

Final draft

Lytra, V. (forthcoming 2018) "Faith literacies matter: Reflecting on the role of faith as a force for learning, socialisation and personal and collective identification in young people's lives in a global city". In: Languages and Spiritual Traditions. Linguistic Diversity and Religious Diversity in the City of Barcelona. LinguaPax International

Faith literacies matter: Reflecting on the role of faith as a force for learning, socialisation and personal and collective identification in young people's lives in a global city

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I would like to introduce my topic by way of a personal story. Last May I had gone to school to bring my 11 year old daughter her packed lunch which she had forgotten at home. At the school corridor I saw her class teacher, Mr A. and we started chatting. I don't quite remember how we began talking about the role of faith in children's language and literacy development but I distinctly remember his remark that he had never really thought about the relevance or importance of faith in children's learning. Mr A. is a very thoughtful teacher who encourages his students to ask questions and discover knowledge. Later that day, Mr A. sent me the following email:

Hi again,

Interestingly and coincidentally, just after you left a classmate wrote this:

What does this small action idea make you think / understand about our central idea?

It makes me think that anyone can make a difference, no matter what age, race, gender, or nationality. It shows us that there are more important things than ourselves, and that no one should be alone in the world. We were not made to be alone, we were made so that we could comfort, not kill, so that we could heal, not hurt, and so that we could help our earth become the better, cleaner, kinder earth that God created it to be. Juan Mann's story shows us that no one should suffer being alone. We are all humans. We are all equal. We are all His creations, and He blessed each and every one of us differently, but all the same, he blessed each and every one of us. I think that the Free Hugs campaign was a small bit, but it helped the people he hugged, and the people who saw, and cared.

Funny time, non?

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The child was reflecting on the Free Hugs movement that sprang up in 2004 in Australia. It was initiated by Juan Mann from Sydney who started giving free hugs in his local shopping mall. His actions were spurred by the realisation that people were living increasingly disconnected lives and wanted to do something about it. The idea caught hold of people's imagination and spread across the globe. The children had been talking about how the actions of a single person could affect the lives of so many as part of the central idea of their unit of inquiry: "Through small actions, everyone can make an impact."

What struck me when I read the child's response was how powerful and personal it was; but also how she was using a religious frame to make sense of academic learning (in this case reflecting upon how the story of Juan Mann was related to the central idea of the unit and evaluating his actions). I was particularly struck by the language and how it resembled a sermon ("we were not made to be alone, we were made so that we could comfort, not kill, so that we could heal, not hurt, and so that we could help our earth become the better, cleaner, kinder earth that God created it to be") but also what this very short piece of writing revealed about the child's sense of self, how their faith seemed to be central to their understanding and interpretation of the world and their place within it ("We are all His creations, and He blessed each and every one of us differently, but all the same, he blessed each and every one of us"). As an educator, I pondered the question that if we are to build our pedagogies drawing on all children's linguistic, cultural and social resources surely we cannot ignore children's

faith literacies nor consider them irrelevant to their academic learning. As the child's reflections reveal, for many children around the world these are important resources for learning and identification that cut across home, school and community. But what do we actually know about children's faith related languages and literacies?

As the studies in Lytra, Volk and Gregory (2016) attest, we do know that faith underpins the everyday experiences of many children and adults. It has been viewed as an important source of support, comfort and hope, as they navigate the challenges and opportunities of a globalised world and partake in multilingual, multicultural, multiethnic and multi-faith societies. This is especially the case for individuals and communities new to a country or facing hardship and discrimination. For instance, scholars have examined the significance of the Black Church in the US in supporting African American youth to develop resilience and educational achievement (Barrett 2010, Haight 2002, McMillon and Edwards 2000, Peele-Eady 2011, 2016). Others have investigated the role of faith as a source of spiritual and material support to resist the racism and marginalisation many Latino children and their families in the US face in their daily lives (Baquedano-López and Ochs 2002, Ek 2005, Volk 2016).

Nevertheless, within Educational Studies, the role of faith in children's learning, socialisation and personal and collective identification remains an emergent field of inquiry. Most often than not, schooling and wider society tend to ignore or disparage the role of faith in children's educational achievement, socialisation and identity development or unfavourably compare it to that of school literacies (Dávila 2015, Genishi and Dyson 2009, Gregory, Long, and Volk 2004, Long 2016, Skerrett 2013). Mr A.'s remark that he had never really thought about the relevance or importance of faith in children's learning is indicative of many teachers' stance towards faith

literacies.

This educator's stance is compounded by the fact that faith is often perceived as a very private, deeply personal matter. This is compounded by the belief that only if one is a member of the faith community one can truly understand the religious rituals and sacred texts (Fader 2009, Sarroub 2005). These widely held perceptions have been intensified by the secularisation of social life and the compartmentalisation of the secular and the religious spheres in many contemporary societies around the world. At the same time, there is a growing realisation of the "entanglement" of the secular and the religious and the existence of more porous and fluid boundaries (Baquedano-López and Ochs 2002: 175).

Rather than ignoring or disparaging faith literacies, in our work we take a view of faith as an essential part of culture; a complex and multifaceted cultural practice that is embedded in specific sociocultural, historical and political contexts and is passed down from one generation to the next, providing children and adults with membership and a sense of belonging (Lytra, Volk and Gregory 2016). In this respect, becoming a member of the faith community entails acquiring the necessary language and literacy-oriented skills to partake in the rituals of the faith community. Equally importantly, as we saw in the child's reflections at the beginning of this paper, it entails acquiring particular ways of being, acting and seeing the world through religious frames of understanding, interpretation and belonging. Moreover, faith learning has an additional moral and spiritual dimension that distinguishes it from learning in other contexts: ultimately, the knowledge, competences and performances a child learns and perfects over time are the means to build a relationship with a higher and eternal

being (Gregory and Lytra 2012). In the ensuing sections, I present and discuss our ethnographic study of children's engagement with faith literacies in present day London.

The study

Our multi-sited team ethnography "Becoming Literate in Faith Settings: Language and Literacy Learning in the Lives of New Londoners" examined how sixteen children aged between four and twelve from Bangladeshi Muslim, Ghanaian Pentecostal, Polish Catholic and Tamil Hindu communities were becoming literate through faith activities in London. The faith communities were chosen because they represented recent migration to London (from the 1950s onwards) (Gregory et al 2009). From 2009 to 2013, we worked as a team of 11 researchers, sharing different linguistic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, age, gender, professional and educational circumstances, religious and no religious beliefs. We worked with four families from each of the faith communities, their faith leaders and faith teachers as well as older members of the communities across three sites, namely places of worship, homes and religious instruction classes.

The purpose of our study was to investigate the following questions: (1) What is the scope and nature of literacy practices in each faith setting? (2) How do teaching and learning take place during faith literacy activities across different settings? (3) In what ways have faith literacy activities changed over time, in the London setting and across generations? and (4) How does participation in faith literacies contribute to individual and collective identities? We collected a wide range of data including demographic and historical data, fieldnotes, audio and video-recordings of faith activities across

sites, interviews, scrapbooks, photographs and other artefacts (see Gregory and Lytra 2012 and Lytra et al 2017 for further discussions of the project methodology).

Through out the data collection and analysis, we sought to make "children's experiences, perspectives and understandings visible and audible" (Lytra et al 2017: 216).

Children's faith literacies

First, I will share some examples of children's faith inspired text-making which they created for their scrap books. At the beginning of the second year of the project, we gave each child an A4 size scrapbook with multicolored pages and asked children to write, draw and stick in it what they considered important about their faith and wished to share with us. The examples of text-making come from one of the four faith communities, the Tamil Hindu/Saiva faith community. This was the faith community I worked with. Saivism is a branch of Hinduism. Saivaites believe that Lord Siva is the ultimate deity and all other deities are avatars of Him, an incarnation or manifestation of God. Sri Lankan Tamil migration to the UK was due to socio-economic and educational concerns followed by the deterioration of relations between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority, which culminated in a 25-year civil war (1983-2009). In the UK, Sri Lankan Tamils have sought to sustain their contested language, culture and identity in their country of origin for the next generation.

The first image depicts a colourful representation of Lord Hanuman, worshiped as a symbol of physical strength, perseverance, and devotion, in a praying position [Image 1].

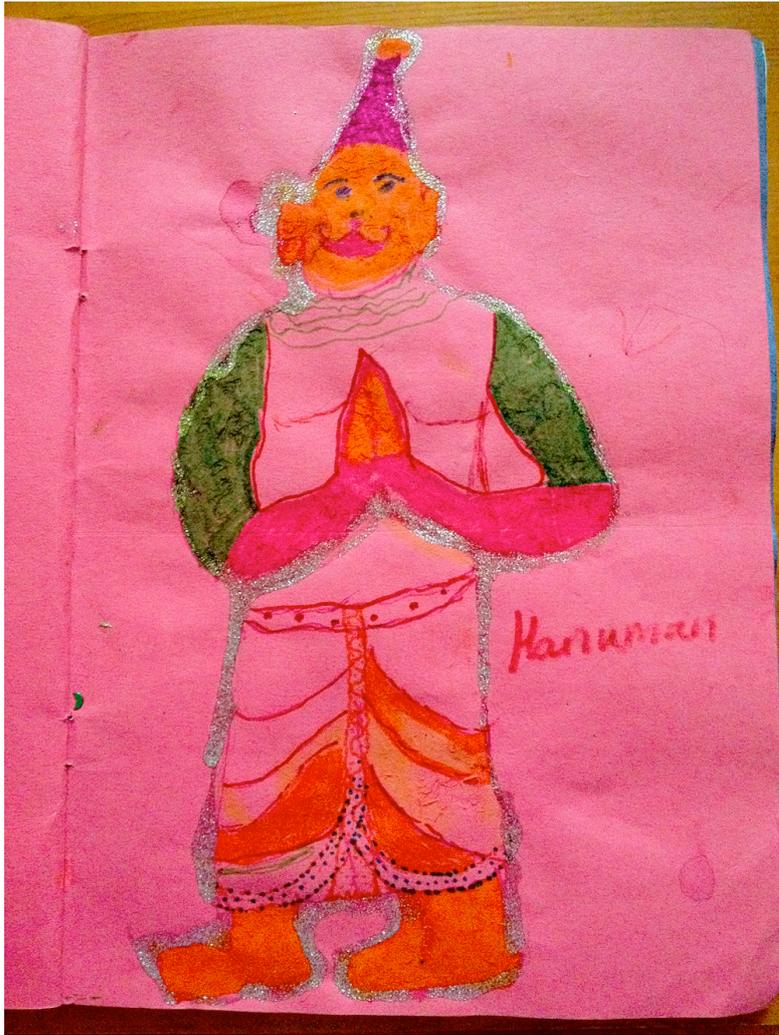


Image 1: Lord Hanuman

The second is a pencil drawing of the Goddess Saraswati, the Goddess of knowledge, music, and the arts, sitting on a lotus flower and playing the veena (a chordophone instrument). The child who made the drawing also wrote a short explanatory text for our benefit: "Saraswati the consort of Brahma is the goddess of learning. Every day we should pray to her before starting our studies" [image 2].

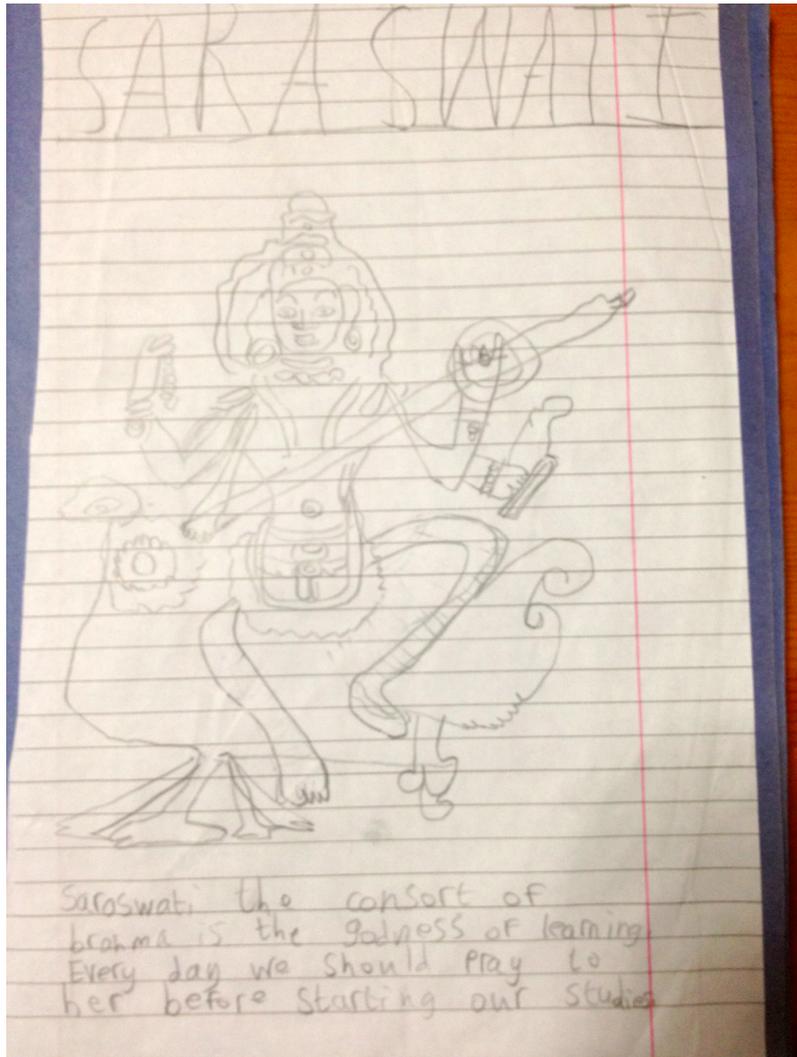


Image 2: Goddess Saraswati

The third image represents the Ther festival, the public procession of Gods and Goddess in ornate chariots in the streets around the Temple. As depicted in the drawing, devotees in traditional dress (sari for women and veshti for men) gather around and pray. The child drew herself in the left corner of the drawing and inserted a playful touch, a sticker of a colourful bee [image 3].

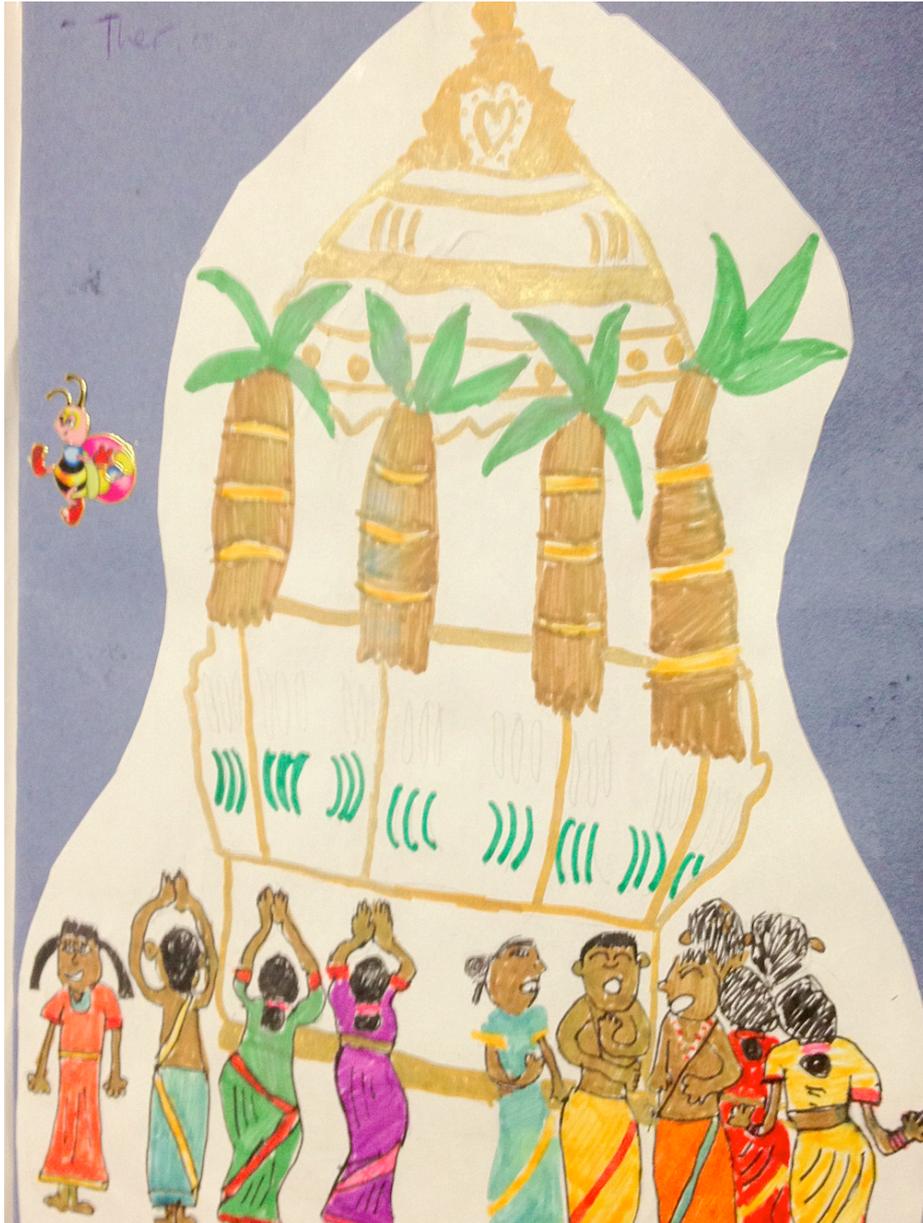
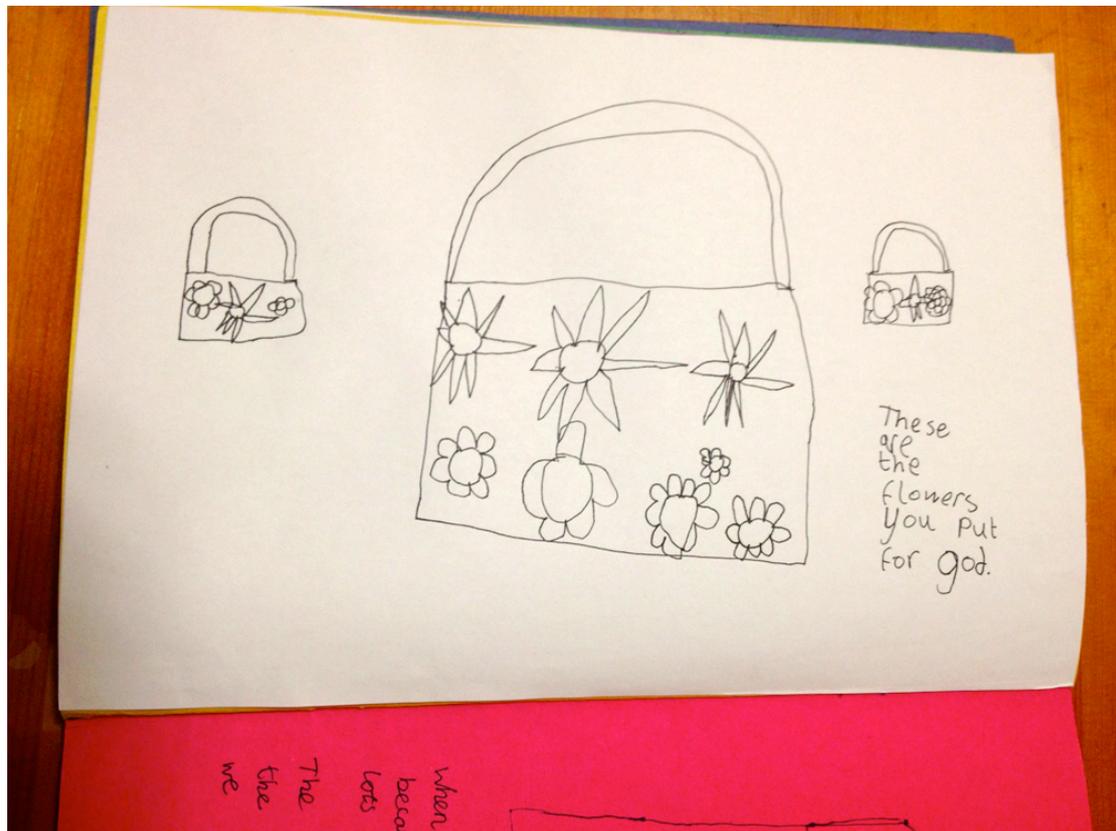


Image 3: The Ther festival

The last image made by one of the youngest children who participated in our study is a drawing of flower offerings to God at the Temple. The child added a short explanation: "These are the flowers you put for god" [image 4]. After the completion of the scrap books, the researchers went through them page by page with the children. The children were encouraged to talk about why they had chosen to include a particular God, faith story or special religious celebration (such as the Ther festival),

and how particular symbols and rituals depicted in their text-making (such as the symbols of the lotus flower and veena, and offering flowers to God) related to their everyday lives.



The children's text-making drew on the rich visual imagery of Hinduism to bring together different aesthetic preferences, genres and linguistic and cultural threads from diverse sources. The short explanatory texts alluded to the 'school genre' of explanatory writing whose purpose is to convey information clearly and accurately. The aim of the explanatory texts about Goddess Saraswati [image 1] and the flower offerings [image 4] seemed to be to explain Hinduism to a less informed audience and combine this information with the children's own faith knowledge and experiences. The children also personalised their images, for instance, by sticking a playful bee on

the side of the image of the Ther festival [image 3] and using vibrant water colours and a silver marker for the outline of Lord Hanuman [image 2].

Based on our observations, English was the language the children in our study felt most comfortable with to convey information and express her experiences and feelings about her faith. Tamil was very much a living language in the faith community, often used to communicate with parents and grandparents. Children also learned to read and write in Tamil, at Tamil school and in the religious instruction classes afterwards, which they attended on Sunday mornings. Tamil is also the devotional language of Tamils and it was used almost exclusively for Temple worship. The children's knowledge of Sanskrit, the liturgical language of Hinduism, was restricted to prayers they learned to recite by heart. In their scrap books, children strategically used Tamil and a few instances of Sanskrit to refer to auspicious celebrations, religious and cultural concepts, names of God and titles of faith stories. In those instances, they transliterated the words into English, but occasionally used Tamil and Sanskrit scripts (for further discussion of children's faith-inspired text making see Lytra et al 2016a, 2017). Indeed, the children's text making united these different elements to "to create something that is greater than just the sum of the constituent parts" (Gregory et al, 2013: 323). Their text making revealed how their Tamil Hindu/Saiva religious identities were fostered through their participation in faith rituals and celebrations at home and in the Temple and through their engagement with a wealth of faith literacy activities in the religious instruction classes, such as collective praying, narrating faith stories and discussing the religious and personal meanings of key religious concepts (all the children's scrap books can be accessed via the project web-site: www.belifs.co.uk).

A similar syncretising of linguistic resources with other modalities is evident in one of the children's morning prayers in front of the family prayer altar (the video-recording made by the child's older brother and transcribed and annotated by my co-researcher, Arani Ilankuberan, is available on the project web-site: www.belifs.co.uk). The child closes her eyes, places her palms together in prayer position and begins chanting the Gayathiri Mantra in Sanskrit seven times. The Gayathiri Mantra is addressed to God as the divine life-giver, symbolised by the Sun, and is most often recited at sunrise and sunset. The child then brings her hands down in front of her while keeping her eyes closed, as she recites the morning sloka (supplication) in Sanskrit once. The child places her palms again in prayer position and begins reciting her morning prayer in English. Afterwards, she performs the Thopukaranam ritual practice which consists of pulling on the ear lobes with the right hand tugging on the left ear and vice versa and squatting ten times. She ends her morning prayer ritual by applying Thiruneeru (white holy ash) with her finger in the form of a horizontal line across her forehead.

The highly scripted individual prayer the child engages in reminds us how learning to pray is an embodied experience, where children learn to draw on and combine a range of semiotic resources, including the use of different languages (in this occasion, literate forms of Sanskrit and English), gesture (the ritual practice of tugging one's earlobes and squatting) and body posture (bowing head, closing eyes and placing palms in prayer position) and perform prayer by exhibiting appropriate feelings and sincere intentions. In this sense, we go beyond an exclusive focus on language as a meaning-making resource to examine the broader relationships between language and other communicative modalities, including gesture, body posture and image as well as

the materiality and technological dimensions of these practices (Lytra et al 2016a). Moreover, prayer, whether individual or collective, is a moment-to-moment experience firmly rooted in the here-and-now (in our example to mark the beginning of the day) but it also links the children to a wider Saiva/Hindu congregation, both locally (in London) and transnationally (in Sri Lanka, in India and with other Saiva/Hindu communities across the globe). In this sense, it provides children with opportunities to practice and reaffirm their Hindu/Saiva faith and their religious subjectivities as an integral part of their on-going religious socialisation.

Concluding reflections

I trust that the examples I presented to you today illustrate that faith literacies do indeed matter. Rather than ignoring, silencing or dismissing the role of faith in children's learning, socialisation and identity construction, our work has foregrounded the sense of membership and belonging children develop in the context of their respective faith communities. This feeling of connectedness spans across generations, time and space. While becoming socialised into the rules for participation and engagement in their respective faith communities, appropriate dispositions and emotional responses, religious and cultural heritage and histories, they also learn to navigate multilingual and multicultural spaces bringing together and syncretising different sets of linguistic and cultural resources.

The importance of children being able to flexibly draw on their different linguistic and cultural resources to develop their faith literacies was reiterated by the faith teachers at Tamil school as well as in the other faith settings we worked with. As one of the faith teachers in the Tamil school eloquently put it:

"I think we need to have use of both languages. If you stick to only Tamil, say we are Tamils we got to speak to the children in Tamil, you're going to lose out some of the children, because if the children can't understand what we are saying, especially in terms of faith, we are missing out, we'll be losing a good opportunity, and children will be losing interest, and if they can't understand, obviously, they're not going to come to the classes."

As we claimed in Lytra et al (2016b: 10), his reflections illustrated "an awareness of the cognitive and linguistic demands faith literacy learning placed on children to access the religious curriculum in Tamil only". In addition, they demonstrated "a recognition that while Tamil school had been set up to maintain and promote a persecuted language, culture and identity in the country of origin (Sri Lanka), the main focus of faith lessons in contemporary London was not Tamil language and literacy development per se". Rather, the main aim of faith lessons was to support children's understanding of the principles, beliefs and values of Hinduism/Saivism and help them make sense of highly symbolic and metaphysical concepts by relating them to their own lives in present day London.

In the current climate of political, social and religious tensions where media portrayals often stereotype or misrepresent the experiences of members of minority faith communities or privilege dominant narratives of majority faith communities, our work brings to the fore the wealth and complexity of languages, literacies, heritages and identities in faith settings in London. We believe that it is critical to listen to, learn and seek to understand from the children, their families and faith communities

and to avoid stereotypes and dismissive or essentialising generalisations. For educators in particular, if we truly believe that an equitable education is the right of all students, then we must inquire into the teaching and learning practices in out-of-school contexts that are most meaningful to children's lives, religious spaces being some of the most important ones. We hope that our work has taken a small step in this direction urging us to engage in dialogue and work collectively toward more pluralistic, democratic and equitable societies.

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