An Investigation of Interreligious Education in Public Schools

By

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of the changes in inclusive education found in Ontario’s curricula, particularly in the Social Studies, History and Geography Grades 1-8 documents. The study explores the topic of interreligious education, and examines the gaps between the expectations of religious knowledge in elementary and secondary school. The findings suggest that the gaps are causing a division between the two levels of schooling. The implications of these findings are that there is a lack of religious understanding in schools, which impacts students, especially at the secondary level. Both elementary and secondary educators who participated in this study agree that interreligious education is necessary and relevant in elementary school. This study explores how to best incorporate interreligious education in public schools so this area can be properly addressed and cultivated in secondary school and beyond.

Key Words: inclusive education, interreligious education, multiculturalism, multi-faith dialogue
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Introduction: Research Context and Problem

An internationally-recognized defining characteristic of Canada is its multicultural population. However, citizens often segregate themselves into groups by staying within their ethno-cultural communities (Dib & Donaldson & Turcotte, 2008). With the rise of immigration in Canada, there must be opportunities for these immigrants to comfortably express all aspects of their identity, especially in terms of freedom of religious expression. Wearing religious garb or sharing religious traditions with peers are a few instances in which citizens can exercise their religious freedom, especially in public institutions. In light of the religious conflicts that exist globally, ethnic communities must be represented properly to avoid misunderstandings of certain religious traditions within Canada. Some students hold misconceptions regarding religious traditions, which cause those who belong to these religious groups to face exclusion in schools (Gold, 2004). Here, I am proposing that the education system should be an area that can inform and educate students of all religions. In particular, public schools should directly address topics such as religion within the study of Social Studies and History in elementary schools, in order to provide a holistic representation of Canadian history. Educational institutions, such as schools, are places in which immigrant families must leave their respective ethno-cultural communities, and inevitably are confronted with diverse members of Canadian society, on a daily basis (Dib et al., 2008). This approach to religious diversity has existed and successfully been implemented in other multicultural countries, in which the objective has been to increase the level of integration for students (Tan, 2008).

Interfaith educators are working to “create a culture of peace, to facilitate individual and communal transformation” with pedagogical reflection (Puett, 2005, p. 268). In an age of
continuous globalization and mobility, interreligious education becomes a critical piece that must be included in teaching. Following the progression in the curriculum documents, students are expected to demonstrate an ability to discuss certain concepts of other religious traditions and beliefs (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013), especially in their upper years of public education. It is essential for teachers to understand a student’s religious background, as well as for students to possess this knowledge, in order to better understand one another. Religious background is often conflated with cultural tradition, but the core of many schools is the promotion of obedience and morality, commonly identified in religious traditions. The moral aspect of school provides a greater purpose and clarity to learning, a thought shared by the educator Neil Postman, in his work, *The End of Education* (1995). Not only is it necessary, but also it is found to be desirable among the parents of the students. Research suggests that parents and students who belong in the public school boards find the value of placing interreligious education in schools, because of its connection to moral and character education (Hammer, 2011). Despite these findings, there is a significant gap of religious material between interreligious education at the earlier grades and the later grades in the Ontario curriculum, but there are expectations for both students and teachers to have a comprehensive understanding of religion in the upper levels of public education (Grades 11-12).

Whether or not individuals associate with a religious belief, promoting interreligious education is an international and local concern (UNESCO, 1999-2001). All people who live in Canada, especially within the province of Ontario, will encounter and interact with others who strongly identify with another religious tradition. There are misconceptions regarding religious traditions, causing students who belong to these religious groups to face exclusion in schools. For instance, the scholar Nora Gold found students who experienced anti-Semitism because of
their religious background in schools (Gold, 2004). This is one experience of many students who are discriminated against because of their religious background. These experiences are also the main reason that students should be educated about religious traditions.

In the curriculum documents for Social Studies from Grades 1-6, and History and Geography for Grades 7-8, religion has been acknowledged generally in the past tense. However, when we compare this to the curriculum for high school students in Grades 11-12, the content and emphasis for Grades 1-8 is significantly greater and shaped in a critical context (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). For example, if one looks at the word “religion” in the Social Studies curriculum (Grades 1-6), there are only 20 instances where the word “religion” is mentioned, and this is in an archaic context at a remove from the student (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). Education has the power to teach attitudes that promote the recognition and respect for multiple faiths (Ontario Ministry, 2014), and has the potential to prevent future acts of religious discrimination. There are limitations for elementary school students to learn extensively about world religions, since this course is under interdisciplinary concepts for secondary schools introduced in Grade 11 and 12 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2002). There has been a shift in religious education from the past.

The content that is taught in schools should represent the student demographics; thus, it is essential for educators to be teaching content about religious beliefs to their students (The United Nations, 2017). Elementary school education is the primary means in which students are initially socialized and learn to interact with one another. Since the majority of time during youth is spent in schools, their thoughts on other cultural and religious identities are formulated, solidified, and reinforced in the classroom. The Ontario Grades 1-8 Social Studies and History Curriculum
does, in fact, mention the recognition of religious traditions, which has become further recognized in the revised editions of the documents (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013).

Despite Ontario’s commitment to acknowledging diverse religious beliefs, teachers cannot depend simply upon curriculum documents to adequately implement interreligious education in their classrooms. As the study of religion has been removed from the public curriculum, and is predominantly studied in Catholic or private schools, one may question whether this causes a divide between public, Catholic public and private religious schools. Students are not participating in enough interreligious dialogue in public elementary schools, and since Eurocentric Christian values and beliefs are often emphasized, other perspectives are negated (Guo, 2011, p. 55). In public schools, the lack of religious education may cause confusion, and devalue students who follow other religious traditions (Guo, 2011). The lack of religious content found in the curriculum documents suggests the significance of incorporating interreligious education into these subjects, considering the exclusion of multiple religious perspectives. The most current curriculum document for Social Studies Grades 1-6 and History and Geography Grades 7-8 mentions the word “religion” and “religious” 11 times. In one instance, religion is used to describe how medieval society is constructed. The other examples provided are religious events and practices, occupations, and buildings. These examples do not offer the student a sense of understanding the cultural or shared components of religion (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013).

There is a great gap between the depth and expectations in understanding religions when comparing the elementary and secondary school level. The way that the word, “religion,” is used in the upper levels of schooling is also limiting, because the religious views refer to ancient civilizations, rather than offering a place of discussion on the current use of religion, and not
placing the word in the past (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). The lack of inter-faith
dialogues within the school curriculum perpetuates and reinforces stereotypes, and negatively
impacts their engagement in school activities and participation in certain classes (Gold, 2004).
Ontario’s Character Development Initiative is found in a document titled Finding Common
Ground: Character Development in Ontario Schools, K-12. The document emphasizes the
importance of equitable and inclusive schools in which all students are welcomed and respected,
and feel a sense of belonging (Finding Common Ground, 2008). As it is a curriculum document
for all grades, there should be opportunities to bridge this gap between religion and culture in the
classroom.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore whether elementary school teachers are fostering
an environment for students to share their religious identity openly and appropriately in a
classroom, particularly in the subject of Social Studies and History. A student’s identity, in a
cultural and religious sense, is still being developed during this stage in their life, and opinions
begin to formulate about others, positive or negative, hostile or inclusive (Brennan, 2011, p. 23).
In view of this problem, the goal of my research is to understand the objectives of the Social
Studies and History Ontario curriculum documents, especially in the intermediate level grades 7-
8, as well as to determine the expectations that are held for elementary school teachers when
teaching about religions in the Social Studies or History curriculum. I aim to share these findings
with the educational research community in order to further inform teachers on the methods that
can be used to increase interreligious education in elementary schools, and decrease the gap of
religious understanding that exists between elementary and secondary schools. Further, this
research is intended to provide resources for other teachers who have previously tried to facilitate
these types of discussions within their classroom, but are restricted by the curriculum requirements. As I have reviewed the curriculum documents, the most recent versions of this work provide multiple frameworks and methods of achieving this type of inclusivity in terms of promoting interreligious education. However, when viewing how religious words are used in the curriculum requirements, there is a significant difference in the expectations for the students. For example, a religious belief/practice that is studied in a grade four Social Studies unit concerns medieval Japan (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 100), without an emphasis of dialogue and discussion. It is very removed and distant, which students may project onto the study of religion itself.

1.2 Research Questions

The primary question guiding this study is: Why is there a significant gap in the expectations of religious knowledge for students from upper elementary to secondary school? Sub-questions to broaden the scope of this inquiry include:

- Does the Social Studies and History and Geography curriculum document address interreligious education in an appropriate context?
- How can teachers successfully implement interreligious education in the Ontario elementary school board curriculum?
- Do curriculum documents provide a space for ethnic minorities to be accurately represented?
- How have other countries been able to successfully implement interreligious education into their curriculum?
- What is the difference in interreligious education being addressed between public and private schools?
• What is the long-term impact on citizens if these divisions exist from the beginning?
• What are the existing types of religious intolerance that is found in schools?

1.3 Background of the Researcher

As someone who has immigrated to Canada and still strongly identifies with both my cultural and religious traditions, I have developed a keen interest in learning how other ethnic minority communities share and celebrate their respective traditions. Although school is often the main source of understanding and embracing differences, I had to learn about other religious cultures independently, rather than being taught in elementary school. Since interreligious education was not explored or emphasized in social studies or history when I was a student in the public school board from grades 4-8, I believe it would be beneficial for other students to have a guaranteed opportunity to learn about interreligious education at a younger age, as well as to understand that it is embedded in the lives of Canadians historically and culturally, through multiple perspectives.

My religious and cultural background has enabled me to see other perspectives and expand my own learning. The study of religious traditions was introduced to me in university, and later became my primary focus of study. In hindsight, I realize that the information I had learned through my post-secondary education could have contributed greatly when developing my ideas on other religions at a younger age. There are so many misconceptions that I have heard and internalized, and I had to deconstruct these ideas and distance myself from the biased opinions I was once taught. Even from personal experience, I realize that these thoughts must be nurtured at a young age, or else students may develop hostile feelings towards religious traditions by learning about them inaccurately, which often cultivates religious intolerance in
society. As an educator, I see great value in discussing religious traditions in the classroom, to help create an inclusive environment in society for future students.

1.4 Overview

To respond to the research questions, I conducted a qualitative research study by interviewing individuals who are in the field of education and are familiar with the subjects of Social Studies and History. I interviewed one Grade 4-8 Catholic elementary school teacher who taught Social Studies or History and incorporated religion, spirituality, and faith in the Social Studies or History curriculum, and they successfully integrated interreligious education. I also interviewed a History teacher at a secondary public school to see if they noticed a gap in their students’ understanding of religions. The third interviewee I had was a teacher from a Catholic secondary school, with whom I discussed the differences between Catholic and non-Catholic schools. In Chapter 2, I provide a literature review on the existing models of interreligious education in other countries, experiences of religious minorities in public school settings, and the historical and political implications of religion with a certain perspective in the curriculum. I situate my position by analyzing whether there is enough material to promote interreligious education in the current curriculum documents, particularly by comparing the amount of religious material in the Social Studies and History component of elementary and secondary levels. Afterwards, I extensively explain the nature of my research and the approach by which it will be presented throughout the paper, which is found in Chapter 3.

In Chapter 4, I report my research findings and examine their significance when viewed within the existing research literature on interreligious education. Chapter 5 analyzes the purpose of my research findings and develops my understanding on how these findings will inform my teaching pedagogy in the future, as well as for Ontario teachers who teach Social Studies and
History in the public education board. I realize that there will be challenges and limitations during my research, which have been taken into consideration during the course of my study. However, this paper conducts an analysis and introduces possibilities for possible changes, as well as provided insights on what can be accomplished and modified for interreligious education to be successfully integrated into the curriculum. I will end with my research conclusions.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter I examine the existing literature relating to religion, in regards to how it is perceived by Canadians, and how the subject is being taught in Ontario school boards, particularly to intermediate students in the subjects of Social Studies and History. I then focus on interreligious education, which is a discussion of diverse religions and belief systems in class on a cross-curricular level. Religion tends to be avoided in public education, because it is politically charged. Peter Beyer (2008) has studied religion and diversity in Canada and addressed the changes that have been made as a result of the growing diverse population. The following quotation encapsulates the essence of studying religion: “Religion seems to oscillate between being problematic and being essential” (Beyer, 2008, p. 21). Despite the tensions that it may cause, it is a discipline that should be studied at an early age, especially for the purposes of preventing religious hate crimes. Tiffany Puett (2005), a scholar of American religions, highlights education as a means “for countering these dangerous trends of prejudice, violence and exclusion that plague our society” (Puett, 2005, p. 264). As Puett suggests, these discussions can be used as a guide for students to break down stereotypes and misconceptions from a young age, which could result in religious tolerance and understanding. In this chapter I define interreligious education, and determine why it is necessary to be included in the Ontario Ministry of Education curriculum documents. I then look at case studies of intermediate students in Ontario who have been subjected to discrimination caused by religious intolerance. Afterwards, I review the literature concerning the preventative measures that have been set in place to avoid religious discrimination in the curriculum. I juxtapose this literature by comparing the existing educational materials in Ontario for teachers, to highlight the potential obstacles teachers face.
when teaching about religion in public schools. I transition into the literature of existing models of interreligious education that is found outside of Canada. Finally, I outline the recent shifts that have been made in the public Ontario Catholic School Boards that provide further reasoning for explicitly incorporating interreligious education in the curriculum.

2.1 Experience of Religious Minorities in Schools

Existing research on the experience of religious minorities in schools varies greatly, often because of the diverse external factors affecting these individuals. One of these factors is the geographic location, where their governing bodies have a strong influence over public interreligious education. The field of interfaith education is interdisciplinary, consisting of facilitators who strive to cultivate and sustain social cohesion (Puett, 2005). Moreover, interreligious education refers to the dialogue about religion led by an educator, to develop an understanding between numerous religious traditions. The religions that are studied may depend on the demographic of a school or classroom.

There have been multiple instances where students have been attacked because of their religious affiliation. For instance, many Muslim high school students have experienced feelings of alienation and marginality due to their religious traditions (Rezai-Rashti, 1994 as cited in Zine, 2001). Jasmin Zine conducted a comprehensive case study on ten Muslim youth and their parents in Canada, and how their religious identity was challenged by their experiences in school as religious minorities. Within this study, Zine sets up her study by referencing the work of Goli Rezai-Rashti. Rezai-Rashti (1994), an antiracist and gender-equity practitioner in a school board, has also witnessed how negative stereotypes were reinforced and projected onto Muslim students, by non-Muslim students, teachers, and administrators (Rezai-Rashti, 1994, as cited in Zine 2001). Based on her findings and observations, Rezai-Rashti highlights the amount of
unreported religious intolerance. One student describes the experience as “patronizing attitudes by teachers whom she felt clearly misunderstood Islam and her status as a Muslim woman”. An initial reaction that a student receives from a teacher is shock that she is “allowed out of the house” (Rezai-Rashti, 1994, as cited in Zine 2001, p. 409). This case demonstrates that non-Muslim students, teachers, and administrators can hold negative stereotypes of Muslims, causing false perceptions and poor treatment towards these students. Yet, Rezai-Rashti shares that many situations could have been avoided if there had been a better understanding of Islam from other stakeholders in this situation (Zine, 2001). These individual stories provide insight into how the lack of religious and cultural knowledge causes great boundaries between the students and their teacher, decreasing the amount of inclusivity in a classroom because of religious ignorance.

The scholar Oliver Valins explores the issue of whether faith-based schools assist in maintaining religious identities, or cause segregation within Jewish communities in the United Kingdom. Although most parents hold a positive opinion towards Jewish schools, some are concerned about their children becoming too “isolated from the ‘real world’ if they did not mix with those from other religious and cultural backgrounds”. These schools are criticized because “there is a ‘restricted range of cultural development’ and ‘insufficient opportunities for pupils to develop their awareness of other cultures” (Valins, 2002, p. 245). Students who are religious minorities have a choice in attending their respective private religious schools, but negative experiences caused by a student’s religious affiliation in public schools is an indicator that a change towards interreligious education must occur in schools. Religion should not be left to be studied only by the religious, but for all individuals to better understand and interact with the world.
This notion is further supported in Canada, especially with an increasing Muslim population. In recent years, the number of private Islamic schools has rapidly increased in Canada, especially in Ontario. This increase “highlight[s] Muslim dissatisfaction with public schools” (Niyozov, 2010, p. 25). In a more local example, the scholar Sarfaroz Niyozov conducted a study on teachers teaching Islam and Muslims in Toronto public schools. In Niyozov’s findings, parents expressed their concerns for their children participating in certain school activities. Various non-Muslim teachers have difficulty catering to Muslim students and their needs (Niyozov, 2010). Niyozov continues the discussion by asking public school teachers on their opinion of Muslim students who attended public schools moving to Islamic schools. They shared that having Muslims in public schools is imperative in “changing other peoples’ perceptions about what the regular Muslim person is, educating non-Muslims – there won’t be a chance to do that” (Niyozov, 2010, p. 27). This shift of schooling will become a disservice to non-Muslim students who lack exposure and understanding of this religious tradition. If there is constant segregation with the religious and non-religious in society, all parties involved will develop misinformed perceptions of one another, causing more barriers between the two rather than integration and understanding. The integration of Muslim students in public schools is still in progress, further reinforcing the need for interreligious education. There is the potential for misunderstandings between Muslim teachers and non-Muslim teachers, causing challenges with all parties involved over the preference of everyday items such as attire. This ranges, but is not limited to, Jewish to Sikh religious attire.

2.2 Religious Attire

In elementary education, from grades 1-8, it is common for parents to play a stronger role in shaping their child’s education than in the older grades (Child Trends, 2013). Professor Yan
Guo provides a voice for immigrant Muslim parents in Calgary when he conducted a study on their experiences. The participants expressed concerns for their children and the right to exercise their freedom of religious expression. In his findings, one mother of a student stresses that it is imperative for educators to be aware and “open to different perspectives, and to realize that there are many different ways of doing the same thing” (Guo, 2011, p. 58). One example of accommodation that Guo finds in his research is when a parent suggests that the school allow Muslim girls to wear full body suits instead of swimsuits during their physical education class. The parent’s daughter is not permitted to wear a bathing suit during co-ed swimming class, due to religious reasons, and shares that the teacher, acting on their own reasoning, dismissed the parents’ instructions, causing tension between the parent and the teacher. This example demonstrates how the lack of religious and cultural understanding directly impacts the student’s learning experience. These misconceptions can be ameliorated by promoting interreligious dialogue from the perspectives of Muslim parents, students, and teachers with non-Muslim parents, students, and teachers. To further the responsibility of the teacher, the article recommends that public school systems should mandate that their administrators and teachers undertake a course on world religions, in order to better accommodate the religious practices of their students (Guo, 2011). Since the teacher is the facilitator of information for their students, their role and knowledge to facilitate such topics is essential for students requiring religious accommodations in the classroom to be addressed appropriately and respectfully. Based on Guo’s findings in his study, the manner in which the teacher addressed the situation left both the student and the parent in a position of disadvantage and discomfort.

Another similar case was found in Montreal, Quebec that caused widespread concern within the Sikh community. The issue involved a twelve-year-old student, Gurbaj Multani,
whose kirpan, a religious Sikh symbol, stirred up a large amount of controversy. Initially, the local school board decided to allow Multani to wear the religious object. However, shortly thereafter the governing board of the school revoked this decision, the case was ultimately taken to the Supreme Court and Multani won the right to wear his kirpan at school. The student became a beacon for religious minorities and their freedom of religious expression in Canada, especially in the Sikh community (Commission Scholaire Marguerite-Bourgeoys v. Singh Multani, 2004). Multani advocated for his religious freedom to wear this symbol that represented his religion, despite receiving pushback from the public. The hostility from those who do not belong to the Sikh community exemplifies how religious minorities are misperceived. These responses are an indication that education on religious minorities can prevent such situations to arise and escalate. If curricula had greater opportunities to explore and discuss religious traditions, it may have been possible to avoid future misunderstandings of religious symbols. The literature that exists on the impact of immigrant communities in Canada provides insight into the necessity for interreligious education in public schools. It is expected that roughly one out of every five people in Canada will be a visible minority by 2017 (Statistics Canada, 2011), and the various cultural and religious needs must be taken into consideration when revising curriculum. Since religious intolerance is a global growing concern (UNESCO, 1999-2001), there have been initiatives taken to decrease existing religious intolerance. Again, if students are receiving unfair treatment due to their religious attire, there should be space in the curriculum to guide teachers and students. Despite the growth of religious minorities, limited action has been taken to address the persistence of religious intolerance.
2.3 Preventative Measures to Avoid Religious Discrimination in Curriculum

Not only do students play a pivotal role in advocating for their religious freedom, but also there are curriculum documents that seem to promote religious inclusivity as well, such as Catherine Broom’s comparison of Social Studies curriculum documents in the three provinces, British Columbia, Nova Scotia, and Ontario. She finds that all provinces consider the social and cultural diversity in Canada, and incorporate the multiple perspectives and experiences of Canadians (Broom, 2015). While Broom’s research does not specifically address religious inclusivity as a topic, it is implied when she writes, “include the histories of multiple social groups in Canada and to tailor the materials to the students’ backgrounds” (Broom 2015, p. 11). Religion is integral to many histories of multiple social groups, as well as students’ backgrounds. Although this province is not mentioned in Broom’s study, Newfoundland contains an explicit religious education curriculum in public schools. Newfoundland’s religious education curriculum document directly addresses the promotion of religious inclusivity. Newfoundland has mandated a curriculum document for religious education in their public schools from kindergarten until grade twelve, and provides a rationale of why this separate category for teaching about religions is necessary.

In a world that is truly multi-cultural and multi-faith, it is important that each person can value and celebrate his/her own faith…major decisions have been made in light of religious teachings. While it is true that…religions are responsible for conflicts in the world, it is also true that they have served to bring about resolutions, peace, and social justice. Students need to be aware of the role religion has played historically (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2002, p. 2).
The document acknowledges the breadth of religious traditions, and how it serves cross-curricular purposes, such as the connection between religion and history. The document also highlights the Judeo-Christian tradition, which refers to the beliefs and values that are commonly found in Christianity and Judaism. These traditions were embedded in the Canadian education system in regards to explicitly using a Christian text such as the catechesis to supplement curriculum documents (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2002, p. 1). This is one model of a Canadian curriculum document that addresses the need for teaching students about this topic. In the Ontario curriculum document, it is integrated implicitly in the area of Social Studies and History, found in the Equity and Inclusive Education section of Social Studies, History and Geography (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 45).

Once students enter elementary school, most courses that are offered are required and uniform within Ontario. All students are required to take Social Studies in grades 1-6, and History and Geography for grades 7-8. Since this is the case, curriculum documents should prepare students for history courses in secondary school. This can be achieved by incorporating material that represent immigrant students, who play a crucial role in the social history of Canada. The Ministry of Education has taken demographic shifts into consideration when modifying and revising its curriculum documents, by incorporating more inclusive education for Social Studies and History and Geography for grades 1-8 and World Studies for grades 9-12 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). This document was revised in 2013, and there is a section dedicated to “Equity and Inclusive Education in Social Studies, History, and Geography”, in which the document states that the environment of a classroom is based on the principles of inclusive education, and that “all students, parents, caregivers, and other members of the school community” – regardless of any factors that may cause difference – “are welcomed, included,
treated fairly, and respected” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 45). This section has been included in the Grades 9-12 World Studies documents as well. The revision of inclusive education in the curriculum document has a possibility to promote religious tolerance, and is a step towards creating an inclusive classroom environment, since the content that is studied in the curriculum document has been modified. These revisions affect not only students, but also parents who can oversee the changes affecting their children. Although there are regulations that inform such changes within school boards in Ontario, each teacher responds to these situations in a variation of ways which can be problematic. Within Broom’s study of how Social Studies is taught in Canada, she notices that the Ontario guide “jumps around a little in elementary school” and “offers a number of varied courses of studies in local and global history at the senior high school level” (Broom, 2015, p. 5). Simultaneously, teachers have room for variation in their teaching, causing students to have many levels of exposure to interreligious material.

In a small-scale study in the United Kingdom, the scholars Elaine McCreery, Liz Jones and Rachel Holmes (2007) delved into answering the question of why Muslim parents want Islamic schools. Their findings focus on meeting these children’s needs, which are often neglected in public schools. Their needs range from identity to belonging, which are fundamental needs of any student, religious or non-religious. Protecting and maintaining their religious tradition represents another reason parents wanted the choice of Islamic schools. However, respecting and understanding that there are other religious traditions was still emphasized in these schools. In addition, this school accepts students who are not Muslim, and the parents did not disclose their reason as to why they chose to enroll their students here. In this case, the public school curriculum is not providing sufficient exposure of teaching religious traditions, particularly Islamic traditions. This case study provides insight into what parents are looking for
directly in the curriculum, where even those who do not belong to the faith enroll into these schools. Moreover, these examples serve as a model for places that have yet to implement religious education into public education, such as Ontario. In Ontario, Muslim students are choosing to attend publicly funded Catholic schools because of these schools’ faith-based approach in education (Globe & Mail, 2011). The student in this article expressed that they felt comfortable enough to attend another public, albeit faith based, school, proving that public schools do in fact have the ability to meet the needs of students of all religious traditions. Students who identified with their respective religion explored artistic expressions of faith.

2.4 Artistic Expression of Faith

When looking at the literature involving faith, it was discovered that students who had restricted opportunities to discuss their religious beliefs in the curriculum would express themselves through artistic mediums in schools. Even without teacher support, students have been able to incorporate their religious and cultural identities in schools through artistic expression, which has received positive recognition from teachers, other peers, and even the general public. Sameena Eidoo (2013) explores the positive effects of Muslim students using spoken word poetry to express the personal accounts of their religious and cultural identity. Eidoo shares the story of Mustafa, a Muslim student who attends a public elementary school in Toronto. Mustafa uses poetry to communicate his concerns of the negative stereotypes that others have associated to his religious beliefs, and found spoken word as an alternative method to raise awareness on existing acts of religious intolerance in schools (Eidoo, 2013). Students have autonomy over exercising their religious expression, but creating a school environment that is conducive and supportive is essential in promoting religious tolerance. As mentioned in Eidoo’s work, using the art form of poetry in education “can create cultural connections across in-school
and out-of-school learning by affirming students’ multiple and diverse ways of knowing” (Eidoo, 2013, p. 120). As this promotes critical thinking, artistic expression is a relevant and powerful approach to interreligious education. These preventative measures are the impetus for an overarching approach towards teaching, which is critical pedagogy.

2.5 Criticisms on Education

Neil Postman (1999) is an American educator who challenges the structure of North American public school systems. In particular, he questions and deconstructs the notion of “schooling”, for the audience to reconsider their role in education, whether they are a student, parent, or educator. Throughout his work The End of Education, Postman (1999) focuses on the moral aspect of education, as it is an institution that works with rules and social understandings. The following quotation encapsulates the role of religion in schools.

There may be some disputes over what subjects best promote piety, obedience, and faith; there may be students who are skeptical, even teachers who are nonbelievers. But at the core of such schools, there is a transcendent, spiritual idea that gives purpose and clarity to learning. Even the skeptics and nonbelievers know why they are there, what they are supposed to be learning, and why they are resistant to it (p. 5).

This takes many forms, but the central idea behind his work is for students to have a meaningful learning experience, which is a foundational aspect of education. Character development and inclusive education are significant Ministry of Ontario documents, and an emphasis in character development is for students to “think critically, feel deeply and act wisely” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 4). Not only are there Ministry of Ontario documents dedicated to this initiative, but is incorporated in the introduction of each curriculum document. There are many parallels when situating this work with the current Ontario Curriculum documents.
Outside of the ministry, this type of moral instruction is sought out by several parents, as there is an increasing Islamic school population, and there are non-Catholics enrolling in Catholic schools (Toronto Star, 2014). The critiques found in Postman’s work responds to current work and its position in its recognition and approach to interreligious dialogue. Facilitating interreligious discussion enables meaning towards education, as well as exploring how and why rules exist in various religious traditions and non-religious settings.

2.6 Comparison of Existing Educational Materials in Ontario

I have searched for scholarship pertaining to Ministry of Education documents, but since their revisions are recent, in 2013 and 2015, the documents have yet to be closely researched. The updated revisions indicate that there has been more of an emphasis placed on addressing equity and inclusivity within a classroom, and suggests the importance of having this at the forefront when teaching the curriculum. There is a section dedicated to “Equity and Inclusive Education in Social Studies, History, and Geography”. The strategy “focuses on respecting diversity, promoting inclusive education, and identifying and eliminating discriminatory biases, systemic barriers, and power dynamics that limit the ability to grow, and contribute to society” (Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 45). This is an overarching theme throughout the curriculum, in order to support students’ wellbeing and create a thriving environment for learning. Instead of a direct reference to religious tolerance or interreligious education, the word “inclusive” is used to represent all types of inclusivity, ranging from religious and cultural associations. The word, “religion” is written explicitly as one of the factors for what constitutes as diverse. When referring to the elimination of discriminatory biases, systemic barriers, and power dynamics, these all exist within religious intolerance. The ongoing acts of religious intolerance is the
impetus for the new curriculum reform to eliminate discriminatory biases, systemic barriers and power dynamics.

Religious intolerance is expressed in multiple ways, and one of those is through the proliferation of Eurocentric values and beliefs of Christianity in Canadian curricula, with limited mentions of other religious identities. This often results in devaluing the religious and cultural traditions of minority groups in schools, especially that of immigrants. Eventually, this leads to the expectation for immigrants to conform to these norms and values (Guo, 2011). This notion has been a common belief throughout history, often reinforcing colonial thought, which is presented in the one-sided information found in Canadian history textbooks. In the 2016 edition of a Nelson History 7 History Textbook, there is an introduction that explains why history should be studied, which later extends into a section titled, “Learning Who We Are” (Nelson History 7, 2016). In the index of the textbook, there are only references to Christianity and the First Nations. This is how history is depicted to present upper elementary school students on a daily basis. The construction of this textbook is a concern because it does not reflect a global perspective of religions. Although it is Canadian history, the textbook fails to illustrate the remaining voices of the minority religious groups. Addressing these religious and cultural voices are significant factors when viewing worldwide violent conflicts (UNESCO, 1999-2001). Early education on these topics has the capacity to influence future thoughts, and UNESCO is an organization that supports interreligious education within public education. In fact, there are successful public curriculum models provided in other countries that have explicitly included interreligious education.
2.7 Existing Models of Interreligious Education Outside of Canada

There have been cases of implementation of religious accommodation in other countries. There are programs and models set in place in the United Kingdom that have seen the relevance in adapting religious activities and teaching religious knowledge in their public primary schools. Since it has been accomplished in other countries, it is significant to see what has been set in place in Ontario that prevents further interreligious discussion to develop. Interreligious education has become a common desire of many countries to implement into their public education. In Elisabeth Arweck, Eleanor Nesbitt and Robert Jackson (2005)’s article, the authors report on two education programs that are available in schools in the United Kingdom. These two programs are associated with two Hindu-related organizations, the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University and the Sathya sai Service Organization. The religious component is incorporated in the curriculum for social and health education, enabling the students to participate in physical religious exercises such as ‘reflection time’ (Arweck et al., 2005). As students participated in these physical religious exercises, students learn to engage with religious material, allowing the possibility to confront any misunderstandings when seeing the benefit of these religious exercises. The programs that are implemented in these two countries are the ‘Living Values: An Educational Program (LVEP) and the Sathya Sai Education in Human Values (SSEHV) programs. The SSEHV has five main values: love, truth, peace, right conduct, and non-violence (Arweck et al., 2005). These universal values can be both religious and non-religious. The purpose of this research was to see how religions can interconnect with mainstream education, and how religious materials can be used in mainstream schools (Arweck et al., 2005). The emphasis of these two programs by using specific activities to promote spiritual and moral development by highlighting the five main values, rather than emphasizing one
religious view. This program is intended to be used in common or community schools at the primary and secondary level, emphasizing the ‘values’ aspect of the program. A community school in the UK is the equivalent to a public school in Canada. These activities consist of “stilling” exercises and “reflection time”, which is influenced by certain forms of prayer or meditation (Arweck et al., 2005). They are used to aid students in experiencing calm and stillness, as well as explore values. Although this is one religious practice, this approach can extend into public schools when teaching about other religions.

Another example of implementing religious teaching is found in Singapore, a place that is becoming increasingly more multicultural. Charlene Tan (2008) discusses how religious knowledge is taught in Singapore schools (Tan, 2008). Singapore is becoming increasingly pluralistic, and followed the ideas concerning interreligious education projected by UNESCO. UNESCO urges schools to play an essential role in preventing religious intolerance (Tan, 2008). Public schools have taken a phenomenological approach to religious education, with the aim to inform students “about the religion, its founder or its origins and the universal moral teachings and main beliefs of the religion” (Tan, 2008, p. 178). The teaching of religious knowledge is taught through a compulsory course titled “Civics and Moral Education (CME)”. In the syllabus, one of the modules for CME is Community Spirit, where the objective is to foster “a greater sense of belonging to and care for the community, as well as cultural and religious appreciation” (p. 181). One of the sections encourages students to be aware of the various religious beliefs and practices, and there are activities to help facilitate and reinforce this idea (Tan, 2008). The author does highlight the difficulties that surface with the phenomenological approach to teaching religious knowledge, but recommendations are made to improve the current practice. Although teaching religious studies is a contested topic in Singapore, it was mandated by the government
in the hope that this will help instill moral values and promote religious harmony (Tan, 2008). Singapore recognizes school to play a pivotal role in the education system, and with modifications, can become a vehicle in preventing religious intolerance. The author highlights that the government must be careful when teaching religious knowledge, because it must teach moral values and promote religious appreciation, without causing interreligious problems as a result of including this in the curriculum (Tan, 2008). These two models provide insight into the benefits and challenges of interreligious education in public education.

2.8 Shifts in Rules and Regulations in the Catholic School Boards

Despite the increasing secularism in Ontario education, there are parents who are searching for religious and moral education within public schools (Globe and Mail, 2011). In light of the revised health curriculum documents, there is a greater desire for parents to enroll their children in Catholic schools. Parents have vocalized that the health curriculum document does not correspond to their religious beliefs as their children were being exposed to sexual content too early, as well as infringing on their religious rights (Toronto Star, 2015). Having conducted data on Ontario Roman Catholic schools, Terri-Lynn Kay Brennan finds that only two-thirds of current secondary level Ontario Roman Catholic school students identify as Roman Catholic. During the interviews she has conducted, 45-50% of the students in her high school were non-Roman Catholic, with Muslim and Sikh students being the most visible (Brennan, 2011, p. 30). Supporting this data, a Globe and Mail article mentions that there are more Muslim students seeking to enroll in Catholic schools (Globe and Mail, 2011). The reasoning being that parents believed Catholic schools provide a religious teaching that can help with managing situations outside of school. There are also similarities in religious beliefs, such as the emphasis on prayer and modest dress. The fundamental reason non-Catholic but religious parents and
students seek Catholic schools is the emphasis on moral instruction. Although they evidently do not identify as Roman Catholics, these are a few examples as to why these students enroll in Catholic schools. The increase in non-Catholics enrolling in Catholic schools has caught the attention of mainstream news, causing many Catholic school boards within Ontario to change their regulations for admitting non-Catholic students. These rules and regulations mainly refer to the elementary Catholic school boards in Ontario. These shifts have been found in Windsor’s Catholic school board, as well as that in Kingsville (Toronto Star, 2014). However, there are still elementary schools that do not permit non-Catholic students to register in their school, such as the Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB). According to TCDSB, at least one parent of the child must be Catholic (Toronto Catholic District School Board, n.d). Nevertheless, the Catholic School Board is one option that parents choose for their children, because they are seeking for an education that emphasizes character and moral values as a way to navigate their lives. Although there is a focus on one specific religion, the increase in non-Catholics may suggest that interreligious dialogue and discussion is wanted.

In James Kent Donlevy’s paper, he addresses the inclusion of non-Catholic students in Catholic schools, which has become increasingly relevant in Canada, the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Inclusion is a central component to the Catholic school teaching, and non-Catholic students comment on how they feel included despite their religious differences. Although it is a Catholic school, Catholic students also benefited by learning from students who identified as non-Catholic (Donlevy, 2008). One non-Catholic student participated in the Catholic prayer, liturgies and Mass in the school and stated: “there was a Christian influence there and it’s something important to me…you can talk about [God] without being afraid [of] political incorrectness…[of being] offensive to someone else…That’s an issue
nowadays…what if there is someone in the room who isn’t a Catholic or Christian?” (Donlevy 2008, p. 166). This student expresses their inclination to discuss religious issues at school, and senses an opposition to this in other aspects of their life. Donlevy’s paper continues to include voices of both Catholic and non-Catholic students, and if non-Catholics are seeking for a better sense of religious understanding, public schools should also provide similar methods for students to explore and understand other religions. As non-Catholic students have explicitly shared that their exposure to Catholic traditions was positive, there is great potential for this to continue in public school boards.

2.9 Conclusion

In this literature review, I examine research on existing religious intolerance in Canada, specifically in Ontario, and find literature that is related to interreligious education, and the effects that it has on public education pertaining to the expanding immigrant population. I go into greater detail with the revisions that have the potential to promote interreligious education in the promoting of artistic expression of religious faith, as well as the Ontario Ministry of Education curriculum documents, in regards to Social Studies and History. However, I highlight that within these documents, the discussion of religion is limited and varies greatly depending on the grade level. By reviewing the accessible materials for Ontario teachers, I highlight the gaps that exist between elementary level public education and secondary level education.

Additionally, I provide existing models of interreligious public education in other countries as an example of positive methods towards increasing religious tolerance. By comparing and contrasting existing models of interreligious education, and seeing the need for this in Ontario through a range of case studies, I aim to bring in the greater implications within public education. Teachers can exercise critical pedagogy when approaching the curriculum, to
facilitate their students’ learning towards religious traditions. Students have the right to exercise their freedom of religious expression, but if there are several obstacles that the students encounter in the education system, it will prevent the growth for religious tolerance. I aspire to contribute to the existing literature, and raise awareness on the necessity to decrease religious intolerance. The purpose of interreligious education in elementary schools is for students to receive a better foundation when they enter high school, as they are confronted by more complex materials concerning religious traditions. I hope that this will promote stronger religious understanding beyond the school system, and cultivate religious inclusivity.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter I provide an overview of the research methodology. I begin by specifying the methodological decisions I have made, such as the general approach, procedures, and data collection instruments, before expanding on participant sampling and recruitment. I explain the process of the data I am analyzing, and review the ethical considerations relevant to my study. Additionally, I recognize the limitations to my methodology, but will also highlight the positive outcomes using this methodology. Lastly, I conclude the chapter with a brief summary of key methodological decisions I have chosen, and offer my rationale for these decisions given the research purpose and questions.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

Prior to this chapter, I have provided a literature review of current scholarship. The existing literature concerning my topic validates its relevance in the classroom, especially when there are direct prompts for educators to teach religious traditions to students in Ontario Ministry of Education documents. The literature review is limited, in a sense that the Social Studies and History curriculum documents have recently been revised, causing a lack of research in the responses for teachers and students have had with these documents. However, the literature on interreligious education provides greater insight into the international perspective on interreligious education in schools. This research study is conducted using a qualitative research approach, involving a literature review and semi-structured interviews with teachers. Qualitative research provides an authentic representation of the field that is being studied, and contributes to the value of my research, because my topic requires personal insight into the field of interreligious education in public education. These insights will be taken from the semi-
structured interviews I conducted, as a response to current research. Despite the lack of quantitative methodologies in my research, the qualitative method is still adaptable and can be used in multiple disciplines (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In my case, qualitative research is used in the field of education, and is adapted to further progress the promotion of interreligious education in public elementary schools. Another reason qualitative research is set apart from quantitative research is its emphasis on searching for pure and detailed responses. Qualitative research offers valuable and trustworthy accounts of educational settings and activities, the contexts in which these accounts are found, and the meanings that they have for participants (Maxwell, 2012). The value of qualitative research is that it allows for a structured response to investigate a topic in an authentic manner, since the research allows for the participants’ voices to guide my research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The purpose of my research is to enable teacher engagement with my topic, as well as develop student understanding towards interreligious education. Since my research purpose is to inform teachers on the methods that can be used to increase interreligious education in their classrooms, the voices of teachers who have experience in this field prove to be the most suitable approach for me. Their experiences are crucial in identifying whether or not the existing resources for teachers are sufficient in the classroom, and can answer many questions that I have encountered throughout the research process.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

Given the limitations of the Master of Teaching Research Project, the primary instrument of my data collection is through semi-structured interviews with three participants. Since my research topic explores how interreligious education is integrated in the Social Studies and History curriculum of elementary school, in-depth interviews therefore provide the most relevant information. My interviews are predominantly structured with questions that have been prepared
in advance, but there was room for unstructured interviews, where I have asked questions that were not included in the list that I have provided. This causes my interviews to fall into the category of semi-structured interviews. These interviews consist of answering questions relevant to the purpose of my research, to gain a better understanding of how students respond to interreligious education in the classroom.

In addition, my interviews were both structured and semi-structured in a sense that it allows for direct questions and indirect questions. For example, a direct question relates to the participant’s background, and the indirect questions relate to their teaching practice, and leaves room for the participant to interpret. The indirect questions allow the interviewee to express their opinion on the topic, providing insightful and reflective responses to questions that vary with each participant. This is a positive attribute of the interview process (Paine, 2015), and my research highly benefits from this approach. I have designed the questions in a manner in which the criteria for the questions are to be reflective, challenging, and informative to the existing literature. I have organized my protocol (found in Appendix B) into four sections, which includes the participant’s background information, questions about their encounters with religious intolerance, and their experiences and beliefs related to religious intolerance, and concluding questions concerning supports, challenges, and next steps for teachers. Examples of questions include:

1. What does interreligious education mean to you? What kinds of attitudes and behaviours are indicators of religious intolerance, in your view?

2. In what ways do you feel your religious identity has benefited or hindered your success within your profession? Do you think your experiences would have been different if you were born here/an immigrant?
3. What is your current experience of interreligious dialogues in school? a. From whom do you receive resources to teach this material?

3.3 Participants

The desired outcome for in-depth interviews is to discover mutual understandings of a certain group (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). This group fulfills the following sampling criteria I have created, in keeping with time limitations. Qualitative research enables me to communicate my participants’ experiences, as well as examine their experiences (Yilmaz, 2013). In this section, I evaluate the sampling criteria I have chosen for participant recruitment, and examine a variety of choices for teacher recruitment. I have also included a section where I introduce each of the participants.

3.3.1 Sampling Criteria

The teachers I interviewed have met the following criteria:

1. Teachers have had experience with teaching about different religions to their students.
2. Teachers have been working in the field of Education, or enrolled in a pre-service teaching program.
3. Teachers have worked in the Toronto Catholic District School Board, York Catholic District School Board, or York Region District School Board.
4. There is one teacher who has worked in upper elementary school, and one teacher who has worked in secondary school.
5. There will be both male and female participants.

Since the interviews provide detail from a few perspectives, the participants are a small example that represents my research in a fulfilling way. The first criterion refers to the teachers having experience of teaching about different religions in their classroom, since my research
topic concerns interreligious education. I am interested in comparing the experiences that teachers have in a public school board versus a Catholic school board, which is why I would like to interview a minimum of one participant from each board. Despite the scope of the study, they provide breadth and depth and support to the research that I am conducting. In terms of geographical focus, teachers were or are currently employed in the Toronto or Greater Toronto Area, due to my research focusing on schools in Toronto. Since my study emphasizes the gap between upper elementary school and secondary school for interreligious education, I have interviewed one teacher who has worked in upper elementary school, and one teacher who has worked in secondary school. Finally, I have worked with both female and male participants who vary in age and teaching specialty, so that it can provide a more comprehensive representation of the data obtained from this small sample.

3.3.2 Sampling Procedures

In terms of selecting my participants, I wanted to ensure that I accounted for the various teachers in Toronto or the Greater Toronto Area. The essential criteria the teacher must fulfill is the geographic location, and that they have made an attempt to teach interreligious education in their classroom. To recruit participants, I contacted school boards and provided them with an overview of my research study. Since I am unable to use a random sample of participants, there is both merit and limitations to this approach (Suri, 2011). I have chosen my participants and conducted in-depth interviews, and ensured that the participants were able to answer the questions I have created. However, since I have chosen these participants, this may cause bias in my findings.

I realize that my sampling procedures are limited, and therefore I have used convenience sampling, where I located convenient cases that met my required criteria, and then chose
depending on who responds. I have relied on the current contacts and networks I have
established to recruit participants (Robinson, 2014). This has been beneficial during the
interview itself, since I knew that my participants have prior knowledge on my research topic,
and have been able to answer the questions. Additionally, due to the confinement made for the
MTRP, I am using snowball sampling, since I am looking for information from the participants I
select, and they are informing me about their experiences in the classroom (Suri, 2011). Due to
the fact that I could not conduct interviews with the students themselves, the information I have
obtained from my participants has reinforced my research purpose.

3.3.3 Participant Biographies

1. Kendrick is an elementary core grade six teacher with 5 years of teaching experience. He
identifies as a practicing Catholic, and uses his prior knowledge from university and by
traveling to various places to gain further understanding about religious traditions. He has
also taught a grade 11 World Religions course during a Long Term Occasional position.

2. Sarah is a secondary school teacher who worked in the Catholic school board in the
Greater Toronto Area. She now works in Calgary in another Catholic secondary school
board. She has taught 9-12 world religions and philosophy, and has had 6 years of
teaching experience. While teaching religion in a Catholic school, she teaches religion in
an academic perspective.

3. Yusuf is a secondary school teacher who has taught grades 9-12 World Religions, Grade
12 History, and Drama in a public-school board in the greater Toronto area. He has been
teaching for 8 years, and identifies as having a Hindu background. He separates his
religious identity in his teaching.
3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis fulfills a vital role in both qualitative and quantitative research. Whether or not the data is quantitative or qualitative, the two approaches seek to ‘tell a story’ (Hardy & Bryman, 2004). The analyses I have drawn from the interviews tell a narrative that responds to my literature review, and present new materials in my findings. My interviews have been recorded and transcribed, and there are a few analytic strategies that I have used to conduct my interviews. As I gathered my data, I wrote ‘analytic memos’ for myself, especially in regards to my coding of the interview (Hardy & Bryman, 2004). These anecdotal notes were taken during the interview process, and have helped me in the process of connecting my ideas and gaining deeper understanding into the topic. These memos were also taken right after the interview, so that the ideas and insights I gained during the interview will not be forgotten. As the interview is audio recorded, this also benefitted the transcription and coding process, to ensure that I am using the participants’ words correctly. Moreover, I have organized the material by finding categories and themes, to create meaningful connections with the interviews and the existing research. I have extended my analysis as I have approached these matters holistically, especially when organizing the data in themes, and considered the existing research that has already been found. The primary objective is to relate my analysis to the research literature, and interpret this information effectively.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

There are many considerations that have been made, especially in regards to the treatment of my participants before, during, and after the interview process. Since qualitative data entails very different relationships between researchers and their participants as opposed to quantitative researchers, who mainly conduct surveys (Irwin, 2013), this may have had an impact on the data
conducted by qualitative researchers. In order to maintain professionalism and to decrease any amount of bias, my participants have been given a pseudonym, and were notified that they have the right of withdrawing from the research study at any given time. Their identities are confidential, and any information that could be traced back to them will be eliminated. Before beginning our interview, the participants were asked to sign a consent letter (Appendix A). This consent letter was comprised of the following information: that the participant can review the transcripts and clarify or retract any statement before any of their data is analyzed. After the participant consented to having their interview audio recorded, I stored their interview on my password protected laptop and phone, and their recording will be destroyed after five years. The letter included an overview of my study, and provided specific expectations of their participation, which is one 45-60 minute semi-structured interview. Participants are safeguarded by their right to refuse questions, and were informed that they are the right to withdraw at any time during the interview.

As the researcher, I have taken full responsibility to abide by these procedures, and to uphold and ethical practice throughout this process. My research study can be a contentious topic, since interfaith dialogues are highly contested in public domains, and I have carefully selected research questions that will not jeopardize a participant’s career. The purpose of my research is not to gain insight on a participants’ personal religious background, but to see whether they have integrated this challenging material to students in an appropriate manner, and if so, how they integrated this material in the classroom. My participants will continue to be made aware of any changes made, and will be held to the highest degree of protection and anonymity.
3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

Due to the qualitative nature and time restrictions placed on my research, the scope of the research will be affected by these limitations. There are also ethical parameters placed for the MTRP, where I can only conduct interviews with only teachers, and not students or parents. The greatest limitation is the size and scope of the research, in terms of the number of participants that can be interviewed. In qualitative research, the sheer number of participants is limiting, and if a researcher wanted to expand the group being studied, would be more time consuming with the semi-structured interviews in place (Hardy & Bryman, 2004). Since the curriculum documents have been updated relatively recently, and other existing research is current and constantly changing, this factor also creates limitations within my findings and the research I have reviewed so far.

There are several strengths in conducting qualitative research, especially in regards to the semi-structured interviews. This interview process highlights the importance of transparency, which is easier to maintain the authenticity of the information gathered through audio or video recordings of the interview. Qualitative data strives for data reduction, since the researcher collects a large amount of information from one participant (Hardy & Bryman, 2004). Despite the drawbacks that exist in qualitative research, I have strived to maintain an objective approach when analyzing the interview, in order to gain deeper insight into the implementation of interreligious education in public schools, particularly in subject of history. The interview process has informed my research findings, as well as positively contributes to the existing research on interreligious education in public education.
3.7 Conclusion: Brief Overview and Preview

In this chapter I explained the research methodology I have used during my research. I began by describing the research approach and procedure, further explaining the meaning and significance of qualitative research, and recognizing noteworthy differences from quantitative research. Afterwards, I described the instruments of data collection by identifying semi-structured interviews as the primary source of data, and highlighted a few of the benefits of semi-structured interviews. I continued explaining my methodology by mentioning that I will have participants for the study, and listed the criteria required for all interviewees. I have also provided brief introductions for the participants I selected. Afterwards, I explained the recruitment procedures, where I had to strategically select to ensure I would have depth in the data I obtain. I have specified how I have analyzed the data I gather from my interviews, and have mentioned convenience and snowball sampling due to the scope of the research study. I have considered ethical issues and discuss ways to address these potential issues. I acknowledge the limitations found in the study, such as the size of the research, as well as emphasize the strengths, such as the insight given by participants’ voices. Next, in chapter 4, I report on the research findings.
Chapter 4: Research Findings

4.0 Introductory Overview

This chapter will examine the themes and sub-themes that were analyzed in the three semi-structured interviews that were conducted. The primary question of the research is this: what does interreligious education mean to one’s own teaching? This question was inspired by connections that my research participants, Kendrick, Sarah, and Yusuf, made on interreligious education. This question also touches on the overarching question at hand: whether there is a gap between students engaging in interreligious dialogue between elementary and secondary school. There were two subsidiary questions: in what ways did they feel their religious identity has benefited or hindered their success within the profession? Would their experiences have been different if they were born in Canada or as an immigrant? These questions were used to determine two things. First, whether the discussion of religion is a current topic that is used in schools. And second, whether there were resources on interreligious education available for them while teaching.

Two of the participants taught in secondary schools. Thus, they provided insight on the existing gaps between school levels. Six themes emerged after listening to their responses. Many of these themes addressed the primary and subsidiary research questions for this study. These themes were: participants’ personal connection with religious traditions; student interest in learning about various religious traditions; barriers between Catholic public school board and public school board; resources and instances of religious intolerance; cross-curricular connections; and artistic forms of interreligious education. The two Catholic teachers’ answers noted the difference between how religion is taught in Catholic schools versus public schools. As
4.1 Participants’ Personal Connection with Religious Traditions

The criterion, listed in Chapter 3, for the Ontario educators was for their subject area to teach about religions to some capacity. During the interviews, the participants were asked to elaborate on what their religious/non-religious identity means to their profession as a teacher, and what role, if any, it plays in their life. All participants, including those who teach in the non-Catholic board, identified that religion was a critical component in their lives and formation of identity. Participants were careful and wary when answering questions surrounding their own religious standpoint as though it is a contested topic.

4.1.1 Participant’s Standpoint of Interreligious Education in Their Teaching

Yusuf teaches in the secondary school system in the Greater Toronto Area of Ontario. They noted that they come from a traditional Hindu family, which conflated their cultural and religious upbringing. Yusuf’s upbringing, and cultural and religious Hindu identity played a significant role in how they instruct material and maintain an open perspective on religion. The participant explicitly defined the difference between Eastern and Western influences in their life. They discovered that these differences were pivotal in forming their understanding of religion. They later articulated the separation made with their personal religious affiliation and teaching of religion to students. Furthermore, Yusuf highlighted that they never experienced religious intolerance living as a minority in Canada.

Sarah, a secondary school educator who taught in Ontario and now teaches in Calgary, abstained from answering the question about their own religious identity. Instead, they strictly focused on the academic perspective of religion. Working in the Catholic board, Sarah
consistently referred to teaching material that was relevant to the students. They mentioned the challenges of being a professional Catholic school teacher in an increasingly secular society.

Kendrick, another educator who teaches in the Catholic public board at the elementary level, strongly identified with their Catholic identity. Kendrick listed various Catholic practices that they follow to warrant their reasoning. Catholic teachers are required to participate and teach religion to their students. Despite their different approaches to teaching and associating with religion, all participants made a clear division between their personal religious affiliations and their religious tradition teachings.

4.2 Teacher Perspectives on Student Engagement with Religious Education

One objective in this research was to uncover whether teachers and students currently express a need for greater interreligious discussion in school. This was measured by the response that teachers received after facilitating interreligious discussion in their classrooms. The students expressed their interest in various forms, which was grouped into two sub-themes: Questioning and Bringing Outside Knowledge into the Classroom. Yusuf noted that,

Kids nowadays, they’re interested in learning more about the world outside of what they know and their community. I find that as we move on in the world, people in general are becoming a little bit more progressive with religion. If I bring up something that could be deemed as controversial, kids enjoy talking about it.

Religion was a topic that students demonstrated a clear interest in. They responded positively and wanted to know more about the world. Sarah also mentioned that interreligious dialogue allowed the students to reconsider their notions and assumptions. This feedback suggests that school is a place where students are able to separate what is heard from outside the classroom (whether that information is provided by parents or the media). School becomes a place where
students can make informed decisions about how they view a certain type of religion. Here lies the beginning of a separation between parental ideas of religion and the child’s ability to formulate their own ideas and meanings surrounding religion.

Kendrick discovered that the students lacked knowledge of other religious traditions when facilitating interreligious discussions. During these discussions, they discovered that students were uninformed about other religions--even different denominations of Christianity, the foundational religion that is used as a moral guideline in Catholic schools. In general, each participant provided their own anecdotal evidence of student interest during interreligious discussions. Both the teacher and the students actively engaged in the material.

4.2.2 Questions and Questioning

A common pattern that emerged from the semi-structured interviews was that students demonstrated their curiosity by asking questions. These questions ranged from asking clarification on the material, to questions about personal religious experiences that they wanted an answer to. For example, one of Kendrick’s students made a connection between their extracurricular activities and religion. The student brought their questions about religion to school.

The student said that they “play basketball with someone at a community centre, and the kid’s name is Muhammad. Do you think he’s a Muslim?” Kendrick reflected on this experience. He stated that “there are students that are kind of unaware and innocent, but it just means educating them with interfaith dialogue”. These types of questions are what the Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools ministry document is based off of. The document ensures equitable and inclusive education practices that practice accountability and transparency (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). The student asked about Islam due to an extra-curricular personal
experience, and they explicitly presented their interest in learning about this religion. The participant illustrated that that students found school to be a safe enough space to ask such questions about religion. The participant speculated that some students did not have access to this information at home if they were asking it at school.

While teaching, Sarah learned to listen to the students’ responses and anticipate what types of questions they would ask. Sarah recognized that students learn through questioning, and so Sarah would prepare materials according to the patterns in the questions that emerged. This contributed to a positive discussion. Ontario’s guide highlights that diversity is one of Ontario’s greatest assets. The renewed goals for education are: “achieving excellence, ensuring equity, promoting well-being, and enhancing public confidence”. Since “equity and inclusive education aims to understand, identify, address, and eliminate the biases, barriers and power dynamics that limit students’ prospects for learning, growing, and fully contributing to society” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 6), Sarah achieved a successful way of approaching these questions. They also learned to “step out of [her] teacher shoes, and into the students’ shoes to see where they’re coming from, learning to listen a lot more”.

For Yusuf, there were instances when students would ask what religious affiliation they identified with. Although they hesitated when this question was asked, they did not refrain from answering these questions. Whenever Yusuf noticed a students’ curiosity, they strived to facilitate objective dialogue rather than guiding the student in one subjective direction. They noted,

They’ll ask me sometimes, and I’ll tell them I’m Hindu, but they wouldn’t know it based on what I say, right? In fact, when I find that when I’m teaching a particular unit, I kind of become that culture. I kind of become that religion, right? I’m trying to present it from
all different angles, and really try to be as open and fair as possible, to a wide range of beliefs.

One student’s questions provided a prompt for other students in the classroom. They also helped the educator facilitate as well. All instances illustrate the student’s interest surrounding religion, and provide insight into the lack of knowledge they seemed to have with religion. When Yusuf facilitated interreligious discussions, they noticed that students would “preface it by saying, I’m not trying to be offensive, but, and then they’ll ask a question”. In this scenario, they realized that students hesitated in fear of offending others in the classroom. Yusuf also mentioned that “when students wanted to know more about a topic, it was my responsibility to ask difficult questions that would continue the discussion”. These types of guiding questions were imperative in continuing interreligious dialogue. The students responded positively to this type of teacher facilitation.

4.3 Barriers between the Catholic Public School Board and Public School Board

The two participants in the Catholic school board mentioned the gap in resources when comparing the two school systems. There were distinct barriers made with both participants who belonged to the Catholic public school board. The public school board participant did not mention the distinction between Catholic and non-Catholic. Kendrick referred to their Catholic upbringing and identity making a significant contribution to their career. They found that they were in an advantageous position by being able to apply to two public boards. Kendrick became better acquainted with Catholic religious traditions because they were teaching in the Catholic board. They also found that they expanded their knowledge by taking school trips that associated with other religious traditions. Both educators in the Catholic board regarded their schools as gender, ethnicity, class, and culturally diverse. Students provided multiple perspectives during
interfaith dialogues because they associated with various religious traditions. There are non-Catholic students who attend Catholic schools for varied reasons. For example, the emphasis on moral instruction is attractive to some parents (Toronto Star, 2014).

Furthermore, both Kendrick and Sarah referred to the modifications they created to accommodate and teach religion to their students. Kendrick and Sarah came across the same challenges while teaching, despite teaching different age groups. They found a bias towards Catholicism rather than teaching all religions objectively in their current school system. This bias caused students to be unfamiliar with other religious traditions. Kendrick observed that “students did not know any better, because that was their upbringing”. Since a majority of the students identify with being Catholic, the students lacked exposure to other religious traditions. Sarah shared that the Catholic material was too outdated. They mentioned that the students had desensitized to the religion on a personal level. They also found that the students were apathetic towards religious material that did not relate to them. Data collected by Brennan (2011) discovered that only two-thirds of the current Ontario Roman Catholic school students identify as Roman Catholic. With this shift in demographics, as well as the higher level of education, Sarah’s pedagogy of culturally relevant material is essential to the students’ learning the material (Rolheiser et al., 2011).

Religion is embedded in the Catholic school curricula, and the student demographic mainly consists of a Catholic background. Thus, the two educators easily referred to the challenges of teaching world religions. The students had basic knowledge of Catholic traditions but lacked knowledge of other religious traditions. However, they expressed an interest in learning about other religions, and the teachers taught about them when possible and appropriate.
Similarly, the non-Catholic board teacher never embedded their own religious beliefs while teaching world religions, rather, they embodied the religion that they were teaching. They also stressed that they remained objective in their positionality of religion. They stated,

Saying something that could be suggestive in one way or another, could not only, I think, hinder education, and hinder the proper development of critical thinking, but it can also get you in trouble. So I find that I’m very objective, and in fact, sometimes students don’t even know what my religious background is.

Yusuf is familiar with both Western and Eastern religious traditions, which evidently influences how they facilitate interreligious discussions. Yusuf stated that their resources are found through their own digging and learning. Both Kendrick and Sarah mentioned that the board provides them with relevant resources; however, Yusuf, a teacher from the non-Catholic board, did not mention this. Instead, Yusuf referred to their exposure to two different cultures, which broadened their perspective. In conclusion, both boards faced challenges teaching religious traditions, in regards to the insular view that students held towards certain religious traditions. Nevertheless, the Catholic board alluded to more availability of resources when teaching religion, since it is a mandated course in their curriculum.

4.4 Resources

Since interreligious education is not an explicit curriculum requirement to teach, the lack of resources within the Ontario school board was a prevailing theme throughout the interviews. Ontario curriculum documents are the mandated resources for all educators, and the questions and research findings are centred around these parameters.

Kendrick highlighted that there should be greater emphasis on interfaith resources since he is a teacher from the Catholic board. However, Kendrick noted that there were not very many
resources for interfaith education in particular. Kendrick says, “a lot of it right now, at least, with our board, is answering questions about, you know, how do you reconcile being a Catholic school teacher in the sex ed curriculum or things like that. But there’s not a lot about interfaith, at least, not that I’ve found”. Even within a religious school board, the emphasis is not on interfaith, but on how to teach the new sexual education curriculum document. Kendrick also noted that they did not go out of their way to look for resources, but stressed that the board is not promoting interfaith dialogue.

On the other hand, Sarah found that schools did provide resources, but the material was too “churchy”. As a result of the material being shaped in a certain way, it caused the students to turn away from the material. Sarah decided to use their own material to appeal to her students, which says something about the quality of board resources. Even within the religious material being taught, there is a certain bias in the Catholic board’s material, and the students are unresponsive to it. Moreover, Sarah emphasized that the resources must be renewed for teachers to develop their own knowledge on the material. They elaborated,

I feel like teachers need to be more educated on the church’s position, but I understand and recognize why they are not. So that is definitely a barrier, and so it’s the inability to talk about, and then there’s the lack of resources of where you find this stuff. In terms of how to eliminate it, there just has to be more discussion, more development for teachers, um...and I think those are the big ones.

Sarah suggested an overarching personal development for teachers, or a comprehensive resource readily available for all teachers to access on interreligious education. Yusuf explained that the first place they looked for resources was through colleagues and external sources, which are not a part of the curriculum resources. A common pattern that emerged out of all of the interviews is
a discussion on the lack of resources directly provided by the ministry. These documents are the primary places that teachers are expected to consult. The rest are secondary resources to supplement the existing resources. This discrepancy in resources causes the gaps in teaching interreligious education. The discussion of teaching religion inclusively is an aspect that is mentioned explicitly in all curriculum documents. Interreligious education has been implemented and recommended in other places outside of Canada, such as the United Kingdom. Arweck, Nisbitt and Jackson (2005) explore an education program that worked directly with two Hindu-related organizations. They reported on the success of religious materials implemented in these mainstream schools. This helped with promoting spiritual and moral development for students, which are two critical pieces in the current Ontario curriculum documents.

4.4.1 Curriculum Documents

A significant function of curriculum documents is that they are guides, and a ministry requirement that all educators are required to abide by, to support each student as much as possible (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). Yusuf recounted that they do not use curriculum documents as direct prompts, but always followed the curriculum and overall expectations. Once lessons were taught, they would be able to draw parallels with the curriculum, since that is the responsibility of all teachers in Ontario. There have been recent revisions made on the Social Studies and History and Geography curriculum document. The elementary level was revised in 2013 and the secondary one was revised in 2015. Within these documents, there is an explicit reference to promoting inclusive education. Religion is to be included, “welcomed, included, treated fairly, and respected” in any school environment (Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 45).

Sarah shared that they used the History curriculum document, but if teaching prompts were used at all, mainly used the prompts from the religion curriculum document. Sarah’s main
objective was to connect between curriculum and recent material for the students. Kendrick also highlighted the organic nature of initiating such discussions. However, they ended their answer by sharing that they “kind of” use the Social Studies and History curriculum document. All of the educators made loose connections to the curriculum documents. They all recognized that the documents must be incorporated into their teaching to some degree, but they do not view them as the primary resource for teaching interreligious education.

4.4.2 Ministry Resources

Similar to curriculum documents, the Ministry of Education has provided multiple resources for educators to positively impact student achievement and success. This can be found in the Finding Common Ground: Character Development in Ontario Schools, K-12 document (2008), as well as the Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools document (2014). In regards to the correspondence and communication between the teacher and the religion resource teacher, Kendrick shared that they “haven’t gone out of my way to kind of look for resources myself, and they haven’t really promoted them either”. This sharing of ministry resources was minimal, and they placed more weight on using their own materials rather than going to the resource teacher.

Sarah contributed with the most positive and direct feedback in this area. She noted that there are a lot of resources in the Catholic board, and their superintendent routinely sent out updates. However, they referred to holding onto their own university material, and placed equal weight on these materials.

Yusuf did not mention that they used any ministry documents as resources. Overall, ministry resource use ranged amongst educators. The Catholic board educators expressed that
there were more religiously oriented documents since it is a course that is taught on a regular basis.

4.4.3 Resources from Colleagues

Each teacher brings a unique dimension into teaching, and the variety of resources that they search for are meant to supplement all learners’ needs. Yusuf sought for primary resources when gathering materials for students, particularly by discussing with closer colleagues about their religious traditions. They explained that this was conducive to their learning, and desired to extend this type of learning to their own students. He shares that,

We’re friends, I understand more about them, they understand more about me. That interfaith dialogue has certainly brought us closer together. And more obviously, being a world religions teacher, I have a great deal of experience inside the classroom with interfaith dialogue, and again, it’s all been positive.

Sharing these resources is substantial to Yusuf. It modelled a type of relationship between colleagues that Yusuf strives to maintain in the classroom.

Sarah does not mention finding resources from colleagues. Kendrick mentioned speaking with a religion resource teacher and other personal development methods. Kendrick also emphasized the fact that there were Professional Development opportunities available, but they focused on the sexual education curriculum rather than interfaith. Both mention speaking to colleagues about the discussions that they have with students in the classroom. They both noted that this oral exchange provided insight into their interreligious material and teaching strategy. This was beneficial even though they did not receive physical resources from colleagues. Just as collaboration is emphasized for students in their learning, there should be collaboration between
educators and colleagues (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). Based on the response from each participant, this is desired by current educators.

4.4.4 Personal and Primary Resources

All participants unanimously found the majority of their resources by searching themselves, and by activating the prior knowledge they had on other religious traditions in their own educational background. Each educator referred back to what they had learned during their time in university. More specifically, Yusuf often went digging for resources on their own to provide solid primary sources for their students. Both Yusuf and Kendrick mentioned the importance of physically visiting sacred spaces or speaking with religious leaders to gather information. Yusuf commented: “I’ve went to synagogues, mosques…asked questions to the priests, rabbis, and imams, from different faiths, just to ask them questions to understand more about their faith and things like that”. Yusuf noted that they were extremely informative resources on religious tradition.

Sarah referred to the university material that they kept, as well as supplementary online research they completed in preparation for their teaching. Sarah reinforced the importance of preparing materials that were current and culturally relevant to their classroom. They often referred to the cross-curricular aspect of teaching religion, although it was predominantly through a religious perspective. It is vital for educators to use their own voice in teaching, but also facilitate the study of religion carefully. They can accomplish this by directing attention to “study them in their current forms and potentials for dialogue and conflict”, as it was accomplished in a project in Europe, targeting 14-16 year olds studying religion in public schools (Weisse, 2011). This project produced two positive results. First, there was dialogue between cultures; religions were fostered; and both were bridged within the context of religion in
education. Second, new ways of dealing with religious conflict in educational settings emerged. As it was achieved with 14-16 year old students in Europe, Sarah discussed the powerful effect this had in their own classroom.

4.5 Instances of Religious Intolerance

In all interviews conducted, teachers immediately mentioned the occurrence of their students making ignorant comments in regards to other religious traditions. These comments were instantly addressed. However, they revealed that students needed to be taught about such traditions. In all accounts, students responded in a positive manner, and expressed a desire to gain a better understanding of the religions that were mentioned. As mentioned above, Kendrick recalled an instance when a student in grade 6 made an anti-Semitic comment. After, they asked where this thought was learned. The student mentioned that they learned this from their parents. These attitudes occur and take form in the latter half of elementary school, which may transfer over in secondary school. The scholar Nora Gold (2012) conducted a study on Jewish girls’ experiences in schools, which explored the anti-Semitic comments that they encountered during school (p. 539). Gold concluded their study by suggesting that scholars, parents, and educators need to use this type of research to prepare them for such instances.

Yusuf perceived a situation to be problematic once there were explicit racial slurs made against a religious group. Yusuf shared an instance where a few students were wearing flags that had the Star of David on them on an ordinary day. As they wore these Israeli flags, they ran around and seemed to be celebrating something. He asked the students what they were celebrating, and they answered that they were celebrating the 12-straight day bombing of Palestine. As a result of their religious intolerance, these students participated in a violent demonstration. They celebrated the division of two cultures, and any students on the opposing
side may have felt fearful. These students decided to illustrate a physical religious and cultural distinction in public. Religious symbols and garb are often misappropriated in popular culture, among students, and even those who belong yet are outside of certain religious communities. For example, Gurbaj Multani’s case with the kirpan, a religious Sikh symbol, displays the potential misunderstandings from all stakeholders (Globe and Mail, 2011). Teachers must currently address these misunderstandings, just as Yusuf had to with these students.

Sarah shared an instance where an Arabic student was jokingly called a terrorist, and this really offended the student. This comment clearly targeted Muslims, and despite the Ontario curriculum push towards inclusivity around all cultural, religious and historical contexts (TDSB, 2000), the scholar Sarfaroz Niyozov disagrees. Sarfaroz believes that the progress has been stifled for Muslim students who are learning in public schools in Canada (Niyozov, 2010).

4.5.1 Cultural Assumptions Inherited by Parents

All teachers referred to their students’ ignorance and misunderstanding of certain religious traditions. Kendrick, the educator who works in the Catholic elementary school board, found that after having discussions with students who made intolerant comments towards certain religions, the students shared that they were regurgitating their parent’s perspectives, which students often mentioned without understanding the implications of their words. There is a clear transition from parental influence to media influence when comparing the findings of the elementary school and secondary school educators.

Yusuf did not mention an explicit connection to their students’ actions being influenced by their parents. However, they did mention that their actions were a combination of media, culture, and parental upbringing. In one instance, students were celebrating a 12-day bombing of Palestine, and the educator mentioned that this was the celebration of the divisiveness of two
cultures. These types of attitudes stemmed from their cultural upbringing, which was reinforced by their parents. Regarding the existing literature, McCreery, Jones and Holmes (2007) conducted a small-scale study in the United Kingdom. They focused on Muslim parents wanting Muslim schools in fear of their children facing such discrimination. The parents were mainly concerned over identity and belonging, discrimination, values and attitudes, and Islamic education for their children (p. 206). The study allowed for an analysis of non-faith schools in the United Kingdom, and it helped others re-evaluate how faith is approached.

When speaking on the experience of interfaith dialogues in school, Sarah referred to the challenges of dealing with the parents of the students they taught. Sarah noted that it was easier to speak to students rather than parents on such issues. This was the only negative account that Sarah mentioned when asked about interfaith dialogues. Bosacki, Elliot, Akseer and Bajovic (2010) suggest that parents have a significant influence on their children and their religious beliefs at a young age. This further reinforces the need for interfaith dialogue in schools so that their parents are not the only source of information. Sarah shared that educators and students confronted many societal debates that are especially controversial in the Catholic system in class. They noted that [educators] “must learn how to tackle those big questions, and learn how to reconcile the discrepancy between what kids see in the news and what teachers are trying to team them in the school setting”. Sarah expressed that students must be better prepared to talk about such issues, and expressed concern over their ability and opportunity to do so.

4.5.2 Media

The widespread use of media has added an element to teaching. The educators expressed how media has positively and negatively influenced their students’ perception of religion. Sarah and Yusuf, educators who teach at the secondary level, noted the “sound bites” of information
that students retain through mainstream news media outlets and social media, and the detrimental impacts it had on their understanding of certain religious traditions. They highlighted the media bias that exists, especially in American media on Muslims. This can be paralleled with Jasmin Zine’s (2001) work. Zine studied the student experience of various Muslim youth in schools. Negative stereotypes were reinforced and projected onto the students, and there were several accounts of unreported religious intolerance inflicted upon them. The educators who were interviewed expressed that students internalize misconceptions and they have the potential to respond with hateful acts. All participants agreed that the accounts of religious intolerance that they witnessed stemmed from ignorance.

Both Yusuf and Sarah referenced the media as the main source of information on other religions from their students. Media is a double-edged sword: it is a conduit for students to easily access information, but students have difficulty filtering through it. Both of these participants are secondary school teachers. Although they work in different school boards, they provided multiple instances that justify that their students’ age group was greatly influenced by the media. As Tiffany Puett (2005) highlights, the media is constantly bombarded with images of violence for a rising culture of fear. The pattern that is developed in elementary school reinforces these thoughts in secondary school and beyond. As it is found in relevant literature, the participants also expressed concern regarding the gaps they found in their students’ religious traditions knowledge. Their concern regarding their students’ ability to sift through news media outlets also emerged. The elementary school educator expressed that the exposure to materials was delayed, especially since students in Ontario were constantly interacting with other people who associated with other religious traditions at a young age. Even with a mandatory religion course incorporated in the Catholic system, both educators in the Catholic board mentioned that there
was a lack of resources that responded specifically to media when teaching world religions. They believe that new resources should be responsive to current media forms for extra support.

4.6 Cross-Curricular Connections and Artistic Forms of Interreligious Education

Bridging interreligious discussion in cross-curricular ways has proved to be effective by educator’s accounts, as well as scholarly research. Each educator provided their own insight into the continuous conversation of interreligious education. The participants also highlighted several cross-curricular links found between literacy and drama. Eidoo’s research (2013) provides an artistic expression of faith for students. They explore the positive effects of spoken word poetry as a means of students expressing their religious and cultural identity at school.

Yusuf, who taught drama in secondary school as well, mentioned that role-play is a crucial part of teaching world religions. When teaching a certain religion, Yusuf had the tendency of respectfully embodying that culture and religion to make it a more authentic and enriching experience for their students. Conversely, Kendrick (who works in the Catholic board) teaches religion in the religion classes. However, they taught about religious identity while teaching history, which also illustrates the cross-curricular approach. Kendrick noted that the class shared discussions about religion that “came out naturally”. Sarah, an advocate for creating culturally relevant materials for students, shared an artistic and more abstract approach to learning about cultural and religious issues. The example they gave was an activity that focused on stereotypes. The activity later extended into many types of conversation, especially with religion and culture. Sarah recalled a game that they created called the “cultures game”, where they assigned different strips of paper, and each strip of paper had instructions on how to deal with a person of a different culture. Each person had a different role and had to interact with each other based on their given roles. After explaining the game, Sarah remarked,
This was really good at highlighting miscommunications with cultures, misinterpretations, misunderstandings and stereotypes, so things that are activity based that puts them in the role is really good at having them understand the implications of intolerance because they get to feel it.

This activity was a precursor to a grade 10 religion course for the unit on Christ and Culture. It was successful in engaging the learner and facilitating interreligious discussions.

4.7 Summary

All participants saw the catastrophic effects that religious intolerance could create. They shared firsthand accounts of this through their teaching experiences. It manifests in ignorance towards other religions and violent and destructive behaviour brought on by precarious and often misled actions. A division of cultures often lead to misunderstandings. Being aware of this, all educators agree that the school is the place to inform students about religious traditions in order for them to be accepting of other peoples’ beliefs, School is also the place where bigoted or discriminatory comments can be prevented.

Overall, each educator who participated in a semi-structured interview advocated for interreligious education in their classroom. They all directly answered the primary research question: What does interreligious education mean to them, and how did this translate in their own experiences in their respective classrooms. The six themes that developed were: participants’ personal connection with religious traditions, student interest in learning about various religious traditions, barriers between Catholic public school board and public school board; resources, instances of religious intolerance, cross-curricular connections, and artistic forms of interreligious education. The data suggests that interreligious education is well received by students, but there must be a push towards accessible resources for educators. The consensus
behind teaching interreligious education is to establish a greater sense of inclusion and understanding of one another in the classroom. These findings reinforce the need for culturally relevant interreligious education in both Catholic and non-Catholic public schools in Canada.

In the following chapter, I explain the implications of these research findings. I then present multiple opportunities for interreligious dialogue within the context of both the Catholic and non-Catholic public school in Ontario. After, I investigate some areas for further pedagogical research, based on the observed outcomes of the three research participants’ lived experiences in their particular classrooms. Finally, I propose recommendations to educators and administrators for prospective pedagogical progress.
Chapter 5: Discussion

5.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the broad and narrow implications found in Chapter Four. I also provide an overview of the key findings and recommendations for educators, administrators, and school boards based on the conclusions that I drew from my study. The purpose of this study was to explore whether students were sufficiently exposed to interreligious education in Social Studies, History and Geography curriculum in Ontario at the elementary level. There has been a greater emphasis on inclusive education in recent years. This is why I explored interreligious dialogue and the existing gaps between elementary and secondary school. My findings suggest that students entering secondary school lack an understanding of religions. Interreligious education breaks down various misconceptions of international religious traditions; therefore, it is an essential component in a student’s education. I decided to research these issues as a response to existing religiously driven hate crimes in society.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and their Significance

The main research question of this study was asking how the interreligious education gap between upper elementary and secondary schools in the Ontario school board affected students. I had the opportunity to investigate my primary questions throughout my research process. I learned that the Social Studies and History and Geography curriculum does address interreligious education in an archaic context. Insight provided by my participants demonstrate that elementary and secondary teachers can successfully implement interreligious education in the Ontario school board. The educators did not rely solely on curriculum documents about world religions; instead, they used them as prompts. This allowed educators to create a more accurate representation of
religious minorities. I understood how essential it was for educators to be informed about religious traditions. Informed educators are able to extend this knowledge to their students.

Six themes emerged from the data collected from the interview process. The first finding was that all of the participants found value in teaching interreligious education. The participants commented on their own personal religious affiliations. They established that they take an objective perspective while teaching world religions. This study also revealed a unanimous need for interreligious education in classes. In addition, students expressed a strong interest in learning about religious traditions outside of their own religious backgrounds. This includes Catholic students from Catholic schools, who responded positively to interreligious discussion. One of the participants noted that teaching about other religions created an environment where students could reconsider their notions about certain religious traditions. They achieved this by asking questions outside of curriculum material.

Interviewing participants from both the Catholic Public School Board and the Public School Board in Ontario revealed obvious differences in how teachers conducted interreligious discussion in their classrooms. Since there is a religious emphasis in Catholic schools, there was a gap in students’ understanding of other religious traditions. The non-Catholic board teacher found an advantage in their own multicultural background. They used it to facilitate objective interreligious discussions in the classroom. Although the Catholic board teachers came from a Catholic background, they were active seekers in learning about other religious traditions. This distinction between Catholic and non-Catholic boards led to the discussion of resources.

I discovered that the teachers in both school boards lacked resources specifically pertaining to teaching interfaith. If resources were available, they were too outdated to use with students. The relevant Ontario curriculum documents were used as prompts by all teachers. The
richest resources were found through the educators’ personal research, prior knowledge gained in university, or interfaith conversations with colleagues. Educators emphasized on primary resources. One participant shared his personal experience of going to different countries and learning firsthand about the native religion. Two of my participants highlighted the importance of accurately representing religious and cultural traditions which justifies their seeking out authentic and primary sources.

To reinforce the primary question surrounding my research, there was a resounding pattern among all participants. Their students illustrated religious intolerance and ignorance in their comments. These stemmed from cultural assumptions that were inherited from their parents or from the media. With external influences that students consume on a daily basis, educators play an even more crucial role to inform the critical thinking of their students. Educators are a preventative measure for negative attitudes towards different religions that might manifest into hate crimes.

The final finding was that these educators knew interreligious education could be taught in a variety of ways to address religious intolerance. Educators decided to integrate it into their teaching in a cross-curricular manner, or through artistic means of expressing faith. Interviewing both elementary and secondary school teachers revealed that students were interested in learning about religion, yet lacked external knowledge and resources to engage in interreligious dialogue. Students demonstrated their interests by questioning what they were taught on certain religious traditions, and bringing this outside knowledge into the classroom. This gave teachers an opportunity to break down their students’ assumptions about a particular religion.

A clear theme that emerged was the barrier between Catholic Public School Board and Public School Boards and their emphasis on religious education. The participants raised many
concerns; namely, that students lack interreligious education from elementary to secondary education.

5.2 Implications

The data that was gathered from this study generated broad and narrow implications, which will be examined in the paragraphs ahead.

5.2.1 Broader Implications

Many questions were raised in this study regarding the root of interreligious education lacking in the educational community. Questions emerged regarding standardized curriculum, and why teachers are lacking resources. These questions may suggest that there is a systemic issue involved in incorporating interreligious education in the Ontario elementary school curriculum.

Throughout my research, I focused on interreligious education as its own entity, rather than diminishing it as a small component under the inclusive education section in the curriculum document. Since learning about world religions is conflated with other topics, it was imperative to isolate and address this topic for the sake of interreligious discussion in secondary school. One question in my research asked why interreligious education was inadequately addressed in the Social Studies and History and Geography Ontario curriculum document. Content decisions are always controversial. However, a lack of resources may indicate that the Ministry of Education needs to address interreligious education in a more concerted way, especially with the push towards inclusive education for students in elementary schools.

All three participants alluded to the lack of interreligious education training. They proposed that school boards must provide more professional development for facilitating interreligious education in the classroom. As found in my interviews, interreligious education has
the potential to become part of an inclusive education professional development initiative. This could help teachers feel adequately versed in the material to deliver it to their students. In addition, the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) should consider reviewing their teacher education programs for teacher candidates. Perhaps if teacher candidates received sufficient training in interreligious education, there would be a decrease in gaps of knowledge, and an increase in teacher confidence. These interfaith discussions are essential for the students’ future. They will prepare students for higher education, shape their worldviews, and help them positively contribute to society in the future.

5.2.2 Narrow Implications

As a teacher-researcher, I believe that my findings have reinforced my belief in facilitating interreligious dialogue with students. Furthermore, students are interested and unaware of engaging in such discussions. I have also learned that students are capable of having interfaith conversations, even at the elementary school level. Moreover, my findings gave me insight into how interreligious education is regarded in public schools in Ontario. In the interviews I conducted, the teachers echoed my thoughts on the scarcity of resources available for them. The secondary school teachers expressed that there is a gap between the content that they desire to teach and the content that is taught in elementary schools. The expectations for this are laid out in the curriculum documents. I would like to broaden my research by interviewing more practicing teachers in Ontario. I would like to see how it has been successfully implemented in other educational systems around the world.

This topic could be further developed in many directions ranging from equity and race, to inclusive and intercultural education. Since interreligious and interfaith are interchangeable, there could also be a focus on certain religious traditions. As a researcher, I emphasize the need
for interreligious discussion in classrooms at an early grade. This could give secondary school teachers the ability to teach courses to their fullest potential. The issue is that they often end up re-teaching the content that was taught in elementary school because of the gaps in knowledge. Teachers acknowledge the limitations that exist when teaching interreligious education. One dominant theme throughout the interviews was that teachers had to research their own resources from scholarship in the field to facilitate these discussions. Teachers have agency of teaching interreligious material in the classroom; they were all advocates to make their students into better individuals, to prepare them as future citizens of the world.

5.3 Recommendations

I recommend that the Ontario curriculum looks at existing models of interreligious dialogue from other countries, and experiment with them in Ontario classrooms. I want to continue the support of using artistic forms to express religious diversity, because of the flexibility involved with the arts. Instead of attributing religious traditions to certain groups of people, the focus should shift towards learning about religion as its own discipline. This approach should be implemented in several subjects. The Ministry of Ontario should implement religion in a range of subjects such as Language, Social Studies, History and Geography, since this can incorporate narratives of the past and the present.

Based on the findings, I recommend a progressive conversation regarding resources in the classroom. I also recommend the ministry to be more open to supporting resources that have the range of knowledge that teachers recommend. Religion is not recognized in the curriculum in a substantial way, but the existing resources provide an opportunity to include them in the classroom. Students must have several opportunities to share their own perspectives through collaboration and a cross-curricular approach.
5.4 Areas for Further Research

I would like to see further research into why interreligious education has yet to receive greater attention in Ontario. I would also like to continue researching how the interreligious education model has been successfully implemented in other provinces in Canada. Answers to these questions may help interfaith education effectively extend into the Ontario curriculum. Finally, I would continue to research whether interreligious education has been successfully integrated into teacher education programs. If integrated, this training can then be a precursor for teaching interreligious education, in addition to Professional Development opportunities.

5.5 Conclusion

All of these findings lead back to the question regarding the gaps between religious education in elementary and secondary school education. My findings have helped me reconsider what multicultural and inclusive education truly entails. Moreover, I explored whether the rhetoric that is provided in public schools is sufficient for students to gain a better understanding and respect for all religions. As a teacher-researcher, I know that establishing a safe and inclusive environment to conduct such conversations is absolutely imperative. Religious intolerance is a persistent problem in society, one which requires dire attention in schooling. This research advocates for students to obtain a greater knowledge of religious cultures and traditions. The objective is to break down any misunderstandings that may exist in their understanding of particular religions. I feel this is an essential element in ensuring the success of a multicultural society.
References


Appendix A: Letter of Signed Consent

Dear ___________________,

My name is Miga Kim and I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. As a student in a pre-service teaching program, I am interested in learning how a sample of public and Catholic school teachers are applying interreligious education in their practice. Findings obtained from this study may be informative for not only current and pre-service teachers, but equity policy-makers, and leaders in the promotion of anti-racism within the educational community. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is Dr. Rose Fine Meyer. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a 45-60 minute interview that will be audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. Given the topic of interreligious education guiding the research questions, a minute risk with partaking in the study is that questions may produce emotional responses, which could cause the interviewee to feel vulnerable. To address this, you will be provided with the questions ahead of time. There are no other known risks to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Sincerely,
Miga Kim

Phone number: _______________
E-mail: _______________
Course Instructor’s Name: Dr. Rose Fine Meyer
Contact Info: _______________

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 at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by ______________________ (name of researcher) 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/Questions

Thank you for participating in my research study. The aim of this research is to learn how a sample of teachers is teaching and responding to interreligious education in schools. This interview should take approximately 45-60 minutes, and is comprised of approximately 22 questions. The interview protocol has been divided into 4 sections, beginning with the participant’s background information, followed by questions about their encounters with interreligious education, then their experiences and beliefs related to interreligious education, and concluding with questions regarding supports, challenges, and next steps for teachers. I want to remind you that you can choose not to answer any question, and can remove yourself from participation at any time. Do you have any questions before we begin?

To begin can you state your name for the recording?

Section A – Background Information

1. How long have you been living in Canada?
   a. (If born here) Where did you grow up?
   b. (If not born here) Which country did you immigrate from?

2. How many years have you been working as a teacher in Canada?

3. What grades and subjects do you currently teach? Which have you previously taught?

4. In addition to your role as a teacher, do you fulfill any other roles in the school (e.g. coach, advisor, resource teacher etc.)?

5. Can you describe the community in which your school is situated (i.e. diversity, socioeconomic status)? How long have you taught in this school?

6. As you are aware, I am interested in learning about Canadian teachers’ experience of integrating interreligious education in schools. You have identified as a teacher who has taught about various world religions and hence are participating in this study. Can you tell me more about what your religious/non-religious identity means to you/what role it plays in your life?
Section B – Encounters with Interreligious Education in the School

7. Have you ever shared any personal experiences of religious intolerance with students? If so, why/in what context? And how did they respond?

8. How did your students respond when you facilitated interreligious discussion, and if you have been unable to do so, how do you think they will respond to this?

9. Have you ever shared your experiences with colleagues? If so, in what context? And how did they respond?

10. Were you able to use the social studies or history curriculum documents as prompts for your interreligious discussion? How did the students respond?

Section C – Experiences and Beliefs

11. How does your religious/non-religious identity affect your professional identity as a teacher?

12. In what ways do you feel your religious identity has benefitted or hindered your success within your profession?
   a. Do you think your experiences would have been different if you were born here/an immigrant?

13. What does interreligious education/interfaith dialogue mean to you?
   a. What kinds of attitudes and behaviours are indicators of religious intolerance, in your view?

14. What is your current experience of interfaith dialogues in school?
   a. From whom do you receive resources to teach this material?

15. (If applicable) Do you feel your experiences of witnessing or experiencing religious intolerance have influenced your teaching?
   a. Did you notice any changes in your experiences once you began to teach interreligious education in your courses?

16. Has your experience of religious intolerance changed over time?

17. How do you respond to experiences of religious intolerance in school? Can you give me a
specific example of an experience, and how you responded?

18. Currently, there is a lot of attention to religious intolerance in the media. In your view, why does religious intolerance persist in Canadian schools and society?

Section D – Supports, Challenges, and Next Steps

20. What kinds of support systems and resources are available to you with regards to your teaching of interreligious education? What do you think about the supports and resources that are available?

21. What challenges and barriers do you continue to face in your professional identity and practice as a result of your religious identity, and what do you think needs to be done by the school system and people working within it to minimize and eliminate these challenges and barriers?

22. As a beginning teacher who similarly strives to teach inclusively, what advice do you have for me entering the profession?

Thank you, sincerely, for your time and considered responses.