"But we're already doing it": Ontario Teachers' Responses to Policies on Religious Inclusion and Accommodation in Public Schools

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Examining schools through the theoretical lens of the New Institutionalism, this study uses semi-structured, face-to-face interviews to explore (1) how religious diversity is addressed by teachers in the public school system, and (2) the accommodations that are made for students of diverse faiths. Policies on religious accommodation receive tight coupling with teaching practice due to the tangible nature of requests for religious accommodation and because students' or parents' direct requests require immediate attention. This study also finds a strong correlation with the decoupling argument regarding policies on inclusive education. The teachers interviewed interpret what "religious inclusion" means and how it corresponds with their own pre-existing ideas and teaching practice, as they make decisions based on their students' unique needs.

Adoptant la perspective théorique du Nouvel Institutionnalisme, cette étude examine, par le biais d'entrevues semis-structurées et en personne, des écoles pour mieux connaitre (1) la façon dont les enseignants traitent la diversité religieuse au sein du système scolaire publique et (2) les accommodements fournis aux élèves de diverses croyances religieuses. Il existe un lien serré entre les politiques relatives aux accommodements et la pratique pédagogique, notamment en cause du caractère tangible des demandes pour ce genre d'adaptations, d'une part, et parce que les requêtes directes des élèves ou des parents exigent une attention immédiate, d'autre part. Cette étude a également trouvé une forte corrélation avec l'argument du découplage relativement aux politiques sur l'éducation inclusive. Les enseignants ayant passé les entrevues interprètent le sens de l'expression « inclusion religieuse » et évaluent dans quelle mesure elle correspond à leurs propres idées préconçues et leur pratique pédagogique lorsqu'ils prennent des décisions fondées sur les besoins particuliers de leurs élèves.

Introduction

The inclusion of students of all faiths is an ongoing challenge for North American public education. Multiculturalism, an ideology that promotes and embraces diversity,[1] is rooted in Canada's national culture through the Multicultural Policy established of 1971. Inclusion of religious and cultural diversity has most recently been addressed by the Ontario Ministry of Education's (2009) *Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy*. Certainly, pressures to

instill more equitable practices and ideas of inclusion are not new concepts to schools. The challenges and complexities of inclusion in North American society and schooling have long been debated in academic scholarship (for an historical overview of the response to diversity in Ontario schools, see Harper, 1997). However, do these ideals, and the policies that are based on them, actually make an impact in the classroom environment?

New Institutionalism is an organizational theory that considers the relationship between institutions and their environments, and a useful tool in examining how reforms are enacted in schools (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, 1978). While some researchers assert that implementation changes in curriculum and policy are often marginal and superficial (Beck, Czerniak & Lumpe, 2000; Binder, 2000; Smith, 2000; Spillane & Zeuli, 1999), others demonstrate that teachers do in fact implement new reforms to various degrees, due to pressures such as increased focus on testing and accountability, as well as teachers' own initiatives to improve their classroom practice (Coburn, 2001, 2004; Davies, Quirke & Aurini, 2006). Using New Institutionalism, this paper contributes an examination of how elementary public school teachers respond to Ontario policy initiatives regarding inclusion and accommodation of people of different faiths.

I begin with a review of the literature that focuses on teachers' responses to religion in public schools. I then summarize New Institutionalism theory and empirical research on how teachers respond to changes in curriculum and policy. After briefly outlining the context and methodology, I highlight four categories of response to religious diversity based on my interview data: (1) diversity outside of the classroom and school, (2) diversity in the classroom and school, (3) curriculum, and (4) requests for religious accommodation. Finally, I discuss implications for policy and teaching practice in light of New Institutionalism. The findings provide valuable insight into how teachers act on inclusive education and religious accommodation policies. The value in decoupling policy and practice allows teachers to incorporate policy initiatives in a way that fits with their own beliefs about teaching, what religious inclusion means, and their interpretation of what will benefit their students. Conversely, allowing teachers too much latitude in interpreting what "inclusion of religion" looks like in their classroom can be challenging. This can lead to misunderstandings regarding students' religious beliefs due to lack of knowledge, preconceived notions about certain religions, and/or limited resources.

Review of the Literature: Religious Inclusion and Accommodation in Education

A large body of scholarship on religious diversity in education falls under the umbrella of multicultural and anti-racist theories (Banks, 1995a, 1995b, 2001; Connelly, Phillion & He, 2003; Dei, James, James-Wilson, Karumanchery, & Zine, 2000; Dei & James, 2002). This research primarily examines the influence of culture and/or race on students' educational outcomes, with explicit discussion of religious diversity often relegated to the periphery of these larger discourses. Some scholarship aims to justify teaching about religion in education and how students can benefit from its inclusion (e.g., Ipgrave, 2004, 2010; Moore, 2007; Scribner & Fusarelli, 1996). These scholars emphasize schools' important roles in reinforcing a student's religious identity and in building social understanding of differences.

Beyond the theoretical literature, empirical studies explore how religious diversity and inclusion of religion is being addressed by teachers and teacher education programs, especially in social studies education. For example, social perspective taking, where students are encouraged to perceive the feelings and thoughts of others (Gehlback, 2011), and teaching for social justice (Kelly & Brandes, 2010) are recommended approaches for social studies teachers

to include their students' various worldviews. Niyozov (2010) found that Toronto high school science teachers provided space in their curriculum for creationist and evolutionary theories of origin (see also Southerland & Scharmann, 2013). However, while teachers are willing to present both theories in their lessons, they remained unsure of whether they should allow students to decide evolution is false since it is a requirement of the curriculum. Niyozov also found that teachers find flexibility in other areas of the curriculum to allow for more diversity, such as choosing a novel by a Muslim author. Niyozov and Pluim (2009) note that many public school teachers in Western societies are religious themselves, and recognize the need for curricular inclusion of religion (see also Niyozov, 2010). Some of these teachers choose to be open with students about their beliefs in order to create a space of acceptance and willingness to dialogue with students about religion. Moreover, they reported being candid with students about their own experiences with stereotypes and racism in order to help students open up about these issues.

Religious pluralism within classrooms presents teachers with diverse and sometimes conflicting perspectives. In their focus on three Muslim majority primary schools in England, Ipgrave, Miller, and Hopkins (2010) find that school leaders (e.g., administration, head teachers) in all of three schools acknowledge the importance of including students' religious background in lessons as a means of boosting engagement and achievement. In this inclusion, these authors find that schools often choose how they will present a religion to the school population. Characterizing a religious perspective in the curriculum may not always reflect the particular religious practices or traditions of the families in the school, which could lead students' to an overgeneralized view of a particular religion, and ignorance of internal religious diversity (Ipgrave 2010, 2011; Ipgrave, Miller & Hopkins, 2010). In a similar vein, Niyozov and Pluim (2009) remark that teachers compensate for stereotypical presentations of Islam in textbooks by offering a "romanticized" version of Islam (p. 649).

Regarding religious accommodation, teachers are aware that there are differing views within a particular faith, and that some parents are more permissive than others (Chan, 2006; Collet, 2007; Niyozov & Pluim, 2009). In her ethnographic study of a Toronto public middle school, Chan (2006) documents teachers' disappointment when some of their students are not permitted to participate in an overnight field trip for religious and cultural reasons. She notes that although the teachers she observed wanted to learn more about the cultural and religious differences of the parents of their students, their own views of the nature and purpose of schooling often diverged from those of the parents. For instance, one male teacher struggled with his female students wearing the hijab because he saw it as a symbol of oppression for women. This conflicted with his belief that parents should be able to foster their religio-cultural values in their children. Chan's (2006) study highlights the good intentions of teachers, but also demonstrates the lack of connection between public school teachers and religiously devout families. Conversely, other scholars find that teachers are able to resolve Muslim parents' concerns about field trips and curricular and extracurricular activities such as music, sex education, and physical education (Collet, 2007; Niyozov, 2010).

The studies reviewed indicate that classroom teachers respond to religious diversity in reactive and proactive ways. Further, these studies present high school and middle school teachers' views of working with Muslim students in the classroom (with the exception of Ipgrave, Miller and Hopkins' (2010) work in primary schools in England). I offer a broader examination of religious diversity by asking teachers about their experiences with all religious backgrounds in their classrooms. As children begin to question the differences between people

at younger ages (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Mardell & Abo-Zena, 2010), it is important to consider how elementary school teachers formulate their own interpretations of religious inclusion and accommodation in their day-to-day classroom experiences.

The New Institutionalism: Translating Policy into Practice

New Institutionalists state that schooling's institutional nature and structure present challenges to measuring the quality of learning within the classroom. One of New Institutionalism studies' main concepts is that decoupling (separating or disassociating prescribed changes or initiatives from classroom practice) insulates the classroom from environmental pressures (Coburn, 2001, 2004; Meyer & Rowan, 1977, 1978). While schools may respond to environmental pressures by making representational changes to procedures, these changes do not necessarily have an impact on teachers' work in the classroom. Schools do conform externally to the traditional conventions of schooling (e.g., school buildings are fairly uniform, students are divided by grades, teachers are certified), contributing to the legitimacy of the organization. The internal workings of schools are heterogeneous however, especially within individual classrooms. This mismatch between internal instruction and external organizational structure led Meyer and Rowan (1977, 1978) to develop the concept "loosely coupled".[2] They argue that in educational institutions, certain aspects such as hiring practices are tightly coupled, while instruction is often loosely coupled with the overall organizational structure.

According to Meyer and Rowan (1978), schools may avoid close control of instruction because supervision and instructional activities might uncover discrepancies that would make stakeholders doubt their legitimacy. Additionally, schools are often expected to "be all things to all people", making a strict set of guidelines for what should be covered in each classroom difficult to enforce (Davies & Zarifa, 2009). Even though the ties between the external organization and the internal workings of the system are loosely coupled, teachers do manage to perform their work with a fair amount of confidence from the constituents in their district (Davies & Zarifa, 2009; Meyer & Rowan, 1978).

According to the New Institutionalism, schools have a tendency to become more alike over time, making large-scale reforms difficult (see Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Organizational life becomes influenced by the consciousness of "this is how things are done" (Zucker, 1991, p. 83). The idea of loose coupling is essential to describing how policies may or may not make lasting changes in the classroom. Changes that do occur are more likely to be enacted by the teacher in the classroom, and these changes are more likely to endure if they have the support of the organization (Meyer, Scott & Deal, 1981).

The literature that examines how teachers make sense of educational reform and how they interpret the curriculum or policies in question is useful in examining change within the classroom. Teachers' ability to assimilate new ideas into their way of doing things was a common theme. For the most part, teachers' level of commitment to changing practice and implementing policies often depends on the extent to which the new strategies are a good "fit" with their previous teaching practice, and their own beliefs about teaching (Beck, Czerniak, & Lumpe, 2000; Coburn, 2001, 2004; Smith, 2000; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Spillane & Zeuli, 1999). Another commonality was the need for resources to ensure successful implementation of changes. School board initiatives are more likely to be coupled with instructional practice when there is a provision of resources (e.g. time, training, materials) that enable implementation of the reform (Binder, 2000; Gamoran & Dreeben, 1986; Spillane,

1999).

Language also matters. Ashcraft's (2004) study of one school district's response to diversity emphasized the importance of semantics in agendas advocating school reform. There was considerable variance in how teachers and/or school districts made sense of policy and rhetoric for ill defined, or nebulous, terms such as "valuing diversity", "respect", or "tolerance". Because these concepts are not always clearly outlined in policy documents, and are often interpreted differently, talking to teachers directly about how they make sense of policy is therefore beneficial in exploring school reform.

Methods

I conducted interviews with teachers from two public school boards in Ontario. Both boards are home to mid-sized Canadian cities, as well as surrounding suburban and rural areas. Notably, both of these cities include some of the highest levels of religio-cultural diversity in Canada. I conducted in-depth, semi-structured individual interviews with nine public school elementary teachers (8 female, 1 male) in the summer of 2011. Participants were recruited through connections with my colleagues and snowball sampling. The teachers ranged from eight to thirty-four years of teaching experience (mean = 13 years) and were from seven different public schools, including rural, suburban and urban areas (see Table 1 for teacher profiles in the Appendix).

Prior to the teacher interviews, I reviewed the relevant inclusive education and religious accommodation policies, and also interviewed three representatives from the two school boards. This provided pertinent context in understanding how the policies were created, and how boards provided resources, programs, and/or in-service training for teachers regarding to the religious diversity in their regions. All interviews took place at locations of the participants' choosing, lasted 45 minutes to 1.5 hours, and were digitally recorded and transcribed with the interviewees' permission.

The semi-structured interview format allowed for elaboration with classroom examples and/or anecdotes. By focusing on the context of the school and allowing teachers to talk about their teaching practice, I attempted to gain insight into how they view their role in enacting policies on religious accommodation. As a teacher who has worked in both public and private schooling, I tried to be aware of my own assumptions and endeavored to avoid bias in my wording of questions. I further sensed that my background in teaching increased participant comfort, as it marked me as an insider.

Due to the short time frame in which the interviews were conducted, my research design consisted of concurrent data collection and analysis. In analysis, I looked for re-occurring themes in teachers' responses to religious diversity in their classrooms and policies that address religion. For example, religious inclusion in schools' holiday concerts was a theme that I identified early on in the analysis. While I did not originally have a question about how schools handled "winter break", I added a question about this for future interviews after preliminary analysis. I rarely asked the question, however, because participants often brought up the topic themselves. Teachers were quite candid about how they responded to various aspects of religious diversity they encounter in their teaching practice. I used thematic analysis and performed several passes through the data to ensure that codes identified earlier on were narrowed down, and that repeated patterns, themes, or differences were detected in the data (Braun & Clark, 2006).

I acknowledge that my sampling of teachers is limited and subject to self-selection bias. It is likely that the teachers who voluntarily participated are interested in the topic of religious inclusion and accommodation. My data collection depended upon how much teachers shared with me and where they see religious inclusion and accommodation policies fitting into the overall curriculum and their classroom practice.

Teachers' Responses to Religious Diversity

All of the teachers in this study acknowledged the importance of multicultural education and affirmed the significance of religion as an important aspect of Canadian society. Participants were aware of their Board's policies on equity and diversity and religious accommodation via school staff meetings, however, they held the position that these policies and procedures varied within their classroom teaching and schools' activities. I found four categories of response to the different ways that teachers respond to religious diversity in the public school classroom: (1) diversity outside of the classroom and school, (2) diversity in the classroom and school, (3) curriculum, and (4) requests for religious accommodation.

Responding to Diversity Outside of the Classroom and School: Inclusion by Omission

In order to reflect Canada's religious diversity, many teachers advocated what I term *inclusion by omission*. This occurs when religious diversity in society is broadly acknowledged, but not the specific religious diversity in the school or classroom. This category of response presented itself in the interviews in two ways. First, inclusion by omission implies that teachers include certain religious groups in lessons, but not necessarily the ones reflected in their classroom or the school. Second, in order not to offend anyone and/or not to leave anyone out, teachers omitted or diluted the notion of "religion" and the "religious" from all classroom and school activities.

In the first approach, the teacher abstractly included religion as a part of society and culture, reasoning that no individual was left out because they are not specifically teaching about any of the obvious religious minorities that are represented in the classroom. For example, when asked if she felt that all of the religious backgrounds of her students were fairly and equally represented in her lessons, Jenna asserted that she has not done explicit teaching about the religions embodied in her classroom. Rather, she discusses religion with her students as it came up in a book they are reading in class, such as describing a Buddhist book character with no Buddhist students in the class. She stated, "So, they were equally represented in that we were looking at entirely different religions and cultural beliefs. You know what I mean? So rather than including them, I'm including them by not including them I guess". Also concerned with not leaving any students out, Michelle noted that because it is not always possible to know every student's religious background, she focused on "what is done in Canada" when teaching about traditions and celebrations. For instance, she presents Thanksgiving as a holiday of "thankfulness", Valentine's Day as a celebration of "friendship and love", and Christmas as a holiday of "giving". This notion of focusing on Canadian traditions assumes that these celebrations or holidays do not have either religious roots, or contemporary religious significance. In an effort to teach about various groups in either Canadian society or the world, teachers may deliberately overlook the beliefs or heritage of the students represented in their classrooms.

Teachers also reported avoiding or downplaying religious themes in the curriculum in their efforts to be inclusive of all students. Two teachers said that they have selectively eschewed some instruction about religious diversity when teaching a grade two *Celebrations and Traditions*[3] unit, to show sensitivity to students who are Jehovah's Witnesses. In an effort to be inclusive, teachers also deliberately overlooked religion in classroom and school activities because they report that it is not possible to represent all religions. This was most notable in teachers' discussion of Christmas, where four respondents said that rather than holding "traditional holiday concerts" their schools have students sing songs about snow and peace. Another four noted that their schools have December concerts embracing the celebrations or traditions of minority faiths that occur at that time of year, such as Chanukah. The last participant, Eddie, reported that his school has a "traditional" Judeo-Christian Christmas celebration.

For the most part, teachers include religion in their classrooms by addressing Canada's diversity. In this, a teacher may or may not address religious diversities within their classroom, but would still feel that they are acknowledging religious diversity in general.

Responding to Diversity in the Classroom and the School: Inclusion by Identification

Inclusion by identification occurs when teachers recognize the religious diversity within their specific classrooms or schools. To do this, they address students' religious backgrounds when they teach units, lead class discussions, or have students communicate a part of their religious beliefs or practices with the class. A problem that can occur with inclusion by identification is the dilemma with identification itself. That is, individuals who self-identify can receive recognition while others might still be ignored, and still more may not wish to be identified or centred out for their faith.

Having students speak about a significant tradition or celebration is a common way for teachers to include students' religions. This often occurs after a student has time away from school to observe their holy day(s) and they tell the class about the celebration, or share traditional foods. The teachers interviewed were quite willing to have students describe their experiences as, for them, it facilitated students' feeling special and included, while simultaneously informing teachers who may not have known a lot about a particular religion.

Teachers also addressed students' religious questions, noting that students learned more about each other based on inquiries about why some students did not celebrate certain holidays, or why they dressed in a certain way. Often, the answers or discussion that follow student inquiries focused on the need for general acceptance of differences, rather than learning about the specifics of another persons' religious beliefs.

Apart from religious accommodation, teachers' most common response to religious diversity is through "holiday" concerts that take a basic multicultural approach (Banks, 1995a & 1995b). Unlike most of the schools represented in the interviews, Eddie's school presents the Christian aspect of Christmas due in large part to the rural community in which his school is located. As such, his school is a good example of inclusion by identification as it presents one perspective to a very homogeneous population that identifies as Christian.

Certain schools have more religiously diverse populations than others. Three teachers reported large populations of immigrant and refugee families in their schools, many of whom were unaccustomed to separating the religious from other aspects of their lives (Ipgrave, Miller & Hopkins, 2010; Niyozov & Pluim, 2009). Addressing matters of a religious nature can

therefore be, a daily occurrence for the teachers of these students, presenting a unique dynamic regarding religious inclusion and accommodation. Madeline, an ESL teacher for refugee students, states that she frequently talks about tolerance and religious differences:

> It's a normal part of our lives, so the thing about our classroom which would be unique from a regular classroom is that it [topics of a religious nature] probably pops up a whole lot more, and our kids are coming from backgrounds where tolerance wasn't taught in the framework, so I have to teach them tolerance . . . So, at lunch time, when someone's eating bologna and the Muslims are going, "Is that a pig?" . . . I've had to work with Muslim kids to say, "They can eat that because they're not Muslim and it's not against their religion to eat that" and they'll go "Oh!" and that's a new idea for them . . . and so they start to realize that different religions have different rules, and it makes sense to them that you follow your own religion's rules.

Due to the religious composition of her classroom, Madeline responds to religious diversity more frequently than most of the other teachers interviewed. For the most part, however, teachers' responses to religious diversity in their classrooms were more about being open to the opportunity that students present in sharing a part of what is important to them and by responding to questions that may "pop up" in formal and informal conversations in the classroom.

Responding to Curriculum: Finding Curricular "Ties"

Teachers have opportunities to teach about religion within the formal curriculum. There are several subject areas where they incorporate religious themes in their teaching, with most of the respondents implementing those "ties" in social studies curricula. Three out of the four kindergarten teachers interviewed incorporate religio-cultural themes at some level in their program, which was done primarily through a traditions and celebrations approach. Sandy and Julia both teach a unit in December that focused on the celebrations that occur at that time of year: Christmas, Chanukah, Chinese New Year, Kwanza, and Eid (depending on the year). Both reported focusing more on the cultural aspects (e.g., food, traditional dress) than the specific religious aspects or history of the celebration because they felt that their students were too young for education about religions. One kindergarten teacher, however, was intentional about teaching religion in her diverse urban classroom:

> I try to emphasize what all stories have in common. Well, Chanukah has lights and candles and so does Diwali, so does Christmas, so does Chinese New Year. So that's kind of how I focus on it with the celebrations and lights. Also, almost every religion and faith group has some kind of peace emphasis except for, I'm sad to say, Muslims . . . So I try to pick out things that you know we can relate to because the whole peace and conflict in school right, it's zero tolerance, so we can talk about peace, we talk about light and welcoming, we talk about how do families celebrate.

Lily comments that because touching on religious themes can be a sensitive topic for some parents, she presented religions within a framework of peace and light as her way of making the subject more palatable.

While teachers reported that the grade two social studies unit of traditions and celebrations had the most explicit tie to inclusion of religion, there were other units in the social studies curriculum with links to religion. In reference to teaching medieval times, Grace states:

> A touchy one would be the Crusades where you've got the Christians and the Muslims, you know like the "good" guy, "bad" guy. It used to be that the Christians were the good guys and the Muslims were the bad guys. This has to be shelved and taught what they were looking for and what they were trying to learn from each other and what resulted from that; the good things that came out of that.

Eddie also mentions the importance of presenting "both sides" of the Crusades. Three other teachers had previously taught grade four social studies without explicitly mentioning religion. This omission could be due, in part, to lack of good resources. For instance, Madeline tried to use a medieval times unit written from an Islamic perspective from her school board, but found it impractical as the reading was at a grade eight level.

Apart from social studies, teachers also made connections in language arts lessons where they address religious themes that came up in novels or textbooks. In addition to the prescribed curriculum and the conversations that can arise within day-to-day interactions, other co-curricular media such as pictures, posters, student artwork, or classroom work were areas in which teachers felt that religious diversity was fairly represented. Teachers thought that there could be more resources like books and videos available through their school board that specifically addressed religion, but they reported "making do" with what they have on hand. Thus, while the Ontario curriculum does not have an explicit course for teaching world religions at the elementary level as it does for secondary school, most of the teachers interviewed found pockets in the curriculum to implicitly and explicitly include religious themes.

Responding to Requests for Religious Accommodation

A request for religious accommodation was the most recognizable way for teachers to respond to religious diversity because it was so tangible; students make a request and teachers could accommodate or deny it[4]. Certain religious accommodations do not need to be approved by classroom teachers, as they are already specified within school policy. One such accommodation is the matter of religious dress[5]. Students do not need to get clearance from the teacher to wear the *hijab*, *patka*, or the *yarmulke*. Likewise, absence for the observance of holy days and celebrations and dietary requirements do not present any difficulties for students or parents to obtain.

Participation in school curriculum, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities receive the most attention from teachers because they have a direct effect on their classroom activities. As per school board policies on religious accommodation, students can opt out of participating in a curricular unit conflicting with their religious values and/or beliefs. For example, some parents communicated concerns regarding music and dance in the Arts curriculum. Both Jill and Madeline compromised with parents regarding dances that students were learning in class, and reached satisfactory resolutions by talking to parents and addressing their concerns. As Madeline noted:

> The tricky thing is balancing the child's right and desire versus the parent's right . . . He didn't want his daughter dancing in front of the school . . . So I accommodated his request not to have her dance in front of the group, so I let the girls dance with just the girls. So that's an accommodation. His problem was her dancing in front of the boys. So when you have the dialogue, you can find a way through it and if not then they have a right to exempt their child and there's something we can write on the report card for that, an exemption comment so we handle it that way.

With respect to parents' and students' curricular concerns, Eddie recalls a situation where an accommodation to add to the curriculum was not granted, but opting out of a particular portion of the curriculum was permitted:

> I've heard of a teacher, he's actually a friend of mine, and he wasn't willing to accommodate the families [in teaching the Creationist perspective along with Evolution]. He said, "You know, this is what we teach. This is a public school. This is in the textbooks and this is what we're going to teach". And I'm not sure how the students dealt with that. I think they were taken out of the classroom for part of the time.

In most cases, however, explaining the curriculum content and possible pedagogical strategies to parents, alleviated concerns.

While the standard curriculum receives some attention with respect to religious accommodation, co-curricular activities receive the most consideration from parents. Halloween activities can be a concern for some parents and teachers. Most teachers reported that accommodations were easily made, as other activities were provided for students while the class had their Halloween party, or school-wide parade. Two teachers reported not understanding why such a fuss is sometimes made about this social tradition, and it was a touchy subject when the teacher sensed that a child felt left out. In her response to this dilemma, Lily shared:

> Um, ironically, the Jehovah's Witnesses are the ones that I get the most pleading about, "Oh, please, can you bring me a costume to wear at school?" So, I do, and I figure that if they want to put it on during the school day, so what? They don't participate in the Halloween parade, but they can wear the costume. Because I usually bring in like a community helper costume that I have so they can put on the fireman's outfit with the hat and boots . . . It's like the more you forbid, you're not really helping things.

The above example reflects a teachers' misapprehension about the practices of a religious minority. However, teachers can also be discriminatory when students reflect different worldviews than what is presented in the curriculum or even from the teachers' own worldviews. Madeline related an incident about discrimination between another teacher and student in terms of conflicting beliefs within the classroom about theories of origin:

> He had a religious child in their class, like a Christian in their class, and every time the topic of evolution came up they'd say "But I believe that God created the world" and both of those teachers took those children to task on it and humiliated them in front of the class. So, one of the children said something like: "Dinosaurs were around at the same time the people were," um, cause I guess that maybe is a young earth creationist point of view, but the teacher said, "No, you're wrong, that's called the Flintstones." So, absolutely humiliated him.

Misunderstandings and lack of tolerance also happened between teachers and students when teachers do not understand, or even tolerate in some instances, certain aspects of a child's religious beliefs or practice. The beliefs and practices of Jehovah's Witness students, for example, is something that teachers found difficult to understand because these families do not celebrate any traditions or celebrations. The idea that students would miss out on a birthday party was unfathomable, with two teachers asserting, "It's just a cupcake".

While accommodation for Halloween and other traditions or celebrations are yearly

occurrences for the teacher, other religious accommodations were less frequent (e.g., exemption from watching movies, Mexican Mennonite children opting out of a project on World War II, absence for religiously-based circumcision). Due to the differences between religions and even the variations within religions themselves, teachers customarily responded to accommodation requests on an individual basis.

Some of the responses in the four categories require immediate attention from teachers and are difficult to ignore; others demonstrate intentional actions from the teacher to be inclusive of religion. Responses to requests for religious accommodation are what I would term *reactionary* responses to religious diversity, meaning that a request was made, and then the classroom teacher would have to address it in some way. Ipgrave (2010, 2011) calls this "permissive inclusion" where students are allowed to express their religious identity through prayer space provided by the school, religious dress, and time off for religious days of significance. The other three categories of findings, responding to diversity inside and outside the classroom and school, and responding to the curriculum, often require the teacher to be *proactively* inclusive. This "affirmative inclusion" is when teachers recognize the religion of their students through school events and the curriculum (Ipgrave 2010, 2011). In either of these positions of identity-based inclusion, there are implications for policy and practice that are related below within the New Institutionalism's concept of loose coupling.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The data indicates that elementary school classroom teachers have a variety of responses to religious diversity. While my participants were aware that they should be inclusive of all students, they were unclear on what this should look like, and the school board's policy on equity and inclusion did not provide adequately explicit interpretation. While all of the teachers were at least somewhat familiar with policies related to religious inclusion, their responses to religious diversity were more grounded in the day-to-day interactions of the classroom and school environment, rather than a concerted effort to implement policy. With regards to religious accommodation, both Boards had yet to fully enact their new policies at the time of interviews, but this was not problematic for teachers as they often make accommodations based on individual requests from parents and students. Pressures to instil more equitable practices and ideas of inclusion are not new concepts to the public education system. The challenge to researchers and policy makers is to understand how teachers approach their classroom practice, and make decisions to change existing patterns of instruction.

The Value of Decoupling Policy and Practice

The findings of this study do not neatly fit into categories on a spectrum from rejection to complete implementation, as one might find in a study on mathematics reform. Indeed, while teachers have some autonomy in deciding how they will enact educational reforms, they will most likely couple their teaching tightly with changes in core curricular areas. Spillane and Burch (2006) found that academic content received tighter coupling than did other issues relating to policy and practice. Inclusive education policies challenge the status quo in seeking to change teaching practice, therefore, it is important to examine how changes in policy are enacted, or not, within schools (Binder, 2000). Teachers in this study have responded in a seemingly typical way to external pressures for reform. That is, teachers' actions in the

classroom aligned with policy when they considered it a good fit with their current practices, or needed to incorporate change for what they perceived would benefit their students. When asked to describe their current class, all of the participants ordered their priorities as students' learning disabilities, behavioural difficulties, and lastly, their religio-cultural distinctions. This reflected common practice of teachers to assess the needs of their students and then address the most immediate needs. Therefore, reforms on inclusion of religion can often take a back seat to what teachers perceive are the more pressing needs in the classroom.

While teachers' professional autonomy and confidence grants them a fair amount of control over the daily decisions they make in the classroom, there are some limits to teachers' latitude with curriculum. Coburn (2004) calls this "bounded autonomy" where teachers "actively mediate messages about what constitutes 'good' practice" (p. 235). In this study, it was clear that the teachers were "bound" by the curriculum, as they were somewhat limited to the units presented in the Ontario curriculum. A teacher could not decide to teach a grade six social studies unit on world religions because no such unit exists. Conversely, when teaching a unit on medieval times, where one of the expectations is "describe some of the ways in which religions shaped medieval society" (Ontario, 2004, p. 27), teachers could make decisions about what to include and omit in their coverage of a topic.

The participants found it easiest to address those topics that arose within classroom dialogue when they were congruent with their own beliefs about teaching and religious diversity. Teachers drew upon previous interactions with ideas of multiculturalism and inclusion to make sense of new policies. Similar to Spillane and Zeuli's (1999) teachers and mathematics reform, many of the teachers interviewed felt that they had been applying the policy changes by asserting that they were "already doing it".

The Complexity of Interpretation

While there is value in decoupling policy from practice, having too much latitude in interpreting what religious inclusion means can be challenging and lead to misunderstandings. Binder (2000) found that resources and support available from a given district played a large role in her report on Afrocentric curriculum reform. In this study, school boards' support of religious inclusion policies was lacklustre, consisting of just staff meeting discussions and optional workshops. Beyond basic training in staff meetings about the content of the policies, there was no stated intention to follow the recommendations of anti-racist and multicultural education scholars and hold in-service training that confronted teachers with their own pre-conceived notions and prejudices about religion (Banks, 1995a & 1995b; Corson, 1991; Dei et al., 2000; Moore, 2007). Both misunderstandings and prejudices regarding students' beliefs and practices were evident in some of the comments and examples given by my participants, such as one teacher's notion that Islam does not have teaching about peace in its framework, or that students' endorsement of a young Earth creationist perspective needed to be publicly corrected.

Questions also arise regarding teachers' decisions about monitoring students in practicing their faith. One teacher did not feel it was her place to talk to a student about putting the hijab back on or about taking off make-up, even though she knew that the parents would most likely object to the students' choices. It is also noteworthy that some teachers saw certain aspects of a student's faith as important enough that they would help a student out, such as supervising a student during recess so she can perform her prayers. In other instances, however, giving a student a Halloween costume to wear, or humiliating the student because he holds to a young

Earth creationist belief seems to undermine the teachings that are instilled at home.

It appears that teachers make value judgments about what is a salient part of faith, what deserves support, and what could be overlooked or disregarded. While this is a difficult subject to ethically navigate, teachers make value judgments all the time (e.g. denouncing lying or stealing in the classroom). As one participant stated, "The tricky thing is balancing the child's right and desire versus the parent's right" (Madeline). For example, two teachers reported that parents requested their daughters not learn to dance at school. One teacher responded by having the student only dance with other girls; another teacher allowed her student to dance in the classroom, but not in the school assembly. In both of these cases, the teachers modified their classroom instruction to appease students and parents. However, there is a concern that these types of responses manipulate parents' initial requests. When teachers make these value judgments choosing the student's desires over parental wishes, they rationalize that they are supporting the student's right. Yet, mixed in with these decisions may be the teachers' own beliefs and ideas about what is right or wrong. It is not, therefore, just about balancing the child's versus the parents' rights, but also about balancing the values that are upheld by teachers and schools, which are inevitably political rather than value neutral (Kelly & Brandes, 2010; Niyozov & Pluim, 2009). Chan (2009) describes this tension succinctly:

> In a larger sense, there is a tension in that the rights of the individual conflict with the rights of a school to put in place practices and support behaviours that reflect the values respected in the school context but which may conflict with the right of parents to raise their children in ways they deem appropriate (p. 170).

Certainly, this is a difficult topic to consider and will most likely prompt debates about teachers' responsibilities regarding parental rights versus children's rights.

It is also important to consider how policies pertaining to religious inclusion are translated in to practice. Coburn (2004) states that teachers often reconcile educational reforms with their existing ideas about curriculum and teaching practice. Based on the different reactions of teachers in her study of reading instruction reform, she questions the strength of the New Institutionalism's decoupling argument. In contrast, the findings in my inquiry reflect a compelling example of decoupling, wherein teachers' classroom practice was not tightly coupled to inclusive education policy pertaining to religious diversity. Most of the participants taught about a variety of cultures, celebrations, and traditions, but their efforts to incorporate religious themes in that teaching is typically a symbolic response to ideas of multiculturalism (Banks, 1995a & 1995b). For example, units on celebrations and traditions were typically taught in December with instruction revolving around celebrations that coincide with that time of year. While most of these celebrations are religious, the religious components were either omitted or watered-down so that they could be presented more as a distinction of culture. Presenting religious celebrations in this way leads to teachers conflating religious identifications, beliefs, cultures, and practices. Addressing religion within a "food, festivals, and folklore" framework overlooks or ignores the distinctiveness of a person's religious identity (Harper, 1997; Dei et al., 2000). Further, it generalizes the differences within and between religions.

Some policies on religious accommodation received a different response. Requests for religious accommodation were different from curricular inclusion; they were tangible in nature and needed an immediate answer. If a teacher or administrator refuses a request, parents have the right to appeal to the school board, which rarely happens. In this way, there is close

regulation on religious accommodation policies and procedures that clearly outline how requests are to be handled.

Conclusion

From a policy perspective, these findings create an interesting dilemma. While teachers' autonomy allows them to integrate these policies with their teaching to benefit their students, providing more direction within the policies, such as definitions of terms and examples of how to handle specific situations, would assist teachers in understanding how to implement the changes. Teacher education programs in Canada have courses on equity and diversity in education, but these courses are often peripheral to the core subjects (Kelly & Brandes, 2010). A holistic approach to multicultural and anti-racist education would prescribe a more integrated view of religious inclusion rather than leaving it to an "add on" or something that "pops up" (Dei et al., 2000). Ipgrave (2011) similarly proposes an "epistemology-based" approach to religious inclusion, in which teachers accept that different forms of knowledge will surface in the classroom. Students would be encouraged to share their perspectives by manifesting their religion "not just in what they wear and what they eat but also in what they say and what they think" (p. 106).

Since the equity and inclusive education policies are fairly new, it is still too early to tell whether they have actually made significant changes to classroom practice. Future research would therefore benefit from a longitudinal approach, tracking change over time. Additionally, investigating the public debates that sometimes arise over religious accommodation such as the provision of prayer space within the public school, and the phenomenon of parental rights/wishes versus students' rights/desires would complement the findings of this study. This study has made a start in looking at elementary school teachers' responses to religious inclusion and accommodation in public schools, but it is limited due its cross-sectional research design and small sample size.

Within the New Institutionalism, maintaining legitimacy is crucial for schools to be seen as valid in advocating for the greater good of society (Davies & Zarifa, 2009; Spillane, Reiser & Reimer, 2002). Consequently, some policies, such as the policy on religious accommodation, require immediate changes, while others do not appear to require deep-rooted changes. This could depend on the level of intensity with which the message is delivered. Reasonable accommodation and inclusive education of particular religious and cultural distinctions for students is essential, as it reinforces identity and allows fuller access to the social-political structures (Taylor, 1994; Zine, 2001). Further, support for inclusion, recognition, and reasonable accommodation do not appear to be lessening in Canadian society. While teachers' responses to educational reform are interpreted through and sometimes decoupled from their pre-existing beliefs and practices, their responses are not static (Coburn, 2004). If messages of inclusive education are repeatedly delivered to in-service and pre-service teachers, and if those messages include religious diversity as an important factor, then teachers may make more changes to their teaching practice.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1 Dimensions of diversity listed in *Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* (2009) are: ancestry, culture, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, language, physical and intellectual ability, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status (p. 6; although it is noted that this is not an exhaustive list).

2 This term was originally applied to educational organizations by March and Olsen (1976) and Weick (1976) to examine how "structure is disconnected from technical (work) activity, and activity is disconnected from its effects" (Meyer and Rowan, 1978, p. 79).

3 For the grade two *Traditions and Celebrations* unit that is referred to in this study, the curriculum document states that students will investigate "family histories and traditions and report on how these histories and traditions contribute to and enrich Canadian society"; this includes religious holidays (Ontario, 2004, p.23). At the time I conducted interviews for this study, teachers followed the 2004 version of *The Ontario Curriculum*. There is now a 2013 version that teachers are required to enact in Fall 2014. However, the analysis for this study will consider the 2004 version. The introduction in the 2013 social studies document emphasizes the need to include diverse perspectives on curriculum topics, address contentious aspects, and include the students' personal and communal perspectives in their teaching. Examining teachers' implementation of this new document is an idea for future research.

4 The areas of religious accommodation that are listed in the Boards' policies and procedures are:

religious attire, observance of major religious holy days and celebrations, prayer and rituals, dietary requirements and fasting, and participation in school curriculum, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities.

5 One exception to the matter of religious dress is the kirpan. Khalsa Sikh males, or their parents if they are underage, must obtain permission to have a kirpan on their persons due to safety concerns.

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Appendix

Table 1

Teacher Profiles

Teacher's Name	School	Experience (in years)	Grade Taught	School Area
Sandy	Parkview	12	Kindergarten	Suburban
Michelle	King's Park	14	Kindergarten	Urban
Lily	Westside	9	Kindergarten	Urban
Jill	Springfield	8	2/3	Suburban
Jenna	Parkview	10	4	Suburban
Madeline	Hilmount	14	4/5/6 ESL class	Urban
Julia*	Briarwood	12	Kindergarten	Suburban
Eddie*	Lakeshore	11	6	Rural
Grace*	Briarwood	34	4/5	Suburban
Total	7	13 (mean)		

Source: Author's compilation.
Note: * indicates teachers from the Pierre Elliot Trudeau School Board and all other teachers are from the J. A. MacDonald School Board. All participants', schools', and school boards' names have been altered to maintain confidentiality.