Abstract

Educational endeavours within traditional faith communities, and more specifically, religious education programs for youth, present opportunities to inquire into the ways these historically-grounded traditions can be understood as dynamic, diverse, and enriching of present-day life. In this research study, I examine the curricular inquiry of seven Ismaili Muslim secondary religious education teachers for the purpose of drawing attention to the perceptual, interpretive and practical life-worlds of their teaching practices. Using a hermeneutic phenomenological framework, the study articulates how teachers interpret and enact a global curriculum initiative, namely the Institute of Ismaili Studies Secondary Curriculum, within the context of teaching religious education classes for Ismaili youth in Canada. Particular attention is given to the teachers’ understandings of the curriculum text, their rendition of the curriculum text in light of the lived experience of classroom teaching and, more broadly, how these understandings and interpretations of the curriculum shape and are shaped by faith community sensibilities. In addition to drawing upon a range of thinkers associated with hermeneutics and Islamic and Ismaili studies, Dwayne Huebner’s curricular scholarship provides the theoretical framework through which curriculum inquiry and the relation between immanence and transcendence is explored to enable interpretive curricular spaces in classrooms and teacher learning communities.

The claim I make in this study is that curriculum inquiry is an interpretive quest for both teachers and students which requires relational, temporal and hermeneutic ways of knowing. The interpretive quest involves cultivating relations with text, with disciplines, and with individuals. Relational knowledge brings about the presence of the transcendent in the immanence of daily life, thereby facilitating a unity of being for the individual. The interpretive quest also calls for an understanding of the temporal aspects of existence as they reveal themselves in traditions and disciplines. Through practicing epistemological humility in pursuing a plurality of knowledge sources, new expressions of the tradition and its enduring values can be created that resonate with modern times. Hermeneutic ways of knowing are required to access the transcendent possibilities in our encounters with others to enable a ‘going beyond’ who we currently are. This
release of potential allows individuals to envision possibilities for self-transformation and community realization. Central to the interpretive quest is the attunement to beauty brought about by a critical and creative engagement with tradition. This creative engagement opens up an infinitude of possibilities for teachers and students to make and recreate their manifold lifeworlds in the service of humankind.

These study findings suggest an educational applicability broader than religious education. Curriculum inquiry, conceptualized as an interpretive quest, provides transformative possibilities for curriculum, classrooms and community in a multiplicity of educational settings.

**Keywords:** curriculum inquiry; religious education; hermeneutic phenomenology; living tradition; Shia Ismaili Muslim; teacher education