

Prepared for: **Conference on Teaching For Tolerance, Respect and Recognition**
(September, 2004, Oslo, Norway)

Country: Canada

Province: Newfoundland and Labrador

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Introduction to Education in Canada with a Focus on Religious Education

Within its federal system of shared powers, Canada's Constitution Act, 1867, provides that "[I]n and for each Province, the Legislature may exclusively make Laws in relation to Education." While there are a great many similarities in the provincial/territorial education systems across Canada, they each reflect the diversity of the region's geography, history, and culture. Responsibility for education at all levels is vested in provinces and territories.

Each province or territory has a ministry or department of education that is responsible for providing primary, elementary, and secondary education free until the age of 18.

The ages for compulsory schooling vary from one jurisdiction to another, but most require attendance in school from age 6 or 7 to age 16. All provinces and territories also offer one-year kindergarten for 5-year olds, which are operated by local education authorities. In addition, some jurisdictions provide early childhood services, including preschool programs or junior kindergarten. In most jurisdictions, elementary schools provide the first six to eight years of compulsory schooling, after which most children/adolescents go on to the secondary level where they can choose from a variety of programs leading to apprenticeships and the job market or to further studies at colleges and universities.

The first two years at the secondary level usually offer core compulsory subjects supplemented by some optional subjects. In the final two years, there are fewer compulsory subjects so that students can choose more optional courses in specialized programs that prepare them either to enter the job market or to meet the entrance requirements of the post-secondary college, university, or institution of their choice. Students who pass the required number of both compulsory and optional courses graduate with a Secondary School Diploma. For example, in Ontario since September 1999, students must complete 30 credits during the four-year secondary school program - 18 compulsory and 12 optional courses. They must also pass the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test in order to graduate.

Most public schools accommodate special-needs students (the physical or mentally disabled or the gifted) in various ways, whether in separate programs and classrooms or in a regular classroom where they follow the regular program but receive additional support and assistance.

Private or independent schools provide an alternative to publicly funded schools in any province or territory, but they must meet the general standards prescribed by the ministry/department of education. In most cases, they follow closely the curriculum and diploma requirements of the ministry/department of education, except that they function independently of the public system and charge tuition fees. In Ontario and Quebec, private institutions that offer credits toward the secondary school diploma must follow the curriculum and diploma requirements of the Ministry of Education. Some provinces - Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, Quebec, and Saskatchewan - provide some form of financial assistance to these schools.

Religious Education in Canada

In recent decades Canada has become internationally recognized as a multi-cultural and multi-faith country. One province, British Columbia has a large Asian population and Toronto, a city in the province of Ontario, is often referred to as the most multi-cultural city in the world. Across the country the cultural and religious scene is changing rapidly, reflecting the diversity of cultures and religious beliefs and practices present. There is, however, at least one commonality amongst Canada's population. On the cusp of the twenty-first century the majority of people believe in a spiritual side of humanity.

In Canada, the formal religious education curriculum, where offered, significantly incorporates contents that both accept and reflect upon the richness of human experience in all its diversity and variety.

Curricula vary among the ten provinces and three territories. However, as new curricula are developed attention is given to ensure that richness of human experience and diversity is reflected.

Religious Education in the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador

The following is presented by the Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education as an example of one of the programs and policies established in Canada. It is important to keep in mind that what follows is not indicative of all provinces/territories in Canada and is presented as representative of what is happening in only one province.

The province of Newfoundland Labrador is unique in that religious education is taught at all grade levels, K-12, and is an elective only in grades 10-12. (It should be noted that a student at any grade level can be exempt from the religious education program at the written request of a parent or guardian.)

There are courses in religious education offered in public school systems in some other provinces at various grade levels. These, however, are not compulsory and vary by province. There are several provinces where there are schools operated by particular faith communities and these would have a religious education program suited to their needs and requirements.

Previous to 1997, in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, the education system was a Christian denominational system. There were three councils which operated the schools in the province, Roman Catholic Education Council, Integrated Education Council (Anglican, Moravian, Presbyterian, and United Church) and the Pentecostal Education Council. On September 2, 1997, Government put forward a question setting out the direction intended to proceed with for the education system of the future.

The question Newfoundlanders and Labradorians were asked on September 2, 1997 was as follows:

“Do you support a single school system where all children, regardless of their religious affiliation, attend the same schools where opportunities for religious education and observances are provided?”

Government was proposing a new Term 17 which would clearly reflect and conform with the position presented in the referendum question. The following is the text of the new Term 17:

- 17 (1) In lieu of section ninety-three of the Constitution Act, 1867, this section shall apply in respect of the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador.
- (2) In and for the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador, the Legislature shall have exclusive authority to make laws in relation to education, but shall provide for courses in religion that are not specific to a religious denomination. (Understood to mean specific to a world religion.)
- (3) Religious observances shall be permitted in a school where requested by parents.

The new Term 17 would allow for the creation of a single school system where all children, regardless of their religious affiliation, would attend the same schools. The new Term would eliminate the requirement found in the former Term to elect school board members by religious denomination. It would also eliminate the power to assign or dismiss teachers based on their religion.

September 2, 1997 was referendum day and the Chief Electoral Officer announced that 73% of those who voted in the referendum chose “Yes” in answer to the question and 27% chose “No”. On September 4, 1997 the resolution to amend Term 17 was introduced in the House of Assembly and on September 5, 1997 it was passed unanimously.

The wheels were now put in motion for this province to undergo educational reform as it had never experienced in its history. A major part of the reform would be the development of a religious education program that would be inclusive of various living belief systems (religions) but developed and presented from a non-confessional multi-faith perspective. The process would not be an easy one and required the

involvement of personnel from the Department of Justice, Aboriginal Affairs, Human Rights, faith readers from all living belief systems represented in the program, and educators representative of all grade levels and various faith persuasions.

The process is continuing but to date a new religious education program is in place and new custom designed resources have been developed for grade 4-9 and grade 12. The Primary Religious Education Program and resources and an additional high school course are still at the developmental stage.

In the development of the Newfoundland and Labrador religious education curriculum the following were considered:

- The religious education program is non-confessional in its approach. Through the program, students should be enabled to reflect on and make personal decisions regarding their own spirituality and religious traditions.
- Recognition is given to the fact that students are living in a global society and in a country that is multi-cultural and multi-faith. Students are made aware of how religions influences local and global events. The influence of religion on the arts and the expression of religion through the arts, including music, art, drama, literature, and architecture, are also considered in the curriculum.
- The acknowledgment that the essence of all interfaith dialogue is the awareness that human beings share essential truths and experiences. Students should learn to appreciate the intrinsic worth of each religion for its adherents.
- A variety of teaching/learning strategies should be provided to meet the various needs, interests, abilities, and the cultural and linguistic diversity of students. Many of today's learners are complex and sophisticated. They approach a world of diversity and complexity with enthusiasm and trepidation. They encounter conflicts and social pressures in developing their sense of social justice and recognition of diversity. Students today enjoy questioning and are less likely to accept the status quo in attempting to attain their objectives. This opens opportunities for learning through activities such as investigation, research, discussion and community involvement, locally and globally. Students need to know their opinions are welcomed and can be expressed without fear of ridicule.
- Regarding religious beliefs, students need to know that their beliefs and practices are respected and ideally should be celebrated. An effective learning environment is one where sensitivity and respect are shown for all religious traditions. It should foster a positive attitude towards other people and their right to hold different beliefs. The learning environment should prepare students for living in a world of diverse religions.

- It is important that the learning environment be appropriate to the age and developmental needs of the students. This may include, but is not limited to, experiences through celebrations, festivals, food, drama, and field trips. An opportunity for reflection should also be provided. The learning environment, however, should be sensitive to aspects of any religion that can only be experienced and fully appreciated by adherents of that particular religion. In many instances the teacher will have to decide to what degree practices of celebrations can be facilitated in the school with the sincerity, dignity, and reverence they deserve.
- An effective religious education environment is one where learning opportunities are student-centered, engaging and relevant, respectful of diversity, inviting and inclusive, participatory, interactive and collaborative, reflective and celebratory, integrative and challenging.
- Learning opportunity should be provided through instruction which encompasses a variety of approaches - within a course, within a unit, within a lesson. Instructional strategies should vary so that there is opportunity for whole class learning, small group learning, independent learning, indirect instruction, direct instruction, experiential learning, and learning beyond the prescribed text.

Identities and cultural specifications of minority groups, in formal curricula, in textbooks and other teaching materials have been addressed through consultations with representatives of minority groups. In addition to the voice of the mainstream (religious, ethnic and cultural), minority groups have been heard and portrayed accurately and without bias in the formal curricula and supporting resources. All identified stakeholders have been represented and included parents and community leaders with various viewpoints and ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. Only after such consultations were curricula developed.

As resources were developed to support the curricula, they were reviewed by representatives of minority groups as well as representatives of mainstream groups. This process attempted to ensure material that is inaccurate or offensive was rewritten and necessary corrections made.

There are topics/subjects on which there may have been no agreement regarding content. When this occurred it was most important that all groups' positions on the issues were presented clearly and accurately without offence to other.

Equally important in the process was the involvement of persons who are well informed and sensitive regarding cultural differences and identities.

Cultural responsive governance and management were achieved by taking into account religious aspects, that could be promoted through the inservicing of educators with emphasis on cultural differences and diversity of religious beliefs and practices. Also important was close collaboration with publishers as they developed resources in consultation with an education program specialist. This ensured that politically correct language was used and stereotyping was avoided. This collaboration also made certain, in as much as possible, that information contained in resources reflect accurately the culture and religious beliefs and

practices being referenced and/or discussed.

In developing curriculum, consultations with representatives from various ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds were part of the ongoing process.

Teacher Training for Religious Education

In addition to professional training based on wide research and a wide range of practical and theoretical knowledge in dealing with conflict and controversial and sensitive issues, teacher training endeavours to ensure that educators develop certain characteristics and approaches which will benefit them and ease difficult situations.

The following were considered particularly important during the development of teacher guides to support the student resources:

- Educators must be sensitive to diversity of ethnic backgrounds, cultures and religious beliefs.
- Educators need to foster a sense of acceptance, trust and comfort when dealing with conflict and sensitivity issues
- Educators should make no attempt to promote or denigrate any ethnic or religious group
- Educators should make no attempt to indoctrinate or proselytize

For more detailed information regarding the Religious Education Program for the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador, see the Department of Education's *Religious Education Framework* document available at the conference display table.