

BeLiFS

Becoming Literate in Faith Settings



Faith is highly important in the lives of many children and their families. This is especially the case for families who have recently migrated to the UK, where the faith provides both community and individual support. Through faith activities, children learn not only how to worship, but also many academic, social and cultural skills, important both in school and for life. Academically, they learn complex language and literacy skills, often in two or more languages. Socially, they learn to become morally responsible and to care for others. Culturally, they learn about the history of their families' country of origin, as well as important rituals, festivals and the practices of their faith.

This research project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (RES-062-23-1613) from 2009 to 2013, has set out to investigate how sixteen children aged between four and twelve from the Bangladeshi Muslim, Ghanaian Pentecostal, Polish Catholic and Tamil Hindu communities, become literate through faith activities in London. Twelve of the children and some of their parents were born in the UK, but all the families have settled in London since 1950. The children are active members of their faith communities, using different languages and literacy skills as they participate in faith activities in the Church, Mosque and Temple as well as faith classes and their homes.

Our four faith communities

The **Church of Pentecost** started in Ghana in 1931, supported by the Reverend James McKeown from Ireland and was established in London in the 1980s. Since then, it has grown considerably. It now has over 82 branches nationwide, 6,000 members and 16 full time ministers. This particular site is in Goodmayes, East London. The building is Edwardian, having been first a cinema for silent movies and later a Bingo Hall.

The Holy Bible is the main source of teaching. The 9 to 11 year olds access this through CDs of the Old and New Testaments; the 6–8 year olds have a variety of illustrated Bibles which they learn to read with the support of their teachers, whilst the 2–5 year olds learn texts through 'Call and Response' speech and song patterns. The Twi Bible, 'Kyer&w Kronkron' is used for the Akan service and the English Bible for the Pentecostal International Worship Centre service, attended by members of the international community. People travel from across London to attend this Church.

The **Polish parish** and the **Polish community school Croydon-Crystal Palace** in Oliver Grove, south-east London, were both set up in 1950 by the first Priest Father Gajeci and Polish families who settled in the area after the end of World War II. In 1963 the Polish school moved into its current premises; a Victorian house in Oliver Grove donated by Mr and Mrs Brzeski and in 1966 the school house was extended to create a Parish Hall. In 1985, thanks to the efforts of the whole community, the Church of Merciful Jesus was built next to the Parish Hall and consecrated and in 1992 an experienced Priest and missionary, Father Alexander, arrived.

Since the accession of Poland to the European Union in May 2004, the parish community has expanded. The school is bursting at the seams and Mass and Church festivals are very well attended. There are many thriving special interest groups, including *Karolinka* folk dance groups, *Ave Verum* choir, scouts and cubs, Seniors' Club as well as a Mothers and Toddlers group.

The **East London Mosque** and the **London Muslim Centre** together form one of the busiest and most vibrant Islamic Centres in Western Europe. They are located in the heart of Tower Hamlets (East London). The official opening of the East London Mosque in Whitechapel Road took place in 1985 to serve the local Bangladeshi, Sunni Muslim community. Waves of immigration to Whitechapel have included the Huguenot refugees, the Irish, the Jewish and now the Bangladeshi community. Support for establishing a Mosque dates back to the early twentieth century. During the 1930s a temporary site in Commercial Road was used as a Mosque and a hostel for Muslim sailors. As the Muslim community increased from the 1950s onwards, there was an urgent need for a more secure and permanent site and in 1982 the construction at the present site commenced. The London Muslim Centre opened in 2004. It now provides a wide range of services such as education, health and employment advice as well as women's support groups to the Muslim and the non Muslim community.

The **London Sri Murugan Temple** is located in Newham, East London. This is a culturally diverse area which is also home to a large Tamil community who have been migrating to the UK since the 1940s.

The first spiritual Tamil Hindu organisation called the 'Hindu Association of Great Britain' was set up in the 1960s. The outbreak of civil war in Sri Lanka brought larger numbers of Tamils to the UK during the 1980s – 90s who needed to build a more permanent life in the UK. In January 1983, the Tamil Hindu community purchased a property in Church Road which is the Temple's current location. In 1999 the original building was demolished in order to construct a new purpose built Temple with materials brought entirely from India. In May 2005 a grand ceremony took place for the opening of the new Temple.



The Church of Pentecost



The Polish Church



The East London Mosque



The Sri Murugan Temple

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From 2009 to 2013, we have worked with four families from each of the above settings, their faith leaders and faith teachers as well as older members of the communities. We have documented how children learn during religious services, in their faith classes, in other cultural activities linked to faith and, importantly, in their homes.

Taking part in the study are:

- Children
- Families
- Faith Leaders
- Faith Teachers
- Older members of faith community
- Advisory Group

Families, faith leaders, faith teachers and older community members have generously given their time to participate in the study. They have photographed and filmed their children at work and at play. They have taken part in interviews and have attended meetings with us. All this material has revealed a myriad of teaching and learning activities taking place.

Data we collected

- Interviews of faith leaders and teachers, children and parents
- Demographic data
- Historical data: area and faith
- Field narratives
- Field notes from classrooms
- Photos, audio and video recordings by children
- Artefacts and photos by families
- Scrapbooks by children
- Children's scrapbooks and interviews with older people

Questions and Answers

Our questions as we started the project were:

RQ1

What is the scope and nature of literacy practices in each faith setting?

RQ2

How do teaching and learning take place during faith literacy activities across different settings?

RQ3

In what ways have faith literacy activities changed:

- over time?
- in the London setting?
- perceptions across generations?

RQ4

How does participation in faith literacies contribute to individual and collective identities?

Briefly, in response to these questions, we have found that:

- The scope and nature of learning through faith related activities in children's lives is remarkable. Faith permeates children's everyday lives and underpins many language and literacy activities, fostering both bilingual and biliteracy skills.
- Children learn together with their families as well as with the wider community and practise both alone and with siblings and peers.
- Although practices and settings have changed across countries and generations, faith provides a thread of continuity whereby different generations share common knowledge, texts, symbols and narratives as well as common festivals and other ritual events.
- Becoming a member of a faith secures children's identities through a sense of 'belonging' to a community which comes together regularly and where the aim to learn as well as one can is not only for a teacher but also for a more powerful and eternal being.

In this report, we present brief examples to illustrate our findings from one part of the project: the social, cultural and academic skills learned by the children as they practise through participating in faith activities. A fuller account of the project findings can be found on our web-site (www.belifs.co.uk) designed by Zahir Rafiq, where we also list other publications and events.

ACADEMIC SKILLS

Education Ceremony in the Tamil Hindu/Saiva Temple



The photograph shows Chanthia, aged 3, a child from one of our families, taking her first steps into formal literacy learning through a ceremony led by the Priest. Her mother looks on as her father takes this photograph.

The photograph captures the moment Chanthia is repeating after the Priest the letters of the Tamil alphabet, which are printed on the piece of paper she is holding in her hands. This recitation is part of the *Eduthodakkam* (Education Ceremony), a ceremony that takes place annually on the 10th day of *Navarathiri* (the Nine Nights Festival) in September/October to celebrate the trinity of Goddesses: *Durga* (strength), *Lakshmi* (wealth) and *Saraswathi* (education).

For older children, this is a special day to mark the beginning of new learning, which may take the form of starting a new chapter in one of their school subjects. For younger children between the ages of two and five, however, the Education Ceremony has heightened significance because it symbolises their entry into formal education. On this day, the Priests or learned elders initiate young children into literacy by guiding them to trace the first letter of the Tamil alphabet அ with their finger in a silver tray filled with raw rice.

This ceremony involves a range of languages and literacies. The Priest chants mantras in Sanskrit while instructing the children in Tamil. The children respond in Tamil as they learn to trace the first letter of the Tamil script. Nevertheless, as this ceremony is conducted in a London Temple parents may request that the Priest introduces their child to the English alphabet too. Children learn the appropriate ways of being and acting in the Temple by listening, observing and taking part in the rituals involved in the ceremony. They also learn the shape and sound of the letters they are tracing with the guidance of the Priest as their finger moves across the rice grains. In addition, they learn the cultural and religious importance of education and how highly it is regarded by their community. Since their induction to education takes place in the Temple, literacy becomes a religious act and children learn to always treat learning with reverence since for the Tamil Saiva/Hindus education is perceived to be the embodiment of Goddess *Saraswathi* (education). This ceremony is one of many aspects of the Hindu/Saiva religion that teaches children that language, literacy and faith are intrinsically linked; that all forms of learning, including literacy learning, are sacred and that their Tamil language is holy and protected by God.

SOCIAL AND LISTENING SKILLS

Children in the Church of Pentecost-UK



Bema, aged 9, is practising a 'Call and Response' sung speech about Jesus with her 8 year old friend. The song is in Twi which is a language of the Akan people and the most widely spoken language in Ghana.

According to the teacher, when children first start Sunday School (Mmofra AƆƆre), aged between 2 and 6, they are taught how to listen through call and response speech and song. Here is an example:

Twi	English
(Ɔkyerɛkyerɛfo) frɛ: Yesu,	Teacher's call: Jesus,
(Mmofra) Nnyeso: mmofra adamfo.	Children's response: friend of children
(Ɔkyerɛkyerɛfo) frɛ: Yesu a,	Teacher's call: Jesus who,
(Mmofra) Nnyeso: Ɔyɛ mmofra nyinaa awaawaawaa atuu.	Children's response: welcomes <u>all</u> children with open arms.

The call and response pattern is a kind of 'question and answer' conversation between children in which turn-taking becomes a necessary skill needed to make it flow. This involves active listening so that the response (answer) can be provided at the right time. Whereas in normal everyday conversations the person providing the answer to a question would wait to hear the full question and spend time thinking about an appropriate answer, the call and response pattern of

spoken language may involve overlaps because the call is previously known and, therefore, anticipated.

As an introduction to lessons on Jesus, the teacher continues using the call and response pattern because she says she believes *listening* is a useful social skill that will benefit the children throughout their schooling and beyond. Below is the first lesson on Jesus:

Twi	English
Ɔfrɛ: Yesu maame de sɛn?	Call: What is the name of the mother of Jesus?
Nnyeso: Mary	Response: Mary

This knowledge of call and response was first learnt at home by watching the older members of the extended family respond to their leaders and also by dancing to the music provided by disc jockeys at family events, such as weddings and funerals. Later at Church, they learn from the older members of the congregation responding to the Pastor or preacher, as well as from those who dance to the warm-up music prior to Church services.

The Sunday school teacher says she emphasises the cultural rhythmic pattern in order to engage with the young children whilst conveying the intended meaning in an enjoyable way. Bema and her friend use bodily movement including hand gestures, facial expression, and foot-tapping as they practise 'Yesu maame de sen? (What is the name of the mother of Jesus?)'. The vocal intonation adds to the richness and beauty of the rhythm. African-American learners respond to their teachers who use the call and response pattern in their teaching, because there is similarity with cultural traditions. Literacy takes the form of call and response songs so that the children can respond to the adults and each other. In this way they learn not just language skills but also about sharing and caring for each other.

CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE

Learning about heritage culture in the Polish Catholic community



Ten year old Adam and eleven year old Oliver have been pupils at the Polish Saturday School since they were 5. They are both Cubs and stay after school for extra classes. Oliver is also an altar boy and he dances in the folk dance group *Karolinka*. They come to Church with their parents on Sundays and they attend community events and festival celebrations.

During one of his religion lessons in November, Adam learns about the significance of All Saints' Day on 1st November, a day when the Catholic Church commemorates all known and unknown saints. On this day, called *Zaduszki*, a national holiday in Poland, Poles from all parts of the country travel to the graves of their relatives to lay flowers and light lanterns. During the same lesson, Adam learns that 11 November is Polish Independence Day when in 1918 Poland became a free country after 123 years of foreign occupation. He is shown a Polish flag and finds out that its red colour signifies blood and the white, purity of heart.

In April Adam and Oliver, like the whole Polish community, prepare Easter baskets to be blessed in church. Oliver has lined his basket with a white linen napkin and he has placed special foods inside it: hard boiled eggs in their shells, some decorated eggs called *pisanki*, a little lamb made of sugar, small willow twigs with new green leaves and catkins on them, salt in a tiny pot and slices of bread and cake. He knows from his parents that these foods have symbolic meaning for Polish Catholics: eggs represent new life and together with bread and cake will be shared during festive Easter Sunday lunch, a lamb represents victory and freedom, green willow twigs represent peace and salt takes all the bad spirits away.

In religion classes at the Saturday school and through religious practices at home, both Adam and Oliver learn that Catholic religion is inseparable from Polish history and culture.

ACADEMIC KNOWLEDGE

Learning to read and write in Qur'anic class

Below is a photograph of Isha, aged 6, in her Arabic class taken by her mum at the Rainbow Nursery school, which is next to the East London Mosque.

Rainbow Nursery House is an independent provider of a range of services for children under 8 years of age and their families through an Islamic Foundation. The children at Rainbow Nursery learn to read, write and speak in Arabic as well as learning Qur'anic Arabic. The photograph below captures the students learning to write in Arabic. The class of 25 students has been divided into smaller groups of 5 students with the aim of providing more individual attention as children learn to master the language. Teacher Sabah Ahmed is taking the lead in Isha's group. She gathers all the five students together. As they congregate around the table with their white board, marker pens and a small board rubber, Sabah instructs the children to write the word she utters so that when she makes the sound "aaaa", it means "alif" which is the first letter in the Arabic alphabet. Then the children are expected to write the letter "alif" in Arabic on the board provided. She offers clear instructions in English for the children to follow. Here Sabah is testing the children's listening, language and literacy skills. She begins with making the sounds for each letter; the children listen attentively and respond by producing a visual product on the white boards. As Sabah moves

through the sounds, the children write the letters and join each to form the alphabet. Here they learn the correct grammatical and sentence structures and the ability to read and write Arabic from right to left as opposed to left to right in English. These are the beginning stages of learning to write in Arabic. The teachers at Rainbow Nursery carry out such activities for a few hours a day; other activities also follow such as reading Arabic, story-time and Qur'anic Arabic.

Learning to read in Arabic and memorising verses are also a significant part of learning at Rainbow Nursery. The children begin the journey of memorising from the age of 5 or earlier if possible with the Arabic alphabets. Later they move on to learn Islamic supplications such as the supplication before going to sleep, when waking up, when travelling or before a meal. Once children have mastered the skill of memorising, they move on to learning verses from the Qur'an, starting with the shorter verses and later extended to the longer verses. This enables the children to develop the ability to critically evaluate their own progress and to concentrate for long periods of time. During story-time, the children learn the various historical narratives taken from the Qur'an and gradually come to understand the close and important connections between language, literacy and faith.



Summary of skills learned by children at home through practising faith activities

We have found that our children are learning all the following skills:

Language and Literacy Skills

Phonics and decoding; reading comprehension; learning poetry and rhyming, including memorising verses, proverbs and other sayings, prayers and hymns; repeating and reciting difficult texts; pronouncing carefully and learning and practising intonation patterns; performing; story learning and storytelling; learning difficult grammar and sentence structures; listening; hand-to-eye coordination; directionality; building up and practising new and difficult vocabulary; matching illustrations to narratives; handwriting; sequencing; translating and interpreting. All of the above are learned bilingually, sometimes including a new script with different directionality.

Logical Reasoning Skills

Memorising; reflecting and self-reflecting; observing; developing critical evaluation; public speaking; negotiating and problem solving. All of these are supported by the skills of recall, concentration and using technology.

Cultural and social skills

Learning about the history of the heritage country; learning appropriate behaviour and appropriate ways of speaking in intergenerational contexts; sharing; learning moral behaviour and manners; learning important rituals and routines, including festivals and ceremonies and the special language(s) and literacies used for these; learning to prepare certain foods and the special decorations etc. linked with these.

Artistic and creative skills

Dancing; singing; chanting; call-and-response patterns; playing instruments; painting; drawing; physical movements during prayer; creativity through syncretising different artistic forms.

Implications and recommendations from our project

- Faith leaders and faith teachers should be aware of the academic, social and cultural skills children are developing alongside their knowledge of their faith so that they can draw more explicitly upon these in their faith lessons.
- Mainstream school teachers need to know more about the knowledge and skills learned by children in their faith settings so that they can support the whole child.
- Parents of children who are members of their faith community should be proud of their children's skills and achievements.
- This knowledge should be recognised and celebrated by the whole community.

We hope to make such a celebration possible through future work with museums and other interested institutions.

To discuss or find out more about this work, please contact: Professor Eve Gregory, e.gregory@gold.ac.uk



BeLiFS

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