How faith settings contribute to children's learning

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When families migrate to a new country, faith communities offer a source of support and a way of maintaining social, cultural and linguistic connections. The church, temple or mosque may be one of the few places where children speak their community language with a sizeable group of people. Faith classes also provide a rare opportunity to learn to read and write in the community language or liturgical language. Yet these important sites of language and literacy learning have been little studied. It is for this reason that a major research project was set up by the Centre for Language, Culture and Learning at Goldsmiths to investigate children's learning in four recently arrived communities in London: Tamil Hindu, Bangladeshi Muslim, Ghanaian Pentecostal and Polish Catholic. The study took place over three and a half years, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, and was conducted by a team of 11 people, including researchers from each linguistic background who also had personal experience or knowledge of the faith group with whom they worked.

Our questions as we began the study were:

- What is the scope and nature of literacy practices in each faith setting?
- How do teaching and learning take place during faith literacy activities across different settings?
- In what ways have faith literacy activities changed over time, in the London setting, and across generations?
- How does participation in faith literacies contribute to individual and collective identities?

We found the breadth of children's learning through faith-related activities to be remarkable. Faith permeated their everyday lives and underpinned language and literacy practices, fostering biliteracy and bilingual skills. The children learnt together with their families as well as with the wider community, and practised both alone and with siblings and peers. Although practices had changed across countries and generations, faith provided a thread of continuity whereby different generations shared common knowledge, texts, symbols and narratives in addition to festivals and other ritual events. Becoming a member of a faith secured children's identities through a sense of 'belonging' to a community that came together regularly and where the aim to learn as well as possible was not only for a teacher but had wider spiritual dimensions.

In this article we introduce each faith setting and the participants in our study, and explain how we gathered our data, before discussing some of our findings with regard to children's social, cultural and academic skills. More details of the project findings, together with photos and videos from faith classes and homes, and the children's scrapbooks, can be found at: www.belifs.co.uk

Entering the faith settings

To fully understand and appreciate the learning taking place, we needed to know the historical

background of our four faith communities. We discovered that all of them had made great efforts to establish a permanent base in that particular part of London, either by adapting existing properties or raising substantial sums of money to build their own. They had come together to achieve these goals in response to the growing needs of their faith group in the locality.

The Hindu setting, the London Sri Murugan Temple, was located in Newham, where there was a large Tamil community who had arrived in the UK since the 1940s – and particularly since the 1980s and 1990s due to civil war in Sri Lanka. The temple was built with materials brought entirely from India and opened with a grand ceremony in 2005.

The Muslim setting comprised the East London Mosque and London Muslim Centre, located in the heart of the Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets. A mosque had been established for Muslim sailors on a temporary site in the 1930s, and when the community increased in size from the 1950s onwards a permanent site was urgently needed. Construction began in 1982 and the complex was finished in 2004, becoming one of the busiest and most vibrant Islamic centres in Western Europe.

The Pentecostal church was in Goodmayes, east London, where the Ghanaian community had adapted an Edwardian building that had previously been a cinema and a bingo hall. The Church of Pentecost was established in Ghana in 1931 and had grown in London since the 1980s. Some services at Goodmayes took place in Twi, while others were in English for the international Pentecostal community.

The Polish parish and Polish community school, Croydon, were originally set up in south-east London in 1950 for families who had settled after the Second World War. A Victorian house was obtained as a school building in 1963 and a church was built next to it in 1985. With the rapid expansion of the community when Poland joined the European Union in 2004, attendance flourished at the school, Mass and community festivals.

The researchers began visiting each setting, writing field narratives to record their impressions of how worship and special ceremonies took place. We then observed in faith classes, making field notes and video recordings of children's participation in learning. We invited 16 children – four from each setting – aged between 4 and 12 and their families to participate in the next stage of the research. Each family was lent an audio recorder and a flip camera to take pictures and make video recordings to document their choice of home events related to faith. They thus produced a fascinating variety of data: from prayers and celebrations to games and reading stories with younger siblings, and even 'family meetings' where parents asked their children how their learning was going in faith and mainstream classes.

Children also made scrapbooks containing information and ideas about their experiences. The final activity involved them interviewing a grandparent or older person from their faith community about their lives and making a second scrapbook as a record of this interaction. At various stages of the project, interviews with faith leaders, faith teachers, parents and children gave further insights into the community's history, practices and learning.

From this rich data set, we have selected an example from each community that demonstrates how the children gained skills and knowledge by participating in faith-related activities.

First steps into literacy at the Tamil temple

At the Tamil temple's annual Education Ceremony, children aged between 2 and 5 participate in a special ritual that marks their entry into literacy learning. We observed Chanthia, 3, a child from one of the families involved in our research, as she traced the first

letter of the Tamil alphabet with her finger in a silver tray filled with raw rice, guided by a priest while her parents and other families looked on. The priest chants mantras in Sanskrit while instructing the children in Tamil. The children respond in Tamil as they trace the letter, learning its shape and sound as their finger moves across the rice grains. They continue by repeating after the priest the sounds of other Tamil alphabet letters printed on a piece of paper they hold in their hands. However, since this community is London based, parents may ask the priest to introduce their child to the English alphabet also, so we see a bilingual literacy practice developing.

The ceremony illustrates to children the cultural and religious importance of education, and how highly it is regarded by their community. Participation in the ritual involves watching and listening carefully, so these very young children are inducted into appropriate ways of behaving and acting within the temple. Literacy takes on a religious significance and children learn to treat learning with reverence, since education is seen as the embodiment of the Goddess Saraswathi. The *Eduthodakkam* (Education Ceremony) is part of the Nine Nights Festival, which takes place annually in September or October to celebrate the trinity of Goddesses: Saraswathi (education), Lakshmi (wealth) and Durga (strength).

Call and response in the Pentecostal church

The call and response pattern comes from African cultural traditions. It is often used in the Pentecostal church as the congregation responds to the pastor or preacher. Children learn by joining in with their elders as they attend the services. When they go to Sunday school, aged between 2 and 6, call and response is used as a way of learning. The pattern is a question and answer conversation between the teacher and the children, which involves active listening so they are able to provide the right response at the right time. In this particular church, the call and response takes place in Twi, a language of the Akan people and the most widely spoken in Ghana.

Here is an example (translated into English):

Teacher's call:	Jesus
Children's response:	Friend of children
Teacher's call:	Jesus who?
Children's response:	Welcomes all children with open arms

The interaction moves smoothly and swiftly: most children are familiar with the call and anticipate the response. The words are sung and accompanied by bodily movements including facial expressions, hand gestures and foot-tapping. The cultural, rhythmic pattern is rich and beautiful, enhanced by the vocal intonation. The rhythms and intonation are also embedded in the West African disco-style music that children and adults dance to at family events such as weddings, and in church where a band plays before the service.

The call and response pattern facilitates learning through repetition and the association of speech with music and movement. The Sunday school teacher explained how she uses call and response to convey meaning to young children in an enjoyable way. By creating a conversation together, they are learning not only language skills but also how to respect and care for each other. We witnessed Bema, 9, spontaneously practising a call and response song with her 8-year-old friend at home, with the two girls taking delight in their own performance.

Literacy learning in the Qur'anic class

At the Rainbow Nursery House next to the East London Mosque, children up to 8 years of age, including 6-year-old Isha from our study, participate in a variety of activities from story time to beginning to read and write. They learn to speak, read and write in Modern Standard Arabic, while also learning Qur'anic Arabic as their religious language. Children work in small groups when learning to write to have

greater individual attention. They gather round the table, each with marker pens, a small whiteboard and a board rubber.

The teacher takes the lead, beginning with the letter *alif* which has the sound 'aaaa'. The children write it on their whiteboards. Clear instructions are given in English so they also learn bilingually. The teacher tests the children's listening, language and literacy skills, moving through the sounds of the Arabic alphabet while her pupils write each letter in response. They also learn grammatical and sentence structures in Arabic and the directionality of writing, from right to left.

The children develop the ability to memorize through oral recitation, which is fundamental to their Muslim faith. First they learn Islamic supplications – for example, those before going to sleep, when waking up, before a meal, or when undertaking a journey – before moving on to verses from the Qur'an. Recitation involves concentrating for long periods, and the children can evaluate their progress as they move from shorter verses to longer verses. At story time, the children are helped to understand the meaning of the Qur'an's historical narratives. Throughout their learning, they experience close connections between language, literacy and faith.

History and culture at Polish Saturday school

Polish Catholics' faith is strongly linked to their country's history and cultural traditions. So when children learn about significant religious days, they are also introduced to complex symbolic meanings. For example, 10-year-old Adam and his Saturday school classmates talked with their teacher about All Saints' Day on 1 November, when the Catholic Church commemorates all known and unknown saints. The day is called *Zaduski* and is a national holiday in Poland to allow people to travel around the country to visit the graves of relatives, where they place flowers and light lanterns. In the same lesson, the teacher explained that 11 November is Polish Independence Day because in 1918 the country was freed from 123 years of foreign occupation. Adam and his classmates wrote and drew in their exercise books, including in them words and symbols about both faith and history.

The Polish celebration of Easter involves understanding the meaning of a number of different symbols. The children and their families prepare Easter baskets, lined with a white linen napkin and containing special foods, to be blessed in church. Oliver, 11, was video recorded at home showing his Easter basket and describing the meaning of each item: hard boiled eggs in their shells and decorated eggs called *pisanki*, which symbolize new life; a little lamb made of sugar that represents victory and freedom; small willow twigs with new green leaves and catkins on them, which stand for peace; and a tiny pot of salt to take the bad spirits away. Oliver's explanation was in English but based on his study of Easter in Polish, which thus demonstrates both his faith-based knowledge and ability to handle abstract concepts bilingually.

Implications for schools

Our research demonstrates the scope and value of children's learning in faith settings – from acquiring language and literacy skills and historical and cultural knowledge to developing artistic and creative capacities and social skills in intergenerational contexts. All such attributes build self-confidence and provide additional dimensions to children's learning at mainstream school. Our aim now is to disseminate our findings widely so that mainstream teachers understand the importance of faith-learning in children's lives. By finding out more about the knowledge and skills children gain from these experiences, teachers will be better able to make links across the curriculum and foster a holistic approach to learning.

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