

**STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL  
CLASSROOM**

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By

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## **ABSTRACT**

Recently, teachers and administrators have found it difficult to address issues concerned with religious beliefs and practices for fear of offending either students or the community. As a result, whatever is deemed religious in nature is rarely discussed or practiced in school classrooms. In earlier decades, teachers generally had little difficulty relating to students on a religious level because the majority, both teachers and students in this city were from a predominantly Christian orientation. As the demographics of the population of Saskatchewan changed because of immigration and the waning of religious beliefs, public schools also had to change to reflect the beliefs of the population and become more inclusive.

This research, employing narratives, is based on Grounded Theory and explored students' experiences with religious content and issues as they attended public high schools. Students were asked what their experiences were and if their experiences and beliefs about religion affected their subsequent education, and lives.

The findings of this study suggest that more sensitivity needs to be given to students' religious identities in the classroom. Negative comments about religion and religious beliefs made by teachers or students can greatly affect an individual's school experience. These negative experiences can be addressed by discussing religions and religious beliefs in the classrooms of public high schools. This would lead to a greater understanding of others and then in turn, students of all backgrounds will have an increased feeling of acceptance and a sense of belonging to the schools they attend.

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **BEGINNINGS**

When I got to my mailbox in the main office at school at the end of an otherwise ordinary school day, I received notification of a student who had just dropped my World Religions class. Since this was the first year of a new course offering in the school division, I wanted to know why the student had dropped it. He had good attendance and seemed to be an engaged, yet quiet, listener. I was surprised that he had taken this action. The subject matter was one of my passions, and I wondered if I had disturbed or offended the student. The next day I asked the student if he would mind telling me why he had dropped the course. Since religion and religious beliefs can be a very sensitive subject for people, I hoped that I had not created uncomfortable tensions for him. The student admitted recent class discussions about fundamentalism had caused him to question everything he had believed since he was a young child. He found that frightening because it seemed that his very identity was at stake. This caused a conflict, a state of tension in him, as he was now questioning the past stories that had come to shape his life. Although I wished that he had talked to me first before dropping the course, I understood and respected his decision. This experience made me realize that I needed to be more aware of how issues surrounding religion really could affect students. The student perceived the class as a threat to what he believed; his very identity was being called into question. But my intention in this class was to help students gain an understanding of religion and to think critically, not to cause an undue amount of tension about their own identities. What would have happened had he stayed in the course for the rest of the term? I wondered

also what other students experienced in my class. If discussion about religion affected the students in this way in a World Religions' class, what were students' perceptions about how religion was discussed in other classes like English, History or Science? If these perceptions occurred in other classes, did the loss of identity affect students' future learning in all classes?

I began by thinking about my experiences as a student. When I attended a small, rural public school, we recited the Lord's Prayer every morning, followed by the singing of the national anthem. The Biblical account of Jesus' birth was always a part of the school Christmas concert. According to my perceptions, the school was still Christian based even though it was a public school and not affiliated with any religion. I can remember that teachers usually had some activity related to Christian practices and holidays. Since I attended a Mennonite church in my childhood, I experienced such connections among school, church, and home as normal. I did know of other Christian denominations but had little knowledge of the other world religions. As far as I knew, parents and the community did not object that the schools encouraged these beliefs and instilled some Christian principles and values in the students. I cannot remember any students from different countries or cultures in my classes, and I just assumed that everyone came from a Christian background. I can remember only a few occasions when a student left the class during morning exercises or did not participate in an activity related to religion. The teachers never explained why the students removed themselves, and we were left to make our own conclusions.

As a high school teacher, I now see the effects of such religious practices on students in public schools. The World Religions course was created and offered to Grade

11-12 students at all of the Saskatoon's public high schools because several parents challenged the public school board's policy of permitting the recitation of the Lord's Prayer during morning exercises. The parents' complaint was that this practice discriminated against non-Christian students who were either forced to participate in religious exercises contrary to their beliefs or were singled out while other students participated. The Human Rights Commission agreed that the rights of those students who were not Christian were violated. The Lord's Prayer was no longer to be recited, Christmas pageants depicting the birth of Christ were no longer to be performed, Easter celebrations were no longer to be followed, and no prayers were to be allowed before sporting events and at graduation ceremonies. The World Religions course was then created as a way of including religious beliefs in a school curriculum that would be all-inclusive to the beliefs of all children. Since religion was, and is an important part of history and society, some teachers believed that students should be informed about the variety of religious beliefs world-wide. The course was designed to include the study of religion without violating the rights of students. Its goal was not to convert students to a particular religion but to give students an understanding of religion and other cultures. The school division hoped that this course would appeal to students of many backgrounds and faiths, including those of no particular faith.

McEwan (1997) has observed that non-Christian students feel excluded, or even ignored, when their religions are given less respect. Freedom of religion can be exercised by individual students but when a teacher devotes class time to the practice of one religion, a student's freedom of religion rights are violated. He also stated that most school division policies regarding the teaching of religion are usually confusing and

misguided. As a result, teachers avoid the subject altogether. Teachers are not sure how to distinguish among religious instruction, a comparative study of religion, and a student's personal reading material. McEwan suggested that:

a curriculum that represents many cultures and moral perspectives could provide teachers with significant opportunities to explore the shared insights of social justice, respect, and responsibility provided by the world's religions. Such a curriculum would be a positive step toward creating a community tolerant of differences and enhanced by similarities, as opposed to one that emphasizes holiday parties and favours just one viewpoint (p.72)

Religious instruction should be forbidden but studying religion is beneficial and a student reading religious work during reading time is the individual student's choice.

I was one of these teachers who did not know what was permissible or forbidden in regards to the discussion of religion in classroom practice. I was asked to teach this course because I was the only teacher on staff with a Religious Studies degree. I immediately accepted because religious philosophy had always been an interest of mine. My interest in religion began when I was in high school. Growing up in a Mennonite family, I was always interested in Mennonite theology and history. This interest grew as I attended a Mennonite high school and post-secondary college. I was also quite active in the Mennonite church and worked at a Mennonite children's camp in the summer. Up until this point I had only taken theology and religious history courses in my Religious Studies degree. In my final year I enrolled in my first World Religions course and began volunteering in a public school. As I learned more about other religions and Christianity, I began to question my own beliefs. I wondered what followers of other religions

believed, and I asked myself why I had never heard of these ideas during my high school and Bible college years. After graduation from the College of Education, I began working at the same Mennonite high school that I had attended. I found the students there had little knowledge about other religions. The group of Asian foreign students that attended this school formed their own, close-knit group mainly because of the cultural differences between Asian and Canadian students. There seemed to be an underlying tension between the two groups, mostly because each did not understand the other's culture. In fact, it also caused tension for me as I often did not understand Eastern culture. It was then that I realized what was missing from my secondary education and that I needed to expose my current secondary students to other perspectives and beliefs.

After travelling to different places in the world and observing a variety of cultures, my interest in other religions continued to grow. It was also at this time that I began teaching, and after several years, began teaching the new World Religions course. My first class consisted of about thirty excited students who came from a variety of religious and non-religious backgrounds and most of them knew more about their own religion than I did. My insufficient knowledge about religions made me initially anxious, but the students and I decided that we would learn from each other. Only two weeks into the class the events of 9/11 took place. It then became very apparent that my class, and society for that matter, needed more knowledge and understanding of other religious beliefs. Many questions were being asked about Islam and many Hindus and Sikhs were being mistaken as Muslims. After having taught the course for several years and having attended graduate school, I am now even more curious as to how the students perceive the discussion about religion in school, especially public schools.

Recently, teachers and administrators have found it difficult to address issues concerned with religious beliefs and practices for fear of offending either students or the community. As a result, whatever is deemed religious in nature is rarely discussed. In earlier decades, teachers generally had no difficulty relating to students on a religious level because the majority, both teachers and students, were either from a Christian background or had grown up in a culture that was still largely Christian. As the demographics of the population changed because of immigration and the waning of religious beliefs, public schools also had to change to reflect the multiple beliefs of the population. The numbers of atheists, agnostics, and other non-Christian believers increased so that Protestant Christians were no longer the majority (Marshall, 2008). This demographic change would not affect a Catholic system nearly as much and its population and doctrine would remain the same over the years.

As schools became more diverse, new issues arose. While some parents wanted their children schooled in a more traditional Protestant model complete with prayer, others did not want their children exposed to any form of religious beliefs, prayers, icons and works of art. Recent immigrants want public schools to help their children integrate into the wider community whereas generational Canadians see this as a loss of their traditional Canadian Christian identity. Christians whose children attend public schools see this new model as a threat. Some people are quick to blame the absence of Protestant religious values in the public schools as the cause of current adolescent disrespectfulness and school violence (Marty, 2000). These groups do not want any religion and values taught in public schools unless it is according to their Christian beliefs and traditions. As a result of this passionate debate, subject matter and issues relating to religion are often

avoided. Current issues relating to religion might include student requests to wear distinctive religious dress like ceremonial daggers or veils in school. What should public school policy be if students from a religious group ask for prayer space somewhere in the public school or ask to leave class to participate in prayer? What should a teacher or administrator do if a student refuses to participate in mandatory physical education programs involving yoga, martial arts, or co-ed swimming lessons? What should school policy be if students ask to form a religious club? How should staff handle student conflicts with a religious component?

The case of a conflict in Modesto, California is instructive in thinking through such problematic religious questions. Much of the conflict between students of different ethnic backgrounds arose out of misunderstandings about one another's religious beliefs and culture. Teachers and community leaders were finding that conflicts in school were causing tensions in school and vice versa. As a result, community leaders, teachers, and the school board faced these questions: Should teaching about religion be included in the curriculum? If so, what should the curriculum encompass? What type of pedagogy should be used in the teaching about religion? Was there any place for experiential learning with the participation of rituals? After consultation with students, parents and community leaders, teachers and administration decided on a curriculum that included a mandatory World Religions course for Grade 9 students. All parties involved agreed upon the subject matter and the pedagogical methods. Teachers were trained and instructed not to deviate from this agreed upon curriculum in any way. At the conclusion of the course, a survey was done to evaluate its success. Lester and Roberts (2006) found that the course was mostly positive as it had a significant effect on students' respect toward other

religions and religious liberty, and increased basic knowledge of the world's religions. The study also revealed that the students felt that the teachers generally presented the religions in a fair and balanced manner and that the course did not create any noticeable controversy in the community. The study also stated that the implementation of a World Religions course could play a significant role in finding common ground between groups in many communities. Haynes (2006) argued that a world religions course should be required for students. After all, he stated, the United States is the most religiously diverse country in the world, and among developed nations, it is the most religious. Schools that offered the course as an elective were seeing their enrolment numbers steadily increase.

While Saskatoon's World Religions course is different than the required course in Modesto, particularly in the freedom granted to individual teachers regarding subject matter and pedagogical methods, the overall aims are similar. The aims of the Saskatoon course, developed in 2001, are threefold: to provide an opportunity for the study of religion, but not the practice of religion; to expose students to a myriad of religious views, but not impose any particular view; and to respect the values of others. Although I did not participate in the initial writing of the course, I have been involved in the piloting, evaluating, and rewriting of the course. In my case, I tried to be conscious of my own religious biases when I taught the course, and I decided upon subject matter and the pedagogical methods. I also made a conscious effort to create a milieu in which every student's opinions and beliefs were acknowledged and respected. But what I did not place enough emphasis on was the state of anxiety and tension the students may, or could, experience because of what was happening in the classroom. Although I wanted to challenge students to question their own beliefs, like in the above example, I realized that

sometimes the inner tension that I created was far greater than I had intended. The questioning of beliefs caused students to reflect upon their own identity. Student identity is affected by many factors, particularly religious beliefs, and that identity can affect their performance in classes and experiences at school. In my course design, I attempted to give the students a wide variety of experiences such as field trips to different places of worship, hearing guest speakers from different backgrounds, and optional experiential learning. This differs from a conventional classroom where students only interact with the teacher and never leave the classroom.

At the beginning of the World Religions course each semester, I always give a questionnaire regarding students' experience with religion(s) and their expectations for the course. At the end of the course, I give another questionnaire that asks for feedback about the course: what had the student learned in the course, what did the student like and dislike about the course, and how the course could be improved. If I ever encounter a former student, I usually ask what he or she thought of the course. The majority have expressed very favourable opinions. Students frequently mention the unbiased approach taken in the class, the guest speakers, and the field trips to a variety of places of worship in Saskatoon. Many students wished that the class had spent more time on some of the religions studied, especially the Western religions. These results should be approached cautiously, however, since students could well have replied with they thought I wanted to hear, rather than what they actually experienced.

I never had the opportunity to ask students how comfortable they felt when dealing with religious topics in the World Religions class, or in any of my other History or English classes. I began to ask myself questions about what students could possibly be

feeling in not only the World Religions course, but in other courses as well. Because I taught the World Religions course, I was often asked about background material for a particular religious topic that had arisen in a class, most commonly religious holidays, religious conflicts throughout history, and different religious practices that might influence what occurred in the classroom. Knowledge of world religions was very limited. Students also often talked to me about religious questions which their teachers had not been able to respond to. I often wondered if there were issues pertaining to religion in other classes or if administration ever had to address issues of a religious nature. As a teacher, I could not really probe the students for their opinions from a non-authoritarian position. This has then become the focus of my research: student experiences with the teaching about religion in public schools.

Experiences at both home and school, experiences with parents, teachers and peers have a large impact as a student develops as an individual. These past experiences then shape the way a person explains his/her future experiences. The combination of these experiences forms a student's identity which includes the person's religious background. My research question then became: What are public high school students' perceptions of themselves and others when topics of religion are discussed in school?

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## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE ABOUT THE SUBJECT**

My research question has developed because of past students' experiences in my World Religions classes. In one instance, a particular student in one of my classes was questioning who he was and what he believed. He was anxious because the subject matter was completely new to him and it opened up new ways of thinking for him. I did not know his background, particularly his religious background, but he seemed particularly interested in the unit on Buddhism. He listened very intently to the main tenets of the religion and contributed much to class discussion, asking many questions in the process. He became so fascinated with the religion that I arranged a visit for him to a local Buddhist temple. As there are two Buddhist temples very close together in this city, the student went to the wrong one. Even though no one there was expecting him, he still observed the service in a language foreign to him. He was still intrigued by Buddhism so I arranged another visit during which he would be given English explanations. He actually chose to participate in some of the meditation exercises and sought ways to practice them later. He eventually converted to Buddhism. When I met him a few years later I asked him about his journey with Buddhism. He said he practiced Buddhism for a year or so but he realized that it was not for him. He said that although he learned much about himself and philosophy, he had now found a religious practice he was much more comfortable with. His identity had been affected by this experience and the experience had shaped his final year of high school. It is these types of experiences that I wanted to uncover in my research.

Past experiences help an individual understand the present and guide the individual into the future. The student mentioned above seemed to be searching for something spiritual and this questioning led him to Buddhism. Tisdell (2007) suggested that spirituality and cultural imagination have an important role in the development of a person's higher education. Spirituality is defined as "finding meaning in life, or meaning making, and personal experiences" (Tisdell, 2007, p.535). As teachers, we need to be aware of this search for religious or spiritual identity in our students. Teachers can play a significant role in the development of this identity by what we do in our classrooms and how we treat those from different cultures. Cultural identity, the part of a person that is influenced by a particular culture, plays a larger role in the lives of students than we think:

Dialogue in classrooms or communities where people recognize multiple perspectives, also increases participants' overall awareness that they, and all people are, in fact, "narratives in the making." This leads to not only a deeper appreciation of who others are, but also a greater sense of one's own relationship to history and culture as these narratives unfold. This often takes people to the heart of their deepest identity, which includes their cultural identity. (Tisdell, 2007, p.538)

Creating this type of environment may not be an easy thing to do as we bring our own stories and identities to the classroom. This exercise may be difficult for us as teachers but if we can allow space for all to grow, we can all add to our own identities. I have often met students well after their high school years who have commented on how the World Religions class affected them. Most say that it was a great place to discuss new

ideas in ways that they had never done before. Many also say that it was good to learn about world views different than their own. The students felt these experiences made them better people in their young adult years.

What happens in schools and classrooms is crucial to the development of identity (Clandinin, Huber, Huber, Murphy, Pearce, Murray-Orr, & Steeves, 2006). Both students and teachers express themselves in relation to subject matter and to both students and teachers who occupy the same spaces and then adjust their speech and behavior according to the responses they receive. For Clandinin and Connelly (1992) teachers and students live out a curriculum. Teachers do not teach a curriculum; nor are teachers and students carried forward in their work and studies by a curriculum. Objectives do play a part in curriculum but ultimately curriculum is the classroom interaction between teachers and students. In order to understand the impact of identity shaping in schools, one should look to Schwab to understand the influence of curriculum. Schwab (1978) referred to the four curriculum commonplaces as students, teachers, subject matter and milieu, and argues that all four areas needed to be addressed equally. Pressures could be created when one area is given more, or less, attention than the others. Usually, teachers and subject matter receive the most attention. The teacher chooses the subject matter, the pedagogical methods, and the evaluation and assessment techniques. What is forgotten is the students and the milieu in which they are taught. Although the teacher may not be aware of any uneasiness, students may be uneasy about the subject matter or may be uncomfortable in the classroom atmosphere. Furthermore, students may face additional discomfort because of conflict between what they learn in the classroom and what they have been taught at home and in their community. If a teacher is not aware of the

students' cultural and religious backgrounds, the subject matter may be offensive to students. If the teacher has not helped to create a milieu of safety in which students can share views, beliefs, and opinions, they may feel ashamed and even discriminated against. Such experiences will impact their sense of identity and will probably shape future school experiences, even in other classrooms and in relation to other subjects. Further research is necessary to explore the connection between in-school experiences that relate to religion and overall student education.

Since 1990 there has been a substantial increase in the amount of educational research focused directly on student experience of schooling. Student experience is defined as “what it is like for a student to be in a school learning environment in which deliberate instruction is being conducted – that is, what is being presented in instruction that school authorities, including the teacher, have decided should be presented” (Erickson, Bagrodia, Cook-Sather, Espinoza, Jurow, Shultz, & Spencer, J. 2008, p.198), including both the implicit and explicit curriculum. Thiessen and Cook-Sather (2007) divided this research into three main areas: how students participate in and make sense of life in school, who students are and how they develop in school, and how students are actively involved in shaping their own learning opportunities. There is an “increasing awareness of the importance of learner identity in relation to learning and how this identity is shaped in part by the life stories one develops for one’s self” (Erickson et al., 2008, p.199). There is the existence of differing kinds of school experiences and this research will focus on student experiences when religion or culture is discussed in the classroom.

## **Development of Identity**

There are many factors contributing to students' development of identities. Chan (2007) understood student identity "in terms of cultural characteristics of the home and community combined with their ongoing interaction over time" (p.178). Connelly and Clandinin (1999) refer to identities as 'stories to live by'. These stories to live by are formed both at school and at home, and are critical parts of students' daily school lives. Dewey (1938/1963) stated that continuity and interaction are the defining conditions of a student's educational experiences. A student's experience can be examined on an "experiential continuum," where both past experiences and interaction with others shape growth in either a positive or negative direction. Once a current situation has been interpreted, it can either agree or disagree with past experiences and its impact on future experiences can be determined. Students bring their home cultures to school every day and these past experiences affect current educational situations. The student's identity develops through interaction with family and community members. It is necessary to understand the narrative histories of each student as

a seemingly culturally-neutral school event may introduce differences in the stories to live by of parents whose values and beliefs have been shaped by schooling experiences in their home countries, and their children who are being educated in Canadian schools (Chan, 2006, p. 184)

These school experiences can give conflicting messages and may even complicate the development of the student's identity.

As student experiences grow in number, a narrative unity begins to form in the individual. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) described narrative unity as a continuum

within a person's experiences. Narrative unities emerge from our past, bring about certain practices in the present, and guide us toward certain practices in the future. For some people religion is a necessary part of such narrative unity, for it is religion that offers purpose and meaning in our experiences. An example of this continuum occurred in my World Religions classroom when I did not understand the narrative history of my students. I invited a guest speaker to speak to my class about cults and methods of mind control within some religious groups. The students were fascinated as he spoke and a good discussion took place. As the speaker listed different religious groups that employ mind control methods, he mentioned a group to which one of the students belonged. She protested that in her experience, she had been permitted to think freely and leave the group at any time she chose. Her experience did not match the speaker's experience with ex-members of this group. After some debate, the two finally agreed to disagree. In this instance, both people had formed ideas about a particular group. The student had created an identity for herself in relation to her membership based on her participation and membership with a religious group. The speaker had formulated ideas about the group based on his previous experiences with former members. I was impressed that each listened to the other with respect but this experience could have been negative for the student. Her identity could have been greatly affected had she not had a strong sense of who she was.

Yet this student's identity was not completely developed. Aoki (2004) suggested that identity is a production and not something that is already completely formed. It is shaped and formed through different experiences. Although Aoki used this concept in the discussion of teacher identity, in many cases, students experience a multiplicity of

identities as they navigate between their school lives and home lives. Wallerstein (1991) likened this to a combination of idiographic and nomothetic modes of theorizing.

Idiographic theorizing refers to a specific event in time and space. In this case, the guest speaker experienced a specific event in each discussion with former members of the group. It formed his opinion of the group. Nomothetic theorizing refers to generalizing across time and space, seeing the big picture. Here the student, a member of the group, did not share the same experience in the time she belonged to this group.

Another example of these two polar opposites occurred at the end of a school year. In this instance, I experienced an idiographic event as this was one unique situation at one particular time. It would have been beneficial to understand this situation from a nomothetic view, to understand the narrative history of this student before the event took place. All of the teachers of a Muslim student received a letter from the boy's mother informing us that her son was not going to write his final exams as he was going to be enrolling in an Arabic school in another Canadian city. The family was relatively new to Canada and the school experience was much different than it had been in the country from which they came. The letter also stated that the family was aware that this might result in failing marks in all of his classes. We were not to question her on this because it was a family decision and the withdrawal from the student's high school classes would not have any effect on his adult life. In their opinion, a Grade 12 education was not necessary for the direction in which their son was heading. Although we did question the family decision, we did not approach the family because we did not know the family's history.

Every experience that an individual has contributes to this developing identity. Crites (1986) said that it is the past that gives an individual an identity and that each experience builds upon past experiences. Yet these individual stories are not necessarily accurate. Sometimes individuals forget mundane and routine details because they are taken for granted. Other times the individual may alter or repress experiences because they do not fit with the individual's desires for their own narrative history (Erickson et al., 2008). According to Connelly and Clandinin (1988) such self-deception allows the individual to form a continuity of stories that the individual can then live by. For Crites (1971) the narrative quality of experience has three dimensions: sacred stories, the mundane stories, and the temporal form of experience itself. Each of these three dimensions constantly reflects and affects the others. The sacred stories are those stories that have powerfully transformed a group's sense of itself and its world. These stories may take the form of religious stories, but are not only in this form. Mundane stories are those told every day by people, like many religious stories. The temporal form of experience is the setting of the story within a world. Sometimes tensions can exist between sacred stories, mundane stories, and the temporal form they take in the present. It is these stories that will then be projected by the individual into the future.

It is the responsibility of teachers to allow space for different histories of the students they encounter. Aoki (2005) suggested that teachers change the curriculum for the "faces", rather than teach to the "faceless." Lyotard (1984) stated that teachers need to allow the students to have space for their stories, anecdotes, and narratives. As these bump against the curriculum-as-plan, teachers need to change their meta-narratives of the

curricular landscape and transform it into a living curriculum that is more relevant to the students. The students are not faceless others but are face to face with the teacher.

Conflict can sometimes arise as the teacher allows space for these student stories. I once had two students whose roots were in Iran but were of different religious backgrounds (Baha'i and Muslim). The students were friends and wanted to work together on a project on the history of their religions with a comparative analysis of the two. The point of tension for the students was that their parents did not want these students to work together because of past conflict in Iran. People of the Baha'i faith are persecuted in Iran because the religion is seen as a blasphemy against Islam. The Muslim father came to discuss the matter with me and strongly stated that he would not allow his daughter to work on such a topic. He felt that this violated Islam even though his daughter was comfortable with it. What I did not realize and only discovered in our conversation was that the two girls were doing all of their work at the home of the Baha'i girl because the Muslim girl did not want her family to find out what she was doing. I also got the impression that the Muslim father seemed very uncomfortable with any conversation that I might have with his daughter separately about the nature of the project. This too conflicted with the Muslim belief that a woman should not talk to another man without her father or husband present.

After the students decided to change their project to something with a more Muslim focus, the mother of the Baha'i student called me. She was upset that it was her daughter who had to concede; once again people of the Baha'i faith were being persecuted long after they had left Iran. This situation caused her to relive the pain that they had suffered before the family had come to Canada. She asked if I could intercede

and allow the students to complete their original project. I said that it was up to the girls and that I would not get involved in home matters. The students eventually decided to work independently as it was causing too much stress in their homes. I often wonder if I acted correctly in the situation. I wanted to be respectful of students' home lives but it was my classroom and I should have the ability to decide what happened there. Space was allowed for each of these girls' stories but it led to conflict in the classroom and at home. It was also a public school and it was the students' choice to enroll in the World Religions class. I do not know if this experience affected the students' relationship and future learning. These types of experiences discourage teachers from discussing religion in schools because of the potential conflict.

### **Literature regarding the Teaching of Religion in Public Schools**

Currently, there is not much literature available on how students perceive the teaching of religion and religious topics in public schools. As discussed in the introduction, the Lester and Roberts (2006) study of Modesto, California was widely quoted across the United States and Europe as a success story. Cavanagh (2006) reported that the study concluded that students taking that 9<sup>th</sup> grade class gained a stronger factual understanding of world religions and a greater respect for religious tolerance in American society. Teachers, students and community leaders were all happy with the outcomes of the course.

Another related study (Craig & Kessler, 2007) was conducted among first year students at Georgetown University. The researchers found that the students came to the university with significant exposure to persons of other religious traditions. Although the survey did not research students' perceptions of a world religions course in high school,

the study found that a majority of the students reported that they were liberal and open-minded toward other religions and cultures. The report also indicated that students expressed interest in studying religion's role in politics and world affairs. Both of these studies also showed that knowledge of the different world religions was beneficial and that World Religions courses were very beneficial.

A student and parent survey (Saskatoon Board of Education, 2002) was conducted at the completion of the first year of the World Religions course in Saskatoon. The results of this in-house survey, conducted by the Saskatoon Public School Division, were not published. The responses from approximately 100 students and 30 parents indicated approval of the course and wanted the course to continue in the future. This quantitative feedback on a specific course was used to justify the continuation of such a program. My qualitative research did not focus on the justification for and continuation of a World Religions course such as the one in Saskatoon. I focused on the experiences of students and their perceptions of how religious issues are dealt with at public schools, and this differed greatly from the school board's study.

However, there is literature available on the broader question of the separation between church and state, which varies in Canada, the United States and European countries. While such separation is a controversial subject, there appears to be a clearer division in Canada than in the United States. Public education in Canada is not based on religion. This has led to more court challenges regarding religion and school policy in the United States than in Canada. In Canada, it is generally accepted that religion should not be practiced in public schools. The climate in the United States is much different. There are still people that believe that public schools and the church are connected, and

therefore religion should be practiced. Citizens then feel their rights are being violated the school boards draft policy that disagrees with their beliefs. People then feel that the courts should decide the issue.

The situation in Europe is much different. As Lahnemann and Schreiner (2008) stated, the many countries of Europe all agree that religion should be a part of public education. With different religious histories and migratory processes, each European country has its own unique points of emphasis. The report then describes what each of the European countries is doing in their own situations.

As more students of different cultural and religious backgrounds attend public schools, the standard curriculum of the past seems to be less relevant. As students' backgrounds become more diverse, the curriculum needs to adapt so that each student's identity is valued: "As Canadian school landscapes become increasingly diverse, might we consider attending to stories to live by as a way to narratively inquire and understand the complex reality of many school landscapes?" (Clandinin et al., 2006, p.160).

Many immigrant groups were, and are, allowed to create their own schools in order to preserve their culture. In my own situation, my parents encouraged me to attend Mennonite camps and schools in my childhood so that I would not forget my heritage. Never at any time did someone or some agency say that I could not attend these places or that I needed to deny my past. Mennonites were allowed to have our own schools that taught Mennonite history and beliefs alongside what was required by the provincial curriculum. These schools were crucial in building identity amongst its members, but they limited students' thinking by not exposing them to new and different ideas.

Students have told me that they want to study their own histories or other cultures rather than just Canadian or North American history and culture. Usually, students suggest we study histories and a culture closely related to their own, but how does the study of one particular culture and history affect students that are not of that culture or do not share that history? Clandinin et al., (2006) stated that

careful noticing of the bumping places where stories to live by are interrupted help to deepen our understanding so we might re-imagine wider school stories that make space for children who have been left out of dominant stories of school structured around “mainstream” plotlines? (p.160)

It is good to create discomfort within students because it is in this uneasiness that learning takes place. Greene (1993) believed that:

Even in the small, the local spaces in which teaching is done, educators may begin creating the kinds of situations where, at the very least, students will begin telling stories of what they are seeking, what they know and might not yet know, exchanging stories with each other grounded in other landscapes, at once bringing something into being that is in-between...it is at moments like these that persons begin to recognize each other and, in experience of recognition, feel the need to take responsibility for one another. (p. 218)

Different theorists suggest that students’ religious identities need to be recognized and through this recognition, a deeper understanding about each other occurs.

## History in Canada

Before we can move ahead, we must understand not only where we have come from but also why the past unfolded as it did because the "past is only a guide to the future if we can comprehend the reasons why the future may be (un-) like the past" (Dey, 1999, p.237). In the case of religious instruction, we need to recall that separate schools were established by the British North America Act in 1867, partly to maintain the loyalty of French-speaking Canadians, even though education was placed under the control of provincial governments. That arrangement has led to provincial differences: some provinces fund both a separate and public school system; others treat them as independent schools. In any case, within the public school system, there was still some room for religious instruction as the majority of students were of one denomination of Christianity (Sweet, 1997). Local school boards could decide how much religious instruction could take place during the school day. As Canada became more multi-cultural, this instruction in public schools was challenged by non-Christian families as unconstitutional, which occurred in Saskatoon. Subsequent rulings have outlawed all religious instruction in schools even if it was deemed as information, not indoctrination, by school boards.

Many public school divisions across Canada have already mandated policies regarding the teaching of religion, and spiritual and/or religious instruction. As the demographics of provincial populations have changed, provincial governments and local school boards across Canada have developed, created or adapted policies in regards to dealing with religious topics in their schools. Burns (2008) outlined a comparative study of policy regarding religious matters in public schools across Canada. In British

Columbia, the revised School Act (1996) stated that schools must be strictly secular. Morality, based on religious ideas, is to be taught but no specific dogma is to be taught. Later documents suggested that spiritual development is to be encouraged in the primary grades (BCME, 2007) and courses examining religion will be offered in the secondary grades. At no time is one set of religious ideas to be promoted over others. According to Burns (2008), the situation is a little more complex in Alberta. The Alberta School Act 1988 allows local school boards to prescribe religious instruction and exercises. Parents may have their children exempted from these activities, but only if a written request is submitted. The province then grants credit for Religious Studies courses, allowing local boards to offer adoptive faith instruction. These courses must have a comparative religious studies component. The province also offers descriptive courses in religious education; Religious Meanings and World Religions.

The policy was similar in Saskatchewan. The Education Act (1995) allowed local school boards to pursue religious instruction in its schools. This instruction could not require more than two and half hours per week. It can be offered in any language, not just English. The school boards were also allowed to begin the school day with the Lord's Prayer or a bible reading. Any student may be exempted from these proceedings and an alternative program of studies must be provided. This was challenged in Saskatoon and the Saskatoon Public School Board was forced to change its policy regarding religious exercises (Bernhardt, 2001). Like Alberta, Saskatchewan also granted credits to adoptive (Christian Ethics) and descriptive (World Religions) courses. In Manitoba, the Public School Act (2008) states that public schools must be non-religious and no religious

exercises are allowed unless a petition signed by 75% of the parents is presented to the school board. Again, religious instruction must not exceed two and a half hours per week.

According to Burns (2008), Ontario has the most comprehensive policy regarding religious education. The Ontario Ministry of Education (1991, s. 1) stated that the school may offer a study of religion but not sponsor the practice of religion. The school may expose students to religious views but not impose any particular view. The school can educate students about religion, not convert students to any one religion. The school's approach should be academic and instructional, not devotional or proselytizing. The school can make students aware of all religions but should not coerce student acceptance of a particular religion. Students can study what people believe but should not be taught what to believe. Quebec, like many of the other provinces, originally had two publicly funded school systems, Roman Catholic and Protestant (called "confessional schools"). The history of these two systems is linked to the early history of Quebec and the protection of French Catholic minority rights. The Catholic system embodied Catholic beliefs but the Protestant, or public, system was much more diverse. The Protestant Committee created a program entitled Protestant Moral and Religious Education. Its goals were to develop the student:

- 1) by providing a knowledge of the Bible;
- 2) by fostering an understanding of the moral and religious values of the community in which the pupil lives;
- 3) by cultivating respect for all religious traditions including the pupil's own religious tradition;
- 4) by helping the pupil to become aware of the moral principles directing the pupil's actions;
- 5) by contributing to the development of the reasoning used to make moral judgments. (Protestant Moral, 2008).

In 1997, Quebec was granted the right to change their Education Act to reflect the division along language lines, what some saw as a beginning of the separation of church and state in Quebec. Both systems continued with religious education along with nonreligious moral education classes. Allowances were made for minority religious groups to conduct their own religious education classes if the numbers were large enough, but this was removed in 2000. In 2005 the government eliminated the choice that existed in moral and religious instruction and imposed a mandatory new ethics and religious culture curriculum to all schools beginning in 2008. This has been challenged in the courts due to its compulsory nature (History of Education, 2012).

All provinces have some policy regarding religious education. Each province has been influenced by its own history but as each province has developed in different ways, policies reflect trends particular to each.

The situation in the United States is much different than it is in Canada. Minority education rights have never been guaranteed. When settlers first began coming to America, education was seen as the responsibility of private academies and local religious groups. As the population of the new nation increased, public education was transformed as a way of maintaining civic virtue, progress and order into the future. These public schools were supposed to teach all subjects, including morality. Religious beliefs and practices were definitely taught. As the face of America changed, mostly through immigration, in the early and mid 1900s, public education began to change its focus toward the academic skills that workers needed in the modern economy and away from religious beliefs and morality. The first major court decision regarding religion in public schools was the Establishment Clause in 1947 (Greenawalt, 2005). It stated that

governments should neither be allowed to establish a national or state religion; nor favour one religion over another. According to the author, this decision precluded public schools from teaching about religion. He felt that religion should not be ignored because, after all, it has played a significant role in history and remains significant in the lives of people all over the world. As many authors would agree, (Dever, Whitaker and Byrnes, 2001; Vardy, 2002; Van Brummelen, Koole and Franklin, 2004; Clarke, 2005; Van Bockern, 2006), a good education includes the teaching of religion itself and the impact religion has had, and continues to have, in world history and society in general. As in Canada, some educational issues that then arise are what should be taught, how it should be taught, who is qualified to teach it and what happens if disagreements occur?

Canada and the United States are not alone in this educational dilemma (Sweet, 1997). As a liberal society, the Netherlands has decided to fund any group that wants to create its own school. Recently because of a large number of immigrants from the Middle East, this policy has created much debate but the Dutch government has decided to follow its original promise to groups many years ago. On the other hand, the French government offers partial funding to private religious schools but will not tolerate diversity within the public school system. This decision is based on the outcome of the French Revolution and as a result, there is complete separation between church and state. No religious symbols, no celebration of religious holidays and no religious clothing are tolerated in a French public school. This policy has led to acts of vandalism by some extremist religious groups targeting other moderate religious groups and the French in general. The Dutch experience suggests that differences amongst religious groups have narrowed and not grown as acts of violence against religious groups are fewer. British

schools switched from educating students into a religion, namely the Church of England, to educating students about religion. This was met with protest by not only the Church of England, but also those from other cultures concerned with the teaching of new religious ideas. Each particular religious group was also concerned with how its religion was being taught (Brown, 2002).

After 9/11, many newspapers in Canada called for the study of religion in schools (Calgary Herald 2002; Owens 2002; Todd 2003). All agreed that teaching about religion will allow students to explore spiritual ideas and will also promote tolerance and a mutual respect of diversity. This pedagogy should not be confused with proselytizing and should allow students to explore age old questions: Who am I? What shapes my morality? Is there a purpose to my existence? Broadbent (2002a) discussed the rationale for including Religious Education (RE) within the school curriculum and suggested that such a course meet three broad criteria: it should be justified within an academic framework, should be worthwhile in the current cultural and social context, and should be effective in stimulating student interest. Broadbent suggested that RE should be about both knowledge and meaning. Knowledge should be limited to a small body of major concepts and ideas. RE should also be relevant to the cultural context of the students. It should also be skills-based, encouraging discussion and critical thinking skills. And lastly, it should be appropriate to the students' psychological development.

Religious Education has the potential to enlighten and enlarge pupils' minds; it can make reference to material which is worthwhile in the present culture and it can contribute to the development of knowledge and insight which will enable

students to understand others' belief systems and to clarify their own (Broadbent, 2002a, p. 26)

From this perspective, religious education has many more benefits than disadvantages.

Many themes emerge from the literature. One theme is that religious ideas be taught in public schools. It is good for the students' intellectual development and for critical thinking skills. In the long term, it is good for our changing society as students learn other worldviews. Another theme is the interplay of experience and student identity. Positive experiences in the discussion of religious issues in school will lead the student to build a broader positive identity, especially a healthy religious identity. On the contrary, negative experiences in school will lead to a lower self-esteem and a stunting of one's religious identity. A third theme is that teaching religion in public schools is not without its controversies and will always be hotly debated. There will always be debate about which topics and religions should be covered if courses are developed. Then questions will be asked about which pedagogical method, or methods, should be employed. The purpose of my study is to ask the students what they have experienced and how this has affected their subsequent education and their own religious identities.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

The methodology for this research is a qualitative study informed by Grounded Theory, a constant comparative methodology, for several reasons. Grounded Theory is a social science research methodology developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967). It is a way of constructing sociological reality through the generation of theory from data gathered in the research process. Unlike traditional qualitative methods in which a hypothesis is not developed until data collection has taken place. Grounded Theory develops hypotheses during the data collection. Grounded theorists affirm, check, and refine their developing ideas. They are not bound by preconceived hypotheses nor do they follow traditional random sampling. But the research is not conducted in a vacuum. The process is interactive as past interactions and comparisons are constantly made. As results are gained and field texts are created, they are immediately examined for themes and concepts. The emerging categories shape future data collection. Researchers continually analyze what they actually observe in the field or in the data. Hence, theory development hinges on sampling. New data is collected to check, complete, or extend categories.

Conventional methods generally sample and then analyze the data. Decisions about sampling are made in advance. In Grounded Theory, decisions about sampling are based on the preceding analysis, a process known as theoretical sampling (Dey, 1999):

Theoretical sampling is the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it

emerges. This process of data collection is controlled by the emerging theory.

(Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 45)

Although not exclusively, Grounded Theory is predominantly a qualitative method. Data is collected through a combination of fieldwork methods that include observation and interviews.

As Charmaz (1994; 2005) pointed out in her work, there are many advantages to the use of Grounded Theory. Presentations of research results do not require an interpreter to understand the data. Readers can relate the research to their experiences and apply it. Grounded Theories meet the criteria of fit and understandability because they should be built on sufficient sampling and data. Anyone familiar with the subject area will immediately recognize the concepts and ideas discussed. Grounded Theory also meets the criteria of generality because it is based on a number of sampling variables and facts, accumulated from many different situations in the subject area. Grounded Theory seeks out as much variation as possible in developing hypotheses. The theory can thus be easily exported to another locale. It is thought that it is more beneficial to know the types, range, magnitude, and conditions of a phenomenon rather than the frequency of occurrence.

Grounded Theory methods remain open to new directions so the researcher can understand and analyze situations, and possibly predict change. As changes occur, the theory allows for flexibility in the revisions of strategies and application. The theory can even be changed if necessary. Grounded Theories are also seen as valid. They are continually verified and can be modified through experience. Original hypotheses are not invalidated, but new conditions are added and their impact can then be examined.

The use of narratives fit nicely with Grounded Theory. After initial responses from students, researchers can then probe for deeper responses. Student experiences can then be examined in more depth to determine if there were more common concepts and themes. Narratives frequently appeal to teachers since teachers often think about the telling and listening of stories. Connelly and Clandinin (1990, 2006) stated that individuals lead storied lives, both individually and socially. Experience is both personal and social. Researchers not only need to examine the personal aspect of an individual but need to investigate the social aspect as well. Individuals do not act in isolation. Researchers also need to be aware that experience grows out of previous experiences. As current experiences build upon previous experiences, researchers need to be aware of this continuity as it leads to future experiences (Dewey, 1938/1963; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Glaser (1978) suggested that the research take place before any preconceived ideas are formed through the reading of existing theory. According to Glaser, the literature should be read in the sorting stage. Though, in many cases researchers do have knowledge of the subject prior to research. Glaser does, however, note that reading about indirectly related topics would assist a researcher in developing areas of investigation. As I have been involved with the course from its pilot year, this is not possible for me. I have also read literature on religious education in public schools, the variety of methodologies that can be used in religious education, and the case histories of many countries and school divisions. But I have not found any literature on student perceptions and experiences.

My research began with a general survey of approximately 60 Grade 12 students from World Religions, History, and English Language Arts classes at the public high schools; all were voluntarily participants. This number was deemed sufficient to give rich empirical data to generate ample themes and concepts. At the conclusion of each set of questionnaires, I would analyze the responses looking for common themes and concepts. These would then be compared with previous sets of surveys. Emerging categories and concepts were expected to lead to more questions and new concepts. The questions of the general questionnaire were as follows:

1. What has been your experience, if any, with religion and/or any of the world's religions? Please be specific.
2. Throughout all of your schooling, recall any in-school experiences that relate to religious ideas, beliefs or experiences and please explain them.
3. Talk about how your beliefs about religion have been affected by your schooling?
4. Now talk about how your schooling has been affected by your religious beliefs?
5. What are your thoughts as to how religious ideas can be taught and discussed in school?

After analyzing the results from the questionnaires and finding possible themes and concepts, I interviewed 5 students, all of whom indicated that they would be interested in doing follow-up interviews. I chose students according to their responses on the questionnaire. I was looking for a diverse sampling of students with interesting comments about their experiences. The questions used in the first student interview were

based on the results of the questionnaire and focused primarily on developing deeper responses to the answers on the questionnaire. After the first student interview I looked for themes and concepts in the participants' responses. Questions in the second student interview were based on the first participants' responses. I continued to interview students in this fashion until no new themes and concepts emerged. As I interviewed each student, I hoped that each would have a compelling narrative of his or her experience in school. Because I compared each interview to previous interviews and questionnaire responses, I could determine if any new concepts and themes were emerging.

Clandinin, Pushor and Murray Orr (2007) discussed a framework of elements to consider before designing and embarking on a narrative inquiry approach to research. Although my research is not a narrative inquiry, these elements still apply to the research I am conducting. These elements are the following: the justification for doing research, the exploration of student experiences, the consideration of possible research methods, and the analysis and interpretation of student stories. My justification for doing this research is that I have been involved with the World Religions course from its inception and also have a personal interest in religious beliefs and philosophy. I hope that my research will assist teachers in addressing religious issues that may arise in their classrooms. As my experiences in the above stories have shaped my current practices, it is my hope that other teachers can also gain from my experiences in relation to their own.

The second element to consider is the exploration of student stories. This exploration was shaped over time as I engaged in the study. In the telling and retelling of student stories (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000), I hoped to describe and name how

students shape aspects of their identities, especially their religious identities, based on their experiences with religion in school.

The third element to consider is description of the methods used to study the phenomenon experienced by the students. I was aware that participants and their experiences were in a multidimensional and ever changing space. Their stories took place in a continuum, in a social context and in a certain situation. I hoped to build a relationship with the students with these three concepts in mind because the context and the situation of the research could affect their stories.

I began by introducing myself at an initial informational meeting. At our second meeting, I gave students the questionnaire in which they could begin sharing their experiences. If students were interested in giving a more in depth interview, I found a location where students were comfortable and documented their story by recording and taking notes. Glaser (1998) suggested in using Grounded Theory, the recording of the conversation is not useful as it wastes time in the research process. I still wished to record and transcribe so that I could re-examine, with my field notes, what students did say. Hollingsworth and Dybdahl (2007) stated that trust with subjects is built by initially scaffolding conversations, which encourages talk about difficult topics. This allows for emergent purposes of the discussion to develop while valuing different discourse styles.

The fourth element in my research design is the analysis and interpretation of student stories. Much of this was done using information gained from the questionnaires and interviews. I looked for emerging themes in the student responses.

I began conducting research in September 2009 and completed my interviews by the end of June 2010. I interviewed students enrolled in the World Religions 30, History

30 or ELA 30 courses at two unnamed urban public high schools. These students were senior students, either in Grade 11 or 12. If the student was not the age of consent, in this case eighteen years of age, parental consent was required before any stage of the research. These methods had minimal risk and met all ethical standards. Although I have taught the course numerous times, there is no apparent conflict of interest either. My future employment does not depend on the results of this research.

### **ETHICS**

Ethics approval was required for the study from both the University of Saskatchewan and the Saskatoon Public School Division because I was working with students from public schools across the city. Before answering the questions, students gave consent as did parents of those students that were underage. Students were not required to identify themselves on the questionnaires. Students who volunteered to participate in a subsequent interview submitted their email address for further contact. After the initial study, the questionnaires were locked away. The interviews took place shortly after the questionnaires were completed.

Because I was exploring students' stories, I was aware of ethical considerations throughout my research. I followed Noddings (1992) "ethic of care," and entered all researcher-participant relationships with a caring attitude, putting the participants' interest at the forefront of all my research. If at any time during the process I had felt that the participant was experiencing difficulty because of the subject matter, I would have discontinued the research. It was not my intention to cause any discomfort to any of the participants. Issues of religion can be very difficult for some students and I needed to be sensitive to difficulties that students may have had in sharing their stories. I also needed

to turn these stories into research texts in ways that honoured and captured the experience of the research participants.

### **RESEARCH SITES**

The two public schools chosen for my research were established in the 1960s but exist in different neighbourhoods. The schools were chosen because they both offered a World Religions course to their students. School X, a very diverse school with many different student backgrounds was located in a middle class neighbourhood, yet it drew students from both upper and lower class areas as well. The school had once been one of the largest in the city but shifting demographics and the development of new residential areas and schools had resulted in reduced enrollment. It had always prided itself in its diversity and is still known for that strength. The school has some very distinguished alumni and a good reputation for both academics and athletics. Two classes, a senior history class and a World Religions class, were given the questionnaire in this school.

The senior history class consisted of thirty students from a variety of backgrounds; some were immigrants and new Canadians that had difficulty communicating in English. The subject matter was Canadian history and it was a required class for graduation. As I walked into the classroom, I was greeted by many looks of uncertainty. The students had been told that I was going to ask them about their experiences in school with the subject of religion. Many of them were familiar with the World Religions class in their school. I took about twenty minutes to explain my purpose and my methods. The teacher helped persuade the students that this was a worthwhile project and invited them to answer the questions as thoughtfully as possible. I left them with the information sheets and consent forms (Appendices C and E). Two weeks later, I

returned to conduct the surveys. Twenty five of the thirty students completed the questionnaires.

The World Religions class in School X consisted of twenty-five students, also from diverse cultural backgrounds, representing many of the world's religions. Again, I introduced myself and the nature of my research explaining that I would return in about two weeks to conduct the questionnaire. Many students asked me questions about the nature of my research and wanted to tell me of their experiences before my returning date. The teacher also felt confident that this group would be willing to offer their opinions and share their experiences. Twenty questionnaires were returned to me on the day that I came back to the class. As this was not a required class but an elective class, I was curious to see if the answers to the questions would be similar or different from the answers from required classes.

School Y was located on the opposite side of the city in a lower income neighbourhood. Although it was still a large school, its clientele had changed as demographics had shifted in the area. As new schools were being built in newer areas of the city, students from outlying areas were no longer coming to the school. Now the majority of the students at the school were from the local area, causing changes in programming so as to maintain enrolment. Like School X, it had a rich history of excellence and many distinguished alumni. Two classes, a senior English class and World Religions class, were also given the questionnaire.

The senior English class consisted of twenty students. Some of the students in this class were considered "at risk" students because they were often absent from school. Quite often this was because the students were dealing with issues outside of school. I

visited the class to introduce my study and returned about two weeks later to distribute the surveys. Although the teacher had assured the students that this research was relevant, many students seemed a bit apprehensive during my initial visit, since I was a newcomer to their class and school. Only fifteen students completed the questions.

The World Religions class, an elective, consisted of fifteen students of diverse cultural backgrounds with many religions represented. These students were also a bit apprehensive about my motives for asking them these questions as I was unfamiliar to them. Again, the teacher assured them that this research would be very beneficial and that I could be trusted. In both cases at School Y, the students seemed to trust their teachers and as a result, the students did answer the questions but not as fully as the students in School X.

As I entered each of these four classrooms, I was reminded of the four commonplaces of curriculum: students, teachers, subject matter and milieu (Schwab, 1978). I was entering the students' milieu and this would automatically create uneasiness between the students and me. Although I personally knew the four teachers of the classrooms researched, the students would not automatically offer their trust and respect just because I knew the teacher. Each of the teachers would have spent months, maybe longer, building a relationship with each of the students. I would have to use my introduction to earn trust quickly. The teachers assured the students that I could be trusted and that my research was valid. I would not have the same rapport with those students as their teacher did. And I was now asking them to recall personal experiences that might have negatively affected them. This would create more discomfort for some as I asked questions about their identities. As Thiessen and Cook-Sather (2007) stated, I would have

to be aware of how students made sense of the research I was conducting, and how they would connect this with who they were and how they were developing in school. But I was also entering the students' religious milieu at home. This would create extra anxiety as I was asking for entrance into two different sets of stories and experiences.

After conducting the questionnaire in each of the classes, I analyzed the student responses, looking for emerging themes and whether I should alter the questions before going to the next class. From the responses to the questionnaires given to these classes in both schools, several subjects emerged with interesting stories. These students were chosen because their stories each consisted of a personal experience with religious topics that had arisen during the school day, either in or outside the classroom. One student from each class was interviewed at a later date. A fifth subject emerged from one of the classes I personally had been teaching during the research process. This fifth subject revealed some of her experiences regarding identity in school in a biographical assignment that was submitted as part of the class work. Since it directly pertained to the research I was conducting, I wished to interview her further. To avoid any ethical conflicts, I invited this student to participate in an interview after the course was completed and final marks had been submitted. This was done so that there would be no perception that she was required to do this in order to achieve a good standing in my course and the school.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **RESULTS**

After conducting the questionnaire in each of the classes, I analyzed the student responses, looking for emerging themes. As I progressed from class to class, I noticed both similarities and differences in the student responses. After the completion of the fourth class, I felt that there were no new emerging themes. It is the responses of the questionnaires that will be discussed in this chapter. They will be discussed in the order in which I conducted the questionnaires with each of the classes: the History class in School X, the English class in School Y, the World Religions class in School X and lastly, the World Religions class in School Y. An overall summary will be given at the conclusion of the chapter.

#### **Question One**

“What has been your experience, if any, with religion and/or any of the world’s religions? Please be specific.”

Throughout my experience in teaching at a public school, I expected the answers to this question to be as diverse as the demographics of my past and current classes. Students’ experiences with religion vary from none to considerable experience with one or more religions. Responses from the students in the History class showed that the class was quite diverse, including students of many different religions, and several different Christian denominations. Not all students had gone to public elementary schools; several had gone to Catholic elementary schools. As was subsequently indicated in a later question, many had enrolled in a public high school because of the religious instruction at Catholic high schools. In later questions, some students wrote that transferring to a public

school was because of a frustration with having mandatory religious instruction at a Catholic school. This frustration is also supported by anecdotal comments from past students with a similar experience. There were also students that had had no exposure to religion as well as students who had gone to church in their early childhood years but again for reasons unknown, had stopped being active participants. I feel that these responses would be typical of a class at a public high school.

The responses of the English class at School Y were very similar to those of the History class at School X. Students' experiences with religion differed greatly. Again, some had gone to Catholic elementary schools, some believed in Islam, some had been taken to church services and some had practiced traditional Aboriginal ceremonies when they were younger. Some also had school friends who belonged to different religious groups while some had learned about other religions through classroom studies. Students did not elaborate on the details of the events. Overall, this class was not much different than the first one I had visited. Public school classrooms were diverse and students came with a wide range of experiences. But there were common points ranging from happenings at elementary school to friendships with students of different backgrounds than their own. If students did remember a significant event, it had usually occurred in elementary school and had remained with them into high school. The English class differed from the History class in a pervasive conviction that discussions of a religious nature had made them more open-minded individuals. However these discussions seemed to occur only in the context of the creation/evolution debate in science class or in a historical context in a History or English Language Arts class.

The responses from the World Religions class at School X were very similar to those of the previous two classes. This class was also very diverse with experiences ranging from none to very religious backgrounds. Those students that said they had no experience only thought of religion in terms of what had been discussed in the world religion class. This class was seen as very beneficial and “eye-opening.” Some students coming from strict religious families struggled because their beliefs were not as strong as their parents. Some students learned about the Roman Catholic faith because they or their friends had attended at Catholic elementary schools. These experiences had been both positive and negative. Some said that they came to a public high school because they did not like the way that religion was “forced upon” students in a Catholic school. Others said that their experiences at Catholic schools were good but did not explain why they switched schools.

The World Religion class at School Y was a smaller class. Only fifteen questionnaires were returned. The responses were either strongly negative or strongly positive, unlike responses from the other three classes. I assumed that, since this class was smaller and therefore more intimate, students felt more comfortable and shared some degree of trust with each other and the teacher. Another possible reason for the more detailed responses in the class at School Y could be that these students were more familiar with religious language because the course content had encouraged reflection on religious ideas. Some students had either grown up with religion all their lives or had been exposed to it in school. These students were quite proud of their backgrounds and experiences. The students that had negative experiences spoke of how they did not

believe in religion anymore. The reasons for this were either they had not believed in religion from early childhood or they, or their friends, had negative experiences.

Recent immigration during the last decade has made public high schools more culturally diverse than when I was in high school. The question now was whether public high schools had changed to reflect this diversity where all students could feel comfortable sharing their religious backgrounds and beliefs? Or did public schools still subtly follow Protestant beliefs from the past and create, either intentionally or unintentionally, an atmosphere in which any religious beliefs would not be accepted at all? If schools had not changed, more students would feel unsafe in their classes and could be affected by their experiences with topics or discussions of a religious nature.

### **Question Two**

Throughout all of your schooling, recall any in-school experiences that relate to religious ideas, beliefs or experiences and please explain them.

In the History class at School X, several themes quickly emerged from their responses. Firstly, many stated that religion, especially in history, had been discussed but not in very much depth; “We discuss very briefly and not very in-depth religion in history but not enough to be that useful or informative. It’s too hard to discuss religion because it can be very easy to offend someone.” When reading these responses, I wondered if many students wanted to discuss these topics in more depth but did not have the skills, or even felt comfortable, to do so. Were many of the students looking to the teachers for assistance in this area? I also wondered about the level of comfort that both students and teachers had with religious topics. Why were teachers, and students, so afraid to approach topics of this nature? Several students mentioned that different religions might be

discussed if they were relevant to a piece of literature or an event in history. Many specifically mentioned the Holocaust and the Jewish people as well as First Nations people in history. No students said that the religious beliefs of these two cultures were ever mentioned. Was it just that they were mentioned as groups as they pertained to significant historical events and students had perceived that as discussion of a religious nature? In reality these two groups are very different. Even though religious beliefs were one of the things that separated groups, students did not specifically know what these beliefs were and how they were different from others. Without this discussion students had made distinctions based on ethnic background and culture rather than religious beliefs, making generalizations and connecting ethnic backgrounds with religions without thinking clearly about that process. It was becoming clear that these religious or cultural topics were being discussed only in subjects of the humanities which seemed like natural places for these topics to be discussed but that this discussion was not going to the depths that it should.

An example of these experiences was that several students at School X mentioned an annual cultural event at their school, which included dance performances by students from different ethnic backgrounds and foods typical of different cultures and groups represented at the school. But again, no students mentioned anything about religious ideas being presented at this event. It seemed cultural and religious beliefs were synonymous in the eyes of the students. One student did mention an event at a previous school in Toronto that seemed different. Not many details were given other than that students at this school gathered to talk about their religious beliefs and practices. I wanted

more information about that experience but the respondent did not leave any personal information.

Another prevalent theme in the responses from the History class was that students rarely discussed religion in school because it put too much perceived strain on friendships. One respondent replied saying:

“Nothing. Me and my friend doesn’t [sic] touch or go near any religion. I’m not saying we are not religious but just don’t talk bout it cuz [sic] my believe [sic] and my best friend’s religion is at war and we don’t wanna bring that up cuz [sic] we don’t want our friendship to become hatred.”

Other times it was not discussed just because there were other things to talk about with friends. Students seemingly placed a great importance on friendships and did not wish to strain those relationships through the learning of different beliefs and cultures. Such responses raise questions about where students discover that religious discussions could lead to tension among friends and classmates. Was it from personal experience outside of school or something they had observed and experienced in school or elsewhere?

Many students in the English class at School Y could not remember that many experiences in school. One could assume that there were no significant events because students often remember what affects them. Some could remember participating in Christmas concerts in elementary school but nothing else. One student spoke of a negative experience that she had had in the first days of Grade Nine. It was difficult to determine what her religious background was but she referred to the Sabbath and dietary rules in response to another question. Another girl had approached her and told her that “the devil was going to get her and that she was going to burn in hell.” She added that

sometimes her friends questioned her about her faith, asking her if she would break her own dietary rules in order to stay alive. Would she “eat pork if she was dying on a deserted island and there was nothing else to eat?” She was also asked why she did not drive or drink alcohol, common activities for students her age. She gave no other examples of questions or the answers she gave. One could assume that these experiences were causing her anxiety as she tried to navigate through school, struggling with her own values and religious beliefs while comparing them with the values and beliefs of her classmates. One could also assume that her faith and her answers to these questions also caused discomfort for other students because her story was so much different than the beliefs of her classmates. Such differences probably provoked all students to question their own beliefs.

Several students were also familiar with debates about evolution in science classes. One student noted that the teacher seemed to discuss the theory of evolution because “it was required of him” but still he “[enforced] his beliefs about creationism.” The student perceived that the teacher was subtly imposing a personal belief on the student. The student never mentioned if he/she felt pressure to agree with the teacher’s belief or if the teacher allowed students to form their own opinions. One could assume that the student did feel pressure because the experience was remembered because it caused uneasiness in the student.

Another event that a student related concerned Halloween in a public elementary school. The student remembered that the teacher had not allowed students to dress up for the day, as was custom in many of the city’s public schools at that time. According to the student, the teacher was a passionate Christian and would not allow students to

participate even though it was allowed in the rest of the school. I found this story interesting as it would be difficult for a single teacher to enforce this in a single classroom in an entire school. Was this an accurate recollection of events? Why did the student remember this event, even though he said it was not personally bothersome? He could see why it could really bother others though but did not explain why.

The responses from the World Religions class in School X showed that student experiences were very limited. Besides the world religions class they were currently enrolled in, students did not have many in-school experiences with religious ideas and beliefs. Many students, though, did have interactions with other students of different religious and/or ethnic backgrounds, ranging from discussions and debates to some very specific, memorable instances. One student related that she received a negative response from a friend because she could not stay out late on a Saturday night. The student felt she was ridiculed when she explained that she had to go to church on Sunday morning. Another student from a Hindu background was asked quite often why she was a vegetarian; her replies led to quite a few discussions about dietary rules and, consequently, about the Hindu religion. In each case, these two students experienced discomfort with what was happening at school and home. At home, students felt that they needed to act in accordance with their religious beliefs yet at school this was causing distress as each perceived that other students were ridiculing them for their beliefs. Such apparent difficulty in being accepted by other students might have affected their schooling. As Crites (1979) suggested, students will tell certain stories in different situations to conform to what was deemed acceptable. In the case of the Hindu student, she would reshape stories about Hinduism so that she would be accepted by other

students fitting in with the stories of other students. Such students would have to negotiate these stories with their home and religious stories or they would each experience a great deal of anxiety.

A few students recalled experiences in which they felt compelled to participate in religious exercises or discussions or risked being looked down upon. They did not elaborate or explain whether this pressure was coming from other students or the teacher. Others did say that religious ideas had been discussed in both English and history classes as well as science classes in regards to the creation/evolution debate. All said that the discussions were handled well by both students and teachers. No specifics were given about what constituted a good discussion although one student did say that because the school had many international students, religious topics did arise. This student felt that teachers approached religious topics cautiously because they did not want to offend anyone.

Several students in the World Religions class in School Y recalled that they had to sing “O Canada” and recite the Lord’s Prayer in their early years of public elementary school but now did not have to (because of a ruling by the Human Rights Commission mentioned earlier). One girl could remember the experiences of a friend, a Jehovah’s Witness, who did not participate in the singing because of his religious belief. He also almost missed his Grade Eight graduation because it was held in a church. The tension this particular student must have felt in class was not mentioned. Another student spoke of an experience in grade six where the class was not allowed to dress up for Halloween because the teacher was a passionate Christian who did not believe in the holiday. The rest of the school was allowed to dress up for the day. This resembled an incident that a

different student from the same school experienced. Although these two responses were not from the same student, surveyed in two separate classes, it was possible that these students were, in fact, in the same elementary class.

Another girl spoke of being invited by her friends, on the way home from elementary school, to the gym of the school, with the promise that she would receive candy. When she arrived, she not only did not receive candy but was not even allowed to leave until she learned about Jesus. The girl did not mention if this was a public school or a different school. She also did not say if her friendship changed because of this experience or if it affected her at school at all. But it must have affected her in some way since she did remember it quite vividly some years later.

Another student, from a Baha'i background, spoke of how he was both included and excluded at a Catholic elementary school because of his beliefs. He also noticed that students did not have to hide their religious beliefs at a Catholic school whereas in a public school "you must somewhat hid [sic] your faith." At first, I found this interesting because one would assume that a student would hide differing religious beliefs at a Catholic school. But after some thought, I could understand why the student felt this way. The two schools had different story lines. Religious topics and discussion were not part of a public school's story line. If he revealed his religious beliefs to his classmates at a public school, he feared that he would be made to stand out because he was different. At a Catholic school, one could assume that the majority of students would be familiar with religion and would be more accepting of those of differing faiths. In other words, these topics would be part of the school's story line. I do not know if this particular student's

perception was accurate but his fear was real and the experience had become a significant event in his life.

Several students spoke of discussions about creation and evolution in science classes. None of them indicated whether this was a positive or negative experience. In several of my own classes, such discussion had become quite heated. Although most students quietly listened to the debate, students of strong religious background who also believed in creationism were forced to defend themselves against students not of a religious background who were strong believers in evolution. Because of my educational background in religious studies and my experience, I could usually prevent personal attacks between students as they debated the issue. But I have heard stories from other teachers about debates becoming personal attacks that created a great deal of tension. I have also heard stories in which teachers have defended one side of the debate and called into question the evidence from the opposing viewpoint. When personal biases of the teacher become evident, disagreeing students may not say anything.

Based on the student responses, it is safe to say that many students in our public school classrooms have been affected by experiences that relate to religion. These experiences range from classroom topics and discussions to informal discussions among friends and students. In some cases, much time has passed since the event. These experiences may seem inconsequential or trivial but for the students surveyed, they were very real and in some cases, had a definite effect on subsequent experiences in school.

### **Question Three**

“Talk about how your beliefs about religion have been affected by your schooling.”

In the History class at School X, most students agreed that their beliefs about religion had not really affected their schooling. What is most interesting is that many students did say that they were unsure if their schooling had affected their religious beliefs. These responses led me to assume that many students had not thought about this concept at all. Students did not seem to be experiencing any discomfort between their beliefs about religion and course subject matter. Several students commented that they did not have any beliefs about religion or were not yet sure of their beliefs. One student mentioned that the discussion of religious ideas was rare and occurred only in relation to creation/evolution or literary and historical themes. Several students said different religious views should be taught in school. Many respected the fact that students were allowed to have their own opinions in classes and thought that this openness led to many good discussions. One student added, “The fact that their (sic) isn’t much/anything taught in most classes makes at least myself feel that religion isn’t something you talk about inside or outside of the school environment.” It is interesting to note that the students’ perceptions of a lack of discussion of topics of a religious nature meant that those topics were considered either taboo or inconsequential in public schools and in society in general.

Many students in the English class in School Y talked about how school, especially the World Religions class, had made them more open towards other individuals and other religions. This was different than the responses of the students in the History class. These students had seemingly become aware of the benefits of religious discussions. One student, however, perceived that teachers seemed to avoid the subject or remained neutral because of the risk of inadvertently offending others. This perception was very similar to

the responses of the History class. Again, this student did not elaborate on the particular experience that created this perception. In the same class another student said that the discussion of the contrasting ideas of creationism and evolutionism helped him create a personal belief on the issue. I assumed that this was a positive experience for this student.

Students in the World Religions class in School X replied that their beliefs about religion had no effect on their schooling. For the majority of students, school was not causing anxiety regarding their religious beliefs. Those that did respond talked about how they have learned much more about other cultures. One student wrote that as a result of discussions about religion and other cultures has changed his world view to something completely opposite. The student did not elaborate on the particular experience. Several others spoke about these discussions in a positive way because it increased their knowledge and understanding. These were positive experiences for students.

On the other hand, one student talked about how her religion did not allow her to wear clothes that revealed her legs and chest. She also could not go to parties. Those restrictions affected her schooling because she felt like she did not belong with other students. Another girl said that being a vegetarian affected her schooling because it made her “stand out” from other students. Two students said that attending Catholic elementary schools affected their beliefs but only one mentioned it in a negative way. She said that it really “turned her off” religion because it was “forced on” the students and therefore she never had a chance to enjoy the “Catholic religion.” This negative experience related to what another student stated about teachers bringing their own beliefs into the discussion. This classroom experience gave the student the impression that the teacher’s position was correct and student opinions were incorrect. This student felt scared to voice opinions

because of what a student or teacher might say. In another situation, a student experienced other students making offensive comments about religion and noted that it did cause hurt feelings among students. Although these comments could definitely affect a student's schooling, this particular student said it did not influence him personally at school. In all of the above cases, each of the students' identities was affected by what had happened at school. It created conflict because students wanted to discuss religious topics but felt uncomfortable doing so because of offensive comments from other students or personal biases interjected by the teacher. In all cases, the students felt that their own beliefs were wrong.

The students in the World Religions class in School Y felt that their religion had not been affected by their schooling. Several students noted that the world religions class had taught them more about their own and other's beliefs. Many students also realized that in many cases it was acceptable to not agree with other's religious beliefs. One student spoke about how intense her life was because of her religion: the Sabbath requirements applied from Friday night to Saturday night and she worked on Sundays, leaving her little time on weekends to complete her homework for the six classes she was taking at the time.

In all four of the classes surveyed, most students agreed that discussions involving religious beliefs were both beneficial and necessary, but the viewpoints of other students and teachers prevented free discussion in a comfortable setting. Public schools should be a safe place where students can freely discuss beliefs and ideas but students felt uncomfortable discussing these subjects in a classroom setting. The plotlines of public

schools do not permit these kinds of discussions. School administration and teachers need to make public schools safer places for these discussions.

#### **Question Four**

“Now talk about how your schooling has been affected by your religious beliefs.”

The majority of students in the History class at School X commented that their religious beliefs had not been affected by their schooling. This led me to wonder if school subject matter was aligning perfectly with students’ religious beliefs. If students’ beliefs about religion were not being affected by school, were students being challenged and allowed to question their own beliefs? Or was it that those topics were not relevant to their own lives? Were these topics even discussed in public schools? However, several students did comment that their religious beliefs have affected schooling, either for themselves or for others that they knew. One student commented that school was difficult because there was always something that tested personal beliefs. The student perceived that they were to participate in class or that they would fail. The student did not elaborate on the details of the experiences or on the reasons for the perception why he/she felt this way. One could assume that the student meant that failure to agree with the teacher could result in lost marks or even failure of the course. What type of experience in school would make a student feel this way about expressing an opinion? Another student commented that although he was not personally offended, he did see people get offended as religious beliefs were discussed and other students in the class made negative comments about it. He felt that this was the reason many religious ideas were no longer discussed in school. Teachers and students avoided the subject for fear of offending someone rather than creating situations in which discussion, learning and critical thinking

could occur. This perception of past events affected the student's current identity. This current identity then affected the student's future experiences because he did not want these experiences repeated.

Many students in the English class in School Y left the question blank or answered in the negative. These students' experiences at school had apparently not affected their personal religious beliefs. Either religious topics were avoided or the topics discussed did not challenge the students' beliefs. Only one student said that he or she had missed school to attend some religious ceremonies but gave no details about consequences.

The majority of students in the World Religions class at School X left the question blank or said that they had no religious beliefs at all. One student spoke about how her religious beliefs affected the way she acted in school, how she dressed and how she spoke with teachers. She noticed this as a large difference between her and other students. She gave no specific examples. Another student said that her beliefs were pretty simple but that she had noticed that because teachers are in a position of higher authority, they sometimes come across as having the correct answer or position. Again, the student did not say why she had these perceptions.

Many students in the World Religions class left the question blank and those that did give an answer said that their schooling had not been affected by their religious beliefs. One student spoke of not being able to eat certain foods at school and not being able to participate in some physical education activities such as swimming. Another student stated that she was not allowed to attend a Catholic elementary school in her neighbourhood because the school had already filled their non-Catholic students' quota.

The closest public school was some distance away, making transportation difficult. This took place in another city than the one she was in now.

With the results of the four classes being relatively the same, it is reasonable to assume that the majority of students' schooling has not been affected by their religious beliefs. Students did relate some experiences where their religious beliefs did not align with subject matter or student discussions but it was not to the extent that their beliefs were being affected by their schooling. The results to questions three and four surprised me. Responses to question three showed that students' beliefs about religion were being affected by their schooling but their responses in question four showed that their schooling had not been affected by their religious beliefs. One possible explanation could be that students came to school with a sense of identity. Their religious identity or beliefs about religion had been influenced by and developed through experiences in the home and cultural groups. When students came to school with this identity, they could make adjustments to their stories to live by when faced with the subject matter of their various classes. Students were still in control of their own identities.

If, however, some occurrence or discussion at school led them to question their own identity, students no longer had complete control of their identities and had to make adjustments. Learning and identity adjustments occur when students experience tension because of reflection on their own beliefs. Therefore many students remember experiences that cause them to question their core beliefs and shape their identity; a place in which schooling affects their religious beliefs. If students do not experience any situations where they must reflect on their core beliefs, students can easily align their religious beliefs with their schooling. The students experience no tension and these

situations are not necessarily remembered. Therefore, students would have few responses to question four.

### **Question Five**

“What are your thoughts as to how religious ideas can be taught and discussed in school?”

The majority of students in the History class in School X felt it was a good idea to have a Religious Studies class. Others thought that while a class may not be warranted, religion should be integrated into history as background information. Many felt that this would be beneficial in understanding other cultures and interesting. If there was a separate class, it should not be mandatory. But a few students felt that religion should not be discussed at all because it might lead to conflict among students. These responses related to the previous question as many students might have had past experiences in which someone perceived discussion about religion as negative or threatening. One suggestion was that schools could create display cases and clubs outside of class but religious beliefs should not be discussed unless it was part of the curriculum. No details were given about how all groups could be equally represented and without offence. One should note that students mentioned that religion should not be discussed unless it was part of the curriculum. I wondered how many students knew what the curriculum actually stated. This was a question that I asked in subsequent interviews. Other students that attended Catholic elementary schools felt that the public system could offer classes and ceremonies like those offered in the separate system; however, there was no elaboration on what those classes or ceremonies should be.

The English students of School Y gave a wider range of opinions than the History students. Some students thought that teaching religious ideas in history classes would offer a better understanding about world events. Others recognized that a World Religions course would offer students the benefit of knowing about other religions and cultures. Some felt that it should be voluntary only and one student commented that it “should be informal, as long as they don’t tell us our religion is wrong.” An opposite response was that religion should not be taught in schools because it is the responsibility of the individual to decide which religion they choose to believe in.

The majority of students in the World Religions class of School X said it would be a good idea to discuss and teach religious ideas in public schools as long as it was not mandatory. Two students specifically stated that it should not be mandatory because that was not the nature of public schools but two other students said that religion was important enough to be a mandatory course. The world would be a much better place if people understood each other. One student suggested that this should take place in grade nine as students were just coming into high school and learning how to think for themselves. While some students said that discussions should take place in classes, other students said that these debates should take place only in a class like World Religions. Overwhelmingly, students in this particular class saw the benefit of studying religious topics. A possible explanation for their outlook is that they are already in such a class and made their comments accordingly.

World Religions students in School Y responded that religious ideas should be thoughtfully discussed in school, especially in our multicultural society. Some did say that a specific class was a good idea but it should be optional. Another person said it

should be mandatory at the high school level because students already have some knowledge, are more reserved, and are less ignorant about religion.

Student responses in all four classes suggest that all students see the value in the discussion of religious topics, particularly in a course such as World Religions. Many felt that the course should be mandatory because the discussions would cause reflection; an environment where students would experience questioning and learning. The ones that suggested the course was a good idea but should not be mandatory seemed to understand the discomfort it might create among those not ready to discuss such ideas. Students of the World Religions classes were already enrolled in the course and had seen firsthand the benefit of having such discussions. Those that were not in the World Religions course seemed a little more apprehensive about the discussion of such topics in school.

### **Overall Results**

Overall, the results of this questionnaire in all four classes were not surprising to me. Public school classrooms are diverse in nature. With this diversity, religious topics did arise occasionally but not very often. The majority of students felt that there had not been a clash between personal beliefs and what was discussed in classrooms when those topics did arise. Religious ideas had seemingly been discussed only in the course of historical context or in the creation/evolution debate, both acceptable forums. From previous experience most students understood that religion played a role in historical events but may not have necessarily understood the extent. If religion was discussed at a deeper level, students could then just build on what they already knew about the topic. If religion were taught in detail as part of historical context, student identities would not be threatened. Most students have learned aspects of both creation and evolution theories,

whether at school or at home and there were a few students who felt that it had caused inner conflict. These students had been offended or had perceived that others were offended; therefore, religious debate (or discussion) should be avoided in the future.

Overall, the responses from the two World Religions classes were similar as were the responses from the English and History classes. Student opinion did not differ substantially in the four classes I questioned. Students came from diverse backgrounds, and the majority of students did not have any significant experiences, either positive or negative. A few students that did speak of significant experiences that affected them in some substantial way. The only difference between the students in the English and History classes and the students in the World Religions classes was that the latter saw the benefits of religious discussions in school, either generally or in a specific world religions class.

The student responses from the two schools on opposite sides of the city were similar. I assume that the responses from students in any high school in this city would be similar. The majority of students have been able to separate their beliefs about religion and their schooling, and most have had positive experiences learning about others. Some students have experienced discomfort between how they want to be perceived at school and their religious beliefs. These are the stories that I will examine further.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **INTERVIEWS**

As I analyzed the student responses in each of the classes, several subjects emerged with interesting stories. These students left contact information and were chosen because their stories each consisted of a personal experience with religious topics that had arisen during the school day, either in or outside the classroom. One student from each class was interviewed at a later date. Hayley<sup>1</sup>, an Aboriginal student in the History class in School X, told a story of an incident with a teacher in Grade 5 that affected her subsequent learning until a remarkable teacher in Grade 12 helped her feel more positive about school.

Johnny, a student in the English class at School Y, shared his story of growing up in India and eventually travelling to Canada. The differences he experienced between the education systems of the two countries were both positive and negative for him. Johnny was now looking forward to university for a more positive experience that was closer to what he was used to in India.

Penelope, enrolled in the World Religions class at School X, began her schooling in Germany and Great Britain. After moving to Canada, she encountered greater academic success in school because of the sense of belonging and acceptance she experienced here.

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms have been used for the five subjects that were interviewed.

Jessica was a student in the World Religions class who faced difficulty in rural schools because of her religious beliefs. Now that she attended an urban school, she was having more success, both personally and academically.

Acacia emerged from one of the classes I personally had been teaching during the research process. This fifth subject revealed some of her experiences in school in a biographical assignment that was submitted as part of the class work. Acacia was doing her best to hide her Aboriginal background because of the constant verbal abuse she had been receiving from her classmates. Since her story directly pertained to the research I was conducting, I wished to interview her further about the things other students said to her in her early high school years. Here are their stories.

### **Hayley**

I met Hayley, a History student in School X, one afternoon in a conference room at her school. I began by introducing myself, the study, and then reviewing the questionnaire she had completed for me. Her nervousness showed as she fidgeted and often made fun of herself. To put her at ease, I asked her a little about her educational background to get a sense of who she was. Hayley was of Aboriginal descent and had attended many schools throughout her life. From her memory she listed five elementary schools and four high schools, all of which were in the city except for one elementary school on her reserve. I was surprised by the large number of schools so I asked her why. From my experience, the reason for such a large number was either because of problems at home or at school. To my surprise Hayley said she liked to change schools often because she liked to meet new people and did not like to get attached to people and places: "I'd like to think of myself as like, versatile, I suppose.... There are people

everywhere and I like to meet as many as I can.” I was amazed that she was so adventurous and outgoing at such an early age, but these behaviours could have been masking the real reasons for changing schools frequently.

As Hayley became more comfortable with the interview she spoke of people not liking her very much. I began to think that we were now getting to the reasons why Hayley switched schools so often. Hayley told me that she felt that people did not like her because she often did not do what other people expected of her. As a result people, including family members would call her names. The ones that struck me were “weirdo or satanic” and she said was called these names by her family as she did not attend church. Hayley also related an event in Grade 4 when she began attending a suburban elementary school. She said that she really had no friends in grade 4 and that her classmates called her names like “dirty” and “savage.” Hayley also said that she got pushed around a lot and this was why “Grade 4 sucked.” As Hayley began with stories of grade 4, I wondered if this is where her narrative unity began to form (Connelly and Clandinin, 1998) causing her low self-esteem. Although her identity was not completely formed, any subsequent events, although seemingly innocent, may have contributed to the stories that she lived by. As Aoki (2004) suggested, Hayley’s identity was still in production.

As we talked, Hayley described an experience in Grade 5 that impacted her future experience in school. Sometime during the year, the teacher gave an assignment to draw a landscape. Hayley said she placed the prairies beside the mountains and she saw nothing wrong with this. The teacher then commented that her drawing was not proper. Hayley did not elaborate on what the teacher said but felt that she had committed a major wrong.

When I asked Hayley more about the incident, all she could say was “apparently, that’s bad.” She said the teacher then called her a pagan, and Hayley said she felt very ashamed. I asked Hayley if at the time, she knew what the word meant. Hayley did not know the meaning but it was the teacher’s tone of voice that had made a deep negative impression. While she discovered much later what the word meant, she was able to identify the immediate effect the word had on her; if the teacher ever asked her to do something again, she would just “shut down.” I asked Hayley if experiences like this were one of the reasons why she kept switching schools. She said she did not know. In this case Hayley’s teacher played a significant role in the development of her identity (Tisdell, 2007) by how she treated Hayley. For Hayley’s teacher, it was probably just a meaningless passing comment. But for Hayley, it was a noteworthy experience that was not meaningless. The comment had detrimental effects, especially because Hayley and the teacher were from different backgrounds. Since the comments were also religious in nature, it probably affected Hayley more deeply as this is “the heart of their deepest identity” (Tisdell, 2007, p.538). Hayley’s beliefs about religion were experiential and personal in nature and were not institutional in any form. She expressed herself in all areas of her life and did not separate religion from her daily life. Her spiritual practices and beliefs were a central part of her life as she reflected her culture as a whole (Peelman, 1995; Guenter, 2007).

The effects of this comment were deep as Hayley did go on to say that if she discovered that one of her subsequent teachers was religious, through something the teacher either said or wore (like a cross), she would develop feelings of resentment towards this teacher because of what she experienced in Grade 5. Even though much time had passed, Hayley still felt resentment born of that incident. She said that she hated the

class so much that she failed because she skipped so often. Hayley had clearly been affected because culture and religion are so closely connected in the Aboriginal worldview. The experience and anxiety subsequently led to Hayley's inability to accept others. She now began to treat others as she perceived herself to be treated. As we began to explore further, Hayley saw the connection between the incident in Grade 5 and skipping classes in high school. The episodes of Grades 4 and 5 affected her narrative unity as she continued into high school.

Hayley did not know if there was a difference between the students' name-calling in Grade 4 and the teacher's criticism in Grade 5. She could not she say which experience had impacted her more although there was one main difference between this school and the schools she attended for Grades 1-3. Up until Grade 4, Hayley had attended school with other students of Aboriginal descent. When she switched schools in Grade 4, she felt as if she was the only one of Aboriginal descent and that she was alone. When I asked her why this school was so different from the other, earlier schools, Hayley replied:

“It just was, it was more like welcoming and you know, my cousin went to that school. And my other cousin went to that school. A boy named Jacob, who I have a crush on...he's native and went to that school too. I don't know...everyone was just so friendly there...people were just like, they didn't see my skin...well, they did but they didn't focus on it. And I just felt more comfortable.”

She remembered Grades 1-3 as some of her favorite years because she fit in, was accepted and had a large group of friends. Again, this experience relates to Hayley's identity. Hayley had no one to identify with at the schools in which she had negative experiences. As a result she felt isolated, alone and full of anguish. While most students

would turn this anxiety inward, Hayley turned this displaced aggression toward other people who represented the causes of her negative experiences.

These memories led Hayley to recall another experience in Grade 5 related to the brand of clothes the students wore. She had been labeled as wearing “Wal-Mart clothes.” At her previous schools, no one cared what she wore or where she got the clothing. At this school, other students “made a big deal out of it” and she wondered why it was bad to be wearing “Wal-Mart clothes.” She used the words “embarrassed” and “ashamed.” It just made her angry as the other students called her names and subsequently cast her out. She got into some physical altercations with other students, even in high school. These altercations were usually with students from the separate Catholic system. When asked why these students, Hayley said it was because they were religious and she remembered all of those early experiences from elementary school, especially those that involved the “religious” teacher. Was it only Catholic students that she picked on? She said no but it was predominantly them. Hayley then added she wanted people to be afraid of her and that she wanted to be powerful. It seemed that Hayley’s power and identity had been taken from her in elementary school and this was her way of getting back that identity.

By the time she reached grade 6, Hayley recalled these incidents decreased in number and that she did begin to make some good friends. But she still suffered the effects of those earlier experiences, “My confidence basically crumbled. And so I would never read out loud or do presentations. I just didn’t participate in group work.” How did her teachers respond to her in those situations? Hayley replied that the teachers would phone her mother who would then get mad at her for not participating. Although Hayley

said her confidence has improved, she said that even now in grade 12 she did not like participating in those types of activities.

Hayley also began to talk about other experiences outside of school that affected her. She said that there were people everywhere who did not like her because she did not go to church. Hayley said that she would be called names like “weirdo” or “satanic” because she didn’t attend a Christian church. She recalled an experience where she was wearing a cross and someone asked her if she was Christian. Hayley replied that she was not but that she just liked wearing crosses. I asked her about her family background and if she was exposed to Aboriginal spirituality and rituals. She said she had been but there also had been a Christian influence. Even though the majority of her extended family was Christian, her mom had exposed Hayley to Aboriginal things like dream-catchers, pow-wows, sweats, etc. She said that her Mom had “hammered” those things into her head but she also learned much of it from her Native Studies 10 class. At first this appeared contradictory. Hayley greatly resented her Grade 5 teacher that wore a cross and had called her a pagan, and this had obviously affected her later school experiences. Yet here she was, wearing a cross because she liked the way it looked. Hayley was struggling with the forming of her identity as her home and school experiences were very much different. With her religious identity, it could have been a struggle between her Aboriginal spirituality background and the Christian influence of the rest of her family. When her teacher called her a pagan, it affected the deepest part of Hayley’s identity, the aspect she was struggling with the most. As the teacher was more worried about herself and the way Hayley presented the art, she neglected the student, Hayley, and the milieu in which she was taught (Schwab, 1978).

Hayley's Native Studies teacher really sparked her interest because his expertise was in the history of religion and his passion about the subject was obvious in his lessons. Hayley said that because of the positive experience with this teacher she became less atheistic and more agnostic. She attributed her atheism to her elementary experiences. She said that this high school teacher gave her the opposite feelings than her grade 5 teacher had. Instead of feeling ashamed of who she was and her background, Hayley now felt curious, engaged and really excited. The teacher now respected both the student and the milieu where she came from and in which she was taught (Schwab, 1978). She said that this class created a spark in her and that she now began to feel competent. This particular teacher did a very good job in presenting different sides of an issue and never seemed to favour one side or the other. Hayley felt that religious views should be taught in school, especially to younger children to rid schools of "that whole racist thing." But she believed it should not be forced. If different religious beliefs were not taught, Hayley felt it could become very hurtful, as it had been when the teacher in Grade 5 called her a pagan. As Clandinin et al., (2006) stated, teachers need to make spaces so that children who have been left out of the dominant stories of the school also feel a sense of belonging. From this then comes a feeling of competency and potency and with these feelings, Hayley would have had a more positive experience from Grade 5 and onward.

I found Hayley's positive experience with a teacher interesting. In this particular instance, Hayley's teacher seemed to accept her identity and then allowed Hayley to explore the subject matter on her own terms. In elementary school, Hayley had been exploring her identity, but her teachers and fellow students did not allow her to do so openly. As a result Hayley's continued resentment of them and school in general

subsequently affected her performance. This teacher in high school seemed to make Hayley feel somewhat better about what was now happening in school.

I was also curious when Hayley linked religion and racism. Did Hayley associate certain religions with certain races? She did comment that teaching about world religions was good because it eliminated racism. Did other students also make this connection? I wondered if Hayley felt isolated because of her cultural beliefs or because of her race. The effects from either would be the same because the two are closely connected. Why was Hayley telling these stories of herself? Was her telling of these stories a way to negotiate the anxiety that she was experiencing in school? Crites (1986) suggested that the past gives the individual an identity and that each experience builds on past experiences. If these experiences did not fit with Hayley's desires for her own narrative history, she could have altered some of these stories to reduce her anxiety (Erickson et al., 2008). Hayley formed a continuity of stories with which she felt comfortable.

As Hayley's experiences grew in number, she was able to shape a narrative unity and grew more confident in her experiences (Connelly and Clandinin, 1998). With each event, it affected her practices in the present and subsequently her practices in the future. For Hayley, the events of grade 4 and 5, accurate or not, affected her in such a way that she suffered in her later schooling.

### **Johnny**

Johnny, an English student at School Y, was born in India although his parents were from Burma. They had immigrated to India because of the political situation where people, including his parents, had been struggling for democracy. Once in India, Johnny's parents felt that he was receiving an inadequate education. Johnny's parents felt that the

education of their children was more important and even though they had jobs closer to their chosen professions in India, his family applied to come to Canada because they had some friends living in Toronto. The Canadian government decided the family would live in Saskatoon, and they had now been in the country for two years. Johnny did not find it hard to adjust to a Canadian school because his schooling in India had been in English, one of the country's official languages, and he appreciated that he had some choice in his classes.

When I asked Johnny about being a Muslim, he said that it was easy in India to follow religious customs because there were many Muslims. Johnny said it was more difficult to follow them here because there were not as many Muslims. He used the example of eating as well as the types of food. It was easier in India because there were so many more vegetarians. Johnny also had Buddhist and Christian friends in India and had much fun with them while he lived there. He said they debated many points of religion but never had any fights. I asked Johnny if he was receiving the same reception here in Canada. He said that people were friendlier, but he was not getting invited into many people's homes. He did concede that a possible reason for not getting many invitations could be that in India he had known his childhood friends for sixteen years. Johnny had been here for only two years and he hoped that the invitations would increase in the future.

In the Hindu school that Johnny had attended in India, ideas of a religious nature were discussed only during morning prayers. Those prayers were optional and students could leave if they did not want to participate. He did say that some of his Christian friends had asked him to convert because he was coming to all of the meetings and was

participating in Christmas and other Christian holidays. I asked if this affected his relationships with his friends and he said no. It became a bit of a joke and they had continued to have fun. Johnny said that he did not see much about religion in Canadian schools except for the World Religions class. He enrolled in the class because he thought the class would be interesting, and he had an interest in religion.

I asked Johnny if religion had been discussed in any classes other than World Religions. He said yes, that it had arisen in a psychology class when beliefs about life after death had been under discussion. Johnny did point out that the teacher was the same in both classes. The discussion in both classes had been good because there were both non-believers and believers. Those who did not know anything about the subject listened intently to learn more. He thought it was a good idea to talk about religion because otherwise no one would ever know anything about it at all. I asked Johnny if it was a good idea to discuss religion in other classes. He said it would be out of context and would feel “weird” in classes like math and science.

I asked Johnny if he had had any issues being a Muslim, either in India or Canada. He said that there had been none in Canada but that there had been some in India. Because of the history between Hindus and Muslims, as in the history between India and Pakistan, there were some Hindus that said Muslims belonged in Pakistan. Johnny said that he really noticed it when he brought meat to school and ate with Hindus, who were vegetarian. I asked him about people’s responses here in Canada when they found out he was Muslim; he said they would say nothing. He said that there are more people here from Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. There were about four Muslim children in every

one thousand kids where he lived in India. Since there were more Muslims here, and here religion was not talked about, he felt more comfortable so it wasn't such "a big deal."

We talked about what it was like during Ramadan, a Muslim holiday during which believers fast. Johnny said that it was difficult to fast during school because he liked to participate in school activities and sports. Although he had not experienced it yet, he felt that the teachers would understand if he had to miss school for a religious holiday. He said that he sometimes found it difficult because in India there was a school holiday on religious holidays. He did understand that there were more religions here so that there could not be as many holidays but he did feel that since Islam was quite a large religion, it should be considered. He said that teachers were allowing him to leave for prayer and allowing him to finish work he missed while away from class.

Johnny said that religious ideas should be discussed in school but that students should not be forced to take classes such as World Religions. Religious ideas could, and should be discussed when they arose in classes like History and Psychology. Although he felt that this would be a good thing, Johnny did emphasize that such discussions should not be forced. It just would not be right if it was talked about in other classes. Johnny said that he has seen non-believers become very uncomfortable and not want to discuss those things in other classes. He thought the reason for this might be that it was never talked about at home among family members. I found it interesting that Johnny was empathetic towards others and their identities even though he had experienced the opposite. Since he knew what it felt like, Johnny might not want to make anyone else feel this way either. Johnny added that he felt that religious non-believers went in many different philosophical directions. A religious believer follows some sort of path and has a

foundation to help with crucial life decisions. Thus, he felt that a person needed to believe in some sort of religion. I asked him what would happen if a believer was exposed to new religious ideas. He felt that was acceptable because it forced individuals to think about their own religious beliefs and because of those beliefs, they would find it easier to understand other's beliefs. Johnny used the analogy that in order for one to become a tennis champion, one would have to play a lot of tennis. This does contradict what Johnny said earlier about making people uncomfortable in class but I think I understood what Johnny meant. It was good to make people think about their own beliefs but not to the point of discomfort. This way their identity would remain, for the most part, intact.

Johnny only came to Canada for Grade 11 and 12 and was spending much of his time focusing on his studies so he could attend university. He said that his experience in Canada so far had been positive except he had had more friends in India than he did here. Was this because of his background? He said that he felt it was because he was spending so much time with his studies that he did not have enough time to join many sports teams and clubs. I asked him if he felt a connection with the school or had a sense of belonging to the community. Johnny replied that he felt a connection with his teachers because they helped him on many occasions. Students were friendly although differently than in India. In India he knew everyone in his apartment building but here he did not. In fact, he said that he felt ignored sometimes. He attributed this to the North American culture, which he felt was not as inviting as Asian culture. This did cause Johnny some stress as he struggled to find a place in a new situation and school.

Johnny also noticed a few differences in school culture. He said that here in Canada, the students move from class to class, preventing easy development of friendships. In India students spent the day together in classes and then studying. Students also attended the same school from the beginning of Grade 1 until the end of Grade 12. Johnny also noticed that the talk in the hallways was different here as there was “no intelligent talk, just party talk.” He felt an individual was accepted more if he/she went to the parties to have fun. He was really looking forward to university because of its academic population and culture. Johnny had trouble adjusting to other students’ stories by which they lived. He had a set of stories that were developed and accepted in India but those stories were not as accepted here because they were so different from typical Canadian stories. As a result, he struggled with his own identity as he had difficulty fitting into Canadian school culture. Johnny’s narrative unity had been interrupted by his move to Canada. This interruption can be seen in Dewey’s (1938/1963) understanding of experience in that it is comprised of continuity and situation. Johnny experienced a change in situation and his continuity of experience was now also shaped by this interruption. Johnny’s history had now changed and his interaction with other students was very much different than it was in India. These new experiences were so different from what he previously experienced and now he was having difficulty continuing his narrative identity. He believed, and hoped, that discussions in high school would be more open as they were with his friend in India. Johnny hoped that university would be different because it was more diverse and much more academic than high school. I asked if there was anything schools could do to change and he said it would be very difficult, that was just the way that it was. He also felt that parents here did not care

about their children as much. He did clarify that it was not necessarily that they did not care but that because parents and children are working so much, they never see each other. Johnny felt that he was lucky that his parents were so involved in his life and he was very much looking forward to his post-secondary years.

### **Acacia**

Acacia was a Grade 12, Aboriginal student in one of the classes I was teaching during the research process. She submitted a biographical assignment that spoke to some of the difficulties she faced when coming to school in grade 9. Since she had strong family connections, Acacia experienced her Aboriginal culture through participation in powwows and many other traditional ceremonies. Now that she was in high school, Acacia did not openly participate in these ceremonies anymore. Most of her friends were now “White” and she rarely interacted with other Aboriginals or knew much of other religions. As she began to tell me her stories, I certainly saw how her experiences affected her identity.

One of her first experiences at high school was someone asking her if, “She was going to ride her buffalo to school?” Acacia did not know how to respond to this comment or if the person was serious or was just joking. She recalled this as the first form of racism that she had experienced in the school. Acacia realized that students were more accepting in elementary school and that she was now entering the harsh world of high school. Although these derogatory comments were not religious in nature, the effects were the same since spirituality is an integral part of overall identity (Guenter, 2007; Peelman, 1995).

Acacia responded to the comments by determining that she would not fight back and would try not to disclose her Aboriginal background to other students. In high school she felt that people used stereotypes and judged her according to her skin colour and background. Acacia began to lose interest in powwows and even tried to hide her skin colour at school. She went to the extent of not tanning in the summer so that she looked “whiter.” She hoped that she would become interested in Aboriginal ceremonies and culture again, especially if she had her own children. The comments were said outside the realm of religion yet affected her participation in the ceremonies and rituals of her own culture. Acacia said she wanted her own children to experience their cultural background and be proud of being Aboriginal. I pointed out the contradiction of her position in that she was presently renouncing something she wanted her own children to be proud of in the future. Acacia realized this was the case but admitted in the present, it was about survival through her high school years. She felt she would not be accepted if she did not change the stories by which she lived to be similar to those of her friends (Connelly and Clandinin, 1999). Acacia adjusted her identity in order to fit in with the group at school that she wanted to identify with. Her experiences with these other students were changing her narrative identity.

Acacia recounted several experiences where it now became “weird” for her to attend Aboriginal events. Acacia recalled the last time she had attended Treaty Day with her parents and boyfriend; she felt “too white” to be there. She made her non-Aboriginal boyfriend wait in the car because she did not want him to see this aspect of her life. Her parents responded that she was becoming “too white.” Acacia recalled this had happened to her before. In her last year of elementary school, another Aboriginal girl started

attending the same school. This Aboriginal student wanted to fight Acacia because she had become “too white.” Acacia became trapped between acknowledging her own background and trying to gain acceptance in a different culture. She also noticed though that she had started to become like those that ridiculed her. Acacia found she too started to make comments about Aboriginals so that she would gain acceptance in the group she wanted to be her friends.

Another difficult situation Acacia faced was when Aboriginal issues were discussed in class. Students looked to her because she was Aboriginal and therefore, automatically expected her to be an expert on the topic. Acacia also hoped the male students that constantly ridiculed her would just keep quiet through the discussion. She felt very self-conscious because she had no idea what to say. She either did not know anything about the topic or did not have an opinion on the topic. When other students made jokes, she felt bad about herself. One example of such jokes was that on the school’s Multicultural Day, one of the special events was the making of bannock. Some of her classmates told her that this activity must be easy for her since she ate bannock all the time. She felt bad about herself when these inappropriate comments were made but she did not want to fight back. She felt that the situation became worse if she did. As Acacia said, “These guys were just assholes.” Again, these comments were cultural and not religious in nature but their effects were the same. Acacia was feeling that she needed to deny this part of her identity so that she would be accepted by the group with which she identified.

Acacia was finding social situations were getting easier as she got older and was nearing the end of her high school years. She found many of these “assholes” had either

left the school or had become more mature. She noticed that there were now more students from different backgrounds attending the school and she did not stand out as much. Acacia felt more comfortable in the building and I assumed she was becoming more comfortable with her identity. As Aoki (2004) suggested, Acacia was trying to navigate between her home and school lives and her identity was still in production. It was only now, later in high school, that a narrative unity was developing and she was feeling comfortable with herself.

We discussed if she felt her cultural background had affected her education and time at school. She said no because she tried to act like one of the white kids. Since she did not practice her religion, it had no effect on her in any way including her education: “I grew up around white people so religion has been affected in a way that I don’t wanna talk about my religion around people, just because of the stereotypes.” Acacia also said she did not care if her religion or Aboriginal topics were now talked about in school. She felt Aboriginals were “made fun of because of all the stereotypes that are made, such as that natives are poor.” I never heard someone deny their own background to the extent that Acacia went to. Acacia was trying to deny her own past so that her identity was consistent with her friends at school. Acacia was denying her Aboriginal history because it did not fit with her desire to identify with her friends (Erickson et al., 2008). Acacia felt that other students should not ask her questions about Aboriginal beliefs and practices because there was a Native Studies class where students find answers.

Acacia’s ethnic identity was being shaped both at home and at school. These two identities opposed each other and this was creating a large amount of anxiety. At her home milieu, Acacia was of Aboriginal descent and proud to be of that culture. She

enjoyed participating in the practices of Aboriginal spirituality and wished to raise her children in an environment where they too would be proud of their background and religion. Outside of her home, Acacia did not want to be Aboriginal so that she would be accepted among her friends. When these two milieus intersected, it seemed the tension for Acacia was great. She now seemed conflicted because she had two sets of stories to live by. At some point she would have to make a decision as to which stories would become predominant (Chan, 2007).

### **Penelope**

Penelope, from the World Religions class at School X, was born in Germany but was of British descent. Since her father was in the military, her family had travelled back and forth between the two countries so she was familiar with both education systems. She had only been in Canada for three years and had spent most of her life in the British education system. She described the British as two systems; the Anglican/Catholic system and public system where the only difference between the two systems was there was some religious instruction in the Anglican/Catholic system. She attended the Anglican/Catholic system and she said because she went to these schools, people in the public system just assumed that she prayed and read the Bible every day. She said students did not realize that there was more to that school system than just religious instruction and she did not do those things every day. She just chose to go this school system because she felt they were better schools and that they were closer to her house. In Germany, Penelope also attended mandatory religious classes in school but the German students were not as judgmental as the British students. She said that she accepted other religions and felt that religious belief was a personal choice. Yet students

from the other system in Britain would continue to ridicule her just because she attended the religious school system. Even though she felt she had her own identity, other students her age labeled her as something she was not.

Penelope's situation was compounded as her family kept moving. As a result, she did not create the deep friendships she felt she needed. Penelope felt this was an advantage because she had met many different people with many different beliefs. Over time, she felt this made her a better person. In the short term, she accepted she would have to suffer the mocking by those that felt she was different. Penelope felt that people in Britain ridiculed those that were different because, "everyone had to be the same." People sprayed her house and car with graffiti because she had different beliefs. Some days she could not face the bullying anymore so she often chose to be absent from school. To try to avoid the ridicule and, since her grandfather was Buddhist, she brought him to class to speak about Buddhism and to answer any questions the students may have had. She was disappointed by the experience because the students openly insulted him. Although Penelope had a strong identity, the narrative unity of that identity continued to be interrupted by her family's moves. I found Penelope to be a very resilient individual as she knew who she wanted to be even though she faced many obstacles from her classmates. Unlike Hayley, it was not the teachers or the curriculum that stood in the way of her identity development but her classmates. Her milieu at school was Penelope's ultimate concern that determined the narrative course of her identity (Schwab, 1978). As was the case with Acacia, her fellow students affected and interrupted her identity development. Penelope just had a stronger sense of who she was and she stayed on the course she had planned for herself. Acacia created an identity in order to connect with her classmates.

Penelope had only been in Canada a short time but she already felt it was the most open-minded place that she had experienced. She said the first six months were difficult because she was in a new country and did not know anybody, but now she was feeling quite comfortable. Penelope said she was scared to come to school in Canada because she feared her experiences in British schools may repeat themselves but fortunately, they did not. Both Penelope and Johnny had trouble adjusting to the Canadian education system but it was a positive experience for Penelope as she quite liked the open-mindedness of the Canadian system. It was a negative experience for Johnny as he liked the system he came from. Penelope said even though religious classes were mandatory in both European countries that she lived in and that she did not have to take World Religions here, she still signed up for the course because of her prior interest in the subject. Penelope felt the class should be mandatory because it would be very effective in creating more understanding among people. She noted Canadian students did not really know anything of others and of other religions. In her experience so far, she saw many good things here in Canada. Penelope felt that students could ask more questions here without fear of being harassed by other students. She also noticed many people here said nice things to each other when discussing topics in class and were much more respectful. Penelope said students could express themselves and teachers encouraged divergent opinions.

Penelope's experiences were intriguing because of the negative experiences that she had elsewhere followed by positive experiences in her new Canadian setting. Penelope was having a positive home life and was open to many new experiences but her experiences at school were having a detrimental effect on her identity. This caused some

narrative disunity as Penelope was trying to live by one set of stories and her classmates were not allowing her to live by that set because it was different than their own (Connelly and Clandinin (1999). There was no continuity with her stories and Penelope should have had difficulty defining her experiences and identity (Schwab, 1978). Yet somehow Penelope managed to maintain the identity she wished to create. Her temporal form of experience was not necessarily affecting her sacred and mundane stories (Crites, 1971) and she only needed an environment where she was allowed to have her space for her stories and history (Aoki, 2005). Luckily she found that when she moved to Canada.

### **Jessica**

Jessica moved to the city in Grade Nine because she found the first eight years of elementary school in a rural area to be very tough. Jessica had grown up in a Christian home with strong Christian values but this was not the identity of the majority of students in her class. She felt the students of her class were rude and liked to spread rumours about others. Other students of Christian background had left the school leaving fewer and fewer students that believed in Christianity; Jessica felt like a minority. She said during class discussions, teachers would often take the side of the other students. She felt the teachers did not know anything about Christianity and its beliefs. Whenever Jessica stated her opinion, other students usually said her views were “stupid” and she felt the teachers ignored her beliefs. Jessica felt her grades went down because she began listening more to what other students said instead of focusing on her school work. Jessica also really began to “hate” her teachers. She knew she needed a change in environment because she was hurting in so many different ways. The idea of her identity was being battered from all sides. The identity she developed at home was not being accepted at

school. There was no continuity between her home life and school life (Dewey, 1938/1963). Religion was a very important part of Jessica's life but it was not being recognized at school. Jessica brought her home stories to school every day and instead of feeling pride about them, she felt ashamed of something that was the core of her identity. This resulted in Jessica having no direction for the future, a narrative disunity where home stories did not correlate with her school stories (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988). She was developing purpose and meaning in her life with her religion as a foundation. Conflict was created by the ongoing interaction between home and school and this resulted in a narrative disunity.

To make matters worse, the adults at school seemingly did not accept her either. Teachers may have interpreted a classroom event as meaningless when in fact it had deep meaning for Jessica and it was having a detrimental effect on her schooling. Teachers were not aware of her Jessica's narrative history and did not see the effect that these incidents were having on Jessica's identity (Chan, 2006). Teachers needed to allow space for the stories of the different students in their classrooms. Jessica's teachers should have defended her right to be different and to have her own religious beliefs (Lyotard, 1984). Jessica was starting to question her own identity and doubted who she was. The anxiety was so great that Jessica wanted to change schools.

Jessica went to a bigger high school in another town for grade 9 but soon found the situation became the same. As many rural students experience, their high schools are much larger than their elementary schools and are often in larger towns. Jessica had hoped this new environment would relieve some of the anxiety she was feeling as there would be a larger, more diverse student body. She soon found that things had not

changed as many of her old classmates also now attended this high school. Teachers innocently placed students into different groups because it was a larger school, but the rumours and talking among students continued. Jessica's religious beliefs were again at the center of this conflict. She struggled with leaving her faith and church so she would be accepted at school. Her friendships continued to deteriorate because non-Christian students got angry with her for her beliefs and Christian students felt she was not being strong enough in her beliefs. These identity struggles now became her new stories and I wondered how these stories were altered in order to fit with her narrative history (Erickson et al., 2008). The events at her elementary school affected Jessica's identity so much that future events at her new high school setting were interpreted to build upon that identity (Crites, 1986).

Jessica decided to change schools after grade 9 and chose an urban high school because it was larger and she could easily travel to and from school. Jessica began to notice a difference in the teachers who were open to differing beliefs and would accept any student opinions as long as it was openly discussed and not imposed onto other students. Jessica found that both teachers and students listened more and often "agreed to disagree" in cases of differing opinions. Jessica felt that some topics of a religious nature were discussed in English or science classes but were generally avoided in the rural schools because it led to conflict. She perceived these discussions were not avoided in the urban school. She felt her schooling was now going much more smoothly as she became more comfortable in expressing her opinions. Jessica felt the other students in her classes were more respectful and there was now less pressure to be the same as everybody else. As a result, her grades improved because of her feelings towards school and her new

teachers. She felt safer in her new environment and expressed her opinion without fear of reprisals. Jessica was not experiencing the anxiety she once had and therefore, her grades were improving. There was improved continuity between her home and school experiences. There was more consistency between her interactions with family and community members (Dewey, 1938/1963). Since the formation of Jessica's identity was an ongoing process (Chan, 2007) , the stories she chose to live by were now more to her liking and as a result, her anxiety lessened (Connelly and Clandinin, 1999). Jessica was now experiencing more success in school.

Jessica really liked World Religions because the class gave her a forum to discuss her beliefs without feeling isolated by other students and teachers. She thought discussion about religious subjects in other classes was good, especially because there are so many different cultures represented at her new school. She also felt teachers should be comfortable with religious subjects because students felt better about themselves during these discussions. In a sense, Jessica was attributing the anxiety she was experiencing in school to how the teachers allowed discussions to take place in their classrooms (Aoki, 2005; Lyotard, 1984). This may not necessarily have been the case but to Jessica, these perceptions were real and the experiences greatly affected her performance at school.

## Chapter Six

### CONCLUSIONS

The discussion and handling of religious topics and ideas can affect a student's identity and experiences at school. The building of student identity creates a sense of belonging and this is evident in the students' responses in both the interviews and questionnaires. Certain students may feel respected and part of the school if religious views were taught and respectfully discussed. A student's sense of belonging decreases if particular religious views are avoided, mocked, or even deemed as incorrect and not valid. One possible area where a student could connect with the school community is then lost. Logically, the student's interest in school will also decrease. This progression was seen in Hayley as her negative experiences in elementary school resulted in difficulties and feelings of resentment in high school. Johnny also had difficulty with his sense of belonging as he tried to adapt to a new country and environment and found it difficult to connect with students at his new school. Acacia felt she had to deny her own history in order to fit in with fellow students at her school. Penelope, however, had an opposite experience as she was now happy with her new school in Canada because differing views were now encouraged and accepted. And Jessica had to continue to switch schools until she found one where she felt validated because people accepted her identity.

Worrell (2007) conducted a study in which ethnic identity and self-concept were linked to academic achievement. Although the study does not identify religious background, it is possible to infer that the results could be similar. Worrell's data

indicated that students of ethnic minority backgrounds were concerned about their heritage. The more positive the students' self-concept was, the higher the achievement in school. Thus, educators have a duty to monitor educational environments to avoid negative messages for students and include all ethnic backgrounds in the curriculum in a respectful manner. Ethnic background could include students' religious backgrounds as well, since the two are often related. If some negative experiences had never occurred for either Hayley or Acacia, the outcomes for these girls might have been much different later in high school. The girls might have experienced much less anxiety as they developed their own identities.

Hayley and Acacia were both left searching for a sense of belonging after their own religious identities were stripped away by comments from teachers or other students. Although their experiences occurred at different times of their schooling, the end result was the same. It is remarkable that these students did not leave high school because of these negative experiences. Aboriginal students, and all students for that matter, need to have the freedom and affirmation in which to form their own identities and history. As McEwan (1997) stated, students feel excluded and ignored when their religions are given less respect. Canadian schools are becoming more complex as student stories are becoming increasingly diverse. Schools need to make space so that students with different stories from the mainstream are not left out (Clandinin et al., 2006, p. 160).

In a study at two urban high schools, Goodenow (1992) found that school belonging was a predictor of achievement, motivation, and engagement. As students felt a sense of belonging in the school, they were willing to put forth more effort and commit themselves more fully to the school and its purposes. This sense of belonging came not

only from peers but also from teachers. If students from different religious backgrounds, or no religious background, are accepted in the school setting, their achievement, engagement and psychological well-being will increase. This well-being and sense of belonging was evident for Hayley, Penelope, and Jessica. Their experiences at their previous schools affected their schooling and only now did they feel comfortable at their current schools. They were now experiencing less anxiety. Johnny and Acacia were currently experiencing discomfort at their schools because of a lack of acceptance.

Most people use past experiences to help them understand the present and give them some sort of direction for the future. Classrooms where people recognize multiple perspectives increase “participants’ overall awareness that they and all people are, in fact, “narratives in the making.” This leads to not only a deeper appreciation of who others are, but also a greater sense of one’s own relationship to history and culture as these narratives unfold” (Tisdell, 2007, p.538). This allows students to deeply reflect on their identity. As both Hayley and Acacia were developing their own identities, they each had experiences where they perceived that their identities were not valid. Hayley was told that she was pagan and that her artwork was wrong. Acacia was constantly ridiculed about being Aboriginal and this teasing caused her to deny her own culture. Jessica and Penelope had lower self-esteem because both were subjected to constant comments from classmates. Johnny was hoping for a similar experience to his life in India but he was not as excited about school in Canada as he once was. As teachers, we need to be aware of this searching for religious or spiritual identity in our students as it plays a large role in their lives.

Teachers are not sure how to teach and discuss religion in general. As a result, teachers avoid the subject so as not offend students or show favour toward one religion and disfavour towards others. Even though school division policies are unclear, teachers need to be tactful and be aware of the tone of our teaching in the area of religious subjects. Because children are sensitive to mood and atmosphere, how we as educators handle situations, what we say and do not say, can greatly impact a child. Our relationship with children may grow through thoughtfulness and tact (Van Manen, 1986). If the teacher had handled Hayley's situation differently and not made comments with a religious tone, would Hayley's experience in school have been the same? If a teacher had intervened on behalf of Acacia, Penelope or Jessica, and defended their religious views and backgrounds, would their experiences with classmates, and subsequently with school, have been different? No one can ever answer those questions with certainty but the questions should be asked.

In each of the five cases, self-esteem and affirmation of personal religious views seem connected. Would then acknowledging a student's identity and religious beliefs increase self-esteem and encourage positive social attitudes? If a student's religious views are attacked or ridiculed, will the student's self-esteem suffer? If a student's religious views are treated respectfully, will the student's sense of belonging and connection to the school increase? Maxine Greene articulates the vision that I have for public schools:

Even in the small, the local spaces in which teaching is done, educators may begin creating the kinds of situations where, at the very least, students will begin telling stories of what they are seeking, what they know and might not yet know,

exchanging stories with each other grounded in other landscapes, at once bringing something into being that is in-between...it is at moments like these that persons begin to recognize each other and, in experience of recognition, feel the need to take responsibility for one another (Greene, 1993, p.218).

There are a variety of things that teachers can do in order to create such an environment. This could include creating situations where students feel safe the moment they enter the classroom and where students feel safe in interacting with each other. Students need to feel that they can trust both the teacher and other students.

But how does a teacher create an atmosphere of trust in a classroom environment? One of the things that I have always found odd is that the students in my classes do not know each other's names, even in the middle of a class discussion. This has happened several times in my career. I realize that I teach in a big school and that some of these students see each other for only one hour in a school day, but they do not seem to care if they know each other's names. If that is the case, do students then feel safe exchanging stories when they don't know their classmates names? I just take it for granted that they would know each other's names. After all, they are in a community, albeit a very loosely tied community. I wanted my World Religions class to be a little different than most classes so I began my course by introducing myself, explaining a bit of my identity, and then inviting each student to state his or her name and the reasons for taking the course. It seemed to set a different mood in the class but I am still unsure why. Students just seemed to respond differently to each other after that day. Since students choose to be in the elective course, it could be their attitude toward the course may be different. It could also be that the subject matter is much different than anything students have discussed

before so their curiosity about new ideas keeps them interested and respectful. I wonder if it is because students have to reveal a bit about themselves and then are more respectful because they themselves are vulnerable. I have not really tried this in my other classes because they are usually mandatory and larger. I feel those things sometimes affect student attitudes and behaviours in class. Students can remain faceless because of the large numbers and it would take an individual with a strong identity to reveal personal stories in that type of setting.

Large class sizes, in turn, affect a student's sense of belonging to a school and how it impacts his or her success in school. If a student does not feel a sense of belonging in school, subject matter will not seem relevant; if the student does not feel competent, the student's perceived level of potency will decrease. Therefore, the student's level of achievement will be much lower than if the student feels a connection to the school. A student's sense of belonging can come from peers or attachment to the school. It can also come from relationships with teachers and other school staff. It can also come from what is being taught, or not being taught, in the classroom. As more students of different cultural and religious backgrounds attend public schools, the standard curriculum of the past seems to be less and less relevant. As the students' backgrounds become more diverse, the curriculum needs to adapt so that each student's identity is valued.

In related studies, some researchers have tried to extend these arguments into the area of spiritual development and learning. Bagley & Mallick (1997) stated that students who belong to any particular religious faith generally have higher levels of self-esteem than those that do not belong to one. Donahue & Benson (1995) point to a link between religious faith and pro-social behaviour. Related to this, Park & Bonner (2008) found that

some sort of involvement in a religious faith has increased academic performance and achievement. Regnerus (2000) found that religious involvement has a positive relationship with both math and reading achievement among Grade Ten students in public high schools. Religious belief may have some positive effects on education but those effects could be due to the family and the religious community to which students belong. McEwan (1997) indicates that a curriculum that represents many cultures could provide significant opportunities to increase knowledge and tolerance amongst all students.

Religious beliefs, ideas and themes can greatly affect a student's identity yet should not be avoided. There are numerous reasons for this. Identity is always being shaped through experience and sometimes the spiritual and religious experience is neglected in a public school setting. The school setting is a great place to examine these religious topics, if done correctly in a caring and respectful manner. Students learn new ideas, learn to think critically, learn to be respectful towards others and most importantly, learn about themselves. These learning opportunities could then lead to increased student engagement and connection with the school, and maybe higher achievement.

Many researchers have called for the study of religions in schools (Owens 2002; Todd 2003). This would allow students to explore religious ideas and would also promote tolerance and mutual respect. As Broadbent (2002a) suggested, a specific course within a school should include both knowledge and meaning. It should be relevant to the religious context of the students and it should encourage critical thinking skills as well as discussion. Student responses overwhelmingly stated that religious ideas should be discussed in school, especially as our society becomes more diverse. Students that had

already experienced such discussions had found them to be very beneficial and felt that these discussions had a place in public school. Overwhelmingly, students see the need for discussions about religion.

There is still some debate as to whether these types of World Religions courses should be mandatory. Haynes (2006) believes a religion course should be mandatory for all students as the country is becoming more religiously diverse, yet there are not many cases where the course has been made mandatory by school boards. Students were divided as to whether the course should be required of students. Students in the World Religions courses believed courses should be mandatory because of their own personal experiences in the course. It is natural for them to see how it would also benefit others. But these students did acknowledge that not all students would be psychologically ready for such discussions. Researchers (Lester and Roberts 2006; Cavanagh 2006) have seen mandatory courses as successes because of the increase in religious knowledge and tolerance. McEwan (1997) suggested a curriculum should represent many cultures and moral perspectives that could provide significant opportunities for exploration and learning. Religious instruction should be avoided but the study of religion should be encouraged.

Students in the English and History courses felt a World Religions course should not be mandatory because they felt that some students may not be mature enough for such a course. These feelings of apprehension towards mandatory courses probably come from past experiences. There could be a variety of reasons as why these students felt this way but most would probably stem from a negative personal experience causing some sort of discomfort.

The discomfort about talking about religion may originate in comments from others, and would be more significant if these remarks were made by a teacher. Possible reasons could be students' perceptions of past discussions and how those discussions were handled by the teacher. The topic of religion is a very sensitive subject for many people, including students and teachers. If comments made by other students or teachers are seen as unpleasant, an individual's identity could be affected. This discomfort could then affect future experiences as well as learning.

As was seen in the questionnaires, students perceive situations involving religion or religious topics differently. While most are not affected, there are still students that have been impacted by these discussions and experiences. For some it is a beneficial, positive experience that has much value in the development of the student's identity. It is for these reasons that public schools should offer courses about religion and include religious topics in existing courses. The more students become familiar with basic knowledge and beliefs about others, the more accepting students are towards others. This becomes even more important as the province's population increases through immigration from other countries by people with other belief systems. The study of religion also provides for the development of critical thinking skills as students compare differing worldviews and philosophies.

The stories of the five students interviewed show that the faces of public school classrooms are changing. Students are no longer predominantly of one religion but now from many different backgrounds and religions. Public schools need to be sensitive to this and allow for the discussion of a variety of topics, including differing religious beliefs. The curriculums of different subjects should include and encourage the

discussion of religious beliefs, backgrounds and history so that students have a deeper understanding. Teachers should also not be apprehensive about discussing such issues in a classroom. The classroom should be a safe place where all are welcome and where all students and teachers can learn from each other. As our society and our public schools become more diverse and as there are a growing number of influences on students, there has never been a more crucial time for the study of religion and religious ideas in public schools.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **Student Perceptions on the Teaching of Religion in Public Schools**

Please read and answer each question carefully. You do not need to answer all the questions if you choose. If you require more space, please use the back of the question sheet.

1. What has been your experience, if any, with religion and/or any of the world's religions? Please be specific.
2. Throughout all of your schooling, recall any in-school experiences that relate to religious ideas, beliefs or experiences and please explain them.
3. Talk about how your beliefs about religion been affected by your schooling?
4. Now talk about how your schooling been affected by your religious beliefs?
5. What are your thoughts as to how religious ideas can be taught and discussed in school?

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Letter to School Board**

Department of Curriculum Studies  
College of Education  
University of Saskatchewan  
August 20, 2009

I am currently a graduate student at the University of Saskatchewan and have received permission from the university to conduct my research. With your permission, I wish to conduct research at some of the city's collegiates with Grade 12 students.

My research will focus on the experiences of secondary students with subjects of a religious nature in public schools. As the face of our public schools is changing due to immigration, the variety of religious beliefs amongst students is becoming more divergent.

Many teachers have now become very uncomfortable in dealing with religious beliefs and practices for fear of offending either students or the community. As a result, things deemed to be religious in nature are rarely discussed and sometimes even avoided. Recently, teachers and administrators have found it difficult to address issues around religion. For example, what types of distinctive religious dress should be allowed in school? Should there be a provision of prayer space in the school building? How does participation in mandatory physical education programs involving yoga, martial arts, or mixed sex swimming lessons affect students? How does the school accommodate religious-based clubs? How should conflict, with a religious component, amongst students be handled by staff?

I am curious as to how high school students feel that religion is dealt with at the school they attend. How do students feel religious beliefs are handled in other courses like science, history and English? If religious topics were discussed in an appropriate manner, would students of different religious backgrounds then have more of a sense of belonging with the public collegiate they attend?

The research will involve the students completing a short questionnaire followed by an interview with approximately 4-6 students who voluntarily would like to share their experiences in school with regards to religion and religious issues. Pseudonyms will be used for the school and the students and every effort will be made to guarantee anonymity and confidentiality. The school board will be supplied with a copy of the research report.

Permission to conduct this research has been granted by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioral Research Ethics Board on July 31, 2009. A copy of the letter of permission is appended.

Should you have any questions concerning the research, please feel free to contact my supervisor or me.

Glenn Patkau	Geraldine Balzer	Research Ethics Office
665-3080 (H)	966-6920	University of Saskatchewan
683-7950 (W)		Box 5000 RPO University
gwp138@usask.ca	Geraldine.balzer@usask.ca	Saskatoon, SK S7N 4J8
patkaug@spsd.sk.ca		966-2084

Yours sincerely,

Glenn Patkau

## **APPENDIX C**

### **Research Participant Information and Consent Form**

Title: Student Perceptions about the Teaching of Religion in Public School

Name of Researchers:

Dr. Geraldine Balzer, Ph.D., Professor, College of Education, University of Saskatchewan

Glenn Patkau, M.Ed Student, College of Education, University of Saskatchewan

Introduction: You are invited to participate in a research study. This is a way to learn more about students' perceptions about the teaching of religion in public schools.

If you decide to be a part of this study, it is important for you to understand what the research involves. This consent form will tell you about the study, why the research is being done, what will happen during the study and the possible benefits, risks and discomforts. If you wish to participate, you and your parents will be asked to sign this form. Your participation is entirely voluntary, so it is up to you to decide whether or not to take part in this study. If you do decide to take part in this study, you are free to withdraw at any time without giving any reasons for your decision and your refusal to participate will not affect your relationship with any of the researchers, teacher or any services at the school. Please take your time to read the following information carefully and, if you choose, discuss it with your family and friends before you decide.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of the study is to examine student perceptions of the teaching of religion in public schools. Many teachers have now become very uncomfortable in dealing with religious beliefs and practices for fear of offending either students or the community. As a result, things deemed to be religious in nature are rarely discussed and sometimes even avoided.

I am curious as to how high school students feel that religion is dealt with at the school they attend. How do students feel religious beliefs are handled in other courses like science, history and English? If religious topics were discussed in an appropriate manner, would students of different religious backgrounds then have more of a sense of belonging with the public collegiate they attend?

Approximately 60 students will be involved in this study.

#### Possible Benefits of the Study:

This survey will benefit researchers and administrators who want to know what students think about the teaching of religion and religious ideas in public schools.

#### Procedures:

If you agree to participate in this study, the following will happen:

Initially you will be given a questionnaire about your opinions on the teaching about religion in schools and some of your experiences with religious topics in school. I take your views very seriously, so take as much time as you need to fill out the questionnaire and please read the questions carefully. It should take about 15-30 minutes to complete.

After the initial results have been analyzed, some people may volunteer to take part in later interview. If you wish to take part in a later interview, please check the box at the bottom of this form. This interview will examine concepts and themes that have arisen from the questionnaires as well as examine students' experiences with religious topics in schools in more depth. This interview would take 30-60 minutes.

#### Foreseeable Risks, Side Effects or Discomfort:

This study is deemed as low risk. Topics of a religious nature can be sensitive for some people and may cause some distress among friends and family members. There may be some emotional discomfort if past experiences are negative in nature. If the participant or the researcher feels that the issues raised are too sensitive, the participant may withdraw, or be asked to withdraw, from the study.

#### Confidentiality:

When finished with this study, a report will be written about what was learned. This report will not include your name or that you were in the study, so please do not write your name on the survey, unless you wish to be contacted for a later interview. No one except the research team will have access to the completed surveys.

#### Storage of Data:

All raw data will be kept locked in a secure location so it cannot be linked to the data files. The tapes and transcriptions will be stored in a secure place by the principal researcher, Glenn Patkau, until the completion of the study. Following the completion of the study, the data collected from the interview tapes and questionnaires will be stored at the University of Saskatchewan in Dr. Geraldine Balzer's office for a period of 5 years. If the data is destroyed at that time, it will be appropriately destroyed.

Contact:

If you have any questions about the study, or about what you are doing in the study, you may ask the person who is conducting the study, the research supervisor or the research ethics office at the university.

Glenn Patkau	Geraldine Balzer, Ph.D.	Research Ethics Office
665-3080 (H)	966-6920	University of Saskatchewan
683-7950 (W)		Box 5000 RPO University
gwp138@usask.ca	Geraldine.balzer@usask.ca	Saskatoon, SK S7N 4J8
patkaug@spsd.sk.ca		966-2084

By signing below, I confirm the following:

-I have read the research subject information and consent form and I understand the contents of this form.

-I have had sufficient time to consider the information provided and to ask for advice if necessary.

-I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had satisfactory responses to my questions.

-I understand that all of the information collected will be kept confidential and that the result will only be used for research objectives.

-I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and that I am completely free to refuse to participate or to withdraw from this study at any time without changing in any way the quality of services from the university and the school board.

-I understand that I am not waiving any of my legal rights as a result of signing this consent form.

-I understand that there is not guarantee that this study will provide any benefits to me.

-I have read this form and I freely consent to participate in this study.

-I will receive a dated and signed copy of this form

If you decide you want to be in this study, please sign your name.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, want to be in this research study.

(Print your name here)

\_\_\_\_\_

(Sign your name here)      (Date)

If under 18 years of age, consent needs to be given by a parent or guardian.

Parent/Guardian (printed): \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian Signature: \_\_\_\_\_      Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Do you wish to take part in a later interview? Please check the appropriate box:

\_\_\_ No

\_\_\_ Yes

If yes, please give your name and email address so that I may contact you for a possible interview.

## **APPENDIX D**

### **Data/Transcript Release Form**

#### GENERAL INFORMATION

I appreciate your participation in my research study. I have made a written transcription of our interview. I am returning the transcriptions for your perusal and the release of confidential information. I will adhere to the following guidelines which are designed to protect your confidentiality and interests in the study.

1. Would you please read and recheck the transcripts for accuracy of information. You may add to or clarify the transcripts to say what you intended to mean or include additional comments that will be your words. You may also delete any information that you may not want to be quoted in the study.
2. The interpretations from this study will be used in a thesis and scholarly journal articles or other similar publications and presentations. You will be represented by a pseudonym in the thesis and in all publications and presentations.
3. In accordance with the University of Saskatchewan Guidelines on Behavioral Ethics, the recordings and transcriptions made during the study will be kept in a locked file until the study is complete. The tapes and transcripts will be stored in a secure place by the principal investigator, Glenn Patkau, until the completion of the study. From this time on, Dr. Geraldine Balzer will store the data in a locked office at the University of Saskatchewan for five years. After that time the recordings will be destroyed.
4. Participation in the study is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time without penalty. If this happens, the tape recordings and interview data will not be used.

#### AUTHORIZATION OF RELEASE

“I, \_\_\_\_\_, have reviewed the complete transcript of my personal interview in this study. I acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said on \_\_\_\_\_ in my personal interview with Glenn Patkau. I hereby authorize the release of this transcript to Glenn Patkau to be used in the manner described in the consent form. I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.”

SIGNATURES

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Signature of Participant

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Date

---

Signature of Glenn Patkau

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Date

Researcher

## **APPENDIX E**

### **Letter to Parents and Students**

March 10, 2009

Dear Parents and Students,

I am a graduate student at the University of Saskatchewan and have received permission from the university and the school board to conduct research about student perceptions on the teaching of religion in public schools.

I will be asking the participating students to complete a questionnaire outlining their experiences in the dealing of religion in public schools. From those responses I will look for themes and categories in student experiences. After the completion in May and June, I will be interviewing the participants to hear their stories and find out how they think dealing with religious subjects in school has affected them.

The data I collect will be used to determine the ways in which public schools deal with the topic of religion and as such shape and change student views and identity. The data will also be used to evaluate the program and determine whether or not it is meeting the goals the school has set out. A copy of my final report will be submitted to the school board and will be available to you or your child should you request it. Students are not compelled to take part in the research project and those who do agree may also withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms will be used to guarantee the anonymity of the student. There will be no repercussions if students do not wish to participate.

Consent forms with detailed information concerning the study are attached. If your child wishes to participate, please sign and return the form.

Should you have any questions concerning this research study, please contact the Office of Research Services, my supervisors, or me.

Yours sincerely,

Glenn Patkau  
M. Ed. Student  
Faculty of Education  
University of Saskatchewan  
gwp138@usask.sk.ca