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Introduction

On December 11, 2019, President Trump signed an executive order to include discrimination against Jews as a violation of law with an eye toward fighting antisemitism on college campuses (Stracqualursi et al., 2019). As part of this order, a White House official confirmed Judaism would be interpreted as a nationality and not just a religion. This order generated widespread reaction from Jews and Jewish groups, some seeing it as a necessary measure and some calling it a chill on free speech. In my own Facebook feed during that week, I observed a post that said:

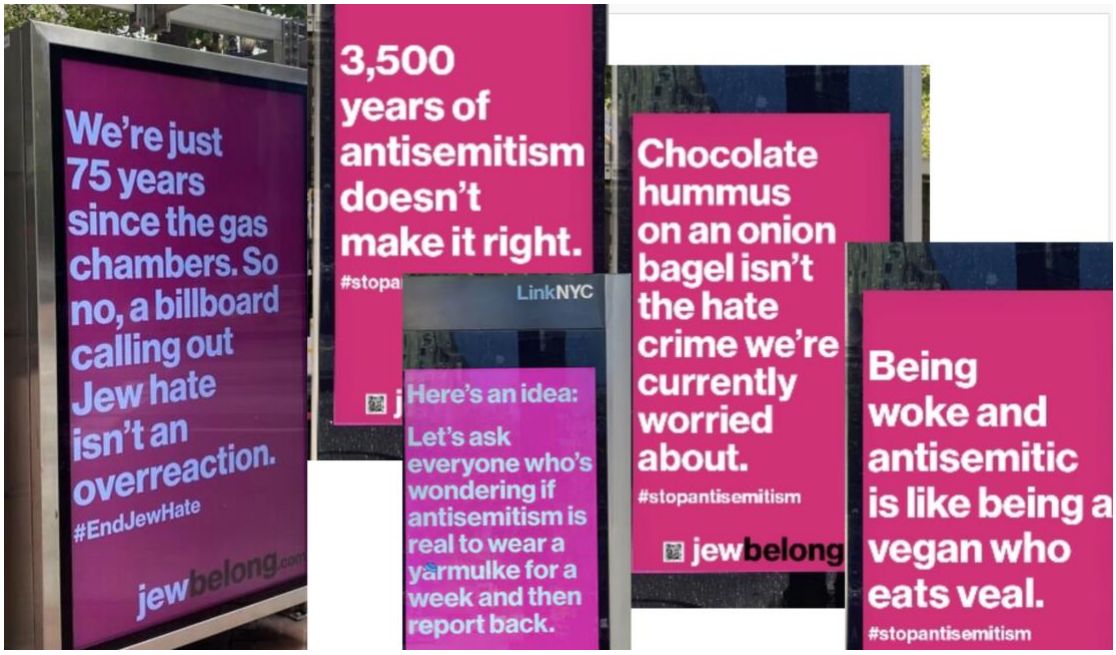
> Trump's executive order to define Judaism as a nationality would essentially rescind the citizenship of diaspora Jews (we'd be "Jewish" rather than American)... By positioning my religious identity as counter to my national identity, Trump makes it easier - in fact, makes it necessary - to exclude Jews from collective national identity. "Nationalism" becomes a counterweight to "Judaism." We are poised no longer as members of a nation, but as its adversaries.

While this post is simply one response to the order, the tone reflects the emotions felt by some in the days following its release and highlights the unique nature of Judaism as both a religion and ethnicity.

The antisemitism this order was attempting to address is not an isolated event. In October 2018, in the deadliest attack on the Jewish community in the United States, 11 people were shot and six were injured at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (Robertson et al., 2018). In May 2021, The Anti-Defamation League (2021) reported a 75% increase in antisemitic incidents in the US during the two weeks of the Israel-Hamas conflict. During a trip to NYC in the summer of 2021, I observed signs condemning antisemitism (Figure 1), part of a campaign launched by advocacy group JewBelong to highlight a rise in antisemitic violence (Cruz & Ross, 2022). More recently, in October 2022, antisemitic comments made by Kanye spurred antisemitic protests in Los Angeles (Rector, 2022).

Figure 1

Jewbelong Signs



These examples demonstrate the importance of teaching about Judaism to all students. However, within our schools, if Judaism is covered at all, it is normally in the context of Hanukkah or the Holocaust (Eichler-Levine, 2010). These two aspects of Judaism are often "conflated," leading to happy holiday stories interwoven with stories detailing profound human suffering, ultimately sanitizing the atrocities of the Holocaust (Eichler-Levine, 2010). Education about Judaism is hyperfocused on a single story that has been carefully curated to align with the American story. This means students often learn about Judaism when they learn about American involvement in WW2, and they learn about Hanukkah around other winter holidays like Christmas, even though it is not a high holiday in the Jewish religion. Further complicating this homogenization is the recognition that a limited amount of children's literature about Jewish culture surrounding topics other than Hanukkah and the Holocaust exists (Green Bean Books, 2019). Telling a single story can be dangerous, particularly when that story has been designed to complement the dominant narrative (Adichie, 2009). Beyond that, when students leave our schools, they should be prepared to interact with others who come from backgrounds different than their own (Gunn et al., 2020). An abundance of research shows that elementary-age students can participate in rich and complex discussions (Author, 2019; Bickford, 2021; McGriff & Clemons, 2019; Mitra & Serriere, 2012; Payne & Green, 2018; Serriere, 2010; Serriere et al., 2017).

Taking all of this into consideration, this study explores religious literacy about Judaism among elementary school students and is centered on the questions 1) Do students have any existing religious literacy about Judaism? and 2) How do they respond to a series of lessons about Judaism? To answer these questions, third-grade students engaged in a series of lessons using the IDM model that asked

students to consider the compelling question, “Is Judaism a race, religion, or ethnicity?”. This unit relied heavily on the use of a text set about Judaism that intentionally did not focus on Hanukkah or the Holocaust. Each lesson utilized a different discussion strategy to engage students in meaningful and critical conversation about the topic.

Literature Review

Religious Literacy

Religious literacy is not often the focus of instruction in US schools. Neglecting to teach students about religion or prioritizing instruction about one religion over others is harmful to students. Lack of exposure to these ideas leaves them unable to speak out against religious intolerance, discrimination, or violence (Prothero, 2007; Saylor et al., 2022), but religious literacy can be increased through a non-devotional approach to teaching about religion at every grade level, including in elementary schools (AAR, 2010). In fact, as agents of the state, K-12 public school teachers should be engaged in religious neutrality that includes exposure to religious and nonreligious ideas without advancing a specific religion while simultaneously respecting individual students' religious expression (Nord, 2010; Saylor et al., 2022). The National Council for Social Studies acknowledge the place of religious studies in the public school curriculum (NCSS, 2017), and 42 states include religious topics in their elementary social studies standards (author, under review). Despite this, teachers often avoid religion completely or blatantly privilege the ideas of a single religion. This avoidance may be attributed to multiple factors. First, there is the challenge of time. The amount of time allotted to elementary social studies has consistently decreased over the last thirty years (Fitchett & Heafner, 2010; Houser, 1995; Sunal & Sunal, 2008; VanFossen, 2005; Vogler et al., 2007). Finding space within these time constraints to include religious topics can be daunting. However, the avoidance of religion may also be due to feeling uncomfortable (Gunn et al., 2020), a lack of preparation (Saylor et al., 2022), or because teachers worry about becoming the subject of a lawsuit (Bishop & Nash, 2007). Additionally, privileging one religion over another may happen because Christian teachers often view teaching as a way to proselytize (White, 2009). Regardless of the purpose, all these actions violate public school teachers’ constitutional obligation and undermine the goals of multicultural education (Davila, 2015; Nieto & Bode, 2008).

When students leave school, they should be prepared to interact with others who come from backgrounds different than their own, including others who practice different religious traditions. But while teachers wait for young students to be “ready” to talk about complex ideas like religion, they are already developing their own worldview about these issues (Serriere, 2010; Serriere et al., 2017). The thoughts we hold in adulthood do not wholly originate therein, and young students often come into the classroom with strong beliefs or opinions already in place (Boutte, 2008). Because of this, it is essential

that part of their education familiarizes students with the religious faiths of various individuals and groups (Davila, 2015).

Picture Books as an Entry Point

Children's literature that includes religious worldviews can be a tool for the development of pluralistic thinking during classroom instruction (Peyton & Jalango, 2008). The inclusion of high-quality picture books about a variety of religions communicates a teacher's respect for their student's individual religious beliefs while allowing students to expand their understanding of other religions (Zeece, 1998). Diverse picture books and the rich and complex discussions they generate can help students move beyond othering those unlike themselves (Bersh, 2013; Cipparone, 2014), and picture book text sets can be an impactful educational tool (Tracy et al., 2016). With critical thought and careful consideration, text sets can increase students' social consciousness, help them grapple with internal conflict, guide conversations about social circumstances that directly impact students' lives (Owens & Nowell, 2001), and lead students to take action on topics they think are important (Tracy et al., 2016). Research shows when a complex topic was connected with a picture book, "students cared about the topic, grappled with some of the complexities, and had much to say" (Cipparone, 2014, p. 13). Coupling text sets with discussion-based techniques and the framework provided by structures like the C3 Inquiry Design Model (Swan et al., 2019) can be a contextual and humanizing way to teach about global religions like Judaism with neutrality.

Methodology

This study aimed to explore religious literacy about Judaism among elementary school students and to see how they responded to a series of lessons about this religion. The research questions were: 1) Do students have any existing religious literacy about Judaism? More specifically, what do students know about Judaism? What perceptions already exist? and 2) How do they respond to a series of lessons about Judaism?

To answer the research questions, I designed a two-week unit that focused on the question, "Is Judaism a race, religion, or ethnicity?" (Author, under review). Then, in conjunction with a practicing third-grade teacher, we took turns teaching the lessons in the unit with a class of 12 third-grade students over the course of two weeks.

Site and Participants

This study took place in a third-grade classroom at a mid-size private Christian school in a large city in the South for grades PK-12. One of the reasons for selecting this location for the study was the relationship I had with the community after working with them over the previous 5 years. The classroom teacher I worked with to implement the lessons was excited to be part of the project because of the

content covered and the opportunity to gain more experience with discussion-based teaching strategies. This site would also potentially provide a unique perspective. Because it is a Christian school, it seemed likely the students would be interested in and receptive to learning about another religion, or at least the idea of learning about religion at school would not be foreign to them. This class included 12 students, 10 of whom (along with their parents) elected to participate in the study. While all students still participated in the two-week unit, only the responses of students who consented to participate in the study are included in the findings.

Researcher Position

I entered this study as a former third-grade teacher at this school. At the time this set of lessons was taught, I was the curriculum director for the school, and I had taught siblings of many of the students in this class in the past. This familiarity with the students in the class seemed to set them at ease with having a "guest teacher" more than might be normal otherwise. As a result, they appeared to be comfortable speaking their mind during class discussions. Additionally, because of my role as an insider within the school as a whole, when I sought IRB approval 1) to teach a set of lessons about Judaism that was not part of the school curriculum and 2) for permission to video record students, I got no push back from administrators or parents. I recognize this is not normal, and it is unlikely I could duplicate this situation again.

During this study, I was one of the classroom teachers for the unit while also serving as the primary investigator for the research. While this may not be ideal, this choice made sense for one primary reason: in addition to assisting with this study, the classroom teacher also participated in a series of professional development workshops at the school, taught by me, designed to introduce new discussion strategies in the elementary classroom. As such, she requested that I assist in teaching the lessons to model what had been taught in the professional development sessions. All lessons were video recorded so that I would be able to watch them later as an observer and take detailed field notes.

The Unit

The creation of this unit was informed by current research about religious illiteracy in elementary school students and the use of picture books as an entry point into classroom conversations, as outlined above. As a result, this unit was designed using two instructional strategies, picture book text sets, and discussion-based teaching, in conjunction with one another. In addition to searching for picture books online, I spoke with some of my close friends who are Jewish parents and asked them what books they chose to read to their children. I sought to develop a text set that not only included books about Judaism that did not center on Hanukkah and the Holocaust but included books that were written by cultural insiders with a unique understanding of what it means to "be Jewish" (de la Fuente-Lau, 2021; Green

Bean Books, 2019). Ultimately, I chose three books translated from Hebrew and published internationally along with four books written and published in the United States. Together, these books created a text set centered on defining Judaism and its core beliefs. In some of the texts used, Hanukkah or the Holocaust are mentioned, but as a small piece of culture. For example, in the book *Shani's Shoebox,* the author highlights nine Jewish Holidays. While Hanukkah is one of those holidays, it is not the primary focus. I hoped this intentional selection of texts would help students contextualize what they have learned about Judaism in the past, complicate the narrative that traditionally surrounds Jewish culture, and expose children to a more complete picture of the religion.

During the two-week unit, students engaged in about 45 minutes of instruction each day. This unit included activities like reading a book from the text set aloud as a class, defining unique vocabulary words, completing independent research, and participating in structured discussions. Over the course of the unit, students read 7 picture books (Table 1) and participated in six structured discussions (Table 2). The independent research project included researching a Jewish holiday and presenting it to the class. Ideally, at the end of the unit, students would also have the opportunity to Take Informed Action (Author, 2021).[1]

Table 1

Picture Books Included in Text Set

Book Citations
Abas, S. (2019). *The sages of Chelm and the moon.* Green Bean Books. Helfand, H. C., & Zagar, E. K. (2018). *And there was evening and there was morning.* Kar-Ben Publishing. Hoffer, R. (2018). *Shani's shoebox.* Green Bean Books. Sasso, S.E. (2018). *Regina persisted: An untold story.* Apple and Honey Press. Smith, S. (2013). *Signs in the well.* Green Bean Books. Weiss, B. (1996). *I am Jewish.* PowerKids Press. Zalben, J.B. (2018). *A moon for Moe and Mo.* Charlesbridge.

Table 2

Structured Discussion Strategies

Day	**Strategy**	**Description of Strategy (Gonzalez, 2015)**	**Questions Used**
Day 1	KWL	Students use a graphic organizer to record information they know (K), want to know (W), and learned (L). While this is often used as a notetaking device for individual students, it can also be used to guide whole class discussion.	• What do we know about Judaism? • What do we want to know about Judaism? • What did we learn about Judaism?

[1] More details about the complete unit, including an IDM Blueprint, will be available in a second manuscript on this topic and can be cited here (Author, under review).

Day 2	Pyramid Discussion	Students begin in pairs, responding to an initial discussion question with a partner. After each person shares their ideas, the pair joins a second pair, creating a group of four. Pairs share their ideas, then groups of four join to form groups of eight. This continues until the whole class is joined up in a single discussion.	• What is the difference between a belief, an opinion, and a fact? • What do Jews believe? • Where do the beliefs, facts, and opinions show up in these two traditional Jewish stories? • How are these the same or different from our own beliefs?
Day 4	Think Pair Share	Students think about their response to a question, pair up with another student, discuss their response, then share it with the whole class.	• Which of these holidays were you the most familiar with? • Why do you think that is?
Day 5	Value Lines Discussion	Students are introduced to a set of information, then provided with a statement they can agree or disagree with. Students take a stance by moving to an area of the room designated as "strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree." In these small groups, students discuss their chosen stance, then share with the class.	• Opportunities for men and women are the same in the Jewish culture as they are in my own culture.
Day 6	Fishbowl Discussion	A group of students sits in the middle of the classroom to begin the discussion. Only the students sitting in the center of the fishbowl may talk. The rest of the students stand outside of the fishbowl, listening. Once someone in the middle of the fishbowl has spoken, a student may tap them out and take their place. Each student must participate at least once, but can participate more than once.	• What are some of the reasons Jews were persecuted? • What did the persecution of Jews look like? • How do stereotypes contribute to discrimination against Jews? • Why would we learn about antisemitism? Do you think it still happens?
Day 7	Socratic Seminar	Students sit in a circle. An introductory, open-ended question is asked by the teacher. Students continue the dialogue, encouraging each other to support their claims with evidence. There is no order to how students speak, but they should share the floor with others.	• What does it mean to be Jewish? • Is Judaism a race, religion, or ethnicity?

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study were collected from multiple sources, including observations while teaching the lessons, analytic memos, field notes, and student work. Immediately following each lesson taught/observed, I wrote analytic memos to record initial impressions and capture key ideas. All lessons were recorded and watched later. While watching the videos, I created field notes, capturing information relevant to the research questions. Additionally, all student work was collected along with any writing

on the whiteboard during a lesson for future analysis. Drawing data from a multitude of sources was helpful in corroborating evidence. Particularly, using data from multiple sources helped me in confirming findings from observations or led me to revisit the recordings in response to findings that arose from the analysis of student work (Yin, 2014).

After the completion of the entire unit, including watching the observation videos and taking field notes, I looked at the written data sources to find answers to the research questions. Using qualitative coding methods (Saldana, 2009), I read through analytic memos, field notes, and student work samples and created codes to describe student responses that correlated with one of the two questions. I then looked to see if any of these codes could be grouped together into larger themes or categories to provide answers about what students knew about Judaism or how they responded to the lessons.

Findings

After the implementation of the lessons and a systematic review of both video recordings and student work samples, I found that students in this study did have a limited amount of religious literacy about Judaism. The current beliefs about Judaism could be sorted into three categories, knowledge about basic beliefs, comparisons to Christianity, and existing negative perceptions. I also found that students responded to the unit about Judaism in ways similar to their current beliefs, including gaining knowledge about basic beliefs, making comparisons to Christianity, and finding connections to current events.

Do Students Have Any Existing Religious Literacy About Judaism?

In short, yes. However, this was a unique population. Because this study took place at a private Christian school, students have learned about the nation of Israel in the context of studying Bible history. Many of these students completed a Bible history unit about Passover as first-grade students. Even though they likely would have been able to articulate what a Jew is in reference to biblical history, none of the students could accurately define Judaism. In our initial lesson, the classroom teacher and I asked students to define Judaism on a notecard. Of the students included in the study, 4 students (about 33% of the students present) referenced Jews in their definition, saying, “being a Jew,” “persecution of Jews,” “Christianity from China/Africa/Jews,” and “being a Jew and obeying God.” Five students defined Judaism as a specific character trait. For example, they used words like justice, racism, goodness, love, kindness, or selfishness. Three of these answers were positive and two were negative. One student was unable to give an answer at all.

After providing a definition of the term, students were then asked to complete a KWL chart outlining what students knew (Figure 2) and what they wanted to know about Judaism (Figure 3). For

both charts, answers were provided by a total of six students, primarily the four who were able to connect the idea of Judaism with Jews on their notecards. A fifth student, who defined Judaism as a kind of racism, contributed the answer that they have strict laws, and a sixth student, who defined Judaism as selfishness, asked the question, “Are Jews bad?” Based on these two activities, it seems fair to assume that four students had a limited amount of religious literacy about Judaism. In contrast, the others had little to no religious literacy about Judaism.

Figure 2

What Students Know

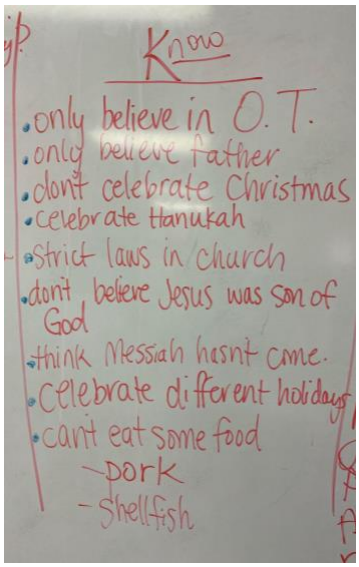
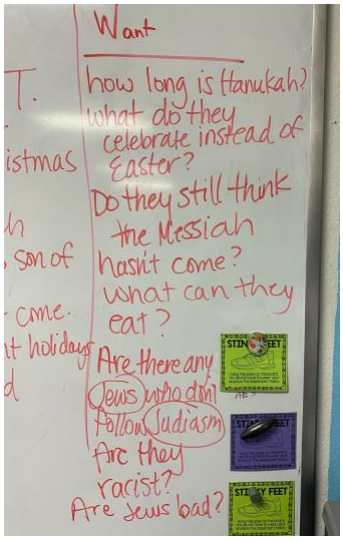


Figure 3

What Students Want to Know



What did they believe? What perceptions existed?

Thinking about the answers provided on the KWL chart, I divided these answers into three categories: knowledge about basic beliefs, comparisons to Christianity, and existing negative perceptions. Some answers fit into multiple categories, and these categorizations are outlined in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Student Responses on KWL Chart

Category	**Student Responses on KWL Chart (Know or Want to Know)**
Knowledge about Basic Beliefs	Believe in Old Testament Believe in Father (monotheistic) Celebrate Hanukkah/How long is Hanukkah? Do they still think the Messiah hasn't come? Can't eat some foods (kosher)/What can they eat? Are there Jews who don't follow Judaism?
Comparison to Christianity	Only believe in Old Testament Only believe in Father Don't celebrate Christmas Don't believe Jesus was son of God Celebrate different holidays/ What do they celebrate instead of Easter? Strict laws in church
Existing Negative Perceptions	Strict laws in church Can't eat some foods Don't celebrate Christmas Are Jews racist? Are Jews bad?

Knowledge about Basic Beliefs

In the first category, knowledge about basic beliefs, students who had limited religious literacy about Judaism did know about a few basic tenets of the religion. They knew that Jews believe in the Old Testament, they knew Judaism is a monotheistic religion (even if they did not have that vocabulary yet), and they knew that there are some foods Jews cannot eat. One student, James, who said he has Jewish friends, mentioned kosher food (although he could not define kosher). Most of the class also knew that Jews celebrate Hanukkah, and that Hanukkah involves candles. They were also able to ask a few fact-based questions about the coming of the Messiah (indicating they knew Jews believe their promised Messiah has not come), were curious about how long Hanukkah was, and wondered what they were allowed to eat.

Additionally, one student brought up an interesting question, “Are there Jews who don’t follow Judaism?” After hearing this question, the teacher asked for more information: “What do you mean by Jews?”, to which the student responded, “The community.” Based on this question, it seems the student is saying that being Jewish does not necessarily mean you practice the religion of Judaism. In other words, at some level, he had an understanding that a person could still be Jewish without being a follower of the religion. While this was not a factual statement demonstrating what a student already knew, this question does demonstrate some religious literacy or, at the very least, an authentic desire to better understand the nuances of Judaism.

Comparison to Christianity

Most of students’ existing beliefs about Judaism fell into the second category. While this category may also include knowledge about basic beliefs (and I have tried to list answers in both categories if that is the case), it is primarily comprised of student comments and questions that make direct comparisons between Judaism and Christianity. For example, students said Jews “only believe in the Old Testament” and “only believe in the Father,” indicating a comparison to Christians who also believe in the New Testament and the Trinity. They also noted that Jews do not believe Jesus was the son of God and asked if Jews still believe the Messiah has not come, both of which are beliefs that would be in direct contrast with their personal Christian beliefs.

More subtly, holidays were also compared to their norms. Some things students knew about Judaism were they do not celebrate Christmas, they do celebrate Hanukkah, and they have different holidays. When talking about Hanukkah, James, who has celebrated Hanukkah with his Jewish friends in the past, said, “They do candles [at Hanukkah].” Another student responded, “We’ve celebrated that at school once… well, we did candles… was that Easter?”, to which the teacher responded, “That was Advent.” One question students had about Judaism was, “What do they celebrate instead of Easter?”

One student also said there are “strict laws in church.” While this comparison to Christianity is also somewhat veiled, the idea of the church as either a group of Christian believers or a place of worship is a distinctly Christian term. Depending on what the student meant by the comment, it would be more accurate to say there are “strict laws within the *religion”* or “strict laws governing behavior in the *synagogue*.” A reference to church demonstrates a lack of literacy about Judaism. This makes sense because the student who made this comment was also unable to define Judaism earlier in the lesson.

Existing Negative Perceptions

Finally, from the start of this activity, there were existing negative perceptions about the religion as a whole. In multiple instances, students defined Judaism by what they “don’t” or “can’t” do (for example, *no* Christmas or *no* pork) rather than with positive affirmations about what they can do or what

they stand for. One student shared that she thought they had "strict laws," another aspect that would be negative. Two of the questions they asked about Judaism, "Are Jews racist?" and "Are Jews bad?" further highlight an existing negative perception. Despite data that demonstrates a limited, little, or no religious literacy about Judaism, students seem to already have internalized opinions about Jews as a group.

How do students respond to a series of lessons about Judaism?

Unsurprisingly, students responded to the lessons about Judaism largely in ways that mirrored their existing beliefs and perceptions, including gaining knowledge about basic beliefs, making comparisons to Christianity, and finding connections to current events.

Gaining Knowledge about Basic Beliefs.

Because the goal of this unit was to help students answer the compelling question, "Is Judaism a race, religion, or ethnicity?", a primary objective of many of the lessons was to help students gain basic information, a baseline religious literacy, about the religion as a whole that would help them answer this question. One activity that addressed the goal of understanding basic information about Judaism was designed to help students define "beliefs." In one of the initial lesson activities, students were given the definitions of beliefs, opinions, facts, and myths. After reviewing vocabulary terms, I paired the first two books, *And There Was Evening and There Was Morning* and *The Sages of Chelm and the Moon*, with a pyramid discussion strategy. Each of these books retells a traditional Jewish story, and one of these stories aligns with Christian beliefs. This pairing was done intentionally to help students understand Jewish beliefs while also interrogating their own beliefs as part of the pyramid discussion questions (outlined in Table 2). While they could understand and recite the definitions easily, these third-grade students struggled with the differences between beliefs, opinions, myths, and facts, often equating their own beliefs with facts and Jewish beliefs that did not align with their own as myths or "fake." In response to the final pyramid discussion question, "How are these the same or different from our own beliefs?", students answered from varying places of understanding. One student said, "A belief might be the exact opposite for another person." While this answer shows a student beginning to understand, another student demonstrated less understanding, saying, "Well [*And There Was Evening and There Was Morning*] is actually real," placing more value on his own beliefs. A third student, Bennett, placed value on his own beliefs while simultaneously diminishing Jewish beliefs, saying, "They are different because one is fake, and one is real." As a note, Bennett was one of the few students who had some existing religious literacy about Judaism. In his initial KWL chart, all the information he added to the letter K of his KWL chart was negatively phrased. For example, he said, "don't believe Jesus was God's" and "can't eat some foods." However, Bennett showed growth in understanding over the course

of the unit. In response to learning about the connection between stereotypes and discrimination of Jews, he said the value of learning about antisemitism is "so you don't do it" and in his final reflection, he said, "One reason you should study [Judaism] is because we don't know enough about it."

Once the idea of beliefs was more clearly understood, students accumulated knowledge about several Jewish beliefs. In Table 4 below, I have included several written responses from student workbooks to questions about Jewish beliefs throughout the unit.

Table 4

Student Responses to Questions about Jewish Beliefs

Student Responses
Judaism means belief in the one God of Abraham
Marriage is important/sacred
You can't touch the Torah
You can't work on the Sabbath/rest on Sabbath
God created everything at the beginning of the world
Miriam, Deborah and Esther were strong Jewish women
They were persecuted because of their stereotypes
Celebrate religious and nonreligious holidays
No women rabbis (for a long time)

On one of the final days of the unit, the teachers facilitated a Socratic seminar to answer the compelling question for the unit, "Is Judaism a race, religion, or ethnicity?" Up to this point, while there was much discussion about the term religion, there had been none about how to define a race or ethnicity. In retrospect, this was a flaw in the design of the unit. Given that this was the primary question students were asked to answer, it would have made sense to define these terms and provide examples on the first day of the unit when the compelling question was introduced. Despite this, the students were very engaged in conversation surrounding what constitutes a race, religion, or ethnicity. When the teacher asked what race means, students responded with "like the people you are born into," "your country," and "the type of person you are, African or American." To clarify, the teacher asked students to raise their hands if they knew their race. All the students who raised their hands said their race was "American." After further conversation, one student said, "I'd say for race [I'm] white," and another contributed that race was the color of your skin. Given this definition, the teacher asked, "If race is the color of your skin, what color would Jews be?" One student said, "Olive colored, like David," referencing the boy in the book we read on the first day of class, *I Am Jewish*, which included photographs. However, when asked if a person could be black and Jewish, students collectively said yes; when asked if a person could be white and Jewish, students collectively said yes; and when asked if they thought Jews had to be a specific race, there were scattered nos.

During this conversation, students were very prepared to define religion. They said it is a specific way of life, includes specific beliefs, was monotheistic, had a holy book, worshipped in a synagogue, had leaders called rabbis, and mainly celebrated religious holidays. However, they had few examples of what it might mean for Judaism to be classified as an ethnicity. When the teacher asked, "If I decided today that I wanted to be Jewish, could I be Jewish?", a student answered, "Yes, but you wouldn't really be Jewish." This answer seems to indicate a perception of the difference between religion and ethnicity–you can choose your religion but you cannot choose your ethnicity–but students had trouble clearly articulating this. Students did agree that you do not have to be born in Israel to be Jewish religiously or ethnically. They also felt that a person could be Christian and Jewish, with one student saying, "You can be a Jewish person who has a different religion." Ultimately, the consensus of the class was that Judaism was both a religion and an ethnicity, but not a race. The teachers accepted this answer, as the goal of a compelling question as part of the IDM model is not necessarily to find a single right answer; rather, the point is to choose a topic that is intellectually stimulating and engages student interest (Grant, 2013).

Based on my initial categories, I expected to find more evidence of negative attitudes toward Judaism at large, but in reviewing worksheets, watching the videos, and taking field notes, aside from Bennett's comment about beliefs above, I could not find additional instances where it seemed that students entered into the learning experience with a negative attitude, only with curiosity, and whatever negative perceptions existed initially seemed to have been expunged by the final writing assignment when students were asked to write a paragraph answering the question "Is Judaism a race, religion, or ethnicity?" Of the ten students who participated in the study, six said it was important to learn about Judaism so that we can help them. Based on video observations of the Socratic seminar immediately following this writing assignment, it seems likely that this answer was directly related to preventing or stopping antisemitic behavior, and two students wrote specifically about stopping antisemitic behavior and recognizing antisemitism is wrong.

Making Comparisons to Christianity

The most common way students reacted, both during the discussion and in the written assignments they were asked to complete, was by comparing aspects of Judaism to their own Christian religion. The use of comparison was both modeled by the teacher and initiated by the students at various times throughout the lesson. For example, during the first activity, when reading the first book, *And There Was Evening and There Was Morning,* the teacher specifically asked, "Does this book sound like something familiar?" About half of the students raised their hands. After reading a little bit, she asked again, "Now does this sound familiar?" Students responded by saying, "It's from the Bible" and "It's in

Genesis." The teacher reminded them it would also be in Jewish holy texts, which students remembered was called the Torah from the previous day's lesson. When we started the second book in this lesson, *The Sages of Chelm and the Moon*, we discussed the definition of a sage, someone who is wise. One student, mirroring what the teacher had modeled for the previous text, said, "I think I might know what this is about! The Bethlehem Star! Because the three wise men." The teacher responded to this by asking the student, "But do they believe in the New Testament?" He remembered they did not, "so probably not?"

Comparisons to Christianity were especially prevalent when talking about Jewish holidays. In the book *Shani's Shoebox*, a shoebox is reused for different purposes throughout the year as the book introduces each new Jewish holiday. At one point in the book a student suggested, "That might be like a manger or something." Another student was quick to respond, "But they don't believe in Jesus," and the original student corrected himself, "Not a manger… a stable or something." This interaction shows how, during lessons about holidays, students defaulted to norms associated with Christian holidays (i.e., Jesus was born in a manger on Christmas) even as they processed information about another religion. Another time, at the introduction of a new holiday, a student said, "[Is that like] Easter?" A second student said, "not Easter" and the original student corrected himself by saying, "Easter for Jews."

Despite intentional efforts to downplay Hanukkah in the design of this unit, as most students are generally familiar with it and it is not a "high holiday," it was frequently brought up by students as an alternative to celebrating the Christmas holiday. After reading about Jewish holidays, students were asked to research a specific holiday and present their findings to the class. After these presentations, we used the Think Pair Share strategy with the questions "Which holiday were you most familiar with? Why?" Student answers to this question were more varied than expected. A couple of students said Purim or Passover because those are holidays they had specifically studied in their Old Testament classes as part of Christian culture. However, more than half said Hanukkah, even though they had not learned about that from school. In thinking about why, they mentioned multiple possible factors, including it is one of the most important Jewish holidays (which is not true), because it is "sort of like Christmas without Jesus," and they see stuff about Hanukkah in Christmas movies. This thinking mirrors the thinking that was also evident in their initial questions when they asked, "What do they do instead of Easter?" When interrogated further, they suggested the reason they had heard about Hanukkah might have something to do with Hanukkah and Christmas happening around the same time of year. Throughout the lesson, students continually tried to equate Jewish holidays with either Christian holidays or even American holidays. For example, during their research presentations, when describing

the holidays introduced by *Shani's Shoebox*, they equated Tu BiShvat with Arbor Day and Yom Ha'atzmaut with the Fourth of July.

Finding Connections to Current Events

Coincidentally, this lesson was taught during the two weeks of the Israel-Hamas conflict in May of 2021 (ADL, 2021). Though I did not bring up the Israel-Hamas conflict or refer to it as an antisemitic event, some students had learned about it while watching the news at home. During one of our final lesson activities centered on Jewish persecution, students began to connect what we were reading with this current event. After reading a teacher-created resource that provided an overview of the history of Jewish persecution, students participated in a fishbowl discussion centered on the questions provided in Table 2. Almost immediately, answering the first question about why Jews were persecuted, a student, Callie, said, "It feels like the news that I watched because other mean people were shooting targets at Israel because they didn't like Jew[s] and lots of children died." Later, when talking about the final fishbowl discussion question, "Do you think [antisemitism] still happens?", she revisited this current event, saying, "In the news, it tells you how many women and children died because of it." In her mind, she found a connection between the historical events we had been studying and the current events she saw on television. This observation led to a realization among her classmates that throughout time, many people had lost their homes and families because of antisemitism that led to Jewish persecution. One student commented, "To me, [antisemitism is] a form of racism… a specific type of racism." Other students built on this, saying, "It [still matters] because what Callie was talking about. People are still attacking Israel" and "It's wrong. We should be able to recognize it. We should help them. When we grow up, if it's still happening, we should help." This conversation stood in direct contrast to the previous day's discussion about the book *Regina Persisted: An Untold Story*. In the end matter of the text, the author shares that Regina was taken to a concentration camp by Nazis and later killed at Auschwitz. One student asked what a Nazi was, and another answered, "those guys from the Sound of Music." When asked if Nazis still exist, the same student said, "Not really." The responses shared during the fishbowl show growth in students' understanding and their ability to make connections between ideology, picture books, and current events.

Discussion

Existing Religious Literacy

Current events highlight the need for religious literacy in our schools. But as teachers attempt to teach for religious literacy, they are actively fighting against both internal and external experiences and existing stereotypes. As other studies have shown, students enter learning experiences already having developed stereotypes and perceptions of other cultures (Boutte, 2008; Torres, 2019), and this study

reaffirms that finding. If education focused on religious literacy is not offered in schools, student perceptions of religious cultures are formed through media, including books, television, and movies, or personal experiences. In answer to the research question, in this study, a portion of students came into the study with a limited amount of religious literacy about Judaism.

Aside from school curriculum, media seems to have the largest impact on these students' beginning religious literacy about Judaism. In classroom discussions during this unit, many of the things students "knew" about Judaism came from one of these sources. Many of the students who mentioned Hanukkah had learned about it through information about and images of Hanukkah in Christmas movies. Another mentioned a book about Hanukkah she had at home. And in a conversation about Jewish persecution, one student explained Nazis as "those guys from the Sound of Music."

These comments demonstrate how the emphasis on Hanukkah and the Holocaust does not only exist in school curriculum; it is also present in the media students consume. These examples demonstrate how media provides students with a narrow view of Judaism, where Jewish culture is only relevant where it comes into direct contact with mainstream American culture (Christmas or World War 2). This egocentric approach to learning about other cultures impacts how students respond to new information, like when one of the third-grade students categorized a newly introduced Jewish holiday as "Easter for Jews."

Despite this, things students had learned previously as part of their school curriculum also stuck with them. Because this classroom was a unique setting in which students had already learned about the religious holidays of Purim and Passover, references to these ideas surpassed references to media sources at large. This observation is promising because it shows when students learn about religious topics in school, they can remember these topics and use them to make connections to new information, possibly at higher rates than information from other sources with less authority.

Student perceptions are also influenced by personal experiences, such as James, the student with Jewish friends. In his particular case, he knew about various aspects of Judaism, like eating only Kosher foods, because of the interactions he had with others he was close to, and he was able to connect these experiences to new learning. Unfortunately, many of our students do not come to the classroom with close personal relationships with students who come from many different religions or cultures than their own, and it would be unrealistic to expect them to. This again highlights the need to educate students for religious literacy and to look for ways, such as the use of picture book text sets, to enter conversations about religion with curiosity and neutrality in a way that humanizes the religion being investigated.

Student Responses to Unit

By the end of the study, as evidenced by both class discussion and final writing assignments, all students had acquired some religious literacy about Judaism, especially as it relates to specific beliefs and practices associated with the religion.

Engaging in conversation with students through the use of specific discussion-based teaching strategies was very helpful in highlighting and correcting misconceptions and in encouraging students to think critically about a topic. For example, in the conversation about holidays, students equated Christmas and Hanukkah, going so far as to call Hanukkah "Christmas for Jews." In thinking around and through this topic, a student asked, "What do they celebrate instead of Easter?" I found this question particularly provocative and connected to the societal link between Christmas and Hanukkah. If students have falsely connected the celebration of Hanukkah with the celebration of Christmas, it is natural to ask what Jews celebrate instead of Easter. Although the students did not explicitly make this connection, it is fair to assume this implicit connection. Additionally, when interrogated further about the link between Hanukkah and Christmas, they suggested it might have something to do with Hanukkah and Christmas happening around the same time. While they were not necessarily able to articulate why that matters or if this is problematic, having this conversation and hearing other students make that connection did prompt other questions about the topic. It started students thinking about the relationship between the two holidays more critically than they had previously.

Some students also showed significant growth from the beginning of the unit to the end. For example, Bennett showed growth in understanding over the course of the unit. While he initially seems to respond negatively to some aspects of Jewish culture, diminishing their beliefs in support of this own, by the end of the unit, he valued learning about antisemitism "so you don't do it" and suggested, "we don't know enough about [Judaism]." This response reinforces many of the ideas presented in current research, which suggest that understanding more about others and what they believe and engaging in discussions generated by exploring those topics can help students move beyond attitudes of fear and othering by exposing students to those unlike themselves (Cipparone, 2014; Gunn et al., 2020; Torres, 2019).

Throughout existing literature, we also find examples of how students can use diverse text sets as a tool to develop students' social consciousness and guide conversations about topics that impact students directly (Owens & Nowell, 2001). In this study, we often see this happening through direct comparisons between Judaism and the students' own Christian beliefs, with and without prompting from the teacher. While reading the book *And There Was Evening and There Was Morning,* the teacher specifically directed students to compare what they were reading with familiar stories; however, during the second book in the same lesson, *The Sages of Chelm and the Moon*, a student attempted to make

these connections on his own. When reading *Shani's Shoebox*, students compared Tu BiShvat with Arbor Day and Yom Ha'atzmaut with the Fourth of July, and students also tried to find an example of "Easter for Jews?" Despite this tendency, through reading these stories and relating them to personal experiences, students were able to think deeply and engage in critical conversations about Judaism in ways that helped them interrogate their own belief systems, saying things like "A belief might be the exact opposite for another person."

Students also treated characters from the text sets as real people, representative of Judaism at large. When discussing a potential connection between race and skin color, one student said, "Olive colored, like David." During this conversation, they grabbed the book to see what color his skin was in the photographs. During the discussion about antisemitism, students also referenced Regina and her family as examples of people who were killed by Nazis, humanizing a character they had only read about and connecting her experiences to examples of what was happening in current events. Moving from existing perceptions that Nazis existed in the past to a conversation about continued antisemitism in the present day underscores students' ability to make connections from books they are reading to current events and also underscores the relevancy of the topic, especially when we think back to the questions students created at the beginning of the lesson: "Are there Jews who don't follow Judaism?", "Are Jews racist?", and "Are Jews bad?" In connection with the use of thematic text sets, this demonstrates how the books we read not only increase students' understanding of other religions as modeled in the literature (Zeece, 1998) but also help students make a connection to the experiences of others unlike themselves. These personal connections with book characters may have been part of the reason many students ended the unit by condemning this type of persecution, saying "[antisemitism is] a specific type of racism," and more than half of the students indicating they would get involved in the future, using first person pronouns to say or write things like, "We should help them. When we grow up, if it's still happening, we should help."

Conclusion

This study explored religious literacy about Judaism among elementary school students centered on the questions: 1) Do students have any existing religious literacy about Judaism? and 2) How do they respond to a series of lessons about Judaism? After teaching the lessons and reviewing video recordings and student work samples, I found that about a third of these third-grade students did have a limited amount of religious literacy about Judaism, including knowledge about basic beliefs and the ability to make comparisons to Christianity. Some students also had existing negative perceptions. Students responded to the unit by gaining knowledge about basic beliefs, continuing to make comparisons to

Christianity, and finding connections to current events. At the end of the unit, all students had gained varying levels of religious literacy about Judaism.

The implementation of and student responses to this series of lessons also provide a positive example of what it looks like to teach for religious literacy with neutrality using picture book text sets and discussion-based teaching strategies. Based on student responses, many students reacted positively to instruction about a religion different from their own with these teaching tools. Many students were able to think critically about both Jewish beliefs and their own religious beliefs, and several connected with characters from the picture books we read and used them to consider their future actions.

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