teachers' religious beliefs and how those are perceived to influence their professional practice, will yield relevant findings.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This qualitative research single case study sought to identify to the extent to which teachers' religious beliefs influence the professional practice of middle school educators. As stated in Chapter 2, this study was based on the conceptual frameworks of Mezirow's transformative learning theory, and Fullan's framework of teacher as agent of change. Each participant engaged in the transformative learning process by having the opportunity to think about and reflect upon their belief systems and how those might influence their professional practices as educators. This study also sought to explore whether or not participants perceive themselves as agents of change, which can be categorized as part of their belief system, and whether or not those beliefs influence their professional practice.

In order to measure the nature of the teacher-student relationship, Pianta's (1999) three-factor Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) was utilized to measure teacher perception with respect to their relationship with their students. Participants were given a self-reporting instrument which will assess the nature of their student-teacher relationships using three measures. The STRS was utilized to measure ranges of conflict, closeness, and dependency with respect to each participant's perceived quality of their student-teacher relationships. In-depth interviews and a questionnaire were also utilized to measure the degree to which teacher beliefs are perceived to influence their professional practice. Instructional episodes were used to allow participants to see their beliefs within the context of their practice and to find any connection between actual practice and perceived influence. Participants also had the option of utilizing a reflective journal during the research process. The reflective journal allowed the participants that chose to use it, the opportunity to reflect upon how their religious beliefs may have interacted with their professional practice in meaningful ways.



## **Research Question**

Through this research study, I asked the following research question:

1. How do public middle school teachers perceive their personal religious beliefs influence their professional lives as educators?

## **Purpose and Design of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore teacher beliefs, specifically teachers' religious beliefs, and how those beliefs are perceived to influence their professional lives as educators. Even though research has been done on teachers' religious beliefs and how those are perceived to influence their professional practice, previous research has relied heavily on general constructs such as self-reporting teacher surveys, which portrays beliefs as being isolated and static (Talbot & Campbell, 2014).

A case study research design was chosen which Creswell (2013) defined as a qualitative approach in which the researcher explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, utilizing in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information, while reporting a case description and case-based themes. A case study research design explores and investigates contemporary real-life phenomenon through the detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions, and their relationships (Yin, 2014). This study sought to follow the single case study embedded analysis research design described by Yin (2014) by taking an in-depth look at each of the participants individually, while looking for common themes within the multiple units of analysis which were the participants as a whole. According to Baxter and Jack (2008) a single case study embedded analysis research design allows for sub-units that are situated within a larger case to be analyzed. Data can also be analyzed within the subunits separately (within case analysis), between the different subunits

(between case analysis), or across all of the subunits (cross-case analysis) as well (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

According to Yin (2014) the data collection in case study research should be extensive, drawing on multiple sources of information. Triangulation, or using multiple data sources, can also help facilitate deeper understanding as well (Patton, 2002). In order to triangulate the data, Pianta's (1999) three-factor Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) to measure the nature of student-teacher relationships was used, while other measures of assessment were also utilized such as, written reflections, in-depth interviews, a questionnaire, and instructional episodes taken from classroom observations.

A detailed description of each case was done initially, which Merriam (1998) referred to as within-case analysis. Thematic analysis within the case was also done by utilizing text analysis software (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998). According to Creswell (2013) case studies often end with conclusions being made by the researcher about the overall meaning derived from the case(s). In taking into consideration the small sample size and the homogenous nature of the sample, the point of data saturation within may have been limited. Even though the data analysis was done systematically, the small sample size and the homogenous nature of the sample may have been obstacles in reaching the point of data saturation. With that being said, this particular single case study expected to provide deep understanding of how teachers' religious beliefs influence their professional practices as educators nonetheless.

### **Research Population and Sampling Method**

The target population for this study was three Christian female middle school teachers in grades sixth through eighth, from one middle school within a local school district. All of the teachers who participated in the study have at least 10 years of experience. The middle school is

located in a California suburb in a predominantly middle-class community. There are approximately 500 students that attend this particular middle school and the student-teacher ratio at this middle school is 23:1. The student body is made up of 48% Caucasian, 32% Hispanic/Latino, 8% African American, 5% Two or More Races, 3% Asian, 2% Filipino, 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 1% Pacific-Islander. Since this particular school district allows students to attend the school of their choice through a lottery system, the student body population is indicative of the surrounding community.

There were a total of seven prospective participants who were originally recruited via an email solicitation. The email consisted of an overall description of the study, what was going to be required of each participant, and an estimated time frame of each of the components of the study as well. Some of the recruits moved out of the district to pursue other jobs, while others decided not to participate because of time constraints. Out of the teachers that were recruited, only three participants chose to participate.

Since each of the participants that were chosen identified as being Christian, purposeful sampling was used, which involved selecting the optimal participants to study the research questions and to understand the problem (Patton, 2002). According to Patton (2002) the purpose of purposeful sampling is to select information rich cases whose study will help illuminate the questions under study. The target population were chosen based on the professional relationship I have established with the school site and each of the participants, along with the flexibility and availability that working at the school site provides.

### **Instrumentation**

Each of the participants were given a self-reflective questionnaire which asked eight

open-ended questions. The questionnaire items did not name particular Christian beliefs, but rather, inquired into personal/professional experiences and their perceptions as well. The questionnaire focused on teaching philosophies, pedagogical commitments, curricular choices, and cultivation of student relationships (Baurain, 2012). No attempt was made in the questionnaire or in any part of this study to define what constitutes a Christian. The criteria for calling a participant a Christian were internal to the participants themselves.

Pianta's (1999) three-factor Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) to measure the nature of student-teacher relationships was also used. The STRS has been widely used as an indicator of the quality of the student-teacher relationship (Pianta, 1999). Also, the STRS and its subscales showed strong evidence of concurrent and predictive validity (Pianta, 1999).

Correlations between STRS scale and subscale scores from kindergarten teachers and their concurrent ratings on the Teacher-Child Rating Scale, a measure of behavior problems and competencies in the classroom, were found (Pianta, 1999). Also, a strong correlation between kindergarten teachers' scores STRS scores and first-grade teachers' ratings of the same student using the Teacher-Child Rating Scale were also found (Pianta, 1999).

Instructional episodes taken from classroom observations and follow-up interviews explored: (a) the teacher's beliefs, (b) actual practices, and (c) the connections between the beliefs and observed practices (Talbot & Campbell, 2014). According to Talbot and Campbell (2014), exploring and reflecting upon a collection of instructional episodes can offer many strengths in investigating teacher beliefs in the classroom. By having participants reflect upon a portfolio of instructional episodes, the researcher and participant began to recognize specific ways teacher beliefs are manifested in the classroom, and the relationship between one belief and the other. Since each participant was observed over a class period, the instructional episodes

were somewhat limited. The observations that were done were utilized as a means of connecting back to each of the participants' previous responses within the other facets of the study. The data that was collected while observing each of the participants were used as a means of reference to help initiate the bigger conversation as to how their personal religious beliefs may have influenced their professional practice.

The participants that chose to utilize the reflective journals documented their journey throughout the research study. The participants were instructed to document any possible connection between their personal religious beliefs and their professional practice. The reflective journals were supposed to be utilized only during the duration of the study. Through the instructional episodes and reflective journals, a mutual respect and discourse was built amongst the researcher and participants. The data collected while observing each of the participants, along with what was written within the reflective journals, provided a foundation in which researcher and participant could participate in a mutual dialogue as professionals.

### **Data Collection**

After the self-reflective questionnaire was administered, participants' responses were analyzed utilizing the text analysis software program ATLAS.ti. Thematic analysis (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998) allowed for main themes to be identified through careful reading, coding, and sorting those codes into related topics and groupings. Those thematic findings were reported qualitatively. The STRS, which measures the nature of student-teacher relationship, was analyzed quantitatively. A 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (definitely does not apply) to 5 (definitely applies) was used to measure ranges of conflict, closeness, and dependency. Triangulation of data allowed for multiple data sources to be used which helped build a deeper understanding within the study (Yin, 2014; Patton, 2002). Measures of central tendency such as,

mean, median, and mode were also utilized for the STRS results to explore the quantitative data in a more thorough fashion.

The self-reflective questionnaire allowed for an initial identification of each participants' beliefs. While the STRS helped gauge each participants' perceived relationship with their students. These insights allowed the researcher to have a frame of reference when observing the participants through each instructional episode. Field notes taken from instructional episodes were analyzed with the previous findings in mind.

In order to give each participant an opportunity to explore the connection (if any) between their perceptions and actual practices, follow-up interviews were conducted. The follow-up interviews occurred after each of the participants was observed. The follow-up interviews were done informally within the classrooms of each of the participants and were intended to be a time of reflection. Also, a thorough transcript review gave participants an opportunity to reflect upon and/or add to anything that had been shared or discussed previously.

### **Identification of Attributes**

The purpose of this study was to explore participants' religious beliefs and how those are perceived to influence their professional practice. There are several characteristics that served as attributes used in defining the current study which include: a) belief systems, b) teaching pedagogy, c) relationships, and d) reflective thought.

**Belief systems.** Since beliefs act as a lens that affects one's view of the world, one's belief system was an important component of this study. According to Talbot and Campbell (2014) teacher beliefs have emerged as the primary factor influencing a teacher's behavior. This study looked at religious beliefs in particular, exploring their perceived influence on the professional lives of the teachers in the study.

**Teaching pedagogy.** In order to recognize specific ways teacher beliefs are manifested in the classroom, exploring the connections between each teachers' religious beliefs and pedagogical practices was important (Talbot & Campbell, 2014). Relationships with students, instructional practices, use of classroom resources, and styles of classroom management are pedagogical factors that were closely explored in this study.

**Relationships.** Previous research studies have found that participants' religious beliefs influenced their relationship with their students (Baurain, 2012; Hartwick, 2015; Kang, 2015; White, 2010). By exploring teacher perceptions of their relationships with their students, the study hoped to gain a better understanding of how participants' religious beliefs may have influenced their professional practice. In order to measure the nature of the teacher-student relationship, this study employed a unique methodological approach by utilizing Pianta's (1999) three-factor Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS).

**Reflective thought.** This study intended to engage each participant in the transformative learning process by allowing them to think about and reflect upon their belief systems. By examining their beliefs systems, the participants not only participated in the transformative learning process, but also examined how those beliefs affected their professional lives in the classroom as well. Results from a self-reflective questionnaire, the STRS, the reflective journals, and a portfolio of instructional episodes allowed the researcher and participant to begin to recognize specific ways teacher beliefs are manifested in the classroom.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

The text analysis software program ATLAS.ti was utilized to analyze the results of the self-reflective survey. Since each question from the survey addressed a different topic, thematic analysis (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998) was done within each case and across cases. Careful

reading of the results, coding each response (which will include words and/or passages), and sorting those codes into related topics and groupings helped for main themes to emerge. According to Saldaña (2013), coding is not just labeling but linking, an exploratory problem-solving technique that will lead the researcher from the data to the main ideas.

The STRS, which utilized a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (definitely does not apply) to 5 (definitely applies), was analyzed quantitatively. The Total scale score, which ranged from raw scores of 28 to 140, measured the degree to which each participant perceived his or her relationship with a particular student as being positive and effective. The Total scale score is comprised of the raw scores of three subscales. Conflict subscale raw scores ranged from 12 to 60, while Closeness subscale raw scores ranged from 11 to 55, and the Dependency subscale raw scores ranged from 5 to 25. The higher Total scale score tend to reflect lower levels of conflict and dependency, higher levels of closeness, and generally a more positive relationship (Pianta, 1999).

All of the data from the reflective questionnaires, classroom observations, follow-up interviews, and reflective journals were organized in order to code the raw data. The first cycle of coding consisted of assigning codes to the participants' various responses (Saldaña, 2013). Since precoding was done, which consisted of, circling, highlighting, and underlining participants' quotes and responses, assigning codes was much easier. Once the codes were assigned the data was then organized in order to gain a deeper understanding of the results. The coding of the data allowed for patterns in the data to become more visible.

### **Limitations and Delimitations of the Research Design**

**Limitations.** Even though the data analysis was done systematically, the small sample size and the homogenous nature of the sample may have been obstacles in reaching the point of



data saturation. The research process which allowed participants the opportunity to reflect upon their belief systems may be transferable nonetheless at the reader's discretion.

Also, since both the self-reflection survey and the STRS employed self-reporting techniques, the responses collected only gave each participant's perception, which may or may not have been an accurate description of reality. Social desirability bias, in which a teacher might seek to inflate their scores, posed limitations (Hartwick, 2015). For example, participants may have viewed their relationships with their students as being that of a positive one as reflected in the results of the STRS, when in actuality that might not have been the case.

In order to ensure validity of results a thorough transcript review was done mutually between researcher and each of the participants during the follow-up interviews. This allowed participants the opportunity to elaborate on what they viewed as the connections between their religious beliefs and their professional practice. Also, participants had the opportunity to explore the connection (if any) between their perceptions and actual practices through the instructional episodes and follow-up interviews that occurred.

**Delimitations.** The study focused solely on female Christian educators, which was not done intentionally. The exclusive nature of the sample was a direct result of the obstacles faced during the recruitment process. Also, since the major themes that were found are not unique to Christianity, findings are viewed as being non-exclusive. Thus, educators of other faith backgrounds (or none) might seek to practice these themes and values in their professional lives. Also, factors such as church attendance and church involvement might solicit different results. Even though the data that was collected from this study could not be generalized to include all educators, it did bring to light how religious beliefs might influence their professional lives.

Also, the sample size only included female educators from one middle school which may have challenged claims of generalizability. Caution should be taken to generalize the results to include all Christian educators. Also,

### **Validation, Credibility, and Dependability**

In order to reduce threats to internal validity, survey instruments with established validity were selected. The STRS has been widely used as an indicator of the quality of the student-teacher relationship (Pianta, 1999). Estimates of reliability for this instrument ranged from 0.76–0.92 within each subscale and .89 for the Total scale score. Also, the STRS and its subscales showed strong evidence of concurrent and predictive validity (Pianta, 1999).

A thorough transcript review was done with each of the participants during the follow-up interviews which ensured they were given an opportunity to clarify their thoughts. Triangulation, or using multiple data sources, also helped facilitate deeper understanding and ensured the results were valid (Patton, 2002). The results of the STRS and the self-reflective questionnaire were discussed which ensured the results of the study were credible and reliable. Also, following each interview audio recordings were reviewed and transcribed into notes which allowed the researcher another opportunity to reflect upon the results. Thorough transcript reviews of all of the data were done to ensure accuracy as well. The process of critical self-reflection carried out by the researcher, or reflexivity (Patton, 2002), helped to ensure the data collected from the study were both credible and dependable.

### **Expected Findings**

This particular single case qualitative study expected to provide deep understanding of how teachers' religious beliefs influence their professional practices as educators. Previous research has indicated that teacher beliefs are the primary factor influencing a teacher's behavior

(Talbot & Campbell, 2014). I expected to find that teachers' religious beliefs do indeed influence their professional practice through their relationships with their students, through their instructional practices and use of classroom resources, and by how they manage student behavior and classroom management (Baurain, 2012; Hartwick, 2015; Kang, 2015; White, 2010). The results of this study confirmed previous researchers' theories connecting religious beliefs to their professional practices.

By utilizing a selection of case study analysis methods guided by Yin (2014), Merriam (1998), and Saldaña (2013), it was expected to uncover major themes that shed light on how specifically teacher religious beliefs influence their professional practice. Through a cross-case analysis it was also expected to find commonalities amongst cases as well.

This in-depth qualitative study provided a resource for teacher education programs who seek to prepare prospective teachers to adequately address all of the challenges they will face. Additionally, this study allowed teacher education programs to intentionally and systematically talk about how teacher beliefs, particularly religious beliefs, may influence one's professional practice (Nelson, 2010). By having meaningful conversations about how religious identity fits into the broader picture of society and community, prospective teachers can become more aware of how their religious identity may influence their professional practice.

## **Ethical Issues**

**Conflict of interest assessment.** I was cognizant of the fact that my perceptions and beliefs about the teaching profession could potentially influence the results of the study. I made sure that my work as an educator which includes how I view the profession, the nature of my student-teacher relationships, and how I organize and present curriculum, among other things, in no way hindered my ability to be an objective researcher. Also, my personal religious beliefs in

being a Christian myself, in no way hindered me from being objective. As mentioned earlier, no attempt was made in any part of this study to define what constitutes a Christian. My personal beliefs and perceptions of how those beliefs influence my professional practice in no way interfered with my ability to be objective during this study.

In order to overcome any potential bias, I focused my efforts on making sure all of the data was collected and analyzed systematically. By systematically coding the data, I ensured that my biases and assumptions did not influence the results. The coding process provided an objective template in which to use in gathering all of the data. Thus the data collected from the self-reflective questionnaire, the STRS surveys, classroom observations, follow-up interviews, and the reflective journals were done from an objective lens.

**Researcher's position.** My intentions were to add to existing literature pertaining to teachers' religious beliefs and how those are perceived to influence their professional practice. The ethics code for conducting research as outlined by the American Psychological Association's (APA) Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (2010) were conformed to during this research study.

**Ethical Issues in the Study.** The IRB found minimal risks in the research design, along with an appropriate risk/benefit ratio. The local school district also found the research design to have minimal risks in conducting the study as well. Informed consent forms were signed by each of the participants which outlined the purpose of the study, what each participant would be doing, potential risks and benefits of their participation in the study. Also, the consent form specified the importance of confidentiality in making sure participants were protected and kept confidential.

In order to avoid potential ethical issues, a thorough transcript review was done with each of the participants which ensured they were given an opportunity to clarify their thoughts. Triangulation, or using multiple data sources, also helped facilitate deeper understanding and ensured the results were free of researcher bias (Patton, 2002). The language used in communicating the findings were clear and concise in order to capture each participant's perspective as accurate as possible.

### **Chapter 3 Summary**

This case study sought to explore teacher beliefs, specifically teachers' religious beliefs, and how those beliefs are perceived to influence their professional lives as educators. Chapter 3 outlined the methodological approach for this study which included the research question being explored, the purpose and design of the study, the research population and sampling method implored. The instrumentation of the study was outlined which also included the data collection methods utilized. The attributes of the study were identified as being beliefs systems, teaching pedagogy, relationships, and reflective thought. The data analysis procedures were presented in detail, while the limitations and delimitations of the research design were noted. The validity, credibility, and dependability of the study were discussed, while the expected findings and ethical issues were noted as well.

## Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

### Introduction

This research case study aimed to identify the extent to which participants' personal religious beliefs were perceived to influence their professional practice. Through this study, the following research question was explored:

1. How do public middle school teachers perceive their personal religious beliefs to influence their professional lives as educators?

In-depth interviews, reflective journals, and a reflective questionnaire were utilized to measure the degree to which teacher beliefs are perceived to influence their professional practice.

Instructional episodes were also used to allow participants to see their beliefs within the context of their practice and to find any connection between actual practice and perceived influence. In order to measure the nature of the teacher-student relationship, Pianta's (1999) three-factor Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) was utilized to measure teacher perception with respect to their relationship with their students.

The text analysis program ATLAS.ti was utilized in order to organize, code, and analyze the data. The coding process allowed for thematic categories to be created which will be detailed within this chapter. The summary of findings were based on the thematic patterns that were found during the research process which help add to the understanding of how these participants perceive their religious beliefs to influence their professional practice.

The coding process ensured that the research process was a sense of discovery. According to Saldaña (2013), the primary heuristic for qualitative data analysis is the transition to coding to categorizing. As a researcher, by systematically coding the data, I was able to ensure that the data results were free of bias and was not influenced by any preconceived notions I

might hold about the participants or the topic in general. The data results were highly anticipated, as I was very curious to share how the participants perceive their professional practice to be influenced by their religious beliefs. As a researcher and as an educator, I am eager to share what the research study has revealed which will be detailed throughout the next two chapters.

**Description of the Sample**

The target population for this study was three female Christian middle school teachers in grades sixth through eighth, from one middle school within a local school district. Since each of the participants that were chosen identified as being Christian, purposeful sampling was used, which involves selecting the optimal participants to study the research questions and to understand the problem (Patton, 2002). According to Patton (2002) the purpose of purposeful sampling is to select information rich cases whose study will help illuminate the questions under study. Out of the teachers that were recruited only three chose to participate. The data gathered was based on the information obtained from all three participants. Data in Table 1 is a description of the completed years of classroom teaching experience for the participants.

Table 1

*Participant Years of Experience*

Participant	Completed years of classroom teaching experience
A	30
B	13
C	13

Participant A has worked at this particular school the least amount of time but has the most teaching experience amongst the participants. She is a special education teacher who has also worked as a general education teacher earlier in her career as well. Participant A is actively

involved in her local church and routinely volunteers in watching children during Sunday school. Her husband is also a teacher within the same school district but works at another school site. Participant A and her husband routinely pray together and act as a support system for each other.

Participant B has taught the same amount of years as Participant C. She worked as a banker for several years before pursuing teaching. Participant B has a strong fascination for history and enjoys being able to make connections between historical events and her Christian faith. For this particular school year she taught history-based electives, but she has also taught English and History for many years prior. Participant B is also actively involved in her local church, sharing that her husband was a member of the choir.

Participant C has taught mathematics and science for the majority of her time at this particular school. She shared that during the past few years she became much more active in attending church regularly than in the past. Participant C was able to make clear connections between her faith and professional practice by her thorough responses in her reflective journal.

### **Research Methodology and Analysis**

Included in this section was an overview of the methodological grounding, analytic strategies employed, key themes identified and a summary of the research. This section provided a step-by-step description of the implementation of the data collection process utilized. Also, the coding procedures selected to analyze and organize the data were explained in detail. Then the specific procedures used to identify themes/patterns based on the codes which emerged during the analysis were presented.

### **Methodological Grounding**



The literature review provided a basis for the conceptual and theoretical framework of the research. There are three theoretical frameworks that guided this study. First, Mezirow (1991) and his transformative learning theory provided the context in which to explore participants' worldviews, beliefs, and presuppositions. This study engaged each participant in the transformative learning process by allowing them to think about and reflect upon their belief systems. Participants sought to find truth by deconstructing that which has been taken for granted by reflecting upon what they believe and why (Mezirow, 1991).

Second, the conceptual model of Pianta's (1999) three-factor Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS), which was designed to measure the nature of the teacher-student relationship, was utilized to measure teacher perception with respect to their relationship with their students. By allowing participants the opportunity to reflect upon their perceptions related to the quality of their teacher-student relationships, they will be able to reflect upon the results and how those may interact with their religious beliefs. The STRS was also used as a reference point in comparing teacher beliefs and actual practice, and the connection between the two.

Lastly, the notion that teachers should affect positive, constructive change in their classrooms is guided by the framework of teacher as agent of change. This study sought to explore whether or not participants perceive themselves as agents of change, which can be categorized as part of their belief system, and whether or not those beliefs influence their professional practice.

### **Methodological Research Design**

**Case study.** A case study research design was an appropriate choice for the research question that was being explored. The research case study design provided the platform for which to engage in the transformative learning process by having each of the participants think

about how one thinks. A case study research design allowed for an extensive data analysis to be done which drew on multiple sources of information as well (Yin, 2014). Triangulation, or using multiple data sources, also helped to facilitate deeper understanding by utilizing Pianta's STRS student-teacher relationship scale (Patton, 2002). According to Creswell (2013) case studies often end with conclusions being made by the researcher about the overall meaning derived from the case(s). The conclusions that were derived from this case study were based on the thematic patterns that were found during the research process.

### **Methodological Strategies**

**Self-reflective questionnaire.** Each of the participants was given a self-reflective questionnaire which asked eight open-ended questions. The questionnaire items did not name particular Christian beliefs, but rather, inquired into personal/professional experiences and their perceptions as well. The questionnaire focused on teaching philosophies, pedagogical commitments, curricular choices, and cultivation of student relationships (Baurain, 2012). Participants were not required to answer every question, but instead could choose between those that were most stimulating or engaging to them. Participants A and C chose to answer every question, while Participant B answered five out of the seven questions (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Questionnaire Responses*

Question	Topic	Responses
1	Philosophy of teaching	3
2	Motivations for teaching	3
3	Teaching methods	2
4	Classroom management	2
5	Curriculum	3
6	Relationships with students	3
7	Other	3

Question #1 focused on each of the participants’ philosophy of teaching. Participant A responded that, “my Christian faith has played a significant role in motivating me to teach, because I believe God has given me the gift of teaching.” Participant B stated that, “Proverbs 22:6 is the verse that best sums up my philosophy of teaching. My responsibility is not just to impart academic knowledge to my students, but to guide them to becoming young men and women of character and purpose.” While Participant C shared that, “it is very difficult for me to say if it is my Christian faith solely or a combination of my faith and past experiences that has shaped my philosophy of teaching.”

Question #2 explored what motivated each participant to enter and continue in the teaching profession. Participant A shared that, “my Christian faith gives me the strength to continue to develop and enhance my teaching skills.” Participant B responded that, “my Christian faith played a major role in my decision to enter the teaching profession. After spending 15 years in what I refer to as an accidental career in banking, I was profoundly

unhappy, but feeling trapped as I had not completed my degree and was convinced that no one else would hire me.” While Participant C stated that, “my Christian faith is a part of me. There are many parts to me. I am not defined by one aspect because I truly do believe that each part of me allows me to be the best me possible.”

Question #3 looked at any links between teaching methods and the participants’ religious beliefs. Participant A shared that, “my teaching methods and instructional techniques have evolved over the past 30 plus years. As new research studies are presented, we learn more about effective teaching methodologies.” Participant C responded that, “in the classroom, I try to tell myself that I am open minded, but in reality I am very "black and white". My Christian faith has guided me to understand that there is only two sides when it comes to many of the challenges that teaching brings.” Participant B chose not to respond to this particular question.

Question #4 explored each of the participants’ classroom management styles. Participant A shared that, “I know that Christ had so much compassion for children. There are moments I could raise my voice at a disruptive student. But, what would that accomplish, other than escalating the situation. I have learned to speak softly, and listen more intently.” Participant C responded by stating, “my classroom management is very similar to lessons from the Bible about respect and honoring elders. I treat my students the way that I want them to treat me. When I was younger, my mom always told me to treat your elders with respect.” Participant B chose not to respond to this particular question.

Question #5 explored each of the participants’ curricular choices in the classroom. Participant A shared that, “I think it is so important as an educator not to short cut your values and present curriculum that is questionable at best. When I taught history I spent more time on Israel and the history of Christianity. I did present the other world religions, but not as much in

depth.” Participant B responded that, “I believe my Christian faith played a strong part in my selection of a specialty as an educator. While I initially earned a multiple subject teaching credential, I quickly learned that my true passion was for history and have since earned a single subject credential in social studies. One motivating factor for this was the errors and biases I discovered in the published curriculum when it related to Christianity.” Participant C stated that, “I do not have any concerns about any links that may exist between my faith and curriculum as a teacher. As a teacher, I have a responsibility to my classroom (students, parents, school district, and teaching standards).

Question #6 focused on the nature of each of the participants relationships with their students. Participant A shared that, “for the most part, I treat all of my students like a family. I support them and encourage when ever possible. I have many students from previous years who stop by just to say Hi, or get a hug. I think God gives us the compassion to care for others. I do it on a daily basis as a teacher.” Participant B stated that, “although I teach at a public school, my students are aware of the fact that I am a Christian. I wear a cross nearly every day, and because of this, students have asked me where I go to church. Likewise, it doesn't take long for me to learn which students share my faith, and which one's do not.” Participant C responded by stating that, “there are few links about my faith and the types of relationships I try to form. Again it is very hard to say how much of what I do directly is linked to my faith. In teaching, I try to keep the lines very clear. When I am in front of my students, teaching a lesson or getting the students through an activity or class period, I keep the relationships purely as teacher and student.”

**Classroom observations.** Instructional episodes taken from classroom observations and follow-up interviews were conducted which explored: (a) the teacher’s beliefs, (b) actual practices, and (c) the connections between the beliefs and observed practices (Talbot &

Campbell, 2014). Field notes taken from instructional episodes were analyzed with the previous findings in mind. In order to ensure validity of results, a thorough transcript review was done, which allowed each of the participants the opportunity to elaborate on what they viewed as the connections between their religious beliefs and their professional practice. Also, participants had the opportunity to explore the connection (if any) between their perceptions and actual practices through the instructional episodes and follow-up interviews that occurred.

Each participant was eager and receptive to being observed. It was overemphasized that each participant was not expected to do anything different than what they would normally do. This was important to point out in order to ensure the protection of the participants and to avoid any conflict of interest. Each participant was reminded that the classroom observations were required in order to gain a better understanding as to how their personal religious beliefs may influence their professional practice. The classroom observations were understood as a way to gather more information in order to add to the conversation that had already begun. The classroom observations occurred over a period of two weeks and lasted duration of one full class period. Specific ways the participants' religious beliefs may have interacted with their professional practice were noted in detail within the thematic findings later in this chapter.

Participant A welcomed me into her classroom and was eager to be observed. Her classroom environment was very intimate, especially since she only had about ten students in her classroom. Since Participant A teaches in special education, the teacher-student ratio is much smaller than a general education classroom. Participant A walked around the room during the observation to check for understanding and to make sure students didn't need any support. Since she had a small class size, Participant A was able to interact with each of her students in a personal way by coming to their desks. During the observation Participant A comforted a student

who looked visibly distraught. Participant A went over to the particular student to make sure they were doing ok visibly displaying a sense of compassion towards her student.

Participant B was also eager to be observed. Her class size was much larger than Participant A's. Participant B had a strong rapport with her students as was evident by the way in which they interacted with each other. Even though Participant B was teaching a direct instructed lesson, she was able to move about the classroom to check for understanding nonetheless. During the observation Participant B came over to a student who was off task and told her that his/her expectations wouldn't be as high if he/she didn't believe in her. The personal attention given by Participant B prompted that particular student to put away their drawing book and instead pay attention to the lesson.

Participant C had a significantly large class, similar to Participant B's. Participant C was teaching a direct instructed lesson but was also able to walk about the room to check in on her students. She felt very comfortable interacting back and forth with her students during the observation. During an observation Participant C continuously responded to students with "please" and "thank you". Participant C responded to students with phrases such as, "I will do anything to support you", "we try to be better every day", and "I appreciate what you guys are trying to do." The positive reinforcement was evident throughout the observation.

**Follow-up interviews.** In order to give each participant an opportunity to explore the connection (if any) between their perceptions and actual practices, follow-up interviews were conducted. This also gave participants an opportunity to reflect upon and/or add to anything that had been shared or discussed previously. The follow-up interviews were done informally within the classrooms of each of the participants and were intended to be a time of reflection. The

interview questions were based on the responses given from the questionnaire, the STRS survey, the observations, and the reflective journals.

Participant C shared that it was easier for her to connect to female students as a person than male students. When asked whether she had that same connection to Christian students Participant C was much more cautious to say. Participant C recalled a time when one of her students wore a “He>I” t-shirt. She only felt comfortable saying “nice shirt” but was hesitant to go more in depth as to what she really meant. Participant C stated that, “I want my students to know my belief system without knowing my belief system.” She is willing to share her faith in an indirect way as long as her students can derive conclusions based on inferences, and the information is not given to them directly. Participant C shared that she would be more inclined to share her faith if it were in a Christian school setting or during a discussion within a Christian club. Out of respect to students who might not be Christian, the classroom environment is a place Participant C feels safe to be herself in other ways, but without sharing directly that she is a Christian.

Participant A, who regularly wears a cross around her neck, stated that she was very comfortable sharing her faith if it came up in conversation. Participant A stated that she would comment if she saw a student wearing a cross. Since Participant A is in a special education setting, the teacher to student ratio is much smaller compared to most classroom settings. Participant A was very aware of each of her student’s home situations and whether they regularly attended church or not. With that said, Participant A encourages her students to ask their parents if they have questions about their faith. Participant A feels comfortable having a conversation surrounding Christianity only if it is within the context of a history lesson. Participant A feels that it is very important not to impose her beliefs on her students in any particular way.



Participant B shared that the connections she has with her students weren't based on gender. The results from the STRS were not indicative to the nature of her teacher-student relationships in general. In talking about sharing her faith Participant B stated that,

I do feel a natural affinity to students who share my faith. However, being in the public school system, I cannot make a point of sharing my faith, short of wearing my cross to work. As a history teacher, I have been in a position of clarifying the scriptural foundations of events such as the Protestant Reformation. When I know a student is a Christian, I have been able to — on a one on one basis — use our shared faith to help them through a difficult time. Interestingly, I have also forged strong connections with Jewish and Muslim students. I have no issues sharing my faith if the conversation comes up. However, I am very cognizant of the fact that I cannot appear to be proselytizing, and should a student ask me, I do tell them that because of my position, I am limited in what I can share with them. During class time, students have been known to ask questions regarding faith-based issues, such as creation, and I always endeavor to answer as honestly as possible, using specific examples, and prefacing remarks with phrases like, "in the Christian belief system . . ." In my Civics class this year, the book referenced an incorrect Old Testament passage, and I opened up the Bible app on my phone (while a Jewish student referenced his Torah app) to get the correct passage. Within my community of colleagues, it is amazing how quickly I discover who my fellow Christians are.

The follow-up interviews allowed the participants the opportunity to reflect upon the results of the STRS survey and their responses from the reflective questionnaire. The follow-up interviews

also provided further clarity on the specific ways participants perceived their religious beliefs to influence their professional practice as well.

**Reflective journals.** As stated previously, each participant engaged in the transformative learning process by having the opportunity to think about and reflect upon their belief systems and how those might influence their professional practices as educators. The reflective journals gave participants the opportunity to document any possible connection between their faith and professional practice. The participants were instructed to document their thoughts, conversations they might have had with students, parents, and/or fellow colleagues, and any other interactions they might have had during their school day. Thus the journal entries were made optional and were meant as a means of having each participant reflect upon their professional practice. The entries varied by participant and were dependent upon whether they chose to write in the reflective journal on that particular day or not. The reflective journals were made optional due to possible time constraints, and to ensure the participants had the opportunity to complete the other facets of the research study. Two out of three participants chose to utilize the reflective journals. Participant B chose not to utilize the reflective journal during the research study. As a researcher, I was confident that through her thorough responses from the self-reflective questionnaire, the STRS, the in-depth interview, and through the other data I collected, that I had gathered sufficient data from this participant. Participant B's lack of participation in utilizing the reflective journal in no way interfered with the research process, and allowed me to come to significant findings nonetheless.

Participant C shared that the reflective journals helped her during stressful times at work. Participant C was able to “vent” and reflect upon her day by writing down her feelings, while also documenting the Christian songs she was listening to while on the way to work as

well. Participant C stated that, “the music, specifically the lyrics, helps me center and make the needed connections to pause, breathe, and keep going.” Words such as “surrender”, “overwhelmed”, “centered”, “focused”, and “positive” were throughout her journal entries. Participant C made the point of printing out the lyrics to a Christian song “Control” in order to better explain how the lyrics allow her to surrender her stress and worries to God. The lyrics to “Control” begin as follows, “Here I am. All my intentions. All my obsessions. I want to lay them all down in your hands...Oh, how You love me. Somehow that frees me to open my hands up and give You control (Tenth Avenue North, 2016, track 8). A journal entry of hers read, “on the way to work-lots going on with science planning/training and kids at home-music helps me center myself for work.”

Another journal entry highlighted Participant C’s desire to find answers as to how to utilize her faith in order to better deal with the trials and tribulations she was facing. One journal entry read, “need a visual reminder of how to be “calm” around the class and new student” and “feeling supported by administration and God.” Participant C’s desire to utilize her thoughts and feelings in order to become a better teacher were well documented,

Apologized to a student in 6th period for snapping at him during test. I was trying to stop him from sharing answers as he was clarifying how to input one of his answers in PowerSchool. I reiterated my main message but apologized for tone. I was trying to be more empathetic.

In trying to resolve an issue with a combatant parent, Participant C sought the advice of her principal,

Talked to Larry after school about impolite parent who I discontinued phone call with a week prior. Meeting set up for tomorrow. Conversation was enlightening as he shared a

personal anecdote. I saw similarities with message of God's presence and guidance.

Sometimes we have to change the way we think or act based on what we need not want. There was evidence throughout Participant C's journal entries that displayed an ability to not only think about her own thinking, but also a deliberate effort to allow God to guide her thoughts and actions as well.

Participant A did not utilize the reflective journals in the manner in which Participant C did. The reflective journal entries did lend some insight as to how Participant A relied on Christian music and daily prayer to help set a positive tone for the day. Participant A shared that, Praise music is played in my classroom when students are not present. It helps set a positive mood and fills the room with peace. This morning my husband and I prayed for our family, friends, jobs, and government.

Another journal entry read,

Michael W. Smith YouTube praise songs playing. This helps to provide a reminder of the true inner peace. Prayed for meetings with parents and students. Prayed for family, friends, and U.S. government.

Participant B chose not to utilize the reflective journal during the duration of the research study.

## **Data Analysis**

**Coding.** The text analysis program ATLAS.ti was utilized in order to organize, code, and analyze the data. All of the data from the reflective questionnaires, classroom observations, follow-up interviews, and reflective journals were organized in order to code the raw data. In taking into consideration the small sample size and the homogenous nature of the sample, the point of data saturation may have been limited. Even though the data analysis was done

systematically, the small sample size and the homogenous nature of the sample may have been obstacles in reaching the point of data saturation. The first cycle of coding consisted of assigning codes to the participants' various responses (Saldaña, 2013). Since precoding was done, which consisted of, circling, highlighting, and underlining participants' quotes and responses, assigning codes was much easier. Table 3 contains the initial codes that were assigned based on the data that was collected.

Table 3

*Code Words Assigned*

Code Number Assigned	Code Name
1	Interactions with Students
2	Positive Reinforcement
3	Content Taught
4	Courses Taught
5	Student Behavior
6	Managing Behavior
7	Christian Music
8	Work-Related Stress
9	Teaching Profession
10	Career Aspirations

Once the codes were assigned the data was then organized in order to gain a deeper understanding of the results. According to Saldaña (2013) coding requires an analytic lens. The coding of the data allowed for patterns in the data to become more visible. Discovering patterns

within the data makes the results a more reliable source of data because they demonstrate habits and importance in the participants' daily lives (Saldaña, 2013). Patterns help confirm what Saldaña (2013) coined as the five r's: routines, rituals, roles, and relationships. Transitioning from coding to categorizing requires synthesis, or combining the various data sources to form a new whole (Saldaña, 2013). Table 4 contains the themes that were created after the coded data was organized, analyzed, and finally synthesized.

Table 4

*Themes Created from the Coded Data*

Theme Name
Caring Relationships with Students
Curriculum Choices
Motivations in Beginning and Continuing in the Teaching Profession
Classroom Management Approaches
Coping Strategies in Dealing with Stress and Anxiety

**Thematic analysis.** Thematic analysis across the cases, or cross-case analysis, was done to find commonalities within the participants' results. The data was then organized by theme. Table 5 contains the raw word count within each theme for each participant. This data displays the themes that were discussed most frequently and the ones that were not discussed at all.

Table 5

*Code Word Count Within Each Thematic Category For Each Participant*

Participant	Caring Relationships with Students	Curriculum Choices	Motivations in Beginning and/or Continuing in the Teaching Profession	Classroom Management Approaches	Coping Strategies in Dealing with Stress and Anxiety
A	205	109	88	0	183
B	214	148	225	0	87
C	114	66	0	130	355
Totals	533	323	313	130	625

**Percentile scores from the STRS.** Pianta's (1999) three-factor Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) to measure the nature of student-teacher relationships was also administered by each participant. The Total scale measured the degree to which a teacher perceives his or her relationship with a particular student overall as positive and effective. Higher Total scale scores tend to reflect lower levels of conflict and dependency, higher levels of closeness, and a generally more positive relationship. Percentiles at or above 75 for the Closeness subscale and the Total scale reflected a significantly high level of positive qualities. Correlations between the subscales Conflict and Closeness and the Total scale seemed to be evident. The higher the conflict subscale score the lower the Total score, and the opposite was true with respect to the Closeness subscale score and the Total score. Dependency subscale score influenced the Total score the least (Pianta, 1999).

Each participant randomly chose five students to score using the STRS survey by reflecting upon the nature of their relationship with each particular student. Participants withheld student names but disclosed whether each participant was male or female. Results were put in

folders and properly secured for confidentiality. Tables 6–12 display the results for each participant with respect to Total scores, and within each Male and Female subgroup as well. The male and female subgroup percentile scores reflected a slight difference than the Total scores due to the fact that female students tend to be scored higher in general than male students (Pianta, 1999).

Tables 6 and 7 display that for Participant A Total scores were high amongst both groups, males and females. Within the male subgroup Total scores ranged from 54th percentile to 82nd with a mean of 74. The female subgroup Total scores ranged from 36th percentile to 80th percentile with a mean of 53.5.

Table 6

*STRS Results for Participant A*

Participants	Total Score	Male Student Subgroup	Female Student Subgroup
Male Student #1	82nd	85th	N.A.
Male Student #2	77th	80th	N.A.
Male Student #3	54th	57th	N.A.
Female Student #1	36th	N.A.	32nd
Female Student #2	80th	N.A.	75th

*\*Note* Scores reflect percentiles for Total Scores and Male/Female Subgroups



Table 7

*Measures of Central Tendency for STRS Results for Participant A*

Measure of Central Tendency	Total Score	Male Student Subgroup	Female Student Subgroup
Mean	65.8	74	53.5
Median	77	80	53.5
Range	46	28	43

Tables 8 and 9 display that for Participant B Total scores were higher amongst females than males. Within the male subgroup Total scores ranged from 16th percentile to 57th with a mean of 49.4, while the female subgroup Total scores ranged from 63th percentile to 77th percentile with a mean of 65.

Table 8

*STRS Results for Participant B*

Student	Total Score	Male Student Subgroup	Female Student Subgroup
Male Student #1	16th	18th	N.A.
Male Student #2	34th	36th	N.A.
Male Student #3	57th	60th	N.A.
Female Student #1	77th	N.A.	72nd
Female Student #2	63rd	N.A.	58th

*\*Note* Scores reflect percentiles for Total Scores and Male/Female Subgroups

Table 9

*Measures of Central Tendency for STRS Results for Participant B*

Measure of Central Tendency	Total Score	Male Student Subgroup	Female Student Subgroup
Mean	49.4	38	65
Median	57	36	65
Range	61	42	14

Tables 10 and 11 display that for Participant C. Total scores were higher amongst females than males. Within the male subgroup Total scores ranged from 3rd percentile to 36th with a mean of 24, while the female subgroup Total scores ranged from 66th percentile to 74th percentile with a mean of 65. Table 12 contains the mean for each of the participants.

Table 10

*STRS Results for Participant C*

Participants	Total Score	Male Student Subgroup	Female Student Subgroup
Male Student #1	28th	31st	N.A.
Male Student #2	36th	38th	N.A.
Male Student #3	3rd	3rd	N.A.
Female Student #1	74th	N.A.	70th
Female Student #2	66th	N.A.	60th

*\*Note* Scores reflect percentiles for Total Scores and Male/Female Subgroups

Table 11

*Measures of Central Tendency for STRS Results for Participant C*

Measure of Central Tendency	Total Score	Male Student Subgroup	Female Student Subgroup
Mean	41.4	24	65
Median	36	31	65
Range	71	35	10

Table 12

*Mean Scores from STRS for Participant A,B,C*

Participant	Mean Total Score	Mean Score Within Male Student Subgroup	Mean Score Within Female Student Subgroup
A	65.8	74	53.5
B	49.4	38	65
C	41.4	24	65
Combined Mean	52.2	45.3	61.2

Based on the results from the STRS one could not say with statistical certainty that the degree to which each participant perceives his or her relationship with a particular student overall as positive and effective are the same. Similarities were definitely evident with respect to the degree to which each participant perceives his or her relationship with female students. Thus no conclusions could be made statistically as to how each participants' personal religious beliefs may have influenced their relationships with their students. Further research should be done to explore and help explain the statistical differences amongst male and female students.

**Summary of the Findings**

Several themes emerged from the research findings that suggest that participants' personal religious beliefs are perceived to influence their professional practice.

**Teaching as a "sense of calling".** Participants attributed their Christian faith as playing a vital role in entering and continuing in the teaching profession. Participant B stated that, "my Christian faith played a major role in my decision to enter the teaching profession." After 15 years pursuing banking, Participant B felt compelled by the Lord to pursue teaching after interacting with children as a Sunday school teacher at her local church. Participant A also contributes her Christian faith for entering and continuing in the teaching profession by stating that, "my Christian faith has played a significant role in motivating me to teach, because I believe God has given me the gift of teaching." Participant A also continued to share that, "my Christian faith gives me the strength to continue to develop and enhance my teaching skills my faith motivates me to create excellent learning experiences for my students."

**Philosophy of teaching.** Participants' personal religious beliefs had an influence on their general philosophy of teaching as well. Participant B stated that,

Proverbs 22:6 is the verse that best sums up my philosophy of teaching. My responsibility is not just to impart academic knowledge to my students, but to guide them to becoming young men and women of character and purpose. As such, I have a responsibility to reflect the love of Christ in my words and actions. "Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31) speaks to me in terms of applying my philosophy to me classroom. I remind my students to focus on doing their best and trying their hardest, rather than focusing solely on their grades. I wish I could say that I am always successful, but I continually pray for the Lord's guidance.

While Participant C shared that,

I cannot always pinpoint the exact instances or times when my Christian faith impacts my teaching. But I do believe they both relate to each other and are a part of my life and how I define myself to the world.

**Relationships with students.** Participants and the cultivation of relationships with and amongst their students were perceived to be influenced by their personal religious beliefs.

Participant B stated that even though she teaches at a public school, her students are aware of the fact she is a Christian,

I wear a cross nearly every day, and because of this, students have asked me where I go to church. Likewise, it doesn't take long for me to learn which students share my faith, and which one's do not. I feel a particular responsibility to develop a positive relationship to those students who profess to be atheists, as their perceptions of Christians are often skewed. Although I have to frame my responses to questions in phrases such as "According to the Christian Bible . . ." I do not shy away from answering questions or challenging an erroneous perception. With Christian students, I have used our shared faith to help them resolve conflicts with other students. Just this week I was speaking to one of my students who had been suspended for an act of physical aggression in retaliation against another student. This boy was wearing a cross around his neck, and I chose to speak with him as a fellow Christian. I am very glad I chose to do so, because he had some misconceptions about when Jesus cleared the temple, which he used to justify his inappropriate behavior, and I was able to clarify Jesus' actions.

During an observation Participant B came over to a student who was off task and told her that his/her expectations wouldn't be as high if he/she didn't believe in her.

Participant A felt that God gave her the compassion to care for her students. Participant A stated that, “I treat all of my students like a family. I support them and encourage whenever possible.” During an observation Participant A comforted a student who looked visibly distraught. Participant A went over to the particular student to make sure they were doing ok visibly displaying a sense of compassion towards her student.

Even though Participant C isn’t open about her faith in front of her students, she provides a “safe place” where her students can come and not receive criticism or negative feedback. Participant C stated that,

I am more open and provide some advice but only if they are willing to receive it. In these instances, I illustrate more compassion and understanding towards students and try to offer additional support to students. These moments allow me to feel more connected to students and see a greater link between my faith and how I connect to students.

During an observation Participant C continuously responded to students with “please” and “thank you”. Participant C responded to students with phrases such as, “I will do anything to support you”, “we try to be better every day”, and “I appreciate what you guys are trying to do.” The positive reinforcement coincided with the perceptions Participant C held with regards to the nature of their teacher-student relationships. Even though the behaviors exhibited by these participants are not exclusive to Christian educators alone, their religious beliefs had a profound influence on the nature of their student-teacher relationships as a whole.

**Curricular choices.** Connections between participants’ personal religious beliefs and curricular choices were found. Participant B attributed her faith as being a motivating factor to pursue a specialization in history. Participant B shared that,

I believe my Christian faith played a strong part in my selection of a specialty as an educator. While I initially earned a multiple subject teaching credential, I quickly learned that my true passion was for history and have since earned a single subject credential in social studies. One motivating factor for this was the errors and biases I discovered in the published curriculum when it related to Christianity. As a Lutheran Christian (Missouri Synod), I have a particular interest in the Reformation, and during my first year teaching seventh grade, I was appalled at the superficial manner in which the text approached it, and began to supplement the curriculum with biographical information, primary sources and even bringing a facsimile of the Luther Bible to class (which allowed me to read John 3:16 in German). The longer I teach, I see the percentage of students in my class who attend church drop. As a history teacher, I have a unique opportunity to explain our faith within the context of the curriculum, which has been a great blessing.

While Participant A shared that,

I think it is so important as an educator not to short cut your values and present curriculum that is questionable at best. When I taught history I spent more time on Israel and the history of Christianity. I did present the other world religions, but not as much in depth.

**Classroom management.** Classroom management approaches were perceived to be influenced by participants' personal religious beliefs. Participant C shared that,

my classroom management is very similar to lessons from the Bible about respect and honoring elders. I treat my students the way that I want them to treat me. When I was younger, my mom always told me to treat your elders with respect. The respect aspect is huge to me. It's very hard for me when people cross the line of being disrespectful

because there is no reason for it. If both sides value and respect each other, then there is more room for a partnership and positive working relationship. Each week, I am reminded of biblical stories that showcase love, empathy, family, and greater lessons. These parables leave a lasting impression on me and I regularly reflect on these messages while heading to and being in my classroom.

While Participant A attributed her faith to the compassion she has for her students,

I know that Christ had so much compassion for children. There are moments I could raise my voice at a disruptive student. But, what would that accomplish, other than escalating the situation. I have learned to speak softly, and listen more intently. When my students feel like someone actually cares about them, their response is positive.” As mentioned previously, even though the behaviors exhibited by these participants are not exclusive to Christian educators alone, their religious beliefs had a profound influence on their approach to classroom management and how they dealt with situations in their classrooms as a whole.

**Persevering through difficult times.** Lastly, participants relied on their faith in various ways to persevere through difficult times. Participant C shared that her faith was based mainly from the messages received on Sunday morning and through song. Participant C routinely listened to Christian music to help release negative energy, feelings of nervousness, and the desire to have everything be done a certain way. Through Christian worship music Participant C was able to relinquish control and trust God more fully.

Participant A routinely prayed with her husband before school for wisdom and direction as a teacher. Participant A also shared that praying with fellow colleagues had been routine during previous school years. Sending group texts asking for prayer and support is something



that Participant A utilized to get through the various trials and tribulations as a teacher. Christian music is played in Participant A's classroom when students aren't present as well. Participant A shared that it helps set a positive mood and fills the room with peace.

Participant B shared how her faith has gotten her through the various trials and tribulations she has faced not only as a teacher but as a person. Participant B shared that, I pray for my students regularly, and I pray for guidance to be a better teacher and to find a way to reach students who are struggling. Often during times of trial, it will be a particular sermon, or comment during a Bible study that will provide the solace I was seeking. At those times, I know that the words may have been uttered by a mortal, but it was the Almighty who provided that mortal with the words I needed to hear. When I was confirmed, the blessing Pastor Fisher said over me was Proverbs 3:5- "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding." That verse has guided my through so much in my life and continues to serve as a beacon.

#### **Chapter 4 Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to describe this research case study sample population, methodology, findings, and present the results of the study. This qualitative research case study sought to identify the extent to which Christian middle school teachers perceive their personal religious beliefs to influence their professional practice. The research question is as follows:

1. How do public middle school teachers perceive their personal religious beliefs to influence their professional lives as educators?

The data analysis found that participants' personal religious beliefs did influence their professional practice. Data showed that found that participants' religious beliefs do indeed influence their professional practice through their relationships with their students, through

curricular choices, and by how they manage student behavior and classroom management.

Participants' general philosophy of teaching, why they entered the teaching profession in the first place, along with being able to persevere through difficult times, was also influenced by their personal religious beliefs.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion**

### **Introduction**

This study sought to explore how religious beliefs are perceived to influence a teachers' general philosophy of teaching, their motivations for entering or continuing in the profession, and their cultivation of relationships with and among students, among other things. By imploring an in-depth qualitative research study, these findings sought to add to the meaningful conversations concerning teachers' religious beliefs that have already begun.

The focus of this chapter was to synthesize the data from the research conducted, and to provide a comprehensive summary of the findings. This was done through an in-depth discussion of the following elements: the summary of the results, discussion of the results, discussion of the results in relation to the literature, limitations, implications of the results for practice, recommendations for further research, and final conclusions.

### **Summary of the Results**

As stated in previous chapters, Mezirow (1991) and his transformative learning theory provided the context in which to explore participants' worldviews, beliefs, and presuppositions. According to Freeman and Johnson (1998) teachers enter the classroom with prior experiences and hold certain personal values and beliefs that inform their knowledge about teaching and shape what they do in the classroom. The presuppositions teachers hold help to define their reality and what they believe is true (Mezirow, 1991). This research study provided the platform for which to engage in the transformative learning process by having each of the participants think about how one thinks, reflect upon the art of reflection, and by being conscious of being conscious.

The reflective questionnaire, along with the other facets of the research study, allowed participants to become much more conscious of how their religious beliefs might influence their actions and thought processes while at work and while outside the work environment as well. During the duration of the study, participants were actively reflecting upon their professional practices, and how their religious beliefs may have interacted with those many facets of being an educator. The reflective journals in particular gave participants the opportunity to document any possible connection between their faith and professional practice. In writing in the reflective journals, two out of the three participants deliberately reflected upon their day, specifically focusing on the interaction of their faith and professional practice. Participants shared that they were able to find much more clarity in how their religious beliefs influenced their professional practice by writing down their thoughts and experiences. The reflective journals provided tangible examples of the participant's religious beliefs influencing how they persevere through difficult times, and how to best interact and respond to their students in a positive manner.

Listening to worship music to deescalate stress and anxiety, and praying for guidance, strength, and wisdom were both documented within the reflective journals as examples of how Participants A and C dealt with the various difficulties they often faced. According to Participant C, the reflective journals by themselves prompted her to document her thoughts and feelings as they pertained to her professional experiences interacting with her Christian faith. For Participant C the reflective journal helped to initiate reflective thought and allowed her to recall the instances when her faith dictated how she dealt with a particular situation. The reflective journal also helped her persevere through difficult obstacles, and helped to give her wisdom in order to better serve her students in a positive manner.

Relationships between teachers and students play a prominent role in the development of student's academic, social, and emotional competencies throughout their entire educational career (Pianta, 1999). Thus, the conceptual model of Pianta's (1999) three-factor Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS), which measures teacher perception with respect to their relationship with their students, helped frame this study as well. The STRS provided the opportunity for triangulation, or using multiple data sources, which helped to facilitate a deeper understanding of the research question at hand (Patton, 2002). Even though the quantitative data from the STRS could not say with statistical certainty that the degree to which each participant perceives his or her relationship with a particular student overall as positive and effective are the same, the STRS as a research tool added to the complexity of the conversation. By the very fact that participants scored particular students in terms of their relationship with them, the STRS helped to initiate reflective thought in terms of how their religious beliefs may have played a role in the results. Participants were more cognizant of the fact that their religious beliefs may have influenced their relationships with their students because of the STRS survey. During follow-up interviews participants not only discussed their relationship with certain students, but also expressed that they had become much more aware of their interactions with them during this study. Participants were much more cognizant of the manner in which they responded to students, sharing that their choice of words and tone of voice often times determined the nature of their interaction. Each of the participants were also motivated to improve the nature of their student-teacher relationships crediting their faith in God and their ability to actively reflect upon how they handle situations, as providing the necessary wisdom in order to do so.

This study which was also framed by Fullan's (1993) framework of teacher as agent of change, is guided by the notion that teachers should affect positive, constructive change in their

classrooms. Fullan believed that teaching is at its core a moral profession, and, therefore, teachers cannot divorce their classroom influence from their morality; they are one in the same. The several themes that emerged from the research findings that suggested that participant's personal religious beliefs were perceived to influence their professional practice alluded to the notion of teaching as a "moral" profession. Participants attributed their Christian faith as playing a vital role in entering and continuing in the teaching profession which will be discussed in further detail in the next section. Several participants shared that they had a "sense of calling" to become a teacher in the first place. Inquiry, which is also one of Fullan's (1993) four core capacities for building greater change capacity, internalizes teacher norms and habits of behavior. The participants, through the many facets of the research study, were able to self-reflect upon the various norms and habits of behavior they have acquired or have been accustomed to do over the years. This self-reflection was evident especially in reading how participants dealt with work-related stress and anxiety in the reflective journals. As mentioned earlier, listening to worship music to alleviate stress and praying for guidance and direction were common themes within the reflective journals. According to Fullan (1993), inquiry, or reflecting upon their professional practice in a meaningful way, helps build a greater capacity for change. Teachers as change agents then are life-long learners in constant reflection (Fullan, 1993) which is what was promoted and encouraged throughout the study. By reflecting upon their professional practice through the various parts of the study, participants were able to begin to explore more positive ways to interact with their students, and more creative ways in which to teach as well. Each of the participants was genuinely excited to utilize the insights they gathered from this study to better serve their students.

## **Discussion of the Results**

Several important findings contributed to the understanding of how the participants' personal religious beliefs influenced their professional lives as educators. The reflective questionnaire, STRS survey, classroom observation, reflective journal, along with the follow-up interview, each uniquely contributed to the findings of this study. Collectively, the several facets of the study helped answer the research question that was explored during this study which was how public middle school teachers perceive their personal religious beliefs to influence their professional lives as educators.

The reflective questionnaire provided the foundation in which to build each participants' set of beliefs. Their responses provided a baseline measure in which to refer back to. The STRS survey allowed each participant to reflect upon the nature of their relationships with their students. Even though participants only rated five of their many students, the STRS survey helped participants reflect upon their relationships with the students as a whole. The classroom observation helped to provide tangible examples of how the participants may have interacted with their students and how their personal religious beliefs may have influenced their teaching practices. The follow-up interviews not only allowed for a mutual dialogue to occur amongst researcher and participant, but they also provided a space in which to clarify what had been stated previously. To ensure that the findings of the study were accurate and a clear representation of each of the participants' responses and actions, the follow-up interviews were vitally necessary.

The following themes that emerged from the research findings that suggest that participants' personal religious beliefs are perceived to influence, why they entered and continue in the teaching profession, their philosophy of teaching, their relationships with students, their

curricular choices, their classroom management style, and how they persevere through difficult times, were derived from the data collected from each of the facets of the study.

**Teaching as a “sense of calling”.** As stated in Chapter 4, participants attributed their Christian faith as playing a vital role in entering and continuing in the teaching profession. Participants A and B both shared that their Christian faith specifically led them to become a teacher in the first place. Participant B shared that after 15 years pursuing banking, she felt compelled by the Lord to pursue teaching after interacting with children as a Sunday school teacher at her local church. Participant A also contributed her Christian faith for entering and continuing in the teaching profession by stating that, “my Christian faith has played a significant role in motivating me to teach, because I believe God has given me the gift of teaching.” Personal vision-building, which is one of Fullan’s (1993) four core capacities for building greater change capacity, examines why teachers came into teaching in the first place. By examining and reexamining why they entered the profession in the first place, participants were able to build a greater capacity to interact and teach purposefully, which will ultimately enact meaningful change amongst the lives of those around them.

This study helped to strengthen this moral purpose each of the participants already possessed, by allowing them to reflect back at the beginning of their journey, deliberately reminiscing about how and why God called them into the teaching profession in the first place. In talking with Participant B during follow-up interviews, I could get the sense that in some ways she missed the corporate world she was once a part of. Participant B shared that she has often considered leaving the teaching profession, contributing stress and politics within the school district as primary reasons. Through the different facets of the study, Participant B was able to recall not only why she entered the teaching profession, but why she continues to stay as well.



Similarly, Participant A was also able to reminisce upon working as a Sunday school teacher, which would eventually prompt her to become a teacher. The opportunity to work with disadvantaged kids gave Participant A the heart to become a teacher in the first place. In working as a special education teacher, Participant A shared about the various battles and the struggles she faced daily. Participant A was very clear in sharing that her faith in God has allowed her to continue in the profession by giving her the strength and wisdom to not only overcome those daily obstacles, but has also given her the heart to continue to view the teaching profession as a “calling” as she did before.

**Philosophy of teaching.** Participants’ personal religious beliefs had an influence on their general philosophy of teaching as well. Participant B shared that teaching was much more than sharing academic expertise, but instead was an opportunity to help her students build character and find purpose and meaning in the things that they did. Participant B shared that, “my responsibility is not just to impart academic knowledge to my students, but to guide them to becoming young men and women of character and purpose.” This coincides with Fullan’s notion that Participant B’s classroom influence cannot be divorced from her moral purpose; they are one in the same. Participants A and B both saw teaching as a “sense of calling” which in turn influenced their philosophy of teaching. This profoundly influenced not only how they teach, what they teach, but how they interact with those around them, and how they persevere through difficult times as well. Purposeful meaningful action seemed to surround the daily lives of each of the participants. Thus teaching in the eyes of these participants was more about what God was going to do through them, than what lessons their students were supposed to learn for that day.

**Relationship with students.** Participants and the cultivation of relationships with their students were influenced by their personal religious beliefs. Even though the behaviors and

interactions exhibited by the participants are not exclusive to Christian educators alone, they were strongly influenced by their Christian beliefs as a whole nonetheless. Participant B shared that with Christian students, she has used their shared faith to help them resolve conflicts with other students. She also felt a particular responsibility to develop a positive relationship to those students who do not believe in God at all, since she felt that their perceptions of Christians were often misguided. This coincided with Fullan's notion of teacher as agent of change in the way in which Participant B deliberately sought to enact positive change within the lives of her students. Participant B acted purposefully in her interactions with her students which were clearly driven by her religious beliefs and this notion of teaching as a "sense of calling".

Participant A felt that God gave her the compassion to care for her students. Participant A stated that she treats all of her students like a family and supports them and encourages whenever possible. These beliefs coincided with the participant's philosophy of education and this notion of teaching as a "sense of calling" as well. Participant C also acted purposeful in the way in which she provided a "safe" place for her students to eat lunch. The interactions with her students in particular though, were not as deliberate and purposeful when compared to Participants A and B. Nonetheless, Participant C felt prompted by her religious beliefs to provide a place where all students could feel valued and where compassion and care were on display as well. For each participant, their religious beliefs drove the way in which they interacted with their students. Even though their actions were not exclusive to Christianity alone, the motives that drove them to act in the manner in which they did were influenced by their religious beliefs as a whole.

**Curricular choices.** Connections between participants' personal religious beliefs and curricular choices were found. Participant B attributed her faith as being a motivating factor to

pursue a specialization in history. Participant B shared that a motivating factor for becoming a history teacher was to help eradicate the errors and biases she discovered in the published curriculum when it related to Christianity. As a history teacher, she believes that she has a unique opportunity to explain her faith within the context of the curriculum she teaches. Other subjects such as math or science would not afford Participant B the same opportunities. This aligned with Participant B's philosophy of education when she stated, "my responsibility is not just to impart academic knowledge to my students, but to guide them to becoming young men and women of character and purpose." Participant B shared that her fondness for teaching history is having the opportunity to impart moral lessons to her students that also align with her religious beliefs. In working in a public school setting, Participant B is fully aware of the boundaries she must respect. Teaching history affords Participant B the opportunity to teach life lessons within the context of the adopted curriculum.

Participant A's religious beliefs also influenced her curricular choices. Participant A shared that, "I think it is so important as an educator not to short cut your values and present curriculum that is questionable at best. When I taught history I spent more time on Israel and the history of Christianity. I did present the other world religions, but not as much in depth." Even though Participant A made it clear that she teaches from the district adopted curriculum, the subject of history afforded her the opportunity to present Christianity in much more depth. The participant's responsibility was to teach the state-mandated standards using the district adopted curriculum, but they were afforded the flexibility to teach in the manner in which they chose. Participant B chose to focus on the life lessons that could be extracted from the lessons she taught, while Participant A chose to teach the unit on Christianity in much more depth. Clearly, Participants A and B made curricular choices that were influenced by their religious beliefs.

**Classroom management.** Classroom management approaches were perceived to be influenced by participants' personal religious beliefs. As noted previously, the classroom management approaches displayed by each of the participants are not exclusive to Christian educators, but instead were clearly influenced by the participants' Christian beliefs as a whole. Participant C shared that her classroom management style was similar to lessons taken from the Bible about respect and honoring your elders. She shared that she treats her students the way that she want them to treat her. Participant C valued the virtue of respect highly and taught her students to treat each other in similar ways to what is seen in the Bible. Participant C paid close attention to the way in which she interacted with her students, especially when it came to classroom management. Interactions with her students were noted several times in her reflective journal. The reflective nature of the study allowed Participant C the opportunity to self-evaluate her classroom management style. Her tone of voice, whether or not positive reinforcement was given to a particular student, and how situations were handled in general, were all mentioned in Participant C's journal. The reflective journal prompted Participant C to not only reflect upon her classroom management style, but also motivated her to make more positive and productive choices as well.

While Participant A shared that her Christian faith gives her compassion for her students. Instead of raising her voice when dealing with a disruptive student which might escalate a situation, she has learned to speak softly, and listen more intently. When her students feel like someone actually cares about them, she feels that she can elicit a response that is positive. Participant A's classroom management style reflected that care and compassion in the way in which she paid close attention to what was going on in her student's lives. By being aware of the various trials and tribulations her students have been through, Participant A was able to be much

more understanding when difficulties arose. Participant A shared that she always tries to be cognizant of a student's situation at home in how that may have influenced the negative behaviors her students are exhibiting.

Even though the classroom management styles of Participants A and C are not exclusive to Christian teachers, the manner in which they handled interactions within their classrooms were heavily based and influenced by their religious beliefs. In a prior study participant's religious beliefs, particularly their perspective on lessons from the bible and the way in which Jesus modeled how to show compassion to others, also impacted how they managed student behavior similarly to Participants A and C (White, 2010). Participants from a prior study were also found to possess the ability to promote equitable learning opportunities for all students similarly to Participant A who was cognizant of the various obstacles each of her students faced (White, 2010). Teachers from all faith backgrounds, or none at all, could very well display the same behaviors but for different reasons. Participants A and C and the participants from prior studies specifically connected their religious beliefs to how they managed classroom management. Other teachers may contribute their classroom management style to how they were raised or other experiences that shaped who they are as a teacher. But the behaviors of Participant A and C and the other participants from prior studies are unique in the fact that they specifically connected their religious beliefs to the nature of their interactions with their students.

**Persevering through difficult times.** Lastly, participants relied on their faith in various ways to persevere through difficult times. Participants shared that they would utilize prayer for guidance and direction as a teacher, and to help them find ways to reach struggling students. Participant C documented in her reflective journal on many occasions that she prayed for her students and for wisdom and guidance to best deal with difficult situations. For Participant C,

prayer was a necessity in being able to cope with the trials and tribulations she faced not only in the workplace but in dealing with her home life as well. Participant A also routinely prays for wisdom and direction as a teacher. Participant A shared that she prays with her husband before school every day, and that praying with fellow colleagues had been routine during previous school years as well. Sending group texts asking for prayer and support is something that Participant A utilizes to get through the various trials and tribulations as a teacher. While Participant B shared that she prays for her students regularly, and prays for guidance to be a better teacher and to help her find ways to reach students who are struggling.

Christian worship music was seen amongst the participants as a means of releasing negative energy and feelings of nervousness, which also helped them to relinquish control. Participant A not only listed the Christian worship song titles in her reflective journal, but also included some of the lyrics to those songs as well. Participant C was able to “vent” and reflect upon her day by writing down her feelings, while also documenting the Christian songs she was listening to while on the way to work as well. Participant C stated that, “the music, specifically the lyrics, helps me center and make the needed connections to pause, breathe, and keep going.” Words such as “surrender”, “overwhelmed”, “centered”, “focused”, and “positive” were throughout her journal entries. Participant C made the point of printing out the lyrics to a Christian song “Control” in order to better explain how the lyrics allow her to surrender her stress and worries to God. The lyrics to “Control” begin as follows, “Here I am. All my intentions. All my obsessions. I want to lay them all down in your hands...Oh, how You love me. Somehow that frees me to open my hands up and give You control” (Tenth Avenue North, 2016, track 8). A journal entry of hers read, “on the way to work-lots going on with science planning/training and kids at home-music helps me center myself for work.”

Participant A also relied on Christian music and daily prayer to help set a positive tone for the day. Participant A shared that,

Praise music is played in my classroom when students are not present. It helps set a positive mood and fills the room with peace. This morning my husband and I prayed for our family, friends, jobs, and government.

Another journal entry read,

Michael W. Smith YouTube praise songs playing. This helps to provide a reminder of the true inner peace. Prayed for meetings with parents and students. Prayed for family, friends, and U.S. government.

### **Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature**

The themes that emerged from the research findings confirm previous studies that suggest that religious beliefs are perceived to influence the professional practice of public school teachers (Baurain, 2012; Hartwick, 2015; Kang, 2015; White, 2010, 2014). First, participants in each of the previous studies were also found to view teaching as a sense of “calling” (Baurain, 2012; Hartwick, 2015; Kang, 2015; White, 2010). In a study of public school teachers in Wisconsin, Hartwick (2015) explored teachers’ beliefs in God and how it affects their teaching practice. Almost 60% of teachers surveyed felt that they had a sense of calling to become a teacher in the first place (Hartwick, 2015). Many of the participants were found to directly connect their belief in God and His will to their professional lives similarly to this study . The participants in a previous study also believed that they had been called to the profession of caring for disadvantaged students as was noted in this study as well (Kang, 2015).

Participants A and B both shared that their Christian faith specifically led them to become a teacher in the first place as previously noted. Participant B shared that she felt compelled by the

Lord to pursue teaching after interacting with children as a Sunday school teacher at her local church. Participant A also contributed her Christian faith for entering and continuing in the teaching profession by sharing that her Christian faith played a significant role in motivating her to teach, believing God had given her the gift of teaching. As mentioned earlier, Participants A and B both saw teaching as a “sense of calling” which in turn influenced their philosophy of teaching. This profoundly influenced not only how they teach, what they teach, but how they interact with those around them, and how they persevere through difficult times as well.

Second, each of the previous studies also found that the participants’ religious beliefs influenced their relationship with their students (Baurain, 2012; Hartwick, 2015; Kang, 2015; White, 2010). Hartwick (2015) found that there was a positive correlation between a participant’s sense of calling and their perceived relationships with their students. Hartwick (2015) noted that participants treated students as unique individuals, gave students personal attention, cared about their well-being, and emotionally extended themselves to students. Baurain (2012) reported that participants paid close attention to student goals, needs, backgrounds, and motivations. Participants were said to be willing to whatever they could for their students and saw them as intrinsically valuable human beings that should be respected (Baurain, 2012). Finally, Kang (2015) pointed out the respondents in the study intentionally attempted to apply religious moral values in their treatment of their students. Participants were found to be willing to do the small things for their students, which included regularly praying for them (Kang, 2015).

These findings coincided with the research findings from this particular study in the way in which participants prayed for their students, through their care and compassion, and by their willingness to do whatever was needed to support their students academically and emotionally. Participant B for example acted purposefully in her interactions with her students which were



clearly driven by her religious beliefs and this notion of teaching as a “sense of calling”. Participant C also acted purposeful in the way in which she provided a “safe” place for her students to eat lunch. For each participant, their religious beliefs drove the way in which they interacted with their students similarly to what was found in previous studies.

Lastly, White (2010, 2014) also found that the participants’ religious beliefs impacted how participants managed student behavior and how they viewed classroom management. Participants’ religious beliefs, particularly their perspective on human responsibility, impacted how they managed student behavior (White, 2010). Participant C in this particular study shared that lessons from the bible such as love and empathy, guided the way in which she viewed classroom management as well. Participant C valued the virtue of respect highly and taught her students to treat each other in similar ways to what is seen in the Bible. While Participant A’s classroom management style reflected that care and compassion in the way in which she paid close attention to what was going on in her student’s lives. By being aware of the various trials and tribulations her students have been through, Participant A was able to be much more understanding when difficulties arose.

### **Limitations**

Even though the data analysis was done systematically, the small sample size and the homogenous nature of the sample may have been obstacles in reaching the point of data saturation. The sample size only included female educators from one middle school which may challenge claims of generalizability. Caution should be taken to generalize the results to include all Christian educators. The research process which allowed participants the opportunity to reflect upon their belief systems may be transferable nevertheless, but at the reader’s discretion.

Since both the self-reflection survey and the STRS employed self-reporting techniques, the responses collected only gave each participant's perception, which may or may not be an accurate description of reality. Social desirability bias, in which a teacher might seek to inflate their scores, could pose limitations (Hartwick, 2015). For example, participants may view their relationships with their students as being that of a positive one as reflected in the results of the STRS, when in actuality that might not have been the case.

In order to ensure validity of results, a thorough transcript review was done between researcher and each of the participants. This allowed participants the opportunity to elaborate on what they viewed as the connections between their religious beliefs and their professional practice, were done. Also, participants had the opportunity to explore the connection (if any) between their perceptions and actual practices through the instructional episodes and follow-up interviews that occurred.

Since the major themes found in this research study are not unique to Christianity, findings are viewed as being non-exclusive (Baurain, 2015). Thus, educators of other faith backgrounds (or none) might seek to practice these themes and values in their professional lives (Baurain, 2015). Even though the data collected from this study cannot be generalized to include all educators, it does bring to light how religious beliefs might influence their professional lives.

### **Implication of the Results for Practice, Policy, and Theory**

As stated earlier, Mezirow (1991) and his transformative learning theory provided the context in which to explore participants' worldviews, beliefs, and presuppositions. This research study provided the platform for which to engage in the transformative learning process by having each of the participants think about how one thinks, reflect upon the art of reflection, and by being conscious of being conscious. The reflective questionnaire, along with the other facets of

the research study, allowed participants to become much more conscious of how their religious beliefs might influence their actions and thought processes while at work and while outside the work environment as well. The reflective journal could be used in a similar way in other studies acting as a means of promoting reflective thought within each of the participants.

This qualitative study also provided the foundation in which to begin an open dialogue in how religious beliefs may influence the professional lives of educators despite the separation of church and state. As stated earlier, misconceptions surrounding the separation of church and state have led to many educators (and researchers alike) avoiding the religion in schools conversation altogether (Passe & Willox, 2009; White, 2009). Despite the separation of church and state though, religion remains an ambiguous topic in U.S. public schools (Berry, 2010; Burke & Segall, 2011, Glanzer, 1999; Hill, 2008). Even though legal boundaries have been set, many unanswered questions remain on how religion plays a role in influencing the professional practice of educators (Burke & Segall, 2011). According to Kang (2015), an examination of teachers' religious beliefs and how those are perceived to influence their professional lives is warranted. This qualitative study helped to add to the meaningful conversations that have already begun surrounding a teacher's religious beliefs and how those might influence their professional practice.

This qualitative case study also provided a resource for teacher education programs who seek to prepare prospective teachers to adequately address all of the challenges they will face. Additionally, this study will allow teacher education programs to intentionally and systematically talk about how teacher beliefs, particularly religious beliefs, may influence one's professional practice (Nelson, 2010). By having meaningful conversations about how religious identity fits

into the broader picture of society and community, prospective teachers can become more aware of how their religious identity may influence their professional practice.

Based on the research findings, establishing a professional development model that will help support learning opportunities that take into account teachers' and students' religious beliefs and how these impact academic and social contexts of learning in schools is needed (White, 2010). Further reflection in teacher education programs about the origin of those worldviews and religious beliefs and their impact in the classroom are also necessary (Burke & Segall, 2011). Within these learning communities teachers could explore, their philosophies of education, why they entered the teaching profession in the first place, their relationships with students and fellow colleagues, curricular choices, and classroom management styles in light of their religious beliefs, among other topics. Hartwick (2015) also furthered this sentiment by suggesting that teachers acknowledge the impact religion has on their beliefs and actions, which could be done through deliberate reflection in teacher education programs and professional development sessions. School districts should provide teachers with the platform for which to engage in the transformative learning process by having each of the them think about how one thinks, and reflect upon how their beliefs, which should include religious beliefs specifically, impact their professional practice.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Since the research findings from this particular study, along with previous studies, suggest that personal religious beliefs are perceived to influence the professional practice of educators, further research in this area is warranted. Parallel studies should include multiple school settings such as, public and/or private, elementary through high school. A diverse sample population should be chosen including both male and female participants, beginning and veteran

teachers, along with participants with multiple faith backgrounds, not just Christians. Future studies should engage participants in the transformative learning process by allowing them to intentionally reflect upon their belief systems and how those might influence their professional practice. Reflective journals, in-depth interviews, and classroom observations should also be utilized to ensure a deeper understanding of how personal religious beliefs are perceived to influence the thoughts and actions of the participants.

## **Conclusion**

This research study sought to answer the question of how teachers' religious beliefs were perceived to influence their professional practice. This research study provided the platform for which to engage in the transformative learning process by having each of the participants think about how one thinks, reflect upon the art of reflection, and by being conscious of being conscious. Several important findings contributed to the understanding of how the participants' personal religious beliefs influenced their professional lives as educators. The themes that emerged from the research findings suggest that participants' personal religious beliefs are perceived to influence, why they entered and continue in the teaching profession, their philosophy of teaching, their relationships with students, their curricular choices, their classroom management style, and how they persevere through difficult times. Also, the themes that emerged from the research findings confirm previous studies that suggest that religious beliefs are perceived to influence the professional practice of public school teachers (Baurain, 2012; Hartwick, 2015; Kang, 2015; White, 2010, 2014).

This in-depth qualitative study will provide a resource for teacher education programs who seek to prepare prospective teachers to adequately address all of the challenges they will face. Additionally, this study will allow teacher education programs to intentionally and

systematically talk about how teacher beliefs, particularly religious beliefs, may influence one's professional practice (Nelson, 2010). By having meaningful conversations about how religious identity fits into the broader picture of society and community, prospective teachers can become more aware of how their religious identity may influence their professional practice.

## References

- Allgood, I. (2016). Faith and freedom of religion in U.S. public schools: Issues and challenges facing teachers, *Religious Education*, *111*(3), 270–287.
- American Psychological Association. (2017). Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct. *American Psychologist*, *57*(12), 1060–1073.
- Anderson, D., Mathys, H., & Cook, T. (2015). Religious beliefs, knowledge, and teaching actions: Elementary teacher candidates and world religions. *Religion & Education*, *42*(3), 268–288.
- Baurain, B. (2012). Beliefs into practice: A religious inquiry into teacher knowledge. *Journal of Language, Identity and Education*, *11*(5), 312–332.
- Baxter, P., & Jack, S. (2008). Qualitative case study methodology: Study design and implementation for novice researchers. *The Qualitative Report*, *13*(4), 544–559.
- Beekley, C. (2013) Navigating religious expression in public school: A case study. *Religion & Education*, *40*(3), 315–327.
- Berry, D. R. (2010). A not so merry Christmas: Dilemma for elementary school leaders. *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, *47*(1), 10–13.
- Bindewald, B., Rosenblith, S., & Green, R. (2013). Testing the limits of free exercise and establishment: Collective religious identity in South Carolina. *Religion & Education*, *40*(3), 299–314.
- Borg, S. (2003). Teacher cognition in language teaching: A review of research on what language teachers think, know, believe, and do. *Language Teaching*, *36*, 81–109.
- Burke, K. J., & Segall, A. (2011). Christianity and its legacy in education. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, *43*(5), 631–658.

- Chan, Y., & Wong, N. (2014). Worldviews, religions, and beliefs about teaching and learning: Perception of mathematics teachers with different religious backgrounds. *Educational Studies in Mathematics*, 87(3), 251–277.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Donaldson, G. A. (2007). What do teachers bring to leadership? *Educational Leadership*, 61(1), 26–29
- Eckert, J. (2014). Christian liberal arts teacher preparation for 21st century students. *Religion & Education*, 41(2), 207–219.
- Freeman, D. (2002). The hidden side of the work: Teacher knowledge and learning to teach. A perspective from north American educational research on teacher education in English language teaching. *Language Teaching*, 35, 1–13.
- Freeman, D., & Johnson, K. E. (1998). Reconceptualizing the knowledge-base of language teacher education. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32, 397–417.
- Fullan, M. (1993). Why teachers must become change agents. *Educational Leadership*, 50(6), 1–14.
- Fullan, M. (2007). *Leading in a culture of change*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Gill, M. G., & Hoffman, B. (2009). Shared planning time: A novel context for studying teachers' discourse and beliefs about learning and instruction, *Teachers College Record*, 111(5), 1242–1273.
- Glanzer, P. (1999). Teaching Christian ethics in Russian public schools: The testing of Russia's church-state boundaries. *Journal of Church and State*, 41(2), 285–305.



- Hansen, O. (2018). Promoting autonomy in public education: A narrow civic approach. *Religion & Education, 45*(2), 173–189.
- Hartwick, J. (2015). Public school teachers' beliefs in and conceptions of God: What teachers believe, and why it matters. *Religion & Education, 42*(2), 122–146.
- Hill, M. (2008). Religion and public schools: What every new teacher should know. *Social Studies Review, 47*(2), 14–20.
- Johnson, K. (2016). Enduring positions: Religious identity in discussions about critical mathematics education, *Religion & Education, 43*(2), 230–245.
- Johnson, S. M., & Donaldson, M. L. (2007). Overcoming obstacles to leadership. *Educational Leadership, 65*(1), 8–13.
- Kang, S. (2015). Exploratory study of professional and personal beliefs of early childhood teachers in public schools: Their perceptions of religiousness and teaching efficacy. *Religion & Education, 42*(3), 308–320.
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education* (2nd ed.) San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Nelson, J. (2010). Teacher dispositions and religious identity in the public school: Two case studies. *The Journal of Negro Education, 79*(3), 335–353.
- Pajak, E., & Blase, J. J. (1989). The impact of teachers' personal lives on professional role enactment: A qualitative analysis. *American Educational Research Journal, 26*(2), 283–310.

- Palak, D., & Walls, R.T. (2009). Teachers' beliefs and technology practices: A mixed-methods approach. *Journal of Research on Technology in Education* 41(4), 417–441.
- Passe, J., & Willox, L. (2009). Teaching religion in America's public schools: A necessary disruption. *The Social Studies*, 100(3), 102–106.
- Patton, MQ. (2002). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (4th Edition). Thousand oaks, CA: Sage.
- Philipp, R.A. (2007). Mathematics teachers' beliefs and affect. In F.K. Lester Jr. (Ed.), *Second handbook on research on mathematics teaching and learning: A project of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics* (pp. 257–315). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Pianta, R. C. (1999). *Enhancing relationships between children and teachers*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.
- Saldaña, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Talbot, J., & Campbell, T. (2014). Examining a teacher's negotiation through change: Understanding the influence of beliefs on behavior, *Teacher Development*, 18(3), 418–434.
- Tenth Avenue North (2016). On *Followers* [CD]. Reunion Records
- U. S. Constitution, Amendment 1
- White, K. (2009). Connecting religion and teacher identity: The unexplored relationship between teachers and religion in public schools. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 25, 857–866.
- White, K. (2010). Asking sacred questions: Understanding religion's impact on teacher belief and action. *Religion & Education*, 37(1), 40–59.

White, K. (2014). Community, forgiveness, and the golden rule: The impact of teachers' religious identities on classroom management structures. *Religion & Education*, 41(1), 63–79.

Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: Design and method* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

## **Appendix A: Informed Consent Form**

**Research Study Title:** Perceptions of Public Middle School Teachers about the Influence Their Personal Religious Beliefs Have On Their Professional Lives as Educators

**Principal Investigator:** Matthew Brooks

**Research Institution:** Concordia University-Portland

**Faculty Advisor:** Mark Jimenez

### **Purpose and what you will be doing:**

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of Christian educators about how their religious beliefs may influence their professional practices. Participants who identify as being Christian are invited to participate in some of all of the study. Each of the participants will be given a self-reflective questionnaire which will ask eight open-ended questions. The questionnaire will focus on teaching philosophies, pedagogical commitments, curricular choices, and cultivation of student relationships. Pianta's (1999) three-factor Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) to measure the nature of student-teacher relationships will also be used. Classroom observations and follow-up interviews will also be conducted which will last a duration of four weeks.

### **Risks:**

There are no risks to participating in this study other than providing your information. However, we will protect your information. I will record interviews. The recording will be transcribed by me, the principal investigator, and the recording will be deleted when the transcription is completed. Any data you provide will be coded so people who are not the investigator cannot link your information to you. Any name or identifying information you give will be kept securely via electronic encryption on my password protected computer locked inside the cabinet in my office. The recording will be deleted as soon as possible; all other study documents will be kept secure for three years and then be destroyed.

### **Benefits:**

This study intends to engage each participant in the transformative learning process by allowing them to think about and reflect upon their belief systems. By examining their beliefs systems, the participants will not only participate in the transformative learning process, but will also examine how those beliefs affect their professional lives in the classroom as well. Results from a self-reflective questionnaire, the STRS, and a portfolio of instructional episodes will allow the researcher and participant to begin to recognize specific ways teacher beliefs are manifested in the classroom.

### **Confidentiality:**

This information will not be distributed to any other agency and will be kept private and confidential. The only exception to this is if you tell us abuse or neglect that makes us seriously concerned for your immediate health and safety.

**Right to Withdraw:**

Your participation is greatly appreciated, but we acknowledge that the questions we are asking are personal in nature. You are free at any point to choose not to engage with or stop the study. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer. This study is not required and there is no penalty for not participating. If at any time you experience a negative emotion from answering the questions, we will stop asking you questions.

**Contact Information:**

You will receive a copy of this consent form. If you have questions you can talk to or write the principal investigator, Matthew Brooks at email [redacted]. If you want to talk with a participant advocate other than the investigator, you can write or call the director of our institutional review board, Dr. OraLee Branch (email [obranche@cu-portland.edu](mailto:obranche@cu-portland.edu) or call 503-493-6390).

**Your Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. I asked questions if I had them, and my questions were answered. I volunteer my consent for this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Name      Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature      Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator Name      Date

Investigator Signature Date

Investigator: Matthew Brooks email: [redacted]  
c/o: Professor Dr. Mark Jimenez  
Concordia University – Portland  
2811 NE Holman Street  
Portland, Oregon 97221

## Appendix B: IRB Approval Letter

DATE: October 2, 2018  
TO: Matthew Brooks  
FROM: Concordia University–Portland IRB (CU IRB)  
PROJECT TITLE: [1235299-2] Perceptions of Public Middle School Teachers about the Influence Their Personal Religious Beliefs Have on Their Professional Lives as Educators  
REFERENCE #: EDD-20180424-Jimenez-Brooks  
SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification  
  
ACTION: APPROVED  
APPROVAL DATE: Oct. 2, 2018  
EXPIRATION DATE: June 14, 2019  
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials for this project. The Concordia University - Portland IRB (CU IRB) has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission. Attached is a stamped copy of the approved consent form. You must use this stamped consent form.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulation.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others (UPIRSOs) and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

This project has been determined to be a Minimal Risk project. Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate

forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of June 14, 2019.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Amon Johnson at [redacted]. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Concordia University–Portland IRB (CU IRB)'s records.

## Appendix C: Reflective Questionnaire

*You are not required or expected to answer all questions—please choose to answer those that seem most stimulating or engaging to you. The researcher is expecting perhaps 1 to 2 written paragraphs per question answered, but the length of answers is open, with no minimum or maximum. It is predicted that completing this questionnaire might require about 30 minutes, but again, the time is open, with no minimum or maximum. Feel free to answer the questions in any ways that are meaningful to you. These might include explanations, examples, arguments, statistics, and metaphors, as well as references to tradition, family background, institutional environment, sociocultural context, the Bible, and personal and professional relationships.*

- (1) In what ways does your Christian faith influence (if at all) your general philosophy of teaching? Has this changed during your career so far? How and why?
- (2) Has your Christian faith played any roles in your motivations for entering or continuing in the profession of teaching? What and why?
- (3) What links (if any) do you perceive between your Christian faith and your teaching methods or instructional techniques? If possible, please provide examples.
- (4) What links (if any) do you perceive between your Christian faith and your classroom management approaches or non-instructional professional skills? If possible, please provide examples.
- (5) What links (if any) do you perceive between your Christian faith and your curricular choices (including both choosing a curriculum and adapting an assigned curriculum)? If possible, please provide examples.
- (6) What links (if any) do you perceive between your Christian faith and your cultivation of relationships with and among students? If possible, please provide examples.
- (7) Are there any other comments you would like to add about the impact of your Christian faith on your teaching?



## **Appendix D: Statement of Original Work**

The Concordia University Doctorate of Education Program is a collaborative community of scholar-practitioners, who seek to transform society by pursuing ethically-informed, rigorously-researched, inquiry-based projects that benefit professional, institutional, and local educational contexts. Each member of the community affirms throughout their program of study, adherence to the principles and standards outlined in the Concordia University Academic Integrity Policy. This policy states the following:

### **Statement of academic integrity.**

As a member of the Concordia University community, I will neither engage in fraudulent or unauthorized behaviors in the presentation and completion of my work, nor will I provide unauthorized assistance to others.

### **Explanations:**

#### ***What does “fraudulent” mean?***

“Fraudulent” work is any material submitted for evaluation that is falsely or improperly presented as one’s own. This includes, but is not limited to texts, graphics and other multi-media files appropriated from any source, including another individual, that are intentionally presented as all or part of a candidate’s final work without full and complete documentation.

#### ***What is “unauthorized” assistance?***

“Unauthorized assistance” refers to any support candidates solicit in the completion of their work, that has not been either explicitly specified as appropriate by the instructor, or any assistance that is understood in the class context as inappropriate. This can include, but is not limited to:

- Use of unauthorized notes or another’s work during an online test
- Use of unauthorized notes or personal assistance in an online exam setting
- Inappropriate collaboration in preparation and/or completion of a project
- Unauthorized solicitation of professional resources for the completion of the work.

**Statement of Original Work (Continued)**

I attest that:

1. I have read, understood, and complied with all aspects of the Concordia University- Portland Academic Integrity Policy during the development and writing of this dissertation.
2. Where information and/or materials from outside sources has been used in the production of this dissertation, all information and/or materials from outside sources has been properly referenced and all permissions required for use of the information and/or materials have been obtained, in accordance with research standards outlined in the *Publication Manual of The American Psychological Association*

**MATTHEW BROOKS**

---

Digital Signature

MATTHEW BROOKS

---

Name (Typed)

5/7/19

---

Date