What’s G-d got to do with it: Teachers’ observations of the impact of religious schools on student academic achievement

By

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Abstract

In this research study, differences in academic achievement between students in religious schools and their peers in secular schools are explored. Three Ontario Certified Teachers working within the religious school system as well as the public system were selected using a convenience sampling method to contribute to this study. Semi-structure interviews were conducted in order to answer to what impacts attending a religious school may have on students’ academic achievement. The interviews were transcribed and coded, and four themes emerged from the data:

1) In religious schools, students may display a difference in academic achievement in specific subjects.

2) A negative gap in academic achievement in religious school students when compared with their peers may exist due to a combination of factors.

3) Differences in student’s academic experience at religious schools may impact academic achievement, such as resources, the balance of multiple curriculums and homework.

4) Students in religious schools may excel academically.

This study presents an analysis on these findings and suggestions towards their significance.

*Key Words*: religious schools, Hebrew day schools, Jewish/Judaic studies, academic achievement
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Chapter 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

I began, and completed, my elementary school education in a private religious school in Ottawa, Canada. Although I never attended a public school, or private secular school, it was clear to me that the education my classmates and I received at our school seemed to be quite different from that of our peers. In our religious school, there was a strong emphasis on many subjects that are outside of Ontario Ministry of Education requirements. Our day lasted longer than other local schools in order to accommodate our expanded course load, and these supplementary religious courses were implemented and tested with as much gravity as other courses. With a wider scope of study than the local secular schools, there appeared to be many students at my school who had a difficult time managing all of the diverse courses and subject matter we covered. The effort and time often spent by many students struggling with religious and supplementary courses appeared to have an overall effect on their achievement in all courses, including those that were ministry mandated. Conversely, there seemed to be many students who seemed to thrive in their attempts to meet the diverse demands of their various courses. It appeared as though the extra work, longer days and varied expectations forced these students to manage their time effectively and excel in all arenas. Looking back on my experiences and those of my classmates, I have begun to wonder what effects, positive or negative, attending a religious school may have on a student’s academic achievement.

The quality of education and potential outcomes on academic achievement seem to be highly relevant and important questions to address. There are many strong opinions on both sides of the discussion touting that academic instruction and achievement in religious schools is either better or worse than their secular counterparts. From the
perspective of parents who value both religious content and high quality education for their children, it is important to study its effects in order to enable community members to make appropriate and informed decisions for their children. Could it be that the instruction of Ministry-mandated courses is neglected when resources, time and effort are expounded on the instruction of supplemental and additional courses? Or is it possible that the inclusion of extra courses and greater academic demands produce students who are better equipped at prioritizing and balancing a large course load, and who have a wider range of more adaptable skills?

My desire to study this area stems from my own personal engagement in this approach to learning. I personally felt I benefitted greatly from this approach, however I have many former classmates from my elementary school days who would attest to feeling as if the time they spent on their religious courses was perhaps somewhat detrimental to them, since the intense devotion to religious study subtracted from their ability to sufficiently excel at the Ministry’s curriculum. In Ontario, publicly funded religious schools’ rights were ensconced in Section 93 of the Constitution Act of 1867, and an understanding of the various factors that may affect academic achievement of students in religious schools could be very valuable to many province wide.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to assess effects on academic achievement for students attending religious schools from their teachers’ perspectives. I will be studying whether or not these students experience challenges to their success that other students may not face. I will be speaking to teachers in religious schools, who have had the opportunity to teach in both secular and religious schools to ascertain their opinions on their students’
experiences in religious and secular schools. Understanding the differences and challenges they face that may contribute to a difference in academic achievement should hopefully make a valuable contribution to the education community.

Previous research has shown a difference in the academic achievement in students from religious and secular schools (refs), but the rationale explaining the discrepancy is greatly varied. In recent research by Card (2008), comparing public secular and Catholic schools in Ontario, religious school students had higher provincial test scores than their public school counterparts; however, the study suggests that this difference can be attributed to external factors, such as improved instruction in geographical areas with greater competition between the secular and religious schools. Jeynes (2002) performed statistical analysis of large amounts of national data in the US to conclude that students in religious schools, including those of low socio-economic background and marginalized ethnicities, had overall better scores than their peers in secular schools. Jeynes does note that scores were significantly lower in certain subject areas for the religious school students, such as the sciences. Not a great deal of research has gone into why this phenomenon may be occurring. I will explore in greater depth whether any existing difference may be attributed to any suggested rationale, such as time constraints, school administrator preference, or lack of funding. In the case of religious schools, Lee, Bryk, Smyth & Newman (1993) propose that the moral and ethical values espoused in religious schools can establish an educational philosophy that can elicit desirable academic and social outcomes. Regnerus & Elder (2003) suggest that involvement in religious activities can contribute to greater academic competence due to the reinforcement of religious values and increased social interactions.
There is a great deal of speculation regarding this topic; what causes it and whether or not the phenomenon of differentiated academic achievement between comparable peers in religious or secular schools exist. In order to contribute to this field, I will be looking at this issue from the perspective of teachers who understand their students and are able to compare them to provincial standards. I am particularly interested in which factors may impact any difference in academic outcomes, as I believe an understanding of this area is missing in the current research literature. I will identify some of the struggles students may face in religious schools, or what academic advantage may be elicited in the religious school environment. This information is important to both the community at large and to educators themselves. Teachers in both systems require a deeper understanding of this issue in order to be better equipped to address students’ needs. My research should also enable parents to make more informed decisions regarding school choice for their children, and inform parents of support their children may need while there.

1.2 Research Questions

The main goal of my project is explore teachers’ perceptions about the effects of attending religious schools on students’ academic achievement, when compared to their peers in comparable secular schools. I interviewed teachers in order to understand any factors they consider may contribute to any academic challenges or amelioration among their students in religious schools. The central question I will be attempting to answer is:

**From the perspectives of teachers, what are the impacts of religious school systems on student achievement?** In other words, how might the academic experience of a student in a religious school differ from that of their peers in a secular school? I also aim
to understand what factors may be affecting their academic achievement. The following is a list of sub-questions I will be considering in order to gain a deeper understanding of these potential real-life implications:

- What differences, if any, are noted between instruction in religious schools and non-religious schools?
- In religious schools, do teachers feel the balance between religious and secular subjects is appropriate?
- How are students’ learning experiences affected by attending religious schools?
- Does the inclusion or infusion of religious content in religious day schools affect the school’s culture or students’ social interactions?

Moustakas (1994) suggests that phenomenological research searches for the essence of experiences and focuses on it as a whole. In this research study, I used this approach in order to work with a group of individuals to understand the phenomenon of any effects attending religious schools may have on students. Moustakas encourages the use of open-ended questions to gain an understanding of participants’ experiences, and I employed this strategy to gain an objective and informative data set. The interview questions were developed to provide the research participants the opportunity to touch on topics and experiences that might speak to, and answer, my research questions.

1.3 Background of the Researcher

This line of inquiry is personally relevant to me and of great interest due to my own personal background, as I spent the entirety of my elementary education at a private religious school. Having begun this approach in grade one, I personally have nothing to compare the experience to, but I have always attributed many of the skills that I still use
in the real world and that of academia to my time at that school. I believe that the extra workload, the diversity in subject matter, the focus on ritual and language that was offered have had long lasting effects on my learning skills and job efficacy. I strongly feel that the balance of work presented itself to me as an intellectual challenge that taught me to prioritize, know myself and to try my hardest, which pushed me to excel. However, I have witnessed the challenges that my friends faced in the same school, and heard first hand accounts of the challenges many of my classmates in religious schools. Many of my former classmates claim that the extra strain of an added course load that was not required by the Ontario Ministry of Education not only hindered their potential success in elementary school, but also affected them later in life and further in their academic careers. Upon completing my first teaching practicum placement in a kindergarten class at a private religious school, and found myself wondering how those students would fare later on in their academic careers. I could see myself eventually working as a teacher in a similar school, and I strongly feel a better understanding of what students are facing can better equip the educational community on how to approach those students, and what support they may need.

Philosophically speaking, I feel as if I approach this work under an axiological assumption. My positionality is biased by my own experiences and the rich value I believe the incorporation of religious content in the classroom can have. I acknowledge that this research is value-laden, particularly since it is focuses on the contentious value of religion and religious instruction. Although my personal beliefs may impact my own interpretation, I am prepared to share the opinions of others regardless of whether or not it aligns with my own. I plan to use a social constructivism framework in order to co-
construct the reality of my research with my participants. According to Creswell (2013), social constructivism leads a researcher to view subjective meanings of experiences as complex rather than categorize and narrowly group them. Using this framework, my goal as a researcher is to rely as much as possible on the views of my participants.

1.4 Overview

This paper is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 includes the introduction and purpose of the study, the research questions, as well as how I came to be involved in this topic and study. Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature related to any effects found on academic achievement in students from religious schools, as compared to their peers in secular schools. This will provide the context within which my research will proceed. Chapter 3 provides the methodology and procedure used in this study including information about the sample participants and data collection instruments. Chapter 4 identifies the participants in the study and describes the data as it addresses the research question. Chapter 5 includes limitations of the study, conclusions, recommendations for practice, and further reading and study. References and a list of appendixes follow at the end.
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

In the province of Ontario, parents are faced with many options when deciding where to send their children to school. Those who have an interest in their children being educated in a religious school will have to consider whether or not there may be an impact on their child’s academic achievement, and whether that impact is either positive or negative. It has been suggested that students attending religious schools generally perform better academically than students who attend non-religious, or secular schools (Jeynes, 2002; Coleman, Hoffer & Kilgore, 1982; Card, 2008; Dronkers & Robert, 2008). In order to truly understand any difference in academic achievement between students in religious schools and students in secular schools, it is critical to understand why this disparity may exist.

In this chapter, I explain some of the theories and findings that have been made regarding academic outcomes in students from religious schools and their comparable peers in secular schools, and delineate what forms this difference may take. Finally, I discuss the contribution my research will make to this conversation, and my aim for a deeper understanding on the topic of the academic merits of secular versus religious schooling.

2.1 School Competition

Prior research in this field often suggests that there may not be anything inherently special about either type of school; rather, it is the competition between schools that contributes to any difference between academic achievement in religious schools and secular schools. Card (2008) examined the potential benefits of Ontario’s
Catholic school system on the performance of students in their school system. In order to establish a difference in academic achievement, scores on provincial tests administered in reading, mathematics and writing between grades three and six were compared between students attending secular public school and Catholic public school. Tracking a series of five cohorts between 1998 and 2005, the results suggested that the Catholic school students scored marginally higher than their peers at local secular public schools. Furthermore, an interesting hypothesis in this study proposes that scores for both secular and religious schools are higher in neighbourhoods where there is a choice between the two types of schools. It can therefore be claimed, according to the authors, that the existence of competition in these neighbourhoods may have resulted in increased incentives for the administration in both the local public secular and religious schools to improve in order to attract students. This extrapolation suggests that perhaps any difference noted in academic achievement might be attributed to factors other than the content of instruction or the school culture, religious or otherwise.

Niaz (2007) assesses the effects of school choice on academic achievement in secondary students in Bangladesh, and suggested that school choice may contribute to students’ academic achievement. Although the study assessed both religious and secular schools in the private and public sector, the author noted the results may have been skewed due to the possibility that students at the religious schools’ academic achievement was influenced by their parents’ value of learning, as opposed to any effects of the school environment itself. In order to establish comparable scores for measuring the quality of education in these schools, the authors used a large-scale survey of registered schools in Bangladesh and compared students’ performance in mathematics. Since an element of
student aptitude may contribute to their scores in mathematics, unfortunately these scores may not be an accurate indicator of academic achievement. However, interestingly enough, the evidence of this study suggests that students attending secondary religious schools scored slightly lower than their peers in secular schools. Since the religious schools included in this study were traditional Muslim madrasas, the research presents the possibility that the religious educational content in the religious schools may have an impact on academic achievement. This knowledge has impacted my desire to investigate the content of curriculum when comparing religious and secular schools.

2.2 School Culture

Lee et. al (1993) suggest that school communal life can be an important contributing factor to student achievement. Within their investigation of school social organization, it is suggested that the fundamental values within the school context can have a great impact on the academic outcomes of its students. In the case of religious schools, the authors propose that the moral and ethical religious values can establish an educational philosophy that can elicit desirable academic and social outcomes.

Regnerus & Elder (2003) suggest that religiously involved students, from both low and high-income families, show greater academic competence than their peers who were not as involved in religious communal activities. Under the assumption that involvement in religious communities can instil standards of achievement in students, this study used the results of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to investigate whether or not religious involvement can impact the ability of low-income youth to maintain the academic pace with their classmates and peers. The scores that were compared in this study suggest that more religiously involved students from both low and
high-income families showed greater academic competence than their peers who were not as involved in religious activities. Specifically, consistent church attendance was identified as a factor that contributed directly to academic progress, potentially due to the fact that church related activities might reinforce the student’s religious values and increase social interaction. However, a comparison to other extracurricular activities might have been useful to establish if the suggested effects, like the reinforcement of messages such as hard work, can only be attained through religious involvement or if other, secular social programming can attain the same goals.

In Ontario, publicly-funded religious schools have a component of their curriculum based on in-class worship (Institute for Catholic Education for the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario, 2012). It would be interesting to consider if the additional educational component of religious communal involvement in religious schools may be a contributing factor in academic achievement.

According to Jeynes (2002), a few distinguishing aspects of the environment in a religious school, beyond the instruction and material covered, may have an impact on academic achievement. The religious school community is described as one that binds students, parents and school staff together and one that has a caring environment committed to the holistic development of each student through the elicitation of many positive effects, including ameliorated academic achievement (Jeynes 2003, Sander 2001, Eide, Goldhaber & Showalter, 2004). Other differentiating aspects of school culture that purportedly impact students’ academic achievement may include the development of a strong sense of collective identity, an effective system of authority, and the personalism of the school community (Sikkink, 2004). Bailey and Cooper (2009) suggest that the
social climate created in religious schools can be highly beneficial to students due to cultural enrichment, smaller classroom size, and various opportunities for student involvement in the community.

2.3 Composition of Student Body

An important aspect of the comparison between students of religious schools and their counterparts in secular schools in order to establish whether or not the composition of the student body may in some way affect academic outcomes. Using data collected from 18,726 students across the United States in the 1992 National Education Longitudinal Survey (NELS) survey, Jeynes (2002) compared data from both religious and secular schools. Using the grade 12 scores, the author used a general linear model regression analysis, controlling for socio-economic status and racial background, to prove that students in religious schools perform statistically, significantly better than the students from public, preparatory, and private schools combined. While the article reports that students in religious schools, both of lower economic standing and of Hispanic or Black ethnicity achieved higher NELS results, and that it can there be inferred that religious schools produce better overall academic outcomes, the data used to support this proposition is dated, limited in scope, and not necessarily generally applicable.

Some research even suggested students of a lower socioeconomic status might excel more academically in a religious school (Coleman, Hoffer & Kilgore, 1982). Regnerus and Elder (2003) assessed data representative of both religious and secular schools in the private and public sector in order to understand whether students’ involvement in religious communities can instill higher standards of achievement in students. The authors noted the possibility that students at the religious schools’ academic achievement
was influenced by the parents’ value of learning, as opposed to any effects of the school environment itself. This inherent difference in values between students in religious schools and their secular schools could be a contributing factor to any inequality in academic achievement.

Using data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey of 2000, Dronkers and Robert (2008) attempted to explain the differences in scholastic achievement between public and private school. Although the PISA survey has no specific indicator for religious schools, the private government-dependent schools in the majority of the countries included were considered religiously-oriented, and compared against the achievement of public and private independent schools to ascertain any differences. Ultimately, it was established that private government-dependent schools had a higher net scholastic achievement than comparable public schools with the same students, parent and social composition. This comparison of data across 22 comparable countries suggests that religious schools across the globe may create ameliorated academic outcomes for their students, regardless of student’s varied personal cultural or socio-economic background.

2.4 Difference in Achievement in Specific Subjects

According to Coleman et. al (1982), students in religious schools’ achievement is higher than that of comparable students in secular public schools, but that this effect is not as robust in comparisons for literacy. Jeynes (2002) suggested that students in religious schools achieved statistically higher results than their peers in secular schools on standardized tests, but that this effect did not impact science scores in the sample analyzed for the purposes of this study. A rationale for this phenomenon is explained by
Jeynes (2002) to be due to budgetary limitations, and that religious schools are not able to create expensive, modern science laboratories on par with those of comparable secular schools. This line of reasoning may be interpreted to suggest that although there may be, in some cases, an overall effect of superior academic achievement when comparing religious schools to secular schools, this effect may not be applicable across all subject areas and may be affected by administrative budgetary decisions.

2.5 No Difference in Academic Achievement

Some of the research points to there being no significant difference in the academic achievement of students from one school system to another. Hallinan & Kubischek (2012) used data from two similar longitudinal studies, the Chicago Catholic School Study, and the Chicago School Study. Data collected from sixth- and eighth-grade students compared on reading and math scores did not show significant differences in achievement gains between the two types of schools. This article makes a significant contribution to existing research by suggesting that neither sector of school, secular or religious, is able to eliminate effects of varying negative background characteristics, such as student age or school poverty, on academic achievement. Additionally, there are two sets of analyses conducted: one to establish any differences in sector gains in achievement, and one that incorporates school policies to investigate differences in sector adherence to the common school ideal. The authors questioned if the prohibitive entrance requirements of Catholic schools, excluding students who do not meet their standards, are inconsistent with the school ideal. The authors make an important contribution by suggesting that a selection bias, according to which students who are more inclined to attend religious schools are also more likely to have higher academic achievement. It was
assumed there was no great effect of selection bias in the Chicago Catholic Schools examined, so the selection effect was not controlled, which may result in skewed findings. This study made an important contribution to existing research, due to the link it suggests to higher achievement specifically for those students who are disadvantaged and have entered the Catholic school system as opposed to their comparable peers in the public school system.

2.6 Conclusion

The discussion surrounding any differences that may be found between the academic achievement of students in religious schools and their counterparts in secular schools is complex, and alludes to a variety of reasons that a difference might be attributable to. A very large gap exists in the literature in this area: “In many cases the differences beg for further explanation in future research” (Sikkink, 2012, p. 38)

There is not a great deal of content that directly focuses on understanding, from the perspective of educators and students involved, what this phenomenon might be attributed to. Much of the research into the difference in achievement is now out-dated, and not specifically centered around Canadian schools. Furthermore, all of the literature reviewed here made suggestions based on the statistical analysis of collected data and students’ test scores. Although the reported results have statistical significance, they do not necessarily reflect the causation of any ameliorated achievement in religious schools. All of the potential causes described, such as allocation of funds, or school cultural climate, can only be inferred from the data.

The purpose of this study is to gain a new perspective as to what may cause any difference in academic achievement in religious schools compared to similar secular
schools. In the studies reviewed in this chapter, the sample size was often very large, none of the participants were personally interviewed, and the results may have been skewed based on the interests of those who had performed the data collection. By taking a qualitative approach, I have the opportunity to delve deeper into the area and gain insight into whether or not a difference in academic achievement does occur, and, if so, why this phenomenon exists. By conducting interviews with a much smaller sample group, my data will be based on the observations and experience of seasoned educators and will provide rationale that is not just inferred from the results of quantitative test scores. My research will look at the difference between school types, and try to understand the factors that may affect students’ academic achievement and differentiate between religious and secular schools.
Chapter 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

This chapter describes the research methodology employed in this study. It includes a review of the general approach and procedures used, and data collection instruments. I review the sampling criteria established for participant recruitment, explain my approach to recruiting participants, and describe participants’ backgrounds and why they were relevant for inclusion in this study. In addition, I explain procedures of data analysis and review the ethical considerations applicable to my study. A range of limitations and strengths of the methodology I have chosen will be explored, and, given the purpose and questions of my research, I will explain key methodological decisions and my rationale for making them.

3.1 Research Approach & Procedures

In order to conduct this research, I chose to engage in a qualitative study by reviewing relevant existing research and literature related to this area, in addition to conducting interviews with teachers. This research approach is applicable and relevant to my line of inquiry because “qualitative research uses text as empirical material (instead of numbers), starts from the notion of the social construction of realities under study, is interested in the perspectives of participants, in everyday practices and everyday knowledge referring to the issue under study.” (Flick, 2007) This approach is appropriate for this line of inquiry because it provides an opportunity to assess prior research in this area and build upon existing literature with my own findings. Furthermore, conducting semi-structured interviews enables a better understanding of the participants’ perspectives on the subject. In my research, I am looking to understand the potential effects of attending
religious schools on students’ academic achievement, and by interviewing their teachers, I will be able to better understand, anecdotally and from a direct source, the potential challenges faced or benefits to the students.

Engaging in qualitative research for this study will yield outcomes that are informed by the research of others in this area, but will also be somewhat limited in scope and biased by the interpretations of those I have interviewed. Understanding the underlying factors that effect students can only, in my opinion, be unravelled through qualitative research as “qualitative research can make visible and unpick the mechanisms which link particular variables, by looking at the explanations, or accounts, provided by those involved.”(Barbour, 2008) As I am attempting to assess the various elements of student experience that may impact academic achievement, and whether or not they do so, this approach is suitable to my research, since it will allow me to understand, in depth, the observations of teachers who are immersed in that school culture.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

This study investigates potential effects of attending religious schools on academic achievement, and why. Due to the fact that I have chosen to engage in qualitative research, and conduct interviews with participants who can inform this line of inquiry, semi structured interviews were selected as the most appropriate method of data collection. I have chosen to use semi structured interviews because they can “make better use of the knowledge-producing potentials of dialogues by allowing much more leeway for following up on whatever angles are deemed important by the interviewee” (Brinkman, 2014). I will explain to participants that an interview guide will be used (see Appendix B), but that follow-up questions may be posed in order to gain a greater depth
of understanding. My goal in using this interview protocol is to create a comfortable and relaxed space that allows for natural conversation, and gives the participant the ability and permission to share what they feel comfortable sharing.

Interviews were conducted in person or over the phone at the convenience of participants, and an audio recording was taken and later transcribed. The reason for this choice, as opposed to taking notes at the time, is that recording the audio of the interview will allow the conversation to flow freely and because participants may often mention thoughts or ideas that deviate from the structure of the interview, but are often critical to understanding the participants’ answers to structured questions. (Brinkman, 2014).

The interview protocol was established in an order that should put the participants at ease, and establish an initial comfort level and rapport between the interviewer and the interviewee. They begin with simple questions regarding participant background, and then delve deeper to probe participants’ opinions and perspectives based on their experiences in religious schools. As interviews are conducted and participants share their responses, it will be possible to ask relevant follow-up questions in the moment to gain clarification. A full list of interview questions that will be used can be found in Appendix B.

3.3 Participants

This section addresses all methodological decisions regarding participants chosen for involvement in this study. In the following sub-sections, I explain the sampling criteria I established for participant recruitment, and explore potential methods of recruiting teachers. One section introduces the research participants, and describes the teaching experience they have that relates to my sampling criteria.
3.3.1 Sampling Criteria

The focus of my research is gaining a better understanding of any underlying factors that may impact the academic achievement of students in religious schools, and whether or not these students’ outcomes may differ as a result. As such, all research participants needed to meet the following criteria:

- Teachers who currently work in religious schools

In order to make my sample relevant to my research questions, it was necessary to have participants who are currently active as teachers in religious schools. It was important to draw upon their relevant experiences and observations that are only applicable to my line of inquiry if the teacher has been involved in the academic culture of religious schools.

- Teachers who have had previous experience teaching in non-religious schools

Teachers who have had experience working in both religious and secular schools were essential, since they needed to be able to draw comparisons between the academic environment they experienced in both school systems in order to inform the differences that stand out to them in religious schools. This criterion of experience helped illuminate any unique aspect of the religious school environment that may impact students’ academic outcomes.

- Teachers of elementary school classes

Only participants who teach in elementary schools were interviewed for the purposes of this research study, since the goal of this line of inquiry is to understand what differences might occur at this level of education that may impact academic outcomes and affect students’ futures.

- Teachers in Ontario

Given that I personally live in Ontario and have an interest in our local educational
system, I was hoping to gain perspectives from teachers who live and are active in the local academic world. Additionally, it would be impractical to attempt to meet with teachers outside of a close geographical area.

3.3.2 Sampling procedures/Recruitment

In order to select appropriate participants and develop a strong sample of teachers who will provide relevant and informative data, I used a combination of convenience and purposive sampling. Due to limitations of time and funding, and my desire to speak only with teachers who have experience directly related to my line of inquiry, I will not be randomly selecting participants. The participants were chosen using my own judgments in assessing potential participants against the specific criteria that I have identified is a purposive, or non-probability approach to sampling. One of the most common types of sampling is convenience or opportunity sampling (Farrokhi & Mahmoudi-Hamidabad, 2012). This approach focuses on the convenience and discretion of the researcher in identifying a pool of potential participants and selecting those who will be included in the study, which is important to my research given that the sample size will be very small and the scope of the research may be limited.

A convenience sampling approach was used in order to assemble a group of participants whom I feel meet my established criteria, who were able to provide me with the most relevant information and with whom it will be comfortable and convenient to meet. As such, I relied mainly on personal networks of friends, colleagues and my own former teachers to establish my participant sample. I reached out to teachers, principals and school boards with whom I have a personal connection, and who may meet my established criteria, and supplied them with an overview of my study, participant criteria and research
goals, and requested that this information be shared with teachers who may fulfill my criteria and provide these people and organizations with my contact information and request they be in touch with me directly should they wish to participate in my research. I did not ask any organization or individual to supply me with names of individuals who may meet the participant criteria, in order to ensure all participants have volunteered freely and feel no obligation to participate in my study.

3.3.3 Participant Bios

For the purpose of this study, three current Ontario elementary school teachers were interviewed. Each of these teachers had worked, or still do work, in both the private religious school system, specifically Hebrew schools, and the Ontario public school system.

Rebecca (pseudonym) has been teaching for thirteen years, and has taught in both Hebrew schools and public schools. Currently, they are a French immersion teacher, covering social studies, literacy, French, drama and the visual arts, in addition to Physical Education in an Ontario public school.

Rachel (pseudonym) teaches math and science in Ontario in both a Hebrew day school and public school. They have been teaching these subjects for over twenty years.

Finally, Sarah (pseudonym) teaches reading readiness at a public school in the mornings, which they have been doing for ten years, and spends their afternoons at a Hebrew school focusing on literacy with elementary students. They have seventeen year’s experience in this area.

3.4 Data Analysis

All participant interviews were recorded and stored securely, and the information collected comprises my data. Once the interviews were complete, I first began with
transcription of all audio collected. Using my research questions as a guide, the interview transcriptions were coded individually in order to identify categories of data or ideas discussed. I chose to use In Vivo coding to “keep the data rooted in the participants’ own language” (Saldana, 2008, p. 6). As an observer of my participants, the way in which I have recorded, interpreted and collated the data is of course filtered by my own understanding, ideas and experiences. In coding the data, I used a “lumping” approach. Lumping “is an expedient coding method (with future detailed subcoding still possible)” (Saldana, 2008, p. 20) I chose to use this approach in order to reach the essence of what my participant was trying to say.

Once I had highlighted the statements the participant had made that particularly stood out to me, I was able to “lump” the data based on the underlying concept I felt the participant was speaking to. After coding the entire transcript, I was able to see that many of the codes were related to each other and specific concepts I was interested in. These concepts came from my research question and supporting questions, and I tried to connect these preliminary categories to the ideas of factors that may affect religious school students’ achievement from the research I had reviewed.

Next, I searched for common themes between the categories of data, and divergences in the data in order to consolidate similar information. I then tried to develop a deeper understanding of the meaning of the themes I have identified and relate them back to existing literature in this area. I also investigated “null” data-themes and ideas that none of the participants discussed in their interview that was nonetheless relevant to my line of inquiry. This process allowed me to identify common themes discussed by multiple participants, or those that were only discussed with one individual, by comparing
transcripts and synthesizing the data. This method of data analysis is relevant to my research since it aspires to derive meaning from the data beyond the literal content (Charmaz & Smith, 2008) while revealing patterns in the data and allowing the researched to conceptualize collected data (Charmaz, Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

### 3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

Ethical review procedures are critical in ensuring this research study is conducted in a manner that protects the participants’ comfort and confidentiality, and represents them in an accurate light. In order to guarantee that all participants involved in this study did not feel obligated to be involved, all members of the potential participant pool were given the opportunity to contact me directly, as opposed to being pursued. Participants selected for interviews were also provided with a letter of consent (see Appendix A) prior to their interview that outlined why they are considered a relevant participant choice, their rights as a participant, and whether or not their participation could pose any potential risks to them. By signing the letter, participants will be consenting to be interviewed in person, and for an audio recording of the interview to be made. This letter will also provide them with a general overview of the study, specify expectations, and address any ethical implications, of participation.

The participants’ rights that are outlined in the letter of consent include a right to withdraw at any time with no penalty; before, during, or even after their interview. This ensures that participants will not feel compelled or coerced into having their responses shared with anyone other than the researcher, should they choose to change their mind about participating at any time. Prior to the interview, participants will be supplied with a copy of all questions I intend to ask them in the interview, and they have the right to answer
as many or as few of the questions as they feel comfortable. Participants will be informed that there are no known risks of participating in this study, and that their wishes will be respected at any point in the research. Another important ethical consideration is safeguarding the identity of the participant, and any identification of a specific school or student they may discuss in their interview. In order to maintain participant anonymity, they will be provided with a pseudonym, and any identifying details of people or places will be removed or replaced with pseudonyms, and participants are informed as such in their consent letter as well.

Participants are also informed regarding the collection and storage of their data. Participants are privy to a process of “member checking”, wherein they will be provided with a copy of their interview transcripts in order to ensure for their accuracy, clarify any statements recorded, or request that any portion be removed. Participants will be informed that the audio recordings and transcripts will be securely stored on my personal, password protected computer, and will be destroyed after five years. The expectations of participating, such as length of time required for interviews, will be clearly outlined to participants, as well as potential benefits of participating.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

MTRP guidelines dictate, to a large degree, the potential scope and depth permissible for this research study. I have chosen to engage in qualitative research, using teacher interviews to collect data in accordance with my line of inquiry after exploring existing literature in the area. Although I am confident this approach will be highly informative and help in developing this area, there are a number of limitations I foresee arising from the design of this study.
The size and scope of the participant sample are limited, which will likely limit the outcomes of this study. According to Sandelowski (1995), “Sample sizes may be too small to support claims of having achieved either informational redundancy or theoretical saturation”. Having only a small number of participants who will be sharing their personal experiences and observations limits the scope of the study and poses potential biases on the data collected. Furthermore, only interviewing teachers will result in a collection of data based on observations from adults, as opposed to the first hand experiences of students who are currently engaged in the school system I am investigating.

“When qualitative researchers decide to seek people out because of their age or sex or race, it is because they consider them good sources of information that will advance them toward an analytic goal and not because they wish to generalize to other persons of similar age, sex, or race.” (Sandelowski, 1995) The limitations these restrictions on sample size and participant impose on this study include being unable to collect relevant data from students, and having a smaller sample size that might not necessarily reflect the overarching issues in other, similar schools.

Data collected from this sample may be further biased by the pool consisting of candidates I will have a personal or professional connection with, which may inherently create a group of people with specific commonalities that will inform their perceptions and observations which will limit the scope of the study. Additionally, I will be unable to collect any type of survey or test data, which may be able to quantitatively define a difference in academic achievement between students in a religious school system when compared to their counterparts in secular schools. In this way, my study will vary greatly from a great deal of previous research performed in this area, but may perhaps be able to provide a new
perspective given its differing approach.

This methodology and study design also has many strengths. By conducting semi-structured interviews, I will have the opportunity to collect in-depth data directly from teachers who will be willing to share their experiences, observations and thoughts. This almost intimate method of data collection, with open-ended questions and natural conversations will hopefully elicit much richer and developed results than most other methods could. This method could also have potential benefits for the teachers who participate, by providing them with an opportunity to reflect on their practice and conceptualize theories. By establishing a safe space for conversation with the participants, a more detailed collection of data may be created and illuminate important themes in the data.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter provides an explanation of the methodology chosen in exploring this study’s line of inquiry. I have chosen to conduct a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews in order to collect relevant data that is related to the existing literature in this area I have explored. Using this method, I hope to collect rich, data that is deep in breadth and explores the unique opinions, perspectives and observations of teachers who meet the criteria I have established. I will be interviewing Ontario elementary teachers who have experience in both the religious and secular school systems in order to inform whether or not there may be an impact on academic achievement in students who attend religious schools, and why. In this preceding chapter I elaborate in greater detail my approach in participant recruitment, drawing on personal and professional collections to create a pool of potential participants who meet the criteria and volunteer for involvement.
Key ethical considerations of participant involvement in this study, such as protecting participant anonymity, providing participants with the ability to withdraw consent at any time, and transparency regarding the data that will be collected and how it will be stored are also further explored, and what the expectations of participating are. I have also reviewed the potential strengths and limitations of this study’s methodological approach.

In the following chapter, I report on the findings of this research and the data I have collected.
Chapter 4: FINDINGS

4.0 Introduction to the Chapter

The participants who contributed to this research study were able to provide a contemporary perspective on any differences that may exist between religious and non-religious Ontario primary schools that may affect student’s academic achievement. In this chapter, I explain and contextualize the opinions and ideas the participants shared that contribute to a deeper understanding in this area, and compare these findings with those suggested in existing literature. Three current primary/junior Ontario teachers who have experience in both religious and non-religious schools were interviewed in this research study. The experiences, ideas and thoughts they shared based on their time in both school systems informed the findings for this chapter. As such, this chapter is organized by themes that arose in the participant’s responses that related to differences between the schools that may impact students’ academic achievement. I will report in turn on the four following themes that emerged from the data analysis:

1) In religious schools, students may display a difference in academic achievement in specific subjects.

2) A negative gap in academic achievement in religious school students when compared with their peers may exist due to a combination of factors.

3) Differences in student’s academic experience at religious schools may impact academic achievement, such as resources, the balance of multiple curriculums and homework.

4) Students in religious schools may excel academically.
4.1 A Difference in Achievement in Specific Subjects

One potential area of difference between religious and non-religious schools that I was particularly interested in was whether or not achievement in specific subjects might differ across the two school systems. For example, Jeynes (2002) suggests that although, statistically, students in religious schools scored higher overall on standardized tests than their counterparts in non-religious schools, there were specific subject areas in which students from religious schools underperformed to the standards of their peers. In this section, I will report on my findings regarding a difference in achievement for students in religious schools, focusing specifically on Science, The Arts, and Literacy.

4.1.1 Science

Jeynes (2002) suggested that, although students in religious schools may, overall, have higher academic performance than their peers in secular schools, they may have lower performance in specific subject areas. In fact, the results of students from the religious schools included in this sample showed no ameliorative effect specifically in the area of science scores. Jeynes (2002) postulated that this was, perhaps, a result of a lack of funds allocated to procuring the necessary spaces and equipment needed in order to support a high level of instruction. Interestingly enough, two of my participants mentioned that students’ achievement in the area of math might be affected, but for different reasons than Jeynes (2002) had postulated. Rebecca noted that, “the secular subjects, and science in particular, were certainly covered in a different way.” They had noticed that some topics covered in the science curriculum could be considered contradictory of religious precepts. Any content that might be considered religiously sensitive in the eyes of the religious administration at the school was removed from
educational content in the classroom and library. As Rebecca mentioned, parts of the curriculum may be problematic as it contradicts religious beliefs or values. They shared that they had once experienced that, “suddenly the whole aspects of creation and timelines, and how do you explain dinosaurs, and when they came, etc., was a sticky issue in the religious school.” Rachel shared that specifically in their science classes they avoid certain topics because “I can’t teach something that I don’t believe and they [the students] don’t believe.” As a result, both Rachel and Rebecca’s experiences reinforced that there is a possibility that the perspectives presented to students, and specific content that may contradict religious precepts are excluded from instruction in a manner that may impact students’ achievement in this subject area.

Jeynes (2002) postulated that another factor that may contribute to lower science scores for students in religious schools is a lack of monetary resources for expansive science tools and instruction. A science teacher themselves, Rachel shared that:

I wouldn't say we [at a religious school] receive an equal amount of resources and support in the religious school, you definitely have much less. For example, lab equipment or chemicals, definitely you don't have the same access as the public schools. It comes down to the money—they're very expensive. We just don’t have the money for this.

Interestingly, Rachel continued to share that, “Right now, there are some alternatives available, like watching experiments on YouTube, which kind of replaces real labs. You have to do the best you can do.” Accordingly, students in religious schools that do not have the funds for inquiry based instruction in the sciences may not gain the same hands-
on experiences and skills their peers are developing as they participate in expansive science programs in non-religious schools.

4.1.2 The Arts

A surprising finding concurred by all three participants is a potential gap in the area of instruction of the arts. The teachers suggested that they have noticed a gap in curriculum instruction in religious schools in specific subject areas that can impact students’ overall academic achievement. Sarah said, “Forget French or music...come to mention it, forget the arts and gym, too. Instruction in these subject areas is minimal…it doesn’t make for a well rounded child!” Rebecca concurred, stating, “at least at the schools where I've been, there's never been an adequate covering of music, of drama, the arts in particular.” Rachel mentioned that they wished there was an opportunity to focus more on these subjects. All three participants shared that they have noticed attempts to infuse the instruction of these subjects through religious instruction. As Sarah shared, “I have seen teachers in religious schools try to cover these subject areas as much as possible, particularly through cross-curricular connections in religious instruction. They also mentioned that the lack of instruction in comparison to their peers in secular schools could be detrimental to students in religious schools, especially those who may have ultimately chosen to pursue The Arts as a future career path.

4.1.3 Literacy Skills

In conversation with the research participants, a few potential factors emerged that may impact the learning and learning skills of students in religious schools. From their unique perspectives, as a teacher of reading readiness in a public school and a literacy specialist in a religious school, Sarah shared an interesting insight regarding a
When discussing whether or not the inclusion of religious-related content can be beneficial or detrimental, Sarah shared:

The only time I see it can be detrimental is in the early years when they are learning how to print. So in English, they’re printing from left to right, but Hebrew is right to left. So we see a lot of the little ones, just learning to print, have a real hard time. And they are printing backwards. If they have Hebrew in the morning and English in the afternoon, they are confused a little bit. They’re confused a little bit...and it takes time!

Sarah was able to point out that, specifically for some students in Hebrew schools, the inclusion of religious instruction can, in some students, affect the development of their learning skills and impact their long term academic achievement. Rebecca concurred, sharing that “In Jewish education you're reading right to left, and left to right, it's not something that necessarily people will say "Oh wow, it's going to be instantaneous" There may very well be that lag.” In their personal experience, Rebecca had noted that:

When you're learning three languages, you have that much more that you have to look after. I think that for kids who aren't language-based learners and for whom having to go and do, not only French and English, but also Hebrew in Hebrew and religious studies for an extended period of time I think that for those kids that was certainly very difficult.

According to Coleman et. al (1982), students in religious school tend to show overall ameliorated academic achievement when compared to their peers, but this effect is not as pronounced in the area of literacy. Based on the experiences of the research participants,
it seems as though the many language skills students are expected to acquire at the same
time may result in somewhat lower levels of achievement in the area of literacy,
particularly in the early school years.

4.2 Factors that may negatively contribute to a gap in academic achievement

The findings of this research point to some of the factors that may detrimentally contribute to students’ academic achievement in religious schools. The research participants shared their observations of the aspects of the school system that may impede their students’ ability to academically excel beyond their peers in secular schools. In this section, time constraints, a heavier workload, and a potential lack of resources are explored as potential reasons for this result.

4.2.1 Time Constraints

A major theme that emerged in conversation with these three teachers is that one of the biggest contributing factors for any potential detrimental effects on academic achievement for students who attend religious schools is a lack of sufficient time for instruction of secular subjects. Rebecca stated:

The main thing is the compression of curriculum there's not as much time being able to be spent. You just didn't have the opportunity to have as much time so you have that much more to cover, so it means that the work, and the kids were doing it, is quite a bit of work so the workload is higher.

Sarah called the approach to Ontario curriculum instruction in the Hebrew school where they work a “cramslam” when compared to the public school that they work in. Sarah explained that due to the number of classroom hours in the religious schools where they have experience are split between secular subjects and religious subjects, there is no
time for extra enrichment, or to expand on a subject. Although there is the opportunity for reinforcement of content through infusion of the curriculum into the religious curriculum, some students “can’t handle” the rushed pace of instruction, which can lead to “learning issues.” However, for “some [students], it works.” Sarah elaborated that they have noticed that, in their opinion, teachers in public school do not assign a great deal of homework, and whatever they do assign is geared towards providing the students with an opportunity to focus on reviewing, or reinforcing what they have already learned during classroom hours.

Conversely, since there is less time to cover all of the required material in the classroom in religious schools, in their opinion, they have noted that teachers tend to assign a greater deal of homework for their students in order to “stretch” instruction time beyond the classroom. They attested that this might make it harder for students to maintain a well balanced academic life, and that they were, “bogged down between homework for their many subjects, in addition to extra curriculars.” Rachel agreed, sharing that the school they worked at had longer school days in an attempt to create more time for classroom instruction. They shared that, “in the winter, my students [at the religious school] hardly saw the sun! If anything, it certainly affected morale and the students’ morale and overall engagement.” Ultimately, this “overload” of work could affect students’ academic achievement in comparison to their peers in secular schools. Some students may not be able to successfully balance all of their subjects and the requirements of the demanding educational program at religious schools.
4.2.2 Heavier Workload

When discussing the workload at a religious school compared to the public schools where they have experience, Rachel shared that, in their opinion, “It [the workload] is much bigger, there is no question about it. They have no free time, and I take that into account and try to do as much as possible in the classroom.”

Rebecca agreed that the shorter length of time could make it more difficult to cover all relevant subject matter, sharing that they, “do believe that certain things may not be covered the way they should be.” From the perspective of a teacher, they feel that with, “the compression of curriculum there's not as much time being able to be spent on the content. You have just a shorter period of time and so you have to become very efficient.” In their experience, they had seen some classes where, based on the classroom dynamic, the teacher was not able to deliver the content in the manner they had planned, or cover quite as much as they had hoped to. The opportunity to review and reinforce the content in the classroom is limited and, as such, achievement of students in a class like that may have been affected.

As a student who attended Hebrew schools, Rebecca shared that they personally, “had a tutor 5 days a week in both the secular and also in the Hebrew just to keep up.” Rebecca also agreed that the inclusion of the instruction of religious content could impact the development of student’s learning skills. Based on their experience, Rebecca shared that “The workload at religious schools is much heavier [than non-religious schools].” As a result, they attest, “the kids were forced at an earlier age to develop certain organizational skills that allow them to handle that workload.” Invariably, not every student will be able to juggle the various subjects and content they are learning in a
Hebrew school, and may have a difficult time coping as a result. According to Rebecca, “What ends up happening is that the kids—in a way, if the kids leave, it's much harder, and that is absolutely what happens, is that you have some kids who left because, academically, they were having a hard time.” Some of these students may then leave their Hebrew school for a public school where, based on feedback Rebecca had received from former students, they often felt that they were not initially at the same level of academic achievement as their peers.

In religious schools, students may experience a heavier workload and greater amounts of homework that can impact academic outcomes.

### 4.2.3 Fewer Resources and Support Accessible to Teachers and Students

Participants asserted that in religious schools, there may be fewer physical resources and fewer educational supports. According to all of these teachers, the materials used in their classrooms in both the religious schools and public schools were similar. Rebecca said that, in both school systems they have worked in:

> In terms of the resources I would say yes, it’s pretty well equal. They [the students] have the resources, the kids have the books, they had the materials. I would say overall, however, if you say okay do they have adequate resources or do they have the same type of resources I would say yes they do.

Sarah shared that they had noticed access to fewer physical resources in their experience in religious schools. They shared that a variety of supplies were not always readily available, and that “we really have to be very creative in the day schools to try and come up with, and ask parents for things we can use like art materials.” They felt as though, at times, they were unable to do a specific activity or lesson because they did not have to the
same resources they would have at their public school to deliver the same content. They felt that, although they endeavored a different way to deliver the content, using those specific resources could have been helpful to a student whose learning style is conducive to using certain manipulatives or tools.

Rachel pointed out that, in every public school they have ever worked in, there was enhanced access to technology. In their experience, classrooms typically had Smart Boards or other electronic whiteboards, there was often a computer lab and libraries typically had tablets that teachers or students could borrow. Sarah also noted that the libraries they have used in religious schools are incomparable to those in the public schools they have worked in, including a great variety of books reflecting diverse communities and broad ranges of topics. Interestingly, they attest that budgetary limitations result in minimal access to these tools in the religious schools where they have worked. In addition to limiting the manner in which instruction is presented to the students without, or with limited technology, in their opinion students are not developing the same media literacy skills as their peers in public school.

Ultimately, this difference could negatively impact students’ academic achievement. In some ways, this could affect the manner in which some topics or content are understood and ultimately, impact students’ academic achievement. Students in religious schools, in their experience, do tend to have access to comparable, or even the same textbooks, and basic curriculum-related tools, like manipulatives. In this sense, there may not be any specific impact on students’ academic achievement. However, it was a common theme that emerged in conversation with the teachers that they may have
felt, at times, like they and their students who may need extra support did not have the
same access to it as their public school peers might. Rebecca shared that they were:

Not sure that the learning support is always necessarily...what I felt was that the
LST [Learning Support Teachers] component, for the kids who were struggling-
that's where you had the kids who were leaving and going into the public sector
because they were having such a hard time.

In their experience, students at the religious school who might need extra support in a
specific area, such as reading recovery, or students with an exceptionality, did not have
access to support staff or modified programming to the same degree as their peers in
public schools. Rebecca noticed that their access to such supports were “not as
consistently available, and students were unable to have regular personalized
programming.” In conversation, they explained that the religious schools they have
worked in may not have had a team dedicated to addressing students’ special needs at the
school all the time, as they had noted in public schools. As a result, they felt that the
onus of differentiating to meet students’ specific needs fell almost entirely to the teacher
and therefore may not have been as conducive to the students’ academic achievement.

Interestingly, Sarah noted that they are able to avail themselves of more practical
resources at the public school. They mentioned that:

There are so many volunteers, and parents who are consistently involved in the
school’s day-to-day activities. Having their extra help, doing photocopying,
taking a couple of students who need more practice reading into the hall, assisting
with extra curricular activities, really allows me to focus more on the instruction I
am trying to deliver. Sometimes it is so helpful to have an extra set of hands.
From their experience as a teacher, Sarah felt that having this extra support allowed them to focus more of their time on developing and delivering engaging content in their job at the public school. They also felt that, with the sporadic in-class assistance from volunteers or of the support staff they called “readily available”, they were able to provide more one-on-one instruction for students who needed extra help, or engage a small group, that helped increase their effectiveness in content delivery. As a result, Sarah felt that, in the public school, their students were enjoying a somewhat augmented program that may beneficially impact academic achievement in a way their students in the religious school did not have access to. The participants shared that, in their experience, there is greater access to physical resources and educational support in public schools.

4.3 Factors that may positively contribute to a difference in academic achievement

Despite the factors mentioned in the preceding section that may have a negative impact in religious school students’ academic achievement, research participants also shared a variety of factors that, in their opinion, may result in overall improved academic experience and ameliorated academic achievement for their students. Smaller class size, instruction of religious values and ethics, involvement in a religious community, parental involvement, and a student culture based in religious values were identified as potential factors that positively impact student achievement. These potential factors are explained below.

4.3.1 Religious Schools’ Tendency to have Smaller Class Sizes

Sarah shared that, in their opinion, the religious schools where they have worked have a “superior academic program” overall. Rebecca concurred, sharing “in terms of
the academic experience, particularly looking at the secular side, I think that generally speaking the view is that the level of education was quite high.” In the previous section, any of the potential drawbacks or factors that may create a gap in achievement between students in religious schools and their peers in religious schools is discussed. Overall, however, the participants shared that they felt that there was a perception that secular instruction in the religious schools where they have experience was superior to the public schools they have worked in. The experiences and ideas they shared concur with Jeynes (2003), Sander (2001), Eide, Goldhaber & Showalter, (2004), who attest that, ultimately, attending religious schools positively impacts academic achievement. Card’s (2008) comparison of student achievement in public Catholic schools in Ontario against their peers in secular public schools suggests that the existence of school choice induces competition between the school types, resulting in improved academic performance. Although the impact of choice was expected to emerge from the data, the teachers provided alternative theories regarding reasoning for enhanced academic achievement in religious schools. In this section, potential reasons as to why that may be, in their opinion, are explored.

Section 93 of the Constitution Act of 1867 includes provisions for Catholic schools to remain under the mandate of the province and create a constitutional obligation for the system to be funded by the government, in the same manner as public schools in the province (Constitution Act, 1986, s 93). As a result, other denominational schools in the province do not receive any provincial or federal funding, and are therefore private schools with substantial tuition fees for parents who choose to send their children there. Accordingly, Hebrew schools are private, and the student body where Rachel
works is quite small, resulting in classes that are much fewer in number than the “typically thirty students” they have in public schools. In their opinion, Rachel asserts that the smaller class size positively impacts the level of instruction and depth they are able to provide in their classroom. They shared that, having fewer students, there are less behavioural issues in the class and that, “when I don't have to spend as much time on discipline, I can focus more on the subject matter and we have enough time for everything, for personalizing the content and for exploring the content in greater depth.”

In concurrence with assertions by Bailey and Cooper (2009) the smaller class sizes of religious schools can positively impact student achievement, and in these teachers’ opinions, can allow for greater personalization of the content, increased time to attend to each student, and more time for the students to ask questions and seek help specific to themselves.

### 4.3.2 Instruction of Religious Values and Ethics

Lee et. al (1993) suggests that, in religious schools, communal school life and the instruction of moral and ethical values create an educational philosophy that produces improved academic and social outcomes for students. All of the participants shared that, in their experience, students attending religious schools were exposed to instruction regarding developing positive character traits, involvement in contributing to the local community, and the study of religious values and ethics. All three of the participants mentioned that, in their experience, religious schools had a focus on ethical behaviour and religious values such as kindness, giving charity and prayer. Rebecca shared that they recalled their students at the Hebrew school regularly visiting the elderly as part of their school activities, and attested that the refinement of personal character traits that occurs
in religious schools may have a positive impact on academic achievement. Rebecca did note, however, that they are starting to see an increase in values education in the public schools. They shared, “There is increasingly recognition within the public school board that there has to be what is being referred to as character education. They even talk about the golden rule—which is actually completely Hillel's proposition.” Ultimately, the research suggests that the inclusion of religious instruction may positively contribute to a school culture that supports and fosters academic achievement.

4.3.3 Involvement in a Religious Community

Sarah shared that one of the most valuable aspects, in her experience, of attending a religious school, was that the students were able to share in communal activities. They noted that students might attend the same synagogue, and discuss their involvement in the religious community upon returning to school. Rebecca noted that it was important that students “could have these friends that had shared values, a shared heritage, etc.” Regnerus & Elder (2003) attest that involvement in religious communities, and the social interaction it involves, imbeds higher standards of academic achievement in students. Accordingly, Rachel shared that the daily prayer services at her school and shared religious experiences seemed to bond the students, creating a positive social environment that helped to create a culture conducive for academic success. This would concur with Sikkink (2004), who attests that attending religious schools can develop a strong collective sense of identity and positively impact academic achievement.

4.3.4 Parental Involvement

Nia (2007) suggests that students’ ameliorated academic achievement in religious schools may be impacted by their parents’ value of learning, and the teachers seem to
agree. In Rebecca’s experience, “it was also an expectation on the part of the parents” that their children attain a high level of academic achievement at the religious schools. Rachel shared that she has noticed parents at the religious school seem to value education very highly and tend to be more actively involved in their children’s academic careers. This increased involvement may include more frequent communication with the teachers, regularly involving themselves with their children’s schoolwork and helping with homework, and providing extra supports such as tutors when needed. Sarah shared that, in their opinion, the parents in the religious school where they have worked are more vocal in demanding high quality instruction, and feel entitled to an improved educational experience for their child, given the amount of money they pay for tuition. Rebecca succinctly summarized that:

Absolutely, I think that out of religious school certainly it requires and expects more, and there is less time to be fuddle-duddling your way through it. Say that the culture, if we look at it from that point of view, I think that there is a sense of the culture- for me it was more of a work ethic. Your parents expect you to do things, your teachers expect you to do things, but more in an understanding of the fact that the bar was supposed to be set high.

As a result, the teachers concurred, they tend to notice that, although the demands of attending a religious school may be high, overall students tend to “excel, work hard and do better”, as Sarah put it, when compared to their public school peers.

4.3.5 Student Culture based in Religious Values

All three of the teachers shared that, in their opinion, the students in religious schools seem to foster a sense of tightly bonded community and develop a strong social
identity in their students. Sarah shared that any improved academic achievement that they saw in their students could be largely attributed to their strong sense of community. They noted that the students felt a sense of camaraderie in sharing the same traditions, holidays and observances and often shared in them together outside of school. They noted these students then developed stronger relationships that often lasted a lifetime, and this created an environment that positively impacted academic achievement. Rebecca shared that:

You can learn the content pretty well anywhere that's not really the sole reason for sending your child to a Jewish day school. It's the friendships and the social context and all together that makes a certain amount of sense because there's an inherent logic in it - because they are celebrating together it becomes normal to celebrate these holidays.

According to Jeynes (2002), the strong sense of community and the focus on holistic development of the child that is developed in religious schools can elicit many positive benefits, including ameliorated academic achievement. According to Rachel, in their religious classes, students “are just more serious. They know where they are going and what to expect.” As the group is tightly bonded and a small, involved community, the students tend to support each other and set a tone for the community of learners to take their learning seriously and to academically achieve at a high level.

The development of a strong, tightly-knit community that values excellence in education may have a positive impact on academic achievement.

4.4 Conclusion

Card (2008) and Niaz (2007) suggest that there may not be anything inherent about a religious school that affects academic achievement. Ameliorated academic
achievement noted in these studies was attributed to the competition created between religious schools and secular schools in the same geographical area, which develops incentives for administration and teachers to excel academically and attract students (Card, 2008). Although I was expecting to record data that might corroborate this hypothesis, any difference in academic achievement in religious school students noted by the research participants was not attributed to this potential factor. Perhaps the concept of school competition did not arise in conversation with the teachers involved in this research study because Jewish Hebrew Day Schools do not directly compete with the local public schools in Ontario, draw from a narrower demographic base, and have high tuition fees. Additionally, not all children of the appropriate age in the area are eligible to attend, and, as a result, they may not be directly competing for students.

I had also expected to learn about how the composition of the student body might act as a contributing factor in affecting or improving student’s academic achievement in religious schools. Jeynes (2002), and Coleman, Hoffer and Kilgore (1982) attest that students from marginalized backgrounds, such as lower economic status in particular excel academically in religious schools when compared to their peers in public schools. However, the teachers who participated in this research study only discussed their students as whole groups, and did not mention any consideration for student background and the composition of student body as factors contributing to student academic achievement.

Hallinan and Kubischek (2012) suggest that there is no difference in academic achievement between students in religious schools and secular schools, but I had anticipated there would be. Overall, the research participants shared that, in their
experience, they did find that students at the religious day schools where they work academically perform at a higher level than their students in public schools, concurring with the propositions of Jeynes (2003), Sander (2001), Eide, Goldhaber & Showalter (2004). In this chapter, I have shared my findings as to why this may be, based on the interviews I conducted.

4.4.1 Theme One
In conclusion, the findings suggest that there may be a difference in academic achievement between students in religious elementary day schools and public schools in Ontario. The data collected indicates that students in religious schools may show a difference in achievement in specific subject areas. In science, achievement may be lower due to insufficient resources as a result of financial limitations. Students in religious schools may not have as robust experiences of instruction in the arts as their public school peers due to comparatively limited time and resources. Specifically, in Jewish Hebrew day schools, students’ development of literacy skills may be impacted due to the instruction of multiple languages at the same time.

4.4.2 Theme Two
The academic experience of students in religious schools may differ greatly from their peers in public schools. Due to the inclusion of religious curriculums, time for instruction is greatly impacted. Teachers have less time to cover content and, as a result, students may experience fewer opportunities for enrichment. They also may find themselves balancing a heavier workload, and completing more homework on their own time to cover material. Ultimately, these factors may contribute to any gap in academic achievement in religious schools.
Another key finding of this research is that teacher’s may have limited access to physical resources and support in religious school. These limitations may be due to monetary constraints and, although resources may be sufficient to deliver content instruction, it is possible that diversification and enrichment to meet specific students’ needs may be inhibited. This constraint may also impact students’ academic achievement in religious schools.

4.4.3 Theme Three
The research also shows that, overall, students may preform better in religious schools. In the opinions of the research participants, the level of education is quite high as is the expectation and standard of achievement. Some aspects of students’ academic experience, such as smaller class sizes and the skills they develop while balancing multiple subjects at the same time might be considered factors that help explain a difference in this area.

The findings also suggest there may be a distinct school culture in religious schools that contributes to student’s academic success. The inclusion of religious content may involve instruction of religious values and ethics that results in improved academic and social outcomes for students. The involvement in a shared religious community and daily practices may also positively impact academic achievement. The resultant tightly knit student community may positively contribute to student academic outcomes, as well as the culture of parental involvement in students’ academic experience. In the culture of these religious schools, parents seem to support their children academically, resulting in improved academic outcomes in religious schools.

The following chapter will relate these findings to existing literature in this area. Based on the findings of this chapter, I will discuss implications for the educational
community, and the community at large, as well as recommendations informed by this research.
Chapter 5: IMPLICATIONS
5.0 Introduction to the Chapter
In this research study, differences in academic achievement between students in religious schools and their peers in secular schools are explored. In the first section of this chapter, key findings of this research and their significance are shared. To follow, the implications and recommendations that arise from the research are presented. Areas for further research are recommended, followed by concluding comments summarizing the findings and underscoring the significance of this research.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings
In the analysis of the data, four themes emerged that spoke to the participants’ perspectives and observations of the impact religious school attendance had on students’ academic achievement. These four themes are:

1) Students in religious schools may display a difference in academic achievement in specific subject areas when compared to their peers in secular schools.

2) For certain students, a negative gap in academic achievement may exist, due to a combination of factors.

3) In religious schools, students’ academic achievement may be impacted by a difference in available resources, balancing multiple curriculums, or more homework.

4) Overall, religious school students appear to excel academically.

Prior to this study, some of the extant research suggested there would be no difference in academic achievement between religious school students and their secular-school peers. The findings of this study seem to disagree with this supposition by Hallinan and Kubischek (2012). The research participants’ shared their personal
perspectives and observations that, overall, they noted that their religious school students seemed to excel academically at a higher level than their students in secular schools. Their perceptions were based on anecdotal observations, grades and personal knowledge, and seemed to concur with Jeynes (2003), with Eide, Goldhaber & Showalter (2004) and with Sander (2001), each of whom suggest that attending religious schools can result in higher academic achievement.

A continuous thread that emerged in this research study to explain any positive difference in academic achievement in religious school students was a variety of study skills that students developed in order to cope with the various subjects and curriculums they might be learning at the same time. According to the assertions of the research participants, their religious school students were required to manage a greater course load than their secular school students, due to the inclusion of religious curriculums and related language and cultural instruction. The participants felt that, in order to succeed, students had to work hard and focus on developing study habits that would enable them to balance the various aspects of their instruction. Although this may be difficult for some students, for others it seemed to elicit positive academic outcomes. Ultimately, this was the strongest proposition presented to explain any potential positive difference that may exist between religious school students and their counterparts in secular schools. None of the teachers involved in this research study spoke to school competition between religious schools and other schools in their local geographic areas, as Card (2008) suggested. This may however, be due to the unique status of Hebrew schools as paid private schools that are not in direct competition with local public schools, and possibly not even directly competing with other private schools due to its the niche target market.
Jeynes (2002), as well as Coleman, Hoffer and Kilgore (1982), suggest that in particular students from marginalized backgrounds achieve greater academic success in religious schools than other students from a similar background might in a secular school. Although it was expected to discover findings aligned with this proposition, none of the research participants noted any related observation. However, Jeynes (2002) also noted that the strong sense of community that results from involvement in communal and cultural religious engagement can create an education environment that is conducive to academic success, and the data seems to concur. All of the research participants spoke to a sense of inclusion, involvement and tight-knit community in their religious schools, that they felt positively impacts academic achievement. The results of this study are aligned with existing research that points to the everyday involvement of religious communal engagement imbedding higher standards of academic achievement (Regnerus & Elder, 2003), while developing a strong sense of collective identity that positively impacts academic achievement (Sikkink, 2004).

The research participants pointed to the instruction of religious teachings related to values, ethics and morals as an educational philosophy that improved students’ academic outcomes, in alignment with the propositions of Lee et. al (1993). It was also noted that parental involvement and value for learning fosters an expectation for academic success within the school. Niaz (2007) attributes ameliorated academic achievement in religious schools to this parental influence, and the results of this study seem to concur, and the opinions of the research participants in this study seems to concur.

Beyond these factors of culture, values and classroom experiences, other factors that may impact student achievement emerged from the data. Bailey and Cooper (2009)
sugest that religious schools’ smaller class sizes can have a positive impact on student achievement, and the participants noted that their ability to spend more time working with their students one on one may contribute to their academic success. Coleman et. al (1982) suggested that, although students in religious schools may have overall higher levels of academic achievement, they may show lower levels in areas such as literacy, which was consistently pointed out by the research participants. The data suggests religious school students may not receive as strong instruction in The Arts as their secular school counterparts, and they may have access to fewer physical resources, such as technology or art supplies, or educational supports like specialists for students with exceptionalities. It also seemed as though religious school students performed lower academically in certain subjects, like science, as purported by Jeynes (2002).

Ultimately, the findings of this research study was aligned with much of the existing literature in related areas, while presenting important new findings, such as a lack of access to resources in religious schools. The implications of these findings are presented in the following section.

5.2 Implications

The findings of this research study are impacted by several limitations. This small scale, short-term, qualitative study has produced important recommendations and insights into religious school systems, but those findings must be understood through the context through which it was gained. The findings of this study may not be representative of every religious school or indicative of all students that attend them. Despite the fact that the findings are impacted by these limitations, they nevertheless have important implications for myself as a future educator and researcher. Additionally, careful
extrapolations from this research can provide important data and information to the educational community at large.

As this research study was undertaken, it was immediately evident that the impacts attending a religious school may have on students’ academic achievement is an area that has not yet been fully explored. Given that there is a great number of students in private and public students attending religious school across Ontario, and Canada overall, the findings of this research study can impact students, teachers and administrators in religious schools, parents and other stakeholders in the school community and teachers in secular schools who may have alumni of religious schools as students. What follows below is a discussion of the study’s implications for school administration, educators, parents, and myself as a researcher.

5.2.1 Implications for school administration
Ultimately, although students in religious schools may show ameliorated academic outcomes, there may be specific curricular areas, such as science or the arts in which they may not have received sufficient instruction and may be lacking in skills. Furthermore, a student who displays exceptionalities may need extra services or assistance, as they may not have been adequately addressed in a religious elementary school. Perhaps money could be raised to contribute to improving instruction in these areas, or the existing budget should be split up differently in order to meet these needs that are not being tackled. The findings of this research suggest it could be vitally important for the administration in religious school boards to consider the areas where extra support may be necessary, and consider their budgets accordingly. This research study also suggests that the academic achievement of students in religious schools may be negatively impacted by heavy course loads, large amounts of homework and
scheduling conflicts. These findings may be relevant to religious school administrators in influencing the development of scheduling and facilitating communication across the religious and secular departments in the school to ensure students are best supported in their academic experience.

Within the religious school systems, these findings may serve to highlight potential areas for improvement. For example, this research suggests there may not be sufficient funds for various supplies such as lab equipment or art supplies. It was also found that educational supports may not be on par with secular schools, and students’ achievement is lower in certain subject areas. This information may serve to inform administration and decision makers within the religious school system as to specific areas that may need to be addressed, or the budget may need to be considered. Based on these findings, perhaps administrators may be better equipped to meet student needs within their schools. The information might also be helpful for financial stakeholders in the religious schools when considering contributions and where their money should possibly be allocated to best serve students.

5.2.2 Implications for Educators

It seems as though students in religious schools are managing a heavy course load and juggling more subjects at the same time than their peers at secular schools. Although this research points to this potentially allowing students to develop effective coping mechanisms and positive work habits in order to balance their various classes, all of the research participants shared that there were students for whom this approach may seem to be overwhelming and result in them not showing as high academic success across their various courses. These findings are important for educators within religious schools in understanding the experience of their students, and planning accordingly. It also seems as
though there is more homework assigned in religious schools, in order to create more
time for instruction of various subjects when there might not be sufficient time during the
day. Perhaps it would be helpful for religious school teachers to understand the added
pressures this may present to their students and adapt their instruction accordingly.

5.2.3 Implications for Parents
There are many stakeholders for in religious schools for whom these findings may
have important implications. The results of this study may provide important insight for
parents or guardians of students in religious schools, or those who are considering
sending their children to religious schools. Noting that students in religious schools may,
overall, have higher academic performance, but may struggle with the balance of having
an increased course load or have more homework than they would from a secular school
may be important information. If the student presents exceptionalities, the findings of this
study may be of even greater import when considering whether there are sufficient
academic supports for that child in place in a religious school. When deciding, parents or
guardians might also want to consider that, although students’ academic achievement
might be lower in specific subject areas, like science, or not as strong instruction for the
arts, the students may experience residual benefits from strong, cohesive communal ties
and engagement in religious involvement.

5.2.4 Implications for Myself as a Researcher and Educator
On a more personal note, this research has many strong implications for me as a
teacher and researcher. As a former student of religious schools and having continuously
participated in formal and informal education within my community, I can see myself
teaching in religious schools in the future. This study will greatly impact my
understanding of my students and their academic experience. Understanding the
pressures of meeting parents’ expectations for high academic achievement while attempting to excel in a wide range of subjects and juggling more than one curriculum can be trying for a student. As a teacher, I would try to address these issues for my students and help support their learning in any way possible. I would also seek out ways of addressing any special needs for students with exceptionalities and provide them with as many resources and supports as possible if that did not exist within my school.

The research also presents many aspects of the religious school system that can positively impact student achievement. The effects of religious infusion on the school culture seems to foster a close-knit community of high achieving students. As a teacher in religious schools, I would try to promote this engagement in my instruction as much as possible, and provide the students with multiple entry points to religious, cultural and communal learning. If I were to teach in a secular school, I would try to implement as many of the attributes of religious engagement in religious schools as possible in the hopes of positively impacting my students’ academic achievement as well. I would include secular ethical and moral teachings into our curriculum, and provide times for community engagement in the hopes that this adaptation, without a religious basis, might positively impact the academic achievement of my students. In either school system, I would do my best to create a close-knit culture in my class to support my students’ learning.

As both a teacher and researcher, I have noted that there is a great deal of intellectual exploration left to do in this specific subject area. Conducting this research has proven to me how many subtle aspects of a school system can have great impact on students and their academic success. Although the in depth responses and observations
from teachers provide a great deal of insight into students’ experiences in religious schools, as a researcher I would feel compelled to also pursue longitudinal qualitative research in this area to get a broader sense of how big of a gap might exist between students in religious and secular schools, and in which specific areas. Analyzing the data and discovering findings that concurred with existing literature and also presented new information was an exciting experience as a researcher. However, as I pursued research in this area, I was surprised to find there was not a great deal of literature exploring this line of inquiry. As a researcher, one of the strongest implications of this research is how important it might be for it to be further pursued and understood.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, the following three recommendations are presented:

1) Specific instruction of skills related to teaching in religious schools should be offered in teacher education programs. As the new requirements of teacher education in Ontario have changed this year, it is the recommendation of this study that faculties of education offer elective training specifically developed to provide future teachers with the skills they may need in religious schools. Currently, such training only exists for future educators interested in teaching in the Catholic boards, but the research suggests this may be pertinent to address the unique challenges teachers may face in religious schools. This matter is ongoing, and as such, it would be prudent for this recommendation to be addressed within the next two years while the new format of teacher education is being developing.
2) The students in religious schools face a unique combination of classes, courses, languages and religious instruction. It is recommended that, within the next five years, teachers and administrators in the religious school system develop and implement additional supports to assist their students cope with heavy workloads and large amounts of homework. This could potentially be addressed by offering a course that formally teaches students study skills and organizational behaviours that may positively impact their learning, or might come in the form of extra work periods built in throughout the day, or supervised, assisted work spaces at recess or immediately after school. Ultimately, a program should be developed to support students manage the high demands of attending a religious school.

3) Many of the areas where students in academic schools are lagging are a result of insufficient funding. Across Canada, education is a provincial responsibility and there is currently no funding offered to religious schools in Ontario. However, other provinces in the country, such as Quebec, Alberta, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and British Columbia, do provide partial public funding of religious schools that meet the standard of education required in their respective provinces. This study suggests that religious schools may have insufficient funding to provide resources and educational supports for students and students may have lower achievement in certain subject areas as a result. In order to bridge the gap between secular and religious schools in these areas, it is recommended that the Province of Ontario consider providing some form of funding to religious schools meeting Ministry of Education standards, as
well as allowing access to resources like specialized support workers within the next five years. Access to government funding could greatly impact students’ academic achievement in religious schools by reducing the financial limitations of the schools while also creating more equitable access to religious education in the province.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

On the whole, it appears as though the impact of attending religious schools on students’ academic achievement has not been explored in great depth, and much of the existing research is not contemporary or specifically related to the context of Canadian schools. As religious schools are an important part of our educational system, an important area of further research is studying the effects of the school system within the local context of Ontario. It would be interesting to see a unique quantitative study developed in Ontario that tested students in religious and secular schools in specific areas to better understand any gap or difference between them. Further qualitative study with a greater number of participants may help in gaining a deeper understanding in this area, and it would be particularly compelling to interview the students themselves or even their parents to truly understand the challenges they may face, their perceptions of their academic experience and any suggestions they may have for improving the religious school system. Through this research, whether or not students in religious schools have higher academic achievement remains as an enduring question that is yet to be answered. Logically, further research might first explore this line of inquiry and then pursue an understanding as to why or why not a differential in achievement might exist.
Research scholars might also direct their attention to the Hebrew school system to better understand its impacts on religious education. The findings of this research study are based in the observations and perspectives of teachers who have worked in both Hebrew schools and secular schools in Ontario, and it is believed that these findings can be extended to religious schools at large. However, within the peer-reviewed literature available in this faculty, there were no other studies that looked to the impacts of specifically attending Hebrew schools on academic achievement, and what factors may be involved in these effects. It would be interesting to additionally explore the various other religious schools in Ontario, in order to ascertain whether or not there are any enduring impacts on academic achievement across the different faith based schools. The differences and similarities between the schools and their culture, and how that may impact students’ academic achievement would be a compelling line of inquiry. The findings of such a study could provide useful insights that could be extrapolated into, for example, methods of instruction or community building that could be implemented in secular schools.

Within Ontario, public Catholic Schools are fully funded by the government. Many of the aspects identified in this research study as positively impacting students’ academic achievement, such as instruction of religious values and tradition, the fostering of a strong sense of community involvement and engagement, are instituted within the public Catholic school system. Further research comparing a religious school system that is publicly funded and one that is private might be particularly compelling in order to gain a better understanding of the impacts of attending religious schools. With this comparison, a better understanding of how any of the factors identified in this research
study that negatively impact academic achievement in religious schools could possibly be rectified through public funding could be explored.

5.5 Concluding Comments

In this chapter, the implications of this research study are explored. In the first section, an overview of key findings is presented. Contrary to the beliefs of Hallinan and Kubischek (2012), it was ultimately found that a difference in academic achievement does exist between religious schools and secular schools. As suggested by Jeynes (2003), many aspects of positive differences were attributed to community culture influenced by religious beliefs, and the infusion of religious content, culture and observances, aligning with the propositions of Jeynes (2002), Regnerus and Elder (2003) and Sikkink (2004). The findings also suggest that perhaps parental influence and value for education creates a culture in which success is expected, as suggested by Niaz (2007), and that smaller class size might also contribute to ameliorated academic achievement (Bailey and Cooper, 2009). In certain subject areas, the findings of this research study suggest religious school students perform lower than their counterparts in secular school, but show overall ameliorated academic achievement (Coleman et. al, 1982).

In the next section, implications of this research are explored. Although this study is limited by sample size, length and style of study, the findings nevertheless present strong implications for the academic community. The findings can inform teaching practices and administrative choices within the religious school community by providing an understanding of students’ academic experience and exposing areas that need attention and greater support. By highlighting the subject areas where instruction or materials may be lacking, as well as the resources and supports that are missing due to insufficient
funding, financial stakeholders and the religious community affiliated with the school can be informed regarding the needs of the community’s young learners. Parents and guardians can use the findings of this research to inform their school choice decisions and also provide necessary information to help understand the student and provide any necessary educational support, such as tutoring. The positive aspects that influence ameliorated academic achievement in religious schools can be studied and applied within any school context. As an educator, I personally will take this understanding of school culture and community engagement to any school where I may work. As a researcher, I gained a better understanding of the research process, and have an interest in pursuing further lines of inquiry that might provide a deeper understanding in this area.

Three recommendations were provided in this chapter. In order to better equip pre-service teachers, it is recommended that faculties of education across the province and country develop and implement an elective course addressing the needs of a teacher in religious schools in the next two years. While the new regulations of teacher education are implemented, it would be a worthwhile complement to the program to provide the opportunity for future teachers in religious schools to be prepared for the unique challenges they may face there. It was also suggested that supports for students in religious schools be developed and implemented within the next five years. Facing a stressful workload, students may need to develop adequate coping and organizational skills and learning strategies in order to successfully complete religious school, and schools can help in that by formally educating students in this area. Lastly, it is recommended that the province of Ontario consider providing partial funding to religious schools in the next five years. This funding could help improve instruction in areas where
there are currently insufficient funds in religious schools, and provide services that are currently unavailable. It would also align the province with many others in the country that already provide this support to their religious schools in the interest of equity and accountability.

Lastly, areas for further research are explored. As this line of inquiry specifically has not been studied at great depth, it would be a worthwhile pursuit for further research. Most existing literature is based in studies abroad, so contemporary, local school systems would be an interesting area to consider. In particular, Hebrew schools specifically have not been studied, and it would be interesting to consider any impacts on academic achievement in that system in comparison with other religious schools in the province of Ontario. And finally, there is no definitive answer as to whether or not, and to what degree, attending religious schools impact academic achievement. A better understanding of this research question would be an important area for future research.

The findings of this research are significant for the educational community at large. There are many aspects of religious schools that may point to higher academic achievement that can be replicated in other school systems in the province, the country, and abroad. In particular, this research is specifically relevant to teachers, administration, parents and students of religious schools. In addition to assisting in decision making for parents and guardians of students in religious schools, the findings of this research can inform teaching practice in religious schools, and impact allotment of funds and resources within the system.

These findings are also important to faculties of education across the province and country who prepare the future teachers of this country to go out into the field, but at the
present time, do not provide any form of preparation for religious schools. This research can also be considered relevant to the Provincial Government in considering providing partial funding to religious schools. As suggested by Jeynes (2002), students in religious schools may have lower achievement in certain subject areas, and provincial funding would be a crucial factor in minimalizing this gap between secular and religious schools.

The price of Hebrew schools in Ontario has increased dramatically over the past few years, and has risen at a pace higher than the rate of inflation for over a decade (Held, 2016). Parents within the Jewish community are seriously considering whether or not the cost of Hebrew Day Schools is worth it, and whether or not sending their children there is an important choice they can afford to make. Alternative educational formats are being considered to mediate costs while still providing students with some form of relevant Jewish education (Held, 2016). Although this research might be applicable to religious communities across the province and the country, the findings might be of particular relevance to the Canadian Jewish community, where Jewish day school education is being considered by many a crisis. In Ottawa, the main Jewish high school was closed in 2015 due to no longer being “financially viable” (Shefa, 2015). Parents are deciding what value a religious school may bring to their child, and what benefits it may pose to their education. As exemplified by the high school in Ottawa, the rising cost of tuition is causing many parents to choose against sending their children to Jewish schools, and that is directly impacting enrollment and the viability of the schools’ existence. For these parents, this research may help to illuminate some of the benefits or detriments of attending religious schools and provide a deeper understanding to inform educational decision making.
The findings of this research may also be relevant to the Ontario government when creating educational policy. The discussions around funding for education is greatly affecting the current political climate. In Quebec, where Hebrew Day Schools are partially funded, tuition is more than $5,000 less (Lungen, 2014). In Toronto, tuition in 2014 at one school was reported to be $24,900 a year (Lungen, 2014). The findings of this research suggests that there are, potentially, many social and academic benefits of attending a Hebrew Day School. Furthermore, many of the possible detriments to academic achievement highlighted herein are due to a lack of financial and physical resources. The findings of this line of inquiry can help inform local policy making regarding educational funding, and increasing equitable access to religious education.

Ultimately, this research has been conducted in the hopes that it may positively contribute to the educational community. Religious education is often considered by its graduates as an important aspect of their development and a definitive factor in the shaping of their personal religious, cultural or communal identity. The factors identified in this research as potentially positively impacting academic achievement can be used as suggestions to implement in any secular school to enhance student success. Understanding how attending a religious school might impact academic achievement is a preliminary stepping stone in understanding the significance to the existence of religious schools, and how they may be improved. Religious schools are an important part of our local school systems, and this study hopes to begin the conversation around understanding them better.
References


What is qualitative research? (2007). In U. Flick (Ed.). *Designing Qualitative Research*. (pp. 2-16). London: SAGE
Appendix A: Interview Consent Form

Date:

Dear _______________________________,

My name is Ashira Prizant and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on the effects of attending religious schools on academic outcomes. I am interested in interviewing Ontario elementary school teachers who have taught students in religious schools, as well as secular schools. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one 45 to 60-minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a research conference or publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. This data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only people who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor ________________. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question.

I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to participation, and I will share with you a copy of the transcript to ensure accuracy.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,

Ashira Prizant
(647) 300-4168
ashira.gailor@mail.utoronto.ca

Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can
withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty. I have read the letter provided to me by Ashira Prizant and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ______________________________________

Name: (printed) _______________________________________________

Date: ____________________________
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Hello (participant). Thank you very much participating in this research study, and for taking the time for this interview. As we have previously discussed, the aim of this research is to learn whether or not attending religious schools can affect student’s academic achievement, and what factors may be involved in this difference. The interview should take between forty-five minutes to one hour, and there will be four parts. I will ask you a series of nineteen questions focused in this area. I want to remind you of your right to choose not to answer any question, and to alter any responses after they are recorded. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Section A: Background information
  1. 1. What do you teach?
  2. 2. Where do you teach?
  3. 3. How many years have you worked as a teacher?
  4. 4. Why did you choose to work in a religious school?

Section B: Teacher practices; What/How
  1. 1. What do you believe students may be able to gain from the culture of religious schools?
  2. 2. Given your experience in both religious and non-religious schools, do you feel that there are any differences in the methods of instruction or pedagogical approach between the two?
  3. 3. What difference have you noted in academic achievement between students who attend religious or secular schools?
  4. 4. In your opinion, is the student workload in religious schools comparable to those in secular schools?
     a. a. Do you feel this may affect students’ academic achievement in any way?
     b. 5. Do you feel that all subjects, religious and secular, are given an equal amount of resources and support at your school?

Section C: Beliefs and Values; Why?
  a. 1. Do you feel the infusion of religious content in instruction can impact student achievement?
  b. 2. Do you feel a difference in school culture between the two school systems?
  c. 3. In your opinion, do you feel as though the inclusion of religious education in the religious school system is beneficial or detrimental to students’ academic achievement?
     d. a. Why?

Section D: Influencing Factors: who?
  a. 1. What kind of feedback has you receive from students or their parents regarding their academic experience in religious schools?
  b. 2. Have you faced any challenges or limitations for secular instruction in a
religious school?

Section D: Barriers/Next Steps
   a. 1. What advice would you give to a teacher who is new to a religious school system?
   b. 2. How do you feel instruction in religious schools should differ from secular schools, if at all?
      c. a. What improvements would you hope to see within the system in the future?

Thank you again for participating in this study and for contributing to the research in this field. Please feel free to be in touch to review my transcriptions of this interview, or with any questions you may have.