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### **The future of religious literacy and teacher education in the Ontario classroom**

*The Canadian multicultural policy is shifting its focus onto religious identity. Concurrently, individuals in society have begun to self-identify based on religious grounds rather than other aspects of one's identity, such as ethnicity. As Ontario is the most multi-religious province in Canada. I argue that teachers must recognize this aspect of students' identities too. I contend that religious literacy needs to become a standard part of citizenship education in teacher training programs in the province, similar to the inclusion and recognition of sexual orientation, physical disabilities and other aspects of identity that currently exist in teacher education. In doing so, this presentation discusses current challenges and presents future suggestions for Ontario pre-service teacher training.*

Kymlicka (2015) contends that Canada is now moving into a third stage of multiculturalism; the stages have transitioned from a focus on ethnicity, to race, to religion. Although his analysis centres on Canadian multicultural policy rather than multicultural ideology, critique, practice or multiculturalism as an empirical fact (Fleras and Elliot 2002), this transition is a result of the perception of religious and non-religious identity in the Canadian context.

At the individual level, there is a change in the self-perception among Muslims in Canada (Kymlicka 2015). As a result of 9/11, governments around the world are seeking ways to understand “the Muslim” psyche and how Muslim organizations can partner with governments to “reduce alienation, monitor radicalism, and promote cooperation among state officials” (Kymlicka 2015, p. 27). Thus, because Muslim community members are not perceived by their ethnic or racial backgrounds, they, especially youth, are more interested in associations based on their religious identity. While my discussion does not focus on the Muslim population in particular, it is noteworthy to consider how social and political events have instigated this shift, and how society needs to respond to it accordingly, especially as Islamophobia is reportedly rising within Ontario<sup>1</sup>. As a vital member of any community, I believe teachers, when

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<sup>1</sup> A 51-page survey on this topic was released by the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI) and Mass Minority, an advocacy group; however, after a newspaper

equipped appropriately with religious literacy and the pedagogical approaches to teach it, can be a leader of change within this shift.

To date, 76.85 percent of Ontario households self-identify with a religious affiliation (Statistics Canada 2013), yet there is no course to prepare Ontario generalist elementary teachers, or subject-specific middle school and high school teachers on how to incorporate religious identity or literacy into their lessons. In my Masters of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education, training to teach English-Language-Learners was standard curriculum for all teachers alongside Anti-Discriminatory Education, but religion as an aspect of diversity was hardly discussed and only mentioned in detail during a course on Educational Professionalism, Ethics and the Law. Variations of multicultural education is currently a component of teacher training, yet the discussion of religious and non-religious identities (hereafter referenced together as “(non)religious” identities) and the pedagogical approaches to introduce them in curriculum are not thoroughly included. Accommodation for religious beliefs and practices are included, but I contend that this is insufficient training for the Canadian teacher today. As such, in light of the change Kymlicka highlights and the demographic need for religious literacy in Ontario, I argue that religious literacy needs to be a focused aspect of the current multicultural education programming in teacher training by introducing a mandatory religious literacy course for all teacher candidates in Ontario (as education in Canada is governed provincially), and that a stand-alone Additional Qualification professional development course for current teachers on religious literacy needs to be recognized by the Ontario College of Teachers<sup>2</sup>, the governing board of professional teachers in Ontario. Religious literacy—conceptualized as the ability to understand and discern the basic tenets of each world religion, the diversity within and across religious communities, and the role of religion within the social, economic, and cultural spheres of history and today (Moore, 2007)—provides a foundation to understand various events in history and today. Equipping teachers and eventually students with this form of literacy prepares individuals in society to better understand their

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article published by Nicholas Keung raised this matter (<https://www.thestar.com/news/immigration/2016/07/04/ontario-facing-epidemic-of-islamophobia-survey-finds.html>), the province and the City of Toronto contacted OCASI to postpone the official release of the findings. This detail was shared by Keung via an email conversation on July 14, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> A search for “religion” in the Ontario College of Teachers website shows that Additional Qualification (AQ) courses related to religion only pertain to teachers who wish to teach religious education in the Ontario public Catholic school boards: <http://www.oct.ca/members/services/findanaqstart/findanaq?searchBy=aqname>. No, course on religion is offered for those who teach in the non-Catholic public school boards.

community and world, and one another, thereby making religious literacy an aspect of citizenship education.

On this basis, this presentation will elaborate on the current state of teacher training in Ontario and offer suggestions on how a course on religious literacy can be implemented in teacher training. As a segment of my doctoral research that explores the potential connection between religious bullying and religious literacy, this presentation will also consider how religious literacy as a form of citizenship education could potentially address religious bullying in the Ontario classroom.

### **Teacher training in Ontario**

Unlike post-secondary education in the United States, high school graduates in Canada enter college and university with a declared major or minor within their first year of studies. This leads many teacher candidates to specialize in one or two specific subject areas within the first few years of their undergraduate experience. In the province of Ontario, teacher candidates (henceforth referred to as TCs) are demarcated into those who will teach Primary-Junior grades (the equivalent of Kindergarten to Grade 6), Junior-Intermediate grades (Grades 4-10), and Intermediate-Senior grades (Grades 8-12). Primary-Junior TCs are expected to be generalists across all subject areas as they are required to teach all subjects, with the exception of French, Music, and sometimes Physical Education. Junior-Intermediate TCs select one subject area and Intermediate-Senior TCs select two subject areas. While sociology and psychology are mandatory course requirements for all Bachelor of Education students at the undergraduate level, no other compulsory training is required across the three streams of TCs. With respect to our discussion of religious literacy, only five of the 16 universities in Ontario that have a Bachelor of Education program<sup>3</sup> offer courses for the subject area of Religious Education<sup>4</sup>. Only Tyndale University College and Seminary requires the completion of one of “[EDUC 501] Democratic Values, Christian Perspectives and Education or [EDUC 510] Religious Education: Democratic Values, Catholic Perspectives and Education” as an aspect of “Concept Requirement” for their Primary-Junior and Junior-Intermediate TCs<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> The 16 schools are listed here: <http://www.oct.ca/becoming-a-teacher/requirements/teacher-education-program-providers>.

<sup>4</sup> The five universities are Université Laurentienne, Nipissing University, University of Ottawa, Western University, and York University. These are listed on the Ontario Universities' Application Centre website (<https://ouac.on.ca>).

<sup>5</sup> Course details are listed here: <http://www.tyndale.ca/education/program/courses>. The school does not offer training for Intermediate-Senior TCs.

At the graduate level, individuals with the Bachelor of Education can enter Masters of Education or Masters in Arts programs, which offer elective-based courses. Individuals who have a non-education bachelor degree, are eligible for Masters in Arts programs and a Masters in Teaching, the latter is only offered at the Ontario Institute for the Studies in Education and provides a research component and a teaching certification upon the completion of two years of teacher training at the graduate level. Unlike the M.Ed. or M.A., the M.T. has compulsory course requirements for students within each stream. However, like the Bachelor of Education programs, religious literacy and Religious Education is only compulsory for TCs who are interested in teaching in the publicly-funded Catholic school boards in Ontario. This form of teacher training is beneficial in that it develops strong teachers within a specialized subject area, yet this same system can streamline teachers based on content knowledge without adequate preparation for the “average” student. Approaches to teaching the “average” student changes over time as the “average” student changes based on social shifts in society. Hence, the implementation of the theory of social-ecology needs to be revisited in teacher training continuously to encourage the development of students.

### **Conceptual analysis**

Bronfenbrenner’s theory of social-ecology (1979) posits that human development occurs under the influence of the biological, psychological, and social bearings of one’s lived context. As students spend numerous hours of their day at school with their teachers, teachers evidently play a noticeable role in a student’s development. With respect to the shift in the recognition of (non)religious identities in Canada, institutions must better prepare teachers by offering a religious literacy teacher education course that would inform teachers about the recognition of (non)religious identities and the pedagogical approaches to include it and teach it to their students. This development of religious literacy would then prepare students as members of a multi-religious society, and help additional facets of society actualize this recognition as well. In doing so, teachers who teach religious literacy in areas with lower levels of understanding about (non)religious identities would be leaders who initiate respect and citizenship education for the students and individuals in a given community. In this presentation, citizenship education is based on Kymlicka’s (2012) conception of *citizenization* - the process whereby individuals’ autonomy, agency, consent, trust, participation, and self-determination are respected.

## Potential solutions

Citizenship education is important because it informs individuals on how to be a contributing member of a cohesive society while fostering the process of citizenization; citizenship education considers the society as a whole. This relates to religious bullying – bullying that occurs when a power imbalance is intentionally created based on an individual’s religious or religiously unaffiliated identity – as all forms of bullying fragment the respect and cohesiveness that is promoted through citizenship education. As bullying occurs when an individual student is intentionally denigrated based on an aspect of their identity, the victimized individual is then segregated or made to feel segregated from the society. To address this concern, scholars have noted that bullying intervention requires the development of healthy relationships in a whole school approach that includes the community (see Craig and Pepler 2007, Pepler and Ferguson 2013), which harkens back to Bronfenbrenner’s theory of social-ecology. Thus (from the perspective of my research on the potential connection between religious bullying and religious literacy) if a religious literacy program is able to offer a holistic approach to form respectful citizens who listen and dialogue with one another despite differing perspectives, perhaps religious literacy courses may be able to address religious bullying. However, religious literacy can only be considered a form of citizenship education if it includes the discussion of the individual within religious literacy.

Several religious literacy courses may only address the basic tenets and practices of a religious group. The absence of human affect in this discussion removes the value of such beliefs and practices on an individual’s identity. As a result, a pseudo-barrier may be placed between religious beliefs that influence social, economic, and cultural events in history and today versus that which is experienced and embraced by religious believers. In contrast, the inclusion of the personal in a religious literacy program informs students of the value and importance of certain beliefs in people’s lives and may potentially develop an understanding of individuals, thereby fostering respect for differing beliefs and one another. Additionally, it bridges the reality that individual beliefs can influence social, economic, and cultural events in history and today.

An aspect of citizenship education can be explicitly included in religious literacy programs through the form of character development, as in the *World Geography and World Religions* (WGWR) Grade Nine course in the Modesto City School District in California, and the inclusion of dialogue, as in the *Ethics and religious culture* (ERC) K-12 program required across all public and private schools in the Canadian province of Quebec. Both programs recognize the human affect within religions. The WGWR is a grassroots course

that was developed by local teachers because they felt that geography and religion were missing components in the students' curriculum (interview with Y.T. 2014). The ERC is categorized as a course concerning personal development within the Quebec Education Plan. While the course content for both programs are context specific, the Ontario curriculum can adapt these courses for its own purposes of citizenship education as both courses aim to teach *about* and *from* religion, rather than the teaching *of* religion (Grimmitt and Read 1975); however, the success of any religious literacy program in Ontario would need to consider the level of teacher training first. Various elective courses on religion are available at the undergraduate and graduate level across many Ontario universities, but the elective nature of the courses do not adequately prepare TCs for the reality of their classroom or their community. To resolve this, I propose that religious literacy needs to be a focused aspect of the current multicultural education programming in teacher training by introducing a mandatory religious literacy course for all teacher candidates in Ontario, and that a stand-alone Additional Qualification professional development course for current teachers on religious literacy needs to be recognized by the Ontario College of Teachers. This will ensure that TCs and in-service teachers are both supported with religious literacy training.

### **Looking forward**

Studies on religious bullying and religious discrimination have not been conducted in Ontario but, from my personal experience teaching in an Ontario classroom, I know that religious bullying does exist there. The existence of religious bullying coupled with the shift in individual and policy recognition of religious identities in Canada calls the Faculties of Education in Ontario, the Ontario College of Teachers, and the Ontario Ministry of Education to adapt and expand its discussion of citizenship education and include religious and religiously unaffiliated identities and individuals in teacher training within the province. If well equipped with religious literacy to teach *about* and *from* religion, teachers could support their students, school, and society in implementing this change.

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