RESEARCH ARTICLE

Characteristics of Atheist Pre-Service Elementary Teachers

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The purpose of this study was to investigate the beliefs and self-identities of 15 nonreligious pre-service elementary teachers (PSTs), as well as the role their lack of faith plays in their teaching. Semi-structured interviews and participant self-analyses served as data sources, which were used to categorize the PSTs into Silver's (2013) typology of nonbelief. Notably different from the distribution of Silver's national sample of nonbelievers, the nonreligious PSTs were much less engaged in their nonbelief and were more willing to comply with religious activities. The nonreligious PSTs were drawn to teaching due to their love of learning, and they intend to promote critical thinking and tolerance in their classrooms; however, 13 (87%) wof the PSTs expressed concern about the negative impact their lack of religion might have on their careers and intend to keep their lack of belief private.

Introduction

More than 1/3 of young adults claim no religious affiliation, and the number of Americans who are distinctly nonreligious is growing (PEW, 2015). Emerging research on the nonreligious has provided insights into this minority population that has been largely ignored, marginalized, and even reviled in the US. Nearly half of Americans think that the growing number of people who are nonreligious is bad for society (PEW, 2013). Nonreligious Americans span all geographic regions, age groups, and occupations, including teaching. Tens of thousands of atheists are teaching in public school classrooms today, despite an alarming number of people who object to the notion. In one survey, only 59% of Americans expressed agreement that an atheist should be allowed to teach high school (Baylor, 2005).

Given the increasing number of nonbelievers in the US, coupled with the rapid rise in the number of Millennial teachers due to Baby Boomers retiring, it is imperative that we learn more about the beliefs and practices of nonreligious teachers, a group about which essentially no research has been conducted. This study sought to learn more about the beliefs and self-identities of nonreligious pre-service elementary teachers, as well as the role their lack of faith plays in their teaching.

Review of Literature

Terminology

Categorizing the nonreligious is tricky. Identification usually results from self-declaration, which can lead to conflicting paradigms. Lee (2012) argued that existing terminology in the field of non-religion has been "used inconsistently, imprecisely, and often illogically" (p. 129). Some of Day's (2009) participants claimed that they were not religious because they did not identify with a church, yet they believed in some version of a supernatural force. Others identified with a specific religion even though they did not believe in a god. In England, for example, a majority of young people identified as Christians for purposes of familial and social relationships, despite their lack of belief in a god.

Much attention has been given lately to the rise (from 16.1% to 22.8%) in religiously unaffiliated Americans over the past seven years; however, only 7.1% declared that they were Atheist (3.1%) or Agnostic (4%) (PEW, 2015). Americans under 30 are more than twice as likely (35% vs 17%) than Baby Boomers to declare their lack of religious affiliation. Most of the "nones" who have been garnering recent media attention claimed that they were "nothing in particular" rather than declaring that they were "atheist" or "agnostic" outright. Only 31% of those classified as "nothing in particular" self-identified as atheist or agnostic (PEW, 2015).

In this study, I chose to include only those pre-service teachers (PSTs) who self-identified as atheist or agnostic. I left out PSTs who wrote that they were "spiritual" or any other derivation of "other". The term "atheism" designates a lack of belief in a god(s) (Smith, 1979; Bramlett, 2012); whereas, agnosticism refers to a lack of certainty over whether god exists (Miovic, 2004; Bramlett, 2012). Yet, because atheism and agnosticism are often used interchangeably to refer to people who lack belief in god(s), I use the abbreviation, "A/A". Throughout this paper, *A/A*, *nonreligious*, and *nonbelievers* are used synonymously.

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Public Perception of Atheists/Agnostics

Americans report greater disregard for atheists than they do toward any other religious, ethnic, or racial group (Cragun, et al., 2012; Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006). More than 60% of Americans expressed that atheists negatively influence society (Fitzgerald, 2003, as cited in Bramlett, 2012), and nearly half of Americans would disapprove of their child marrying an atheist (Edgell et al., 2006). Americans are less likely to vote for a hypothetical atheist than a Muslim or gay candidate, with 43% stating that they would not vote for an otherwise qualified candidate if s/he were an atheist (Jones, 2012). Politically, it is perilous for an A/A candidate. Of the 535 members of US Congress currently, there are no admitted Atheists or Agnostics. What's more, there are still laws in several states barring atheists from holding public office (Cimino & Smith, 2007). Atheists and Agnostics are still barred from participating as Scouts or Scout Leaders, though the Boy Scouts of America dropped its longstanding ban on homosexuals in May 2013 (www.scouting.org). Furthermore, courts have a consistent record of denying custody of children to A/A parents expressly because of their lack of religious belief (Cline, 2006).

Beyond the overt discrimination in the US, A/As report subtle discrimination, which is correlated with the extent to which the person was "out" or public about her atheism (Hammer, Cragun, Hwang, & Smith, 2012). Atheists commonly experience slander (both personally and in the media), coercion (pressure to perform religious behaviors or risk social consequences), and social ostracism (Cragun et al., 2012).

Religion in Public Schools

Corresponding with their affinity for religion generally, Americans overwhelmingly support the presence of religion in our public schools. Despite 50 years' worth of case law that has declared school prayer unconstitutional, 61% of Americans think daily prayer should be allowed in classrooms, and 75% support prayers as part of official school programs (Riffkin, 2014). Once again, however, it appears that Americans' perspectives are divided among generational lines, with 56% of people under 30 supporting the Supreme Court's ban on school prayer compared with 30% of Americans older than 60 (PEW, 2012). A/A children and teachers are susceptible to discrimination since most US schools tend to be Christian-centric (Hartwick, 2007; Ribak-Rosenthal & Kane, 1999). Recently, Michigan (the state in which this study took place) passed a law requiring all schools to lead students in the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance. Though seemingly minor, the daily choral recitation of the words "under God" is a clear reminder that A/As are different from the vast majority of American students and teachers (Laycock, 2004).

American Teachers and Atheism/Agnosticism

America's shifting demographics certainly has implications for its teacher workforce, which has been graying since the 1980s. In 1988 the average age of a US teacher was 41; in 2008 it was 55 (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2010). Recently, however, the US has seen a "greening" of its teacher workforce on the heels of a mass retirement of Baby Boomers. In 2011, only 31% of teachers were aged 50+, with 22% of teachers younger than 30 years old (Feistritzer, 2011). With 3.2 million teachers in the US, more than 7 million are under 30 years old.

Though we do not have clear data on the religious affiliations of US teachers, it appears that teachers are more religious than the general population (Slater, 2008). Research on college students revealed that Education majors are the most religious students on campus (Kimball, Mitchell, Thorton, & Young-Demarco, 2009). What's more, Education majors tend to become more religious throughout their college education (Kimball et al., 2009). The vast majority (84%) of teachers in the US are female (Feistritzer, 2011), and females are half as likely as males to self-identify as atheist or agnostic (PEW, 2012). Still, given the overall national trend regarding religion, it is safe to assume that younger teachers are more likely to be A/A than older teachers.

Despite the increasing number of A/A teachers, we know very little about them. Much has been written about the lives of teachers who are religious (see Hartwick, 2007, 2009, 2012), but there are only a few published studies on nonreligious teachers. This paper stems from a previous study (Author, 2014) of four A/A pre-service elementary teachers (out of a class of 22) who planned, taught, and reflected on a world religions field experience with 7th-grade students, as part of a program requirement during their semester prior to student teaching.

In this paper, I sought to learn about the identities, beliefs, and intentions of 15 nonreligious elementary PSTs from four cohorts. Unlike my previous work on how the PSTs planned and taught lessons, this study aimed to learn more about the self-declared A/A PSTs, including their world views, their school experiences and decisions to become teachers, how their nonbelief relates to their teaching experiences, and their projection of how their nonbelief will impact their future teaching practice. Using Silver's (2013) typology of non-belief, I used semi-structured interviews and participants' journals to categorize the 15 PSTs into six "types" of nonbelievers.

In an attempt to delineate types of nonbelievers beyond merely agnostics and atheists, Silver (2013) developed a typology of six categories, which include:

> **Intellectual A/A (IAA)** – proactively seek to educate themselves through intellectual association;
> **Activist (AAA)** – socially active; proactive and vocal about current issues;
> **Seeker-Agnostic (SA)** – recognize limitations of human knowledge and experience; open to possibilities of metaphysical existence;
> **Anti-Theist** – assertively and diametrically opposed to religious ideology; "new atheists";
> **Non-Theist** – apathetic or disinterested in religion;
> **Ritual A/A (RAA)** – hold no belief in god(s) but find utility in some traditions, rituals, or the teachings of some religious traditions.

Methods

This study used predominantly qualitative and ethnographical methods (Cresswell, 1998; Yin, 2011) to categorize the 15 nonreligious PSTs into Silver's (2013) typology of nonbelief and to seek an understanding of the role of nonreligion in their current and future teaching practices. The undergraduate Elementary Education PSTs, from an approximately 9,000-student public university in Michigan, were in their final semester of their teacher preparation program, the student-teaching practicum. Predominately Caucasian, female (87%), and in their early- to mid-20s, the initial participants came from four cohorts of students over four semesters, 94 in total, of whom 74 (78.7 %) self-identified as *Christian* (37 Roman Catholic and 37 Protestants), 15 (16%) as atheist/agnostic, and 5 (5.3%) as *Other*. This study focused on the 15 PSTs who self-identified as Agnostic or Atheist. The two PSTs who wrote "spiritual" under the *Other* category, and the one PST who wrote, "Unitarian Universalist" were excluded.

All 94 PSTs also took The *Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire* (SCSRFQ), a 10-question self-report measure designed to assess respondents' strength of religious faith (Plante, 2010; Plante & Boccaccini, 1997; see **Table 1**). The SCSRFQ, a reliable and validated assessment useful for multiple religions, uses a four-point Likert-like scale, resulting in a range of possible scores from 10 (no faith) to 40 (strong faith) (Freiheit, Sonstegard, Schmitt, & Vye, 2006). Scores under 26 are to be considered low faith, and scores 26 and over are to be considered high faith (Plante, 2010). Although psychometrically sound and commonly used in social science research due to its nondenominational structure, the SCSRFQ is not an optimum instrument for the nonreligious. Six of the 10 questions refer to "my faith," which could be problematic for nonbelievers who interpret that to mean "my lack of faith". For example, one of the stems states, "I enjoy being around others who share my faith." A nonbeliever might strongly agree that she enjoys being around other nonbelievers.

Using a semi-structured protocol, I interviewed the 15 nonreligious PSTs. The length of the interviews varied greatly (between 30 and 90 minutes), depending on how much each PST chose to share. At the end of each interview,

Affiliation	PSTs	Religiosity
Christian	74 (78.7%)	28.27
Protestant	37 (39.4%)	29.78
Catholic	37 (39.4%)	26.76
Nonreligious	15 (16%)	14.33
Agnostic	11 (11.7%)	15.36
Atheist	4 (4.3%)	11.5
Other	5 (5.3%)	18.80

Table 1: Religious Affiliation of Elementary Pre-service Teachers.

I gave the PST the descriptions of Silver's (2013) six types of nonbelief and asked them to email me with their self-analysis of the type with which they most identify, as well as their reflections on their self-identities as A/As. Using phenomenological principles (Creswell, 1998), I began coding my interview notes before determining which of Silver's categories each PST best fit. Then, using classical content analysis (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008), I examined the interview transcripts and my notes to categorize the PSTs before reading their self-analyses and reflections. Phenomenology seeks to interpret each individual's experiences and perceptions without seeking causal explanations (Van Manen, 1990). Accordingly, I sought to capture the participants' lived experiences before attempting to draw conclusions or generalizations.

My categorizations of the PSTs' types of nonbelief matched the self-identifications of 13 (87%) of the PSTs. For the two PSTs whose self-identifications differed from my categorizations, I asked them to return for a second interview. Each of those follow-up interviews (one by phone) lasted approximately 15 minutes, during which time the PSTs and I reached consensus on which of Silver's categories fit them best. Furthermore, I continued to code the interview transcripts and reflections using constant comparison methods, searching for additional themes with supporting examples until the data reached a point of saturation (Campbell, Quincy, Osserman, & Pedersen, 2013; Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, & Coleman, 2000).

Findings

With the lack of a dominant framework for examining nonbelievers, I selected Silver's Typology (2013), which allowed the PSTs and me to efficiently categorize each of the nonreligious PSTs into a distinct category. However, the distribution of the 1,123 nonreligious Americans in Silver's research did not match the distribution of the 15 PSTs in my study. The three most common types of PST nonbelievers (Seeker-Agnostic, Ritual Atheist/Agnostic, and Non-Theist, in order) were the three least common types in Silver's research. Whereas only 7.6% of Silver's participants identified as Seeker-Agnostics, 40% of the PSTs in my study were Seeker-Agnostics. Conversely, the most common type of nonbelievers in Silver's research were Intellectual Atheists/Agnostics at 37.6%, yet none of the PSTs identified as such. Similarly, the second-most common type of nonbelievers in Silver's research were Activists (23%), yet only one PST (6.7%) was an Activist Atheist/Agnostic.

Despite the 15 PSTs' clear lack of belief in a deity, they were notably less active in their nonbelief than Silver's participants. With nearly half of the PSTs being Nontheists (20%) or Ritual Atheists/Agnostics (26.7%), the PSTs could be considered relatively disinterested in secular activism. While 75% of Silver's participants were active in their opposition to religion (Intellectual Atheists/Agnostics, Activists, or Anti-Theists), only two (13.3%) of the PSTs were energetic about their atheism. See **Table 2**.

Affiliation	PSTs (n = 15)	Silver's participants (n = 1153)
Intellectual A/A	0 (0%)	434 (37.6%)
Activist Atheist/ Agnostic	1 (6.7%)	265 (23%)
Seeker Agnostic	6 (40%)	88 (7.6%)
Antitheist	1 (6.7%)	171 (14.8%)
Nontheist	3 (20%)	51 (4.4%)
Ritual Atheist	4 (26.7%)	114 (12.5%)

Table 2: Type of Nonbelief.

Pre-Service Teachers' Categorizations in Silver's Typology

My categorizations of the PSTs came primarily from the interview data and matched the the PSTs' self-appointed categories 87% of the time initially. Combined with their written self-reflections, their interview transcripts provided ample examples to justify the categorizations into Silver's typology, some of which I provide below.

Seeker-Agnostics

As mentioned above, six (40%) of the PSTs were Seeker-Agnostics. The phrase, "open mind" was repeatedly spoken by these PSTs. For example, one PST said, "I am not sure of the existence of God; however, I do keep an open mind about it all." Another PST said: "I have a curious personality, and have [an] open mind when it comes to religion, but I myself cannot say I necessarily believe in God or some other higher power."

All six of these PSTs referred to themselves as agnostic. What's more, they all intentionally avoided the atheist label. Primarily, they avoided calling themselves atheists due to their perception that atheism connotes a certainty about there being no god. Even when presented with the definition that atheism is simply a lack of belief in god(s), they resisted the label. When pressed, these Seeker-Agnostic PSTs relied on circular logic to defend their agnosticism, such as: "I don't believe in a god, but I can't be sure that there is no god, so I can't say I believe in a lack of god."

Ritual Atheists/Agnostics

The four (26.7%) Ritual Atheists/Agnostics described how they liked to participate in religious events, despite their lack of belief in a supreme being. For example, one PST said, "I enjoy various events and activities like Christmas celebrations, but not because they are religious. I enjoy the ritual." Another PST commented:

> I find comfort in rituals and traditions. For example, at the camp I worked at we had a Native American Ceremony every Friday night. The Chief would come in and we would follow him to the ceremonial bowl where the "spirits" would share their wisdom with us and new campers would pledge to take care of the Earth. I think that is a great ritual.

Common among this group of PSTs was an appreciation for religious lessons and leaders. Another of the Ritual A/A PSTs remarked, "I enjoy reading teachings of many religious leaders. Although I don't identify with any religion, there are many things I have found that encourage me to evaluate myself and the world around me." Notably, these PSTs drew on the rituals and teachings of several religions. One stated: "I have found inspiration in the stories of Siddhartha, Jesus, and within the Bhagavad Gita. I think that religion is popular for a reason; the tales can offer hope and guidance."

Non-Theists

Three (20%) PSTs were classified as Non-theists because they reportedly did not think about religion or non-religion much, if at all. One PST remarked, "I don't care about religion or atheism. We'll never know those answers, so why waste time thinking about it?" Another Non-Theist PST described how she does not need religion for a moral framework:

> As of right now there is no proof of a supreme being, and I am okay with that. I know I am a good person that tries to do good things for others, and I'm very happy simply living by the golden rule – I don't need religion in my life.

The other Non-theist PST acknowledged that she did not believe in a supreme being but refrained from talking about it:

> I am not in any way, shape, or form interested in pushing my disbelief onto others or starting a movement to push society in a direction towards religious disbelief. I don't do or say things with religion or lack thereof in mind. Religion or lack thereof really plays no part in my life on a day-to-day basis.

Activist

One PST was an Activist A/A who stated, "I feel very strongly about the separation of church and state, and am very outright in my beliefs that deal with feminism, LGBT issues, abortion, etc." She maintains a blog and shares articles with others via email but intentionally keeps her atheism activism off of Facebook because of the opposing beliefs of her friends and her father.

Anti-Theist

Finally, one of the 15 PSTs was an Anti-Theist, mainly because of her self-admitted arrogance about atheism and overall disdain for religion. She had tendencies associated with both Intellectual Atheists/Agnostics and Activists but fit more closely with the Anti-Theist category because of her contempt for people who hold beliefs about the supernatural. She expressed particular frustration with religious classmates who were going to be science teachers:

> How can someone who believes in creation be a science teacher? I don't get how people can pick

and choose when they are going to follow logic and the laws of science and when they are going to willingly ignore them. Don't they see that holding onto archaic religious beliefs is slowing the advancement of science?

Overall, this PST saw religion as more harmful than good.

PSTs' Reflections on their Nonreligion

Most of the PSTs admitted that they were rather indifferent about their nonbelief. One of the Non-theist PSTs commented: "I've never really thought about categorizing myself as an atheist. I haven't spent a great deal of time considering what group I fit into; and honestly wasn't aware that there were different 'types' of atheists." Another PST, a Seeker-Agnostic, wrote:

> Although many of my friends are atheists, I have never thought of myself as being part of a group or subcategory so this took me a while to figure out. I don't see myself as being connected to other atheists somehow; it is just who I am.

Several PSTs explained how they were somewhat afraid to talk about their nonbelief. One Ritual A/APST remarked:

> I am rather reserved about the fact that I am an Atheist. Not that I am ashamed, but I think that society has created such a stigma and people often think you must be satanic or a hellion if you are an Atheist. I prefer to keep it private because, along with politics, I think religion or lack thereof is personal.

The PSTs seemed happy to participate in this research and were comfortable talking about their nonbelief, yet generally were not prone to discussing their nonbelief in daily life. As one Non-Theist PST said, "I just don't think about it very much and I seldom talk to anyone about it."

Perhaps most representative of the PSTs' indifference were their responses to my interview question about Michigan's law requiring all public schools to lead students in recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance. Only one PST, the Activist, expressed any concern about inclusion of the phrase "under God." Most PSTs made comments like this one from a Seeker A/A:

> I think that the Pledge of Allegiance is an important part of our nation's history. Really, I just don't care. It is completely absurd to me that the word "God" simply spoken in school would offend or infuriate anyone. I mean, COME ON. I say the word "God" all the time simply out of habit. Oh my God, Jesus Christ, Good Lord, Please God . . . etc. are said on the daily by religious and nonreligious citizens.

The PSTs expressed a desire to "not make waves" and seemed quite bound by tradition, particularly with regard to school operations. Teachers are known to be change-averse

(Fives & Buehl, 2012), and these PSTs were content to accept the status quo, even if it meant practices that opposed their religious beliefs. Most of the nonreligious PSTs had no problems with Christianity's presence in our public schools. One of the Nontheist PSTs remarked, "Like it or not, we live in a Christian country. Christian holidays dominate. I don't mind some Christian songs during the Christmas concert. It's more culture than religion." Another PST, a Seeker Agnostic, commented, "The community where I student-taught is 99.99% White and Christian. I can't expect there not to be a strong Christian influence. It's just the way it is. It doesn't affect me."

Cultural importance

Nearly all the PSTs described how they think religion is important to society, even though they are not religious themselves. For example one Seeker A/A PST said, "I just think that culture is so important and religion is a part of that. It's not a part that I need to actively participate in but I understand the importance." One Ritual A/APST expressed how she thinks society needs religion:

> Organized religion gives people something more. It gives people the opportunity to be forgiven and forgive others, the opportunity to ask for help, the opportunity to share things they cannot share with a person. Organized religion is not something I am against. For some people it is the reason they are able to do good while here on earth. It gives people purpose and an "out" for when life just gets too hard. Humanity needs a base like that. I don't think(?) they could function without it.

Another PST, a Non-Theist opined:

> I have learned that people *need* their religions. Whether it's the social aspect of being in a community who has the same beliefs, or a 6 year old girl who feels awful about her day, which stemmed from her father dying of cancer and a mom who took off a long time ago, they need it to live a full life.

What's more, several of the PSTs revealed how they were jealous of people who believed in a god. The Activist PST remarked, "I have found myself, while growing up, wishing that I could just fake it to be part of an organized religion. However I found that it was too far out of my reach." Another PST, a Ritual A/A admitted: "It bothers me that I cannot just make myself believe because I want to be in a community and have a support system larger than those around me." With the exception of the Anti-Theist, all the PSTs felt that religion is mostly good.

The Role of their Nonreligion on their Teaching

Beyond categorizing the 15 PSTs and examining how they conceptualized their nonreligious beliefs in general, I sought to understand how the PTS' beliefs about nonreligion have impacted their teaching experiences thus far.

All 15 of the PSTs completed a field-intensive teacher education program and had completed, or were close to completing, their 16-week student teaching practicum at the time of the interviews.

Each of the PSTs had at least one story about how they encountered religion during their student teaching practicum. One PST described how her Kindergarten students wrote "god" when asked to come up with words that start with the letter "g". When she walked by one table of students, a little girl asked her, "God make everything, right, Ms. Smith?" to which she replied, "That's what a lot of people believe." The Seeker Agnostic PST explained how she was nervous about the interaction:

> Luckily, they were okay with that answer, but I was nervous that they would question me on what I believed. I didn't know how I would explain it without having angry parents. Looks like my beliefs are going to impact my teaching a little more than I thought.

Another PST, a Ritual Atheist, described how one of her students asked her if God was going to be mad at her for her bad behavior:

> I asked her if she thought he (God) would be. She said no, because he loves her no matter what. I agreed with her. She found peace after a day filled with turmoil. I am always going to support that peace within my students no matter what religion. Always.

The nonreligious PSTs seemed to have no trouble supporting the religious beliefs of their students, at least not during their student teaching practicum. The student teaching practicum, however, is in many ways different from the actual classroom. During student-teaching, PSTs are subordinate to the classroom teacher, their university supervisor, and the host school in general. The PSTs during student teaching were not able to establish their own classroom milieu like they, presumably, will be able to do when they have their own classrooms.

The Role of their Nonreligion on their Future Teaching
In addition to examining the PSTs' experiences with and perspectives on the intersection between their nonreligiosity and their student-teaching experiences, I also asked the 15 PSTs to consider how their beliefs might impact their upcoming teaching careers. All of the PSTs were intending to obtain a full-time teaching position for the following school year, making teaching their careers. I was curious whether the PSTs would project their future actions to be different from what they experienced during their student tea0ching practicum. Three themes emerged from this line of questioning: nondisclosure, tolerance, and critical thinking.

The PSTs' participation in this study was contingent upon confidentiality, and all but two of the PSTs expressed their plans to purposefully keep their nonreligion secret when they are teachers. For example, one PST, a Seeker Agnostic, shared:

> I am nervous about anyone finding out that I am an atheist elementary school teacher because I don't want my students and their parents to think less of me. I hope that the correlation between atheism and being a bad person goes away in my lifetime.

These PSTs were certain that their atheism/agnosticism would be a detriment to them, both in the job hunt and in their teaching careers. One of the Ritual Atheists explained how her lack of belief might negatively impact her: "I want to teach in this area, which is overwhelmingly Christian. Admitting that I don't believe in God could prevent me from getting hired. Admitting it really has no upside."

The PSTs commonly described how they want to model tolerance and acceptance. One PST, a Non-theist, remarked: "If a student tells a story about Sunday School, you can tell them it was a nice story and thank them for sharing. Students need to see that you can have polite, supportive interactions when religion is the topic." The PSTs described how they want their students to feel safe and accepted, regardless of their beliefs. One Seeker-Agnostic PST explained, "Most kids believe what they believe because of their parents. I want my classroom to be a place where kids can ask any questions they want, give any opinion they want, without being ridiculed."

While the PSTs were positive regarding their tolerance of their students, they expressed frustration with students who did not show tolerance of others. One PST, the Anti-theist, stated:

> I feel myself getting so frustrated with students who are not open to learning about other religions. When I taught them in class, we are clearly not teaching them to choose another religion, and some students are taught by their parents that the only religion that is acceptable is their own, so they simply shut themselves off in the classroom. It was incredibly hard for me to teach them when they refused to listen because they were taught to be ignorant of other's beliefs, which is where so many problems arise.

Overall, the PSTs were quite positive and hopeful about their future goals of promoting tolerance. For example, one Seeker Agnostic PST stated:

> I think that my open-minded perspective will help make the most of the diversity and interests of my students, which will connect the students, and challenge them to expand their knowledge and viewpoints. I also hope my curiosity for the world around me will spread onto my students.

Likewise, the Activist PST said, "I think that the world would be a happier place if more people were open minded." The nonreligious teachers in this study articulated a clear sense of compassion for their students and

felt that their lack of religiousness better equipped them to model and teach tolerance. For example, one of the Nontheists stated:

> The fact that I don't follow any religion increases my acceptance and value of different people and their many beliefs. I think there is something to be learned from all of the different religions and that through education we can promote acceptance, and not just tolerance. The fact that I do not follow one religion allows me to teach about religion and culture in a more objective way.

Several of the PSTs were adamant that they intend to teach their students to think critically and to seek evidence rather than to accept what they are told. For example, a Seeker Agnostic PST explained, "I use evidence and reason to view the world, which I think is a good thing. Why wouldn't I want my students to do the same?" The PSTs described how they want their students to "examine issues from all sides." Most of the PSTs noted that they wanted to respect what their students' parents taught them at home; however, the Activist PST and the Anti-Theist PST were explicit in their desire to help students "move beyond the dogma they are taught at home." Only these two PSTs described any intent related to subversive pedagogy. The rest of the nonreligious PSTs mentioned critical thinking, directly or indirectly, but stopped short of indicating that they intend to change their students' minds about their religious beliefs. Rather, most of the PSTs made comments along the lines of this one made by a Seeker-Agnostic PST:

> I really want to foster curiosity in my classroom. Curiosity leads to creative thinking which begins with a sense of wonder and mystery that motivates students to learn new ways to understand and express themselves. This will also cause students to seek diverse connections and build new relationships among ideas.

Most of the PSTs connected their own cognition and learning styles with how they intend to teach. Nearly all of these nonreligious PSTs shared how they did not like having to memorize information only to "regurgitate it back on the test." They preferred to learn through debate and discussion, exploring multiple perspectives on complex topics. Accordingly, the A/A PSTs described how they want to teach students to interpret, analyze, and synthesize multiple sources of information on each topic, particularly in social studies. Even in their plans for teaching math, these PSTs expressed an aversion to rigidity. One PST described how she hated having to "do problems the teacher's way" even though she could get the answers in her head an easier way.

Discussion

With the number of nonreligious Americans on the rise, it is imperative to learn more about the beliefs, intentions, and actions of this minority population, particularly since people's belief systems impact how they act (Hartwick,

2014). We know remarkably little about nonreligious teachers, which is problematic since teachers' beliefs "are likely to influence how they view their professional lives, likely impacting how they see and treat students, view knowledge, and what classroom resources they might use" (p. 4). In other words, teachers' beliefs on the supernatural may impact what and how they teach.

This study did not directly investigate how nonreligious teachers teach. Rather, I sought to learn – through interviews, reflections, and the PSTs' self-categorizations – more about the types of nonreligiousness of 15 PSTs, as well as how those different nonreligious teachers might approach the profession. Unlike the majority of teachers in Hartwick's (2014) research who expressed a calling by God to teach, none of the nonreligious teachers in this study expressed a compulsion or sense of mission to become a teacher. The nonreligious PSTs referred to their love of learning and wanting to share their passion with others, but none of the PSTs connected this directly to their lack of belief in the supernatural. For example, one of the Seeker Agnostics stated, "I am always learning. I love to admit that I don't know things and that I want to learn more. I want to teach that attitude to my students." The A/A PSTs expressed an affinity for critical thinking and debate, and intend to teach their students how to think critically; however, they did not go so far as to describe their desire to become teachers as a "calling."

The ways the PSTs plan to approach their craft of teaching presented the most pronounced expression of the PSTs' nonreligiousness. It is also in this area that differences among the types of nonreligious PSTs were apparent. Recall that Silver's (2013) extensive analysis of nonreligious Americans, which lead to his creation of the six types of nonbelief, yielded distributions quite different from the 15 PSTs in this study. Certainly, the small sample size in this study is a limitation, but the differences are worth noting. Whereas in Silver's sample more than 60% of respondents were Intellectual A/A or Activist A/A, only one PST fell into either of those categories. It is important to note that although large, Silver's sample was not a representative sample of the nonreligious in the US. The Intellectual and Activist A/A categories, along with Anti-Theists, consist of people who are active in the "movement" and are public about their lack of religion. The PSTs in this study, however, were overwhelmingly inactive and private.

Though 13 of the 15 PSTs intend to remain "closeted" during their teaching careers, suggesting that little has changed since Nash (2003) wrote about the stigmatization of atheist college students, the PSTs' nonreligiousness will certainly play some role in their teaching, if only indirectly. Nonreligious teachers are more likely to present students with open-ended tasks and to use resources other than the textbook (Author, 2014; Hartwick, 2014). Albeit covertly, the nonreligious teachers plan to promote skepticism over certainty, and interpretation over dogma. Whereas White (2010) found Christian teachers more likely to select curricular resources written by overtly Christian authors (like C.S. Lewis), the ideas expressed by my nonreligious PST participants suggest they may be more likely

to select resources written by skeptics. As White (2009) noted, "[T]eaching is not a neutral act" (p. 864).

Silver's (2013) typology of nonbelief provided a useful framework for learning about different types of nonreligious teachers; however, the PSTs' difficulties with categorizing themselves illustrates the limitations of Silver's socially constructed typology. Silver's typology worked in this study to help me learn more about nonreligious teachers, but it also revealed the complexity and diversity surrounding nonbelief.

Nonetheless, from this limited sample, it appears that nonreligious White, female elementary pre-service teachers tend to exhibit similar characteristics that align them with just a few of Silver's categories. The PSTs in this study were predominantly Seeker Agnostics, Ritual Atheists, and Nontheists, who, compared to the other types (Intellectual Atheists/Agnostics, Activists, and Antitheists) in Silver's national sample, tend to be less strident in their nonbelief, even to the point of participating in and accommodating religious practices that are part of the dominant cultural norms.

Perhaps most importantly, the PST participants in my sample believe that public schools (i.e., government funded schools) are somewhat unfriendly places for nonreligious teachers. As a marginalized population (Author, 2014; Cragun et al., 2012; Edgel et al., 2006), nonbelievers still face educational and work environments where their worldviews are not fully accepted or accommodated, and the comments of my participants suggest they perceive their future workplaces to not be accepting or accommodating. Subedi (2006) warned that our Christian-centric schools create biases against students with non-traditional religious identities. Nonreligious students and teachers are often seen as disloyal and unpatriotic outsiders, which the PSTs in my study perceive. As a result, they indicated that they plan to remain closeted about their nonbelief and nonreligion.

The 15 PSTs in this study represent a rising trend in religiously unaffiliated Millenials (36%), 9% of whom are agnostic or atheist (PEW, 2015). With the rapid increase in the number of nonreligious elementary teachers entering the profession as Baby Boomers retire, we need to learn more about how these nonreligious teachers construct their self-identities, how they approach teaching, and most importantly how they manage their nonbelief and nonreligion in a workplace environment that they perceive to not be accommodating of their worldviews.

Competing Interests

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