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Citation

Crisp, Beth R and Dinham, Adam. 2019. Are the Profession's Education Standards Promoting the Religious Literacy Required for Twenty-First Century Social Work Practice? *British Journal of Social Work*, 49(6), pp. 1544-1562. ISSN 0045-3102 [Article]

Persistent URL

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Are the profession's education standards promoting the religious literacy required for 21st century social work practice?

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Abstract

This article analyses regulations and standards which frame social work education and practice across a set of English-speaking countries including the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, India, Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa and the United States, as well as the *Global Standards for the Education and Training of the Social Work Profession*. All documents were keyword searched and also read in their entirety. Religion and belief appear briefly and incoherently and are often deprioritised, unless particularly problematic. There is a common elision of religion, belief and spirituality, often expressed in the designation 'religion/spirituality'. References to religion and belief, and their inclusion and removal, are recognisably subject to debates between policy-makers who frame the guidelines. This makes them issues of agency which might themselves benefit from analysis. Religion and belief may frequently be addressed by the use of overarching frameworks such as 'anti-oppressive' or 'anti-discriminatory' practice. Yet such proxies may prove merely apologetic and result in standards which aim only to establish what is the minimum required. It is hard to argue that religious literacy has been a priority in the English-speaking social work countries, though new law and emerging best practice may make it so.

Key words

Beliefs, Curriculum, International social work, Religion, Religious literacy, Social work education,

Introduction

Having largely divested itself of its religious roots, the social work profession has tended to be ambivalent, if not disdainful, of the need to understand religion and belief in their practice (Whiting, 2008). In recent years, equality law and increasing religion and belief plurality have led to a growing awareness that social workers must be able to engage with the religions and beliefs of the individuals and communities with whom they work (Crisp, 2011; Dinham 2018). Nevertheless the response of programmes of social work education has been haphazard and new graduates report feeling inadequately prepared to explore the significance of religion and belief with service users (Horwath and Lees, 2010) or even knowing how to refer to the religious celebrations of the major traditions in ways which will avoid offending people of other religions (Bradstock, 2015).

In the 21st century, globalisation, migration and violent extremism have all variously highlighted the need for policy and practice approaches, as well as social institutions, which are able to both engage with religious diversity and manage tensions between individuals and groups who have differing or no beliefs (Ezzy, 2013; Hovdelian, 2015), even when there are low levels of active religious participation (Boisvert, 2015). This not only includes religions and beliefs who find themselves as minorities in new immigrant groups, but also the growing number of 'nones' or people who identify with no religion, many of whom have little knowledge or experience of any religion (Singleton, 2018) as well as some groups associated with mainstream religion. Hence in Australia it has been noted that groups subject to conflict include 'Muslims, Witches and evangelical Christians' (Ezzy, 2013, p. 199).

Societies and education systems which think of themselves as non-religious or secular have tended to steer away from any curriculum content or practices which

may be seen as having associations with organised religion (de Souza and Halahoff, 2018). But if one accepts the premise that ‘through social work education, graduate students should have some determined degree of understanding concerning the breadth of issues that constitute challenges related to social justice, both nationally and globally’ (Teasley and Archuleta, 2015, p. 620), it becomes difficult to sustain arguments that teaching about religions and beliefs, and their role in society, have no place in social work education. Moreover, while ‘the study of religions can be seen as essential to understanding human behaviour and identity formation’ (Bradstock, 2015, p. 339), social work curricula regarding human development frequently avoid this topic (Le Riche et al., 2008). This is despite most (84 percent) of the global population reporting a religion or belief (Pew Research Center, 2012), which will frequently play a critical role in forming their sense of self and meaning, including both collective and differentiated identities (Tan and Zhang, 2014).

One approach to teaching about religions is to ensure that students are equipped with ‘facts’ concerning the basic tenets of the predominant religions and belief groups in the local region (eg Sorajjakool et al., 2017). Such selectivity may seem pragmatic given estimates of there being more than 4,000 different religions or variations of religions internationally (Cnaan and Curtis, 2013). However, by emphasising certain distinctive elements of each religion, belief systems can readily be wrongly essentialised as homogenous and static blocks of unchanging fact, which belies the lived realities (Kanitz, 2005). Another variant, which focuses on what is common between religions is also problematic:

Not only is it limiting to explain religions exclusively or even primarily from the perspective of common feasts, foods and footwear, the three

f's, or – perhaps even more problematic – a beautifully uniform Golden Rule, but it is also false. Not only does this kind of superficial “comparativism” breed a meaningless relativism, but it can also ultimately breed a form of contempt, a sense that, if we are really all the same, then why bother sustaining or protecting religious difference. (Boisvert, 2015, p. 388)

Whether concentrating on differences or commonalities, the focus of such learning is on observable aspects of religious cultures rather than on the meanings associated with these (Myatt, 2018) or of their influence on the values which social workers may encounter, particularly on issues of sexuality, marriage, parenting and care of the elderly (Tan and Zhang, 2014). This has given rise within social work education to approaches which focus on a broad ability to engage critically with issues of religion and belief rather than learning facts about specific religions (Melville-Wiseman, 2013).

In this space, over the last decade or so, the term ‘religious literacy’ has gained currency in debates concerned with the place of religions and beliefs in civil society. It involves the capacity to not only recognise the importance that religion and belief may be playing in a particular situation but also the skills to explore the role of religion and beliefs for the person, as well as an understanding that these may differ substantially from one’s own worldview (Castelli, 2018). Religious literacy also challenges assumptions that religious faith necessarily results in religious knowledge. Not only can religious faith be an impediment to gaining knowledge of other faith traditions, but many people of faith often have limited knowledge of their own religious traditions (Prothero and Kerby, 2015).

Rather than having fixed understandings of religion and belief, religious literacy calls for a stretchy understanding of what counts, to include non-traditional forms (like house churches and women's mosques), rejuvenated and revived old forms (like wicca and druidism), non-religious beliefs (like humanism and secularism) and non-religions (like the Atheist Church). This broadly follows the definition in English equality law which uses the term 'religion or belief' (Equality Act 2010). Consequently, it has been argued that professionals need to be educated and trained to handle the complexities of religion and belief across this stretchy spectrum (Dinham and Francis, 2015). Not only is it required by law in England and elsewhere, but professional codes of conduct impose an ethical imperative to engage with the identities of service users as they are encountered and this implies a duty relating to religion and belief.

This emerging dialogue around religious literacy also challenges prevailing ideas that religion is a problem to be managed and reimagines it as one of many pervasive human identities to be engaged with, along with gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation in which the implications of diversity are more widely recognised. Hence it is unsurprising that several of those who have been recognised the need for religious literacy are social work scholars (eg Crisp, 2015; Dinham, 2018; Pentaris, 2019).

In terms of conceptualising what it is that social workers need to know, UNESCO's *Four Pillars of Learning* provides a useful framework:

Learning to know: to provide the cognitive tools required to better comprehend the world and its complexities, and to provide an appropriate and adequate foundation for future learning.

Learning to do: to provide the skills that would enable individuals to effectively participate in the global economy and society.

Learning to be: to provide self analytical and social skills to enable individuals to develop to their fullest potential psycho-socially, affectively as well as physically, for a all-round 'complete person.

Learning to live together: to expose individuals to the values implicit within human rights, democratic principles, intercultural understanding and respect and peace at all levels of society and human relationships to enable individuals and societies to live in peace and harmony.
(UNESCO, not dated)

In respect of religious literacy, the framework developed by Dinham (Dinham and Jones 2012; Dinham and Francis 2015; Dinham and Shaw 2015) roughly corresponds with UNESCO's four pillars. This framework has been used in studies which have considered the need for religious literacy in a range of settings including higher education (Dinham and Francis, 2015), teacher education curriculum (Dinham and Shaw, 2015) and has informed recent research about religious literacy among hospice care workers (Pentaris, 2019).

The first phase, in Dinham's framework, is called 'categorisation' and, like the last of the UNESCO pillars, is concerned with the need to understand the conceptual landscape in which professionals frame religion and belief and what they think is meant by these terms. In particular, it is concerned with how individuals and communities themselves categorise or define religion. In the 21st century, arguably this incorporates potential for stretchy definitions of religion and beliefs as outlined above. This encourages understanding of religion and belief as lived experiences

which manifestly affect the way that people live their lives (Schilbrack 2010) rather than as historic perspectives or cultural artefacts (Boisvert, 2015).

The second phase of Dinham's framework is 'disposition'. This involves exploration of the often unconscious emotional and atavistic assumptions that people bring to discussions about religion and belief (Kanitz, 2005) and making these explicit. Developing an awareness of the self, especially one's beliefs and attitudes about religion, is not dissimilar from the third of the UNESCO pillars which identifies the need to be self-analytical as an essential component to learning what it is to be human. There may be significant gaps between what people feel, what they think, and what they know in relation to religion and belief, and these can readily be conflated. Being able to identify these assumptions and emotions is seen as a critical precursor for thoughtful engagement with diverse religions and beliefs. It often translates in to an institutional 'stance' (Dinham and Jones, 2012) which adds a further layer to the context in which professionals respond to religion and belief diversity when they encounter it.

'Knowledge' is the third phase of the religious literacy framework and relates to the first of the UNESCO pillars. While some general knowledge of the religions and beliefs professionals are likely to encounter in their work may be important, equally significant is having the capacity and openness to acquire further knowledge from credible sources when required. This entails developing the confidence and experience to ask appropriate questions appropriately. It recognises that the lived experiences of any religion or belief are fluid and permeable and can vary considerably, so that religiously literate professionals are those who are able to understand religion and belief as identity rather than tradition.

The final phase in the framework is 'skills' which equates to the second UNESCO pillar. Having developed clarity about how religion and belief are understood in the social and conceptual landscape, being aware of one's assumptions and having some knowledge of some religion practices and beliefs all informs professional practice and the skills required. There is a dearth of research underpinning the sorts of skills which are needed, given that the skills required should be related to the challenges and needs at hand in any given sector or setting. The religious literacy framework concludes that this requires research – whether large-scale and formal or swift and informal. Important work has already been undertaken around death and dying, in hospices for example (Pentaris, 2019), and on working with indigenous communities in Canada (Coates et al., 2007) and Australia (Bessarab and Ng'andu, 2010), though the extent to which this has entered social work education and practice is debatable. The opportunities for identifying the religion and belief challenges in every social work setting are extensive, as are the possibilities for translating findings in to skills through training and practice.

In the meantime, category, disposition and knowledge are ripe for inclusion in social work education and practice already. Issues associated with religion and beliefs frequently emerge in social work practice (Sheridan et al., 1992). This is hardly surprising given that social workers are often working with people who are experiencing some form of crisis, and that issues associated with religion and belief are among those most likely to lead to discrimination and persecution (Hodge, 2007). Yet, the impression in many countries is that social work educators are not required – and sometimes required not - to include content on religion and beliefs in the curriculum (Wiebe, 2014). This paper explores the extent to which there are

expectations internationally that social work education programmes should be preparing graduates who are religiously literate for professional practice.

Method

Approach

Social work education occurs within a highly politicised context, within and beyond individual education providers (Watts and Hodgson, 2015), and within and beyond the social work profession (Williams and Sewpaul, 2004). Often disagreement involves the curriculum, of which a broad understanding includes 'educational strategies, course content, learning outcomes, educational experiences, assessment, the educational environment and the individual students' learning style, personal timetable and programme of work' (Harden, 2001, p.123). Explicit curriculum requirements for social work education also tend to include reference to practice learning and the need for professional socialisation (Watts and Hodgson, 2015).

Curriculum mapping involves analysis of curriculum documents to identify similarities and differences between programmes in different places. Although typically used to compare similar programmes within or between institutions (Buchanan et al., 2015), the approach has also been used for international comparisons (Ervin et al., 2013, p. 310).

In many countries, there are minimum requirements to which all course providers are required to comply. Such regulations or standards prescribe how a social work degree programme is administered as well as curriculum content, and typically represent a consensus position which all stakeholders agree to work with, if not actively support. This inevitably determines the ways in which concepts such as

religion and belief are understood, and currently this is largely characterised as a problem requiring the attention of social workers (Bacchi, 2009). This paper reports on an analysis of regulatory documents which has the advantage that it does not rely on the interpretation of individual institutions or teachers who might stress aspects of the curriculum which they believe to be most important or that they believe a researcher may be interested in (Ervin et al., 2013). Furthermore, examining current guidelines not only enables the creation of an international benchmark as to possible requirements for religious literacy within social work education (Teasley and Archuleta, 2015), but also enables what is already considered possible in some places to be revealed.

Data collection

Expectations about social work education vary considerably in the international arena but there is a set of countries which have in common English as an official language and for whom a degree of shared histories and ideologies have resulted in many commonalities in respect of social work education (Williams and Sewpaul, 2004). In addition to the United Kingdom, these countries include Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, India, Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa and the United States. While not a formalised grouping, movement of social work academics between these countries is common and partnerships involving social work educators in two or more of these countries are numerous.

For this analysis, internet searches were conducted to locate documents pertaining to regulations or standards for social work education for each of the countries identified above as well as the *Global Standards for the Education and Training of the Social Work Profession* (IFSW and IASSW, 2004) which sought, though did not necessarily achieve the aim of being a global consensus statement (Williams and

Sewpaul, 2004). As responsibilities for social work education are devolved to each country within the United Kingdom, documentation was sought for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. One or more documents was obtained for all countries except for India where there are no national standards for social work education (Botcha, 2012).

Data analysis

Each document was searched electronically using the following keywords and related terms, via truncations as noted in brackets:

- Beliefs (belie*)
- Faith (faith*)
- Religion (relig*)
- Secular (secular*)
- Spirituality (spirit*)

All documents were also read in their entirety to locate additional material which the keyword searching would be unable to identify. Relevant text was entered onto an Excel spreadsheet, along with details of the country, title and year of the source document, information as to where this was located within the document, and relative location to any other data extracted from the same document. Each author then separately rated each text fragment as either “Yes”, “No” or “Maybe” in respect of each of the four dimensions of the framework for religious literacy. Where there was initial disagreement, which occurred on only four of 120 classifications, these items

were discussed and the data presented here represents the subsequent agreed position.

Results

One or more statements associated with religion and belief was found in documents from all jurisdictions except for Hong Kong (SWRB, 2015) and Wales (CCfW, 2013). A summary of the standards in each place in respect of the four dimensions of Dinham's framework is summarised in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Categorisation

Religion is often one of several items on a list of factors which contribute to diversity within communities. As the *Northern Ireland Framework Specification for the Degree in Social Work* notes:

Social workers practise in a society of complexity, change and diversity. This diversity is reflected through religion, ethnicity, culture, language, sexual orientation, social status, family structure and lifestyle. (NISCC, 2015, p. 6)

The Northern Ireland document is (understandably) unique in that it is the only one which lists religion first. More often, religion tends to come near the end of a long list of factors contributing to diversity. Such diversity can result in discrimination which the *Global Standards for the Education and Training of the Social Work Profession* note can occur 'on the basis of 'race', colour, culture, ethnicity, linguistic origin, religion, political orientation, gender, sexual orientation, age, marital status, physical status and socio-economic status' (IFSW and IASSW, 2004, p. 9). However, while religion is often linked with a wide range of beliefs and characteristics, it is generally

not defined, with an assumption made that the meaning of religion and associated terms is apparent.

The only evidence of 'categorisation' was three statements found in curriculum guidance concerned with working with Indigenous Australians. The first of these concerned 'Ways of knowing':

Ways of Knowing is specific to ontology and Entities of Land, Animals, Plants, Waterways, Skies, Climate and Spiritual systems of Aboriginal groups. Knowledge about ontology and Entities is learned and reproduced through processes of: listening, sensing, viewing, reviewing, reading, watching, waiting, observing, exchanging, sharing, conceptualising, assessing, modelling, engaging, applying. ... (AASW, 2012 p. 20)

Following on from this is 'Ways of Being':

We are part of the world as much as it is part of us, existing within a network of relations amongst Entities that are reciprocal and occur in certain contexts. This determines and defines for us rights to be earned and bestowed as we carry out rites to country, self and others – our Ways of Being. ... (AASW, 2012, p. 21)

Understanding how ways of knowing and being are understood underpins, 'Ways of doing':

Our Ways of Doing are a synthesis and an articulation of our Ways of Knowing and Ways of Being. These are seen in our: languages, art, imagery, technology, traditions and ceremonies, land management

practices, social organisation and social control. ... Our Ways of Doing express our individual and group identities, and our individual and group roles. Our behaviour and actions are a matter of subsequent evolvment and growth in our individual Ways of Knowing and Ways of Being. (AASW, 2012, p. 21)

While from a European understanding of religion it is often questioned whether the spiritual traditions of Indigenous Peoples can be regarded as religious beliefs or practices (Boisvert, 2015), scholars of religion are increasingly acknowledging that “reducing the religion being discussed to the concepts and approaches of Western scholarship alone” (Joy, 2012: 103) is problematic in regards to other belief systems.

Disposition

The professional dispositions of social workers in different countries towards religion and beliefs are often established by understandings of social work which they are exposed to during their professional education (Crisp, 2011). For example, ‘Australian entry-level professional social work education recognises that social work operates at the interface between people and their social, cultural, spiritual and physical environments’ (AASW, 2015, p. 9). While this suggests that spiritual matters may be integral to the social work endeavour, more often they are only considered relevant at times when social workers are working with service users whose backgrounds are different to their own. The need to put aside personal prejudices and recognise the rights of others to hold disparate religion, beliefs and value systems, is considered integral to the disposition of social workers in Scotland. In particular it has been proposed that social workers must be able

... to understand the implications of, and to work effectively and sensitively with, people whose cultures, beliefs or life experiences are different from their own. In all of these situations, they must recognise and put aside any personal prejudices they may have, and work within guiding ethical principles and accepted codes of professional conduct. (SSSC, 2003, p. 18)

Interestingly, changes proposed in Scotland in 2016 deleted any reference to 'beliefs' and called for 'respecting diversity within different cultures, ethnicities and lifestyle choices' (SSSC, 2016). The need for 'respect' was mentioned in a number of the documents including the *Global Standards* document (IFSW and IASSW, 2004), curriculum guidance in Australia concerning working with a) children and b) with people from different cultural backgrounds (AASW, 2012). In Northern Ireland, the stated expectation is that

As a social worker, you must protect the rights and promote the interests and wellbeing of service users and carers. This includes ... Respecting diversity, beliefs, preferences, cultural differences and challenging discriminatory attitudes or behaviour. (NISCC, 2015, p. 40)

Whereas respect in Northern Ireland suggests a reactive response by social workers, the *Social Work Field Education Guidelines* for New Zealand call for an upfront commitment by the profession to promoting the wellbeing of the Maori Peoples as 'tangata whenua' or people of the land, suggesting that practice learning placements provide a pivotal learning experience for students to develop this disposition:

The social work profession demonstrates its commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi and to Māori as tangata whenua by developing culturally responsive, socially just, safe, social work practice that advances mauri ora - wellbeing. ... This obligation is shared by all members of the social work profession and placements are one opportunity to develop competence to work with Maori. (ANZASW and CSWEANZ, 2016, p. 5)

The *Global Standards* (IFSW and IASSW, 2004) and the Council on Social Work Education's [CSWE] (2015) *Educational Policies and Accreditation Standards* both suggest that the teaching of respect for diversity is best achieved by having a student cohort which is itself diverse. The latter of these documents proposes that

The program's expectation for diversity is reflected in its learning environment, which provides the context through which students learn about differences, to value and respect diversity, and develop a commitment to cultural humility. The dimensions of diversity are understood as the intersectionality of multiple factors including but not limited to age, class, color, culture, disability and ability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, immigration status, marital status, political ideology, race, religion/spirituality, sex, sexual orientation, and tribal sovereign status. (CSWE, 2015, p. 14)

Knowledge

The requirement for knowledge is included in a number of the standards which were reviewed. For instance, the Global Standards refer to 'Knowledge of how traditions, culture, beliefs, religions and customs influence human functioning and development at all levels, including how these might constitute resources and/or obstacles to

growth and development' (IFSW and IASSW, 2004, p, 6). In contrast, the standards for both England and Ireland refer to knowledge of the impact of both 'verbal and non-verbal communication and how this can be affected by a range of factors' (Health and Care Professions Council [HCPC], 2017, p. 9). Irish social workers are expected to understand 'and take account of factors such as gender, marital status, family status, sexual orientation, religious belief, age, disability, race or membership of the Traveller community and socioeconomic status' (CORU-SWRB, 2013, p. 24).

Although mentions of knowledge mostly concerned beliefs and practices of individuals, the need to understand the role of religion in society was explicit only in standards from Northern Ireland which noted 'The impact of past and current violence, conflict and divisions in Northern Irish society requires particular emphasis in the education and training of social work students in Northern Ireland' (NISCC, 2015. p. 7).

Specifications of knowledge about religion and beliefs were also found in two Australian documents. The most recent of these referred is in regard to the impacts of family violence:

The health (physical, spiritual, mental, emotional), psychological, developmental, social and economic impacts of family violence on victims/survivors including children, young people, families and the broader community (AASW, 2018, p.4)

The Australian documents also made reference to the 'worldviews' of Indigenous Australians and having "knowledge of some of the worldview differences between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Western perspectives in relation to time, "identity" and individuality' (AASW, 2012, p. 6).

Whereas most of the references to knowledge were concerned with the recognition of diversity, only the South African document included any mention of specific resources which social workers should be aware of:

The relevant resources, available to the social worker for the protection of human rights are clearly identified (Resources include the Public Protector, the Human Rights Commission, the Commission for Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities and the Commission for Gender Equality) (SAQA, 2015, criteria 17.5)

Skills

Given the emphasis on diversity in respect to religion and beliefs across the various standards documents, it is not surprising that the term 'cultural competence' is found in documents from Ireland and Northern Ireland, with similar sentiments expressed elsewhere. This includes the capacity to 'acknowledge and respect the differences in beliefs and cultural practices of individuals or groups' (CORU-SWRB, 2013, p. 20). The Australian curriculum guidelines around family violence not only call for differences to be recognised but valued. Hence, there is an expectation that social workers will possess 'effective engagement practices with those subjected to family violence in ways which: ... value their knowledge and lived experience of violence, trauma, faith and culture' (AASW, 2018, p. 8).

In addition to being able to work effectively with individuals or groups, some documents also propose a role for social workers in promoting human rights within the wider communities in which they work. The *Global Standards* propose that social workers should 'promote respect for traditions, cultures, ideologies, beliefs and

religions amongst different ethnic groups and societies, insofar as these do not conflict with the fundamental human rights of people' (IFSW and IASSW, 2004, p. 4). The Australian guidelines echo this point in respect of the need to 'promote respect for traditions, cultures, ideologies, beliefs and religions among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' (AASW, 2015, p. 7).

In Scotland, skills for working with culturally diverse individuals and communities has been presented as a moral imperative for social workers, such that 'social work has always had a strong ethical basis that emphasises the importance of building a positive, professional relationship with people who use services as well as with professional colleagues'(SSSC, 2003, p. 18), which includes obligations in respect of different people with different beliefs. In addition to being a moral obligation, there may also be a statutory obligation on social workers and their employers to promote the rights for individuals and groups to hold adhere to diverse beliefs and practices. For instance, the *Northern Ireland Framework Specification for the Degree in Social Work* states:

Working with the groups outlined in Section 75, and Schedule 9, of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 which came into force on the 1 January 2000. This places a statutory obligation on public authorities, in carrying out their various functions relating to Northern Ireland, to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity: between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation; ... (NISCC, 2015, p. 44)

Implications for Religious Literacy in Social Work

This study has found some evidence of recognition of the need to include religion and beliefs in social work education, with standards from all but Hong Kong and Wales making some recommendations about this. Nevertheless, concerns about low levels of religious literacy among social workers (Horwath and Lees, 2010) are unlikely to be allayed by these findings. Australia was the one country in which guidance could be found in respect of each of the four stages of Dinham's framework, and even so these were not cohesive as the guidelines which could be related to 'categorisation' were concerned only with Indigenous Peoples and the skills were specific only to family violence.

Canada and New Zealand only included guidance in respect to disposition and in England guidance related to knowledge. But knowledge and skills taught without any reference to disposition are likely to continue a situation in which religion and belief are understood as monolithic, homogenous blocks of 'otherness' and in which '... social work students may not be fully aware of the biases they maintain or recognize whether the information they receive from curricula and instruction are complete (Teasley and Archuleta, 2015, p. 619).

Conclusions

Religion and belief appear briefly and incoherently across the standards for social work internationally, and are often deprioritised, appearing late in lists of identities to be addressed. Moreover, placing religion alongside characteristics such as sexual orientation, age or cultural affiliations has a limiting and diminishing impact on all the forms of identity listed in this way.

Arguably, it is appropriate that standards vary, given that 'the developmental needs of any given country/region and the developmental status of the profession in any

given context, are determined by unique historical, socio-political, economic and cultural realities' (Williams and Sewpaul, 2004). Nevertheless, there are some common themes which emerge. First, religion and belief are prioritised where they are problematic, particularly in relation to Northern Ireland and Indigenous Australians, but interestingly not for Indigenous peoples in other countries such as Canada and the United States. This appears to reify them as risky and difficult. Perhaps this misses the opportunities for thinking about religion and belief more positively, as sources of relationship, wisdom and well-being as is increasingly envisaged in some theoretical work (Stacey 2018). Second, there is a common elision of religion, belief and spirituality, often expressed in the designation 'religion/spirituality'. Yet these are themselves highly differentiated categories in the literature, and in the lived experiences of individuals and communities. Insensitivity to the differences is likely to be felt by service users, many of whom might object to the minimisation of their religion as spirituality, or vice versa. Third, references to religion and belief, and their inclusion and removal, are recognisably subject to debates between policy-makers who frame the guidelines. There are issues of agency which might themselves benefit from analysis in terms of category, disposition, knowledge and skills. Put more simply, how religiously literate are the policy-makers themselves?

It may feel more comfortable to address religion and belief by the use of overarching frameworks such as 'anti-oppressive' or 'anti-discriminatory' practice, as mentioned in guidelines from Australia (AASW, 2012), Canada (CASWE-ACTFS, 2014), Ireland (CORU-SWRB, 2013), Northern Ireland (NISCC, 2015), Scotland (SSSC, 2003) and Wales (CCFW, 2013). Yet such proxies may prove merely apologetic in the end, and result in standards which aim only to establish what is the minimum required for

quality educational outcomes. Where knowledge but not skills are specified, this may reflect beliefs that social workers have generic skills which can be transferred across a wide range of knowledge areas including religion and belief. In an era in which the trend in accreditation standards is to minimise the level of prescriptive rules about content and teaching methods (Phillips KPA, 2017) it may be unrealistic to expect substantial increases in content about religion and beliefs, and there is the possibility that the future might bring reduced guidance. While there is something to be said for the suggestion that standards which are too prescriptive may hinder the receptivity of programmes to new issues or approaches (Williams and Sewpaul, 2004), our experiences as educators is that in a packed curriculum, material that is optional will be sacrificed if space is needed for compulsory components.

As with any research, the approach taken is subject to limitations. We acknowledge that official guidelines do not necessarily reflect either what is taught to, or learnt by, students (Harden, 2001). Furthermore, when educational guidelines concerning religion and beliefs are characterised by a lack of clarity and specificity (Leka et al., 2011) they are open to interpretation by individual programme providers and educators, who might provide much less input on topics than had been the intention of those drafting the guidelines. Conversely, some education providers, particularly those which have a religious foundation, may have developed their own standards as to content involving religion and beliefs which are far more extensive than required under their accreditation (Harris et al., 2017). Secular providers of social work education also often provide in excess of what is stipulated (Moss, 2003). As such the guidelines which were surveyed for this study do not necessarily reflect what is actually taught to students about religion and beliefs. Nevertheless, Dinham's framework for religious literacy, along with the findings from this study potentially

provide the framework for surveys or interview studies with social work educators in different countries as to how matters of religion and belief are included in their programmes.

A further limitation is that this study has only considered published guidelines for social work education from English-speaking countries for which accreditation guidelines were locatable through internet searching. As such, countries with large social work programmes such as India and China, were excluded, as were countries in mainland Europe, Africa, apart from South Africa, South and Central America and Pasifika countries. As such the findings are not generalisable beyond the group of countries surveyed.

On the basis of the findings presented in this paper, it would appear that a need for religious literacy is beginning to be recognised in education standards for social work programmes in several countries. However, in many countries, guidelines cover fewer dimensions of religious literacy than required in the *Global Standards* which were developed in 2004. As such, it is hard to argue that religious literacy has been a priority in the English-speaking social work countries though new law and emerging best practice may make it so. A better understanding of processes of agency in the framing of social work education and practice might reveal some of the factors holding this back.

Standards documents

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Table 1. Social work education standards by place: Stated requirements for religious literacy by category

Place	Categorisation	Disposition	Knowledge	Skills
International	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Australia	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Canada	No	Yes	No	No
England	No	No	Yes	No
Hong Kong	No	No	No	No
Ireland	No	No	Yes	Yes
New Zealand	No	Yes	No	No
Northern Ireland	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Scotland	No	Yes	No	Yes
South Africa	No	No	Yes	Yes
United States	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Wales	No	No	No	No