

# Critical Religious Literacy as Equity Literacy: Disrupting Silence in Teacher Education

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## Abstract

Religious diversity remains a marginalized aspect of social justice-oriented teacher education, leaving many preservice teachers ill-equipped to navigate the complex religious landscapes of Canadian K–12 classrooms. Drawing on qualitative case study interviews with five Canadian teacher educators, this article examines how teacher educators perceive and navigate critical religious literacy as a form of social justice. Applying Gorski’s equity literacy framework, we find that teacher educators experience silencing and self-censorship, are concerned about potential harms for preservice teachers, and consider dialogue as a point of disruption. These findings suggest that teacher educators who create intentional space for cultural safety and critical dialogue around religious diversity are better positioned to prepare preservice teachers for the religious complexity of contemporary Canadian classrooms. This kind of dialogic practice constitutes an underrecognized but essential dimension of equity-oriented teaching.

## Background

In the current North American educational landscape of increasing political polarization, censorship, and threats to equity-deserving groups, Canadian teacher education programs have sought to provide preservice teachers with social justice and equity focused skills to navigate their diverse classrooms. This work presents findings from a small qualitative exploratory case study (Yin, 2014) with five teacher educators who work to prepare preservice teachers for the diverse classrooms in which they will spend their careers. This article explores the narratives of these teacher educators and develops key themes that are informed by Freirean and bell hooks’ traditions of critical pedagogy, as well as Paul Gorski’s (2014) equity literacy framework. In interview data, teacher educator participants describe feeling silenced in academic spaces due to their own faith identities, feeling frustrated by preservice teachers’ lack of understanding about religion and belief systems, and struggling with inadequate programmatic support to address these gaps. At the same time, they identify critical dialogue as a promising pedagogical practice for cultivating cultural safety to instill a deeper awareness, empathy, and engagement among teacher candidates. This article also examines how teacher educators navigate their own silencing and how they enact pedagogies of dialogue and critical hope to disrupt these silences. Grounded in the belief that silence in educational contexts is never neutral (Freire, 1970), I argue that failure to address religious beliefs or identities in our K–12 classrooms is a kind of hidden curriculum that is a form of exclusion serving to undermine genuine equity goals and thus critical religious literacy should be an essential component of equity-oriented teacher preparation.

Contributing to scholarship in the fields of teacher education, equity-focused educational scholarship, and religious literacy, this article will begin with situating the study within the current educational/scholarly contexts. This is followed by a presentation of methodology, findings, and discussion, and then concludes with recommendations for teacher education programs. Ultimately, a central aim of this study is to respond to and disrupt the silence around religion in equity-oriented teacher education.

## Literature Review

To better understand how teacher educators perceive religious literacy as a component of social justice education, this literature review examines teacher-educator identity, equity and social justice in teacher education, gaps in religious literacy, and teacher education in the Canadian context.

### Religious Diversity in the Canadian Classroom

#### *Changing Canadian Landscape*

Shifting demographics of the Canadian landscape have meant sizeable changes in how our schools attend to the opportunities and challenges that such diversity entails. Increasingly, and particularly within our urban centers, racial, linguistic, and religious diversity is the norm as immigration rates have accelerated dramatically in recent decades (Statistics Canada, 2022). As scholarship continues to attest, the teaching profession remains dominated by white middle-class female teacher candidates, even in urban populations with high levels of racial and ethnic diversity, such as Toronto (Ryan et al., 2009; Abawi, 2018; Sulz et al., 2023; Statistics Canada, 2025). Additionally, for the small numbers of racially marginalized preservice teachers in teacher education programs in Canada, they too must contend with the even higher degrees of racialized disparity among teacher educators, where the percentages of racialized faculty have only minimally increased over the past decades compared to their white counterparts, resulting in a persistent lack of representation within teacher education programs themselves (Jafari et al., 2024). Given what scholars have been reporting for decades about the powerful positive impact of representation on educational outcomes for marginalized youth (Villegas, 2010; Sulz et al., 2023), this disparity between Canadian teacher candidates and the classrooms in which they will be teaching represents an ongoing challenge. When combined with other aspects of student diversity, such as religious identity, this challenge can be daunting.

While there has always been some degree of religious diversity in Canada, the shift from a country in which between 70% and 80% of the population reported being Christian in the 1970s to our current landscape of high levels of religious diversity is significant. This increased religious diversity is magnified by the simultaneous forces of declining religiosity among Christian Canadians, and the rising numbers of religious “nones,” with up to 34% of the Canadian population identifying as “no religion” (Wilkins-Laflamme, 2022; Beaman, 2024). Moreover, the ongoing work of reconciliation taken up by our education systems has resulted in a complex educational landscape for teachers and teacher educators when it comes navigating how religious and spiritual issues arise in their classrooms.

Adding to this complexity is the fact that because K–12 education in Canada is provincially mandated, provinces differ widely on their approaches to religion as a topic in the classroom (Van Arragon, 2015). Within secular school districts, some have opted to include religion primarily within social studies curricula, such as in Alberta; however, there has been debate whether such inclusions go far enough in mitigating a Christian bias, exploring religious diversity, and incorporating Indigenous spiritualities and religion in a fulsome way (Patrick, 2023). In contrast, other jurisdictions, such as Quebec, have had mandatory courses that dealt directly with religion as a central curricular topic, such as in the now defunct Ethics and Religious Culture program, which has been a source of much contention among scholars in terms of its Christian bias, insufficient Indigenous content, and the lack of teacher training provided to those tasked with teaching the ambitious program (Chan, 2018; Hirsch 2018; Jafralie & Zaver, 2019). Related to this issue are provincial funding models for religious or faith-based education. Some provinces and territories, such as Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Nunavut, provide no funding to faith-based schools, while others, such as British Columbia, Manitoba, and Quebec, provide some degree of partial funding. Three provinces and one territory have publicly funded Catholic education in the separate school system: Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, and the Northwest Territories. This highly diverse educational terrain means that there is no single map to navigating religious diversity in Canadian classrooms.

### ***Multiculturalism, Coloniality, and Reckoning With Reconciliation***

Official Canadian policies such as the Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1988 formally recognize religious pluralism and position religious diversity as a protected ground of cultural identity. Although Canada’s multicultural policy has been and continues to be the source of scholarly and public debate (Modood & Ahmad, 2007), it remains a part of the fabric of Canadian identity (Kymlicka, 2021; Beaman, 2024). Additionally, Section 2 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees freedom of religion, meaning that K–12 educators must consider both legal and pedagogical obligations in their classrooms when navigating issues related to religion and religious diversity. The Charter’s protections around religious freedom place teacher educators in a difficult position, where they must navigate tensions between protected rights that may be in conflict (Rymarz, 2013; Zaver & DiMartini, 2016). Despite these protections, scholars have noted that Canadian public education tends towards a kind of secularism that may inadvertently marginalize religiously identified students (Guo, 2015; Keddie et al., 2019). The assumption of a secular neutrality in Canadian schools has implications and real risks; it may serve to marginalize students for whom religion or spirituality is a core identity marker. Unaddressed, it risks maintaining unacknowledged dominant structures of Christian privilege (Aronson et al. 2016; Joshi, 2020).

Any serious engagement with religious diversity in Canadian education must contend with Canada’s colonial history through which Indigenous peoples, and their spiritual practices and worldviews, have been suppressed on a systemic level, such as through the residential school system (Bastien & Kremer, 2004). Because Indigenous spiritualities do not fit neatly into Western frameworks of “religion,” they may unwittingly or purposefully be omitted in discussions surrounding religion in the public sphere in Canada

(Stonechild, 2020, p. 242). Certainly, in the era before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), that was often the case. However, in the post-TRC era many Canadian educational institutions have engaged in meaningful reconciliation work by developing students' and educators' foundational knowledge of Indigenous ways of knowing through curriculum development and pedagogical strategies that reflect the diversity within these communities and traditions. Within my own work as a professor of social justice education, I have seen firsthand the impact of these curricular and pedagogical shifts as the next generation of future teachers arrive in my classroom. Many of these students come to my classroom demonstrating a significant foundation of understanding of Indigenization and decolonization that was routinely lacking in previous generations. Moreover, as noted by Indigenous scholar Frank Deer, the widespread work of reconciliation going on in today's K–12 schools and in higher education contexts has necessitated a deep and ongoing engagement with spirituality. Using the Kanien'kehá term of *Onkwehón:we* for "original people," Deer (2024) writes, "When Onkwehón:we community members (such as community Elders) are invited to share about Onkwehón:we knowledge and experiences, spirituality frequently becomes an essential part of the narrative" (p. 596). Thus, transformative Indigenization cannot happen authentically in our education systems without an understanding of the ways in which Indigenous ways of knowing and being are infused with spirituality. In many ways, as noted by Deer, Stonechild, and others, this increased focus and engagement with spirituality in our K–12 schools as a part of reconciliation has created an opening for a paradigm shift in the ways we make space for different epistemologies and ontologies across our educational systems.

### ***Equity and Social Justice Frameworks in Education***

For decades, as North American K–12 classrooms have become increasingly diverse, educational scholars have continued to call for teacher education programs to be embedded with principles of equity, diversity, and social justice (Banks et al., 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017; Gandolfi & Mills, 2023). To foster a safe and inclusive environment for all students in the K–12 classroom setting, educational scholars have emphasized the importance of preparing incoming K–12 teachers with the necessary tools to engage with social justice issues (Ankomah, 2020; Gandolfi & Mills, 2023). As agents of change, teachers must be well-educated and informed about how privilege and oppression are present in the education system. Engaging in social justice courses equips teachers with foundational knowledge to better understand concepts of diversity, equity and inclusivity. Most teachers are willing to improve their self-awareness regarding social justice pedagogy; however, institutional barriers often hinder the integration of such topics in the school system (Gandolfi & Mills, 2023).

## Theoretical Framework

This article draws on three complementary frameworks that together ground religious diversity literacy as an equity practice: Paulo Freire's notion of critical pedagogy and "life-affirming" dialogue, bell hooks' conception of education as the practice of freedom, and Paul Gorski's equity literacy framework.

Throughout his writings and his life's work as an educator, Paulo Freire insisted on the importance of dialogue to create transformation in the lives of the "oppressed" laborers he worked with as a literacy instructor. For Freire (1970), dialogue is seen as more than a means to communicate, but rather as an "act of creation" that when grounded in love and tolerance becomes the site of democratic, life-affirming education (p. 99). This kind of authentic democratic interaction can only take place if educators use what he calls a "problem-posing" education wherein subject-object distinction is dissolved through genuinely respectful dialogue between equals, as opposed to what he calls the "banking model" of education: an oppressive approach in which the teacher is the subject and students are placed in the object position. Freire's insistence on the centrality of critical dialogue built on a foundation of humility, love, hope, and critical thinking is as relevant for today's educators as ever. In the highly politicized and polarized environment in which educators currently work, supporting educators with the skills needed to facilitate critical dialogue in their own classes is as much an "existential necessity" for transformative education as ever (Freire, 1970, p. 88).

Educational and cultural scholar-activist bell hooks was deeply influenced by Paulo Freire, whom she met when he was invited as a guest speaker to the university where she was studying and teaching. While critical of Freire for his early works that ignored intersectional issues of sexism and racism, hooks nevertheless had a deep respect for his work and remained "a devoted student and comrade of Paulo's for life" (hooks, 1994, p. 14). Building on Freire's critique of systems of oppression in educational institutions, hooks insisted that education must be the practice of freedom, a practice that is grounded in hope, dialogue, and love. And in alignment with Freire, hooks emphasizes the central role of dialogue to enacting education that transforms. She notes how it is not only students who must be encouraged to share, but also educators, stating, "When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess . . . empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks" (hooks, 1994, p. 21).

Like Freire, hooks understood education as a system that is never neutral, but rather that reflects societal structures of power and oppression, and that can ultimately be used to replicate or challenge those structures. For hooks, critical hope is a necessary component of dismantling educational structures of oppression. By invoking this notion of critical hope, hooks (1994) focuses on the need for educators to remain committed to the possibilities of transformation in the very structures that they must also critique (p. 18). Thus, hooks' notion of critical hope that centers teachers' capacities for creating actionable change is paramount to creating classrooms that promote equity literacy for all.

Gorski's (2014) equity literacy framework presents a means of understanding and describing equity work across domains through four key abilities: 1) to recognize, 2) to respond, 3) to redress, and 4) to sustain. For the author, all equity work must begin with the ability to recognize injustice around oneself and how it manifests within oneself. He explains that this recognition or awareness of injustice must be followed with a response, such as disrupting an Islamophobic comment instead of ignoring it. Significantly, he extends this to the concept of redress as a process that must follow the initial response. In other words, the step of redressing inequity is to work towards "the elimination of inequities in their classrooms, their schools and their communities" (Gorski, 2014). Perhaps the most important differentiating feature of this framework is found in its last category of "sustain." As Gorski notes, equity work is never easy—and rarely quick. Indeed, social justice scholars have spent decades pointing out that challenging oppressive structures and creating transformational change on a systemic level takes years of sustained effort (Kumashiro, 2000; Banks et al., 2005; Hackman, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2010; Paris & Alim, 2017; Daftary & Sugrue, 2022). It requires the capacity to work within systems and institutions that are often broken and perpetuate marginalization within their structures. As this work is so frequently taken up by those who are themselves marginalized within these oppressive systems, the possibility of burnout, exhaustion, or simple demoralization is high (Kendrick, 2022; Mahatmya et al., 2022). Thus, the ability to engage in equity work in a way that is sustained is key to ensuring lasting change on a generational level.

### **Cultural Safety and Dialogic Pedagogy as Equity Practices**

Cultural safety, a concept that originated in Indigenous healthcare education scholarship in Aotearora New Zealand (Ramsden, 1990), has had a significant impact on Canadian educational contexts. Cultural safety differs from previous frameworks of cultural or intercultural competence by prioritizing the need for those experiencing marginalization to feel secure to bring their whole selves into any environment, including those aspects of their identity that relate to their spirituality and culture (Ahmad, 2018). In the Canadian context, the notion of cultural safety is strongly applicable to Canadian Indigenous individuals and communities who experienced the opposite of safety when their spiritual and cultural ways of knowing were suppressed through the colonial institutionalized racist systems such as residential schools (MacLean et al., 2023). Thus, calls for cultural safety across the Canadian educational landscape are inseparable from the ongoing work of reconciliation in response to the TRC's Calls to Action. Extending the notion of cultural safety to include others who have experienced spiritual or religious marginalization highlights the imperative for educators to have the capacity to acknowledge religious diversity and to actively create conditions where religiously and spiritually diverse children feel safe to bring their whole selves into their classrooms. Thus, as identified by this study's participants, teacher educators' role of fostering cultural safety requires a sustained practice in building skills for dialogue that is central to their work to create equitable classrooms. Cultural safety can be seen as a bridge between the theoretical frameworks above and the pedagogical practices explored in this study's findings, particularly in the theme of dialogue as disruption.

## Religious Literacy in Teacher Education

### What Is Religious Literacy and Why It Matters in Teacher Education

While scholars differ regarding exact definitions, religious literacy has become an increasingly common term used for describing the skills, knowledge, and dispositions needed to engage effectively with religious diversity (Moore, 2007). Religious literacy education is thus different from the more commonly known term of religious education, or RE in European contexts, which has been most commonly associated with education systems that retain denominational or confessional structures (Jackson & Everington, 2017). A confessional approach to teaching religion can be found in the many faith-based schools across Canada, including the many Catholic school districts, Jewish schools, and the growing numbers of Islamic schools (McDonough et al., 2013), wherein religion is taught from within the tradition. Religious literacy, in contrast, is focused on teaching for and within religiously pluralistic contexts. While some conceptions of religious literacy foreground the knowledge needed to engage effectively with religious diversity (Moore, 2007; Prothero, 2008), other more recent conceptions emphasize the need for religious literacy to encompass the skills and dispositions (Francis & Dinham, 2015; Seiple & Hoover, 2021; Walker et al., 2021; Ubani, 2025) required for navigating religious diversity. I employ the term critical religious literacy (CRL) to highlight the need to have a framework for engaging with religious diversity through a lens that includes an explicit consideration of how power operates on individual and structural levels (Reid, 2024).

For decades, scholars have noted that teacher education programs do not adequately provide future educators with formal education to navigate religious diversity in their K–12 classrooms (Subedi, 2006; Moore, 2007; Prothero, 2008; White, 2009), leaving them unprepared. In Canada, preservice teachers' exposure to religious literacy is often limited and depends greatly on a variety of factors, including which province or school district they are in (Guo 2015; Chan et al., 2019; Soules & Jafralie, 2021). Unless it is the teacher's subject specialty, the educator may complete their teacher education program without encountering the concept of religious literacy (Reid, 2024; Soules & Jafralie, 2021). This gap in CRL may leave K–12 teachers entering the field without the nuanced understanding of religious diversity needed to navigate the complex issues and political tensions that can lead to prejudice and conflict in the classroom (Marcus, 2017; Enstedt, 2022).

### Religious Diversity and Teacher Preparedness

Considering religious diversity matters for teachers because of the already well-documented complexity they are dealing with in their current classrooms, impacting teacher well-being. In a recent CBC report, one Albertan teacher described “feeling like I’m drowning,” a sentiment that is increasingly common among all teachers (Stolte, 2026). Thus, increasing complexity impacts student and teacher well-being, leading to greater rates of teacher attrition and burnout (Sulz et al., 2023; Kendrick, 2022), something that teacher education programs must take into account as they consider the kinds of skills and aptitudes preservice teachers need to thrive in their chosen profession. Scholars have pointed out that because religion and religious identities are often perceived as difficult, sensitive, or controversial topics, teachers

may consciously or unconsciously opt to avoid discussing these topics or only do so in a manner that they perceive as safe or controlled (Anderson et al., 2015; Guo, 2015; Damrow and Sweeney 2019; Ubani 2025).

Without the capacity to recognize the ways in which students' religious identities often have deep value to the individual, it is highly unlikely that teachers will be able to enact social justice goals, such as creating more inclusive and equitable classrooms, in a wholistic manner. Instead, teacher educators can recognize and respond to religious identities through teaching CRL (Reid, 2024). Particularly within a pluralistic North American context, studies have shown that preservice teachers often desire explicit instruction about the topic of religious literacy (Patrick & Chan, 2022; Soules & Jafralie, 2022). Thus, drawing on Gorski and Swalwell's (2023) equity literacy framework is helpful for the task of preparing preservice teachers to engage across belief systems by integrating all four equity literacy abilities. Freirian notions of critical dialogue and conscientization coupled with hook's vision for education as a relational, hopeful, and transformative practice provide the theoretical foundation for this work, while the notion of cultural safety offers a pathway for applied practice.

## Methodology

### Entering the Research

I chose to situate this study in a small liberal arts university in Western Canada in the small city where I was living at the time. As a PhD candidate who was also working as a sessional instructor at that same university, I already had some connections and familiarity with its faculty of education, which facilitated the research process. However, I also chose to undertake my study in that location for other, more complex reasons. Prior to my arrival to the Canadian Prairies, I had spent more than 20 years living in Montreal, Quebec, which is where I had started developing my initial ideas for this study. So, while I was very familiar with the kinds of tensions that existed regarding religious issues in public spaces in Quebec, I was initially surprised and disoriented as to how to proceed with my study when I found myself living in a small semi-rural city. I considered returning to Quebec to conduct my study, but I found myself intrigued by how different the tensions and issues surrounding religion and spirituality in the classroom were in this distinct landscape. Thus, I made the decision to undertake the larger study of which the study presented in this article is a part of in the educational context of semi-rural teacher education programs on the Canadian Prairies.

### Positionality

My own positionality naturally impacted how and where I conducted this study. For, while I had spent most of my adult life living in the cosmopolitan city of Montreal, I am in fact a fourth-generation white settler-colonizer from the province of Alberta. Having left Western Canada for Montreal when I was only 22, my return to the Canadian Prairies in 2017 was the beginning of an unanticipated journey into my own process of reckoning with my own settler-colonizer roots and reconciliation with the Indigenous

communities of this land. Of course, this journey of reconciliation was also precipitated by the publication and responses to the findings and Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Given how the specific Calls to Action 63 to 65 directly implicate all levels of Canadian educational institutions, my own engagement with reconciliation and decolonization mirrored that of the larger educational landscape at the time. The city I had moved to was surrounded by several large reserves, so I was immediately struck by the substantial Indigenous presence throughout the community. I was fortunate to have the opportunity through various community events and initiatives to engage closely with different Indigenous groups and slowly begin the process of unlearning my own inherited colonial perspectives. This process is an ongoing part of my professional and personal lives.

## Research Design

I chose to use an exploratory case study approach because it supports my goal of establishing dialogic examinations to allow for what Yin (2014) calls “a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” (p. 13). In this case, the phenomenon is two-fold: it explores how teacher educators a) view the aim of religious literacy and b) engage with religion as a part of their own or their students’ identities within their lived experiences as teachers of teachers.

## Participants and Recruitment

Five teacher educators in a faculty of education at one Canadian university were recruited as participants in this qualitative case study through a combination of convenience sampling and, to a lesser degree, the snowball technique (Patton, 2014). These interviews were conducted in person over a period of one academic semester. Participants were selected based on their experience with equity work and their willingness to and interest in discussing religion in educational contexts. Participant familiarity varied across the study, presenting layered ethical considerations. Three participants were known to me personally, while two were strangers who had been recommended to me by other participants. Following Garton and Copland’s (2010) conception of the “acquaintance interview,” I was aware of the risk of leveraging existing relationships to pressure participation, as well as Braun and Clarke’s (2019) caution against incorporating information that is disclosed outside of the interview process. However, I was also aware of the benefits that familiarity can provide, such as facilitating rapport-building when discussing sensitive topics (Oakley, 1981).

The participants represented faculty at varying stages of their careers, from early career to nearing retirement. All participants were white, four were male, and three identified as Christian (see Table 1). Along with the one white Christian female participant, I had initially recruited an additional participant who was female, Christian, and Black. However, she removed herself from the study due to her heavy workload, a not uncommon reality for those scholars who experience marginalization (Mahatmya et al., 2022). While I was disappointed in the lack of racial and gender diversity among the remaining five participants, I realized that they were, in fact, representative of that faculty at the time, in which the majority of faculty members were white cisgendered heterosexual males.

**Table 1***Participants*

Name (pseudonym)	Gender	Discipline/courses taught	Religious or spiritual background	Career stage
Helen	F	History	Christian	mid-career
James	M	Philosophy	Christian	end of career
Michael	M	Social studies/Literacy	Christian	beginning of career
David	M	Social studies	No religion	mid-career
Matthew	M	Social studies	No religion	mid-career

The teacher educator insights explored here were garnered through semi-structured interviews that emphasized the value of dialogic engagement and the importance of grounding knowledge in lived experience. Given the complexity and sensitivity of religious literacy in secular higher education, it was important to establish rapport and trust with participants by valuing them not simply as sources of data, but as those whose knowledge and experiences shed light on systemic patterns of inequity.

I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews for their alignment with a constructivist epistemology, which views knowledge as socially constructed rather than objectively discovered (Roulston, 2010; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). This approach acknowledges the interview as a dialogic process shaped by the positionalities of both interviewer and participant, rather than a neutral method for extracting stable “data” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 586). At the same time, it is important to resist the assumption that qualitative interviews are inherently more ethical than other methods—a critique well established (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005). Ethical complexities persist, including power asymmetries, the dynamics of interviewing known participants, and the interpretive authority of the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In this context, the asymmetrical relationship between myself as a novice researcher and the established tenure-track faculty participants undoubtedly had an impact on both how I interacted with participants and how I analyzed the data. While I attempted to mitigate any potential impacts through careful documentation and procedures and critical self-reflection, I acknowledge that participants may have “curated” their responses in an unconscious response to my positionality as a doctoral student, just as I may have engaged with these senior faculty members in a way that exposed my own tentativeness.

## Data Collection and Analysis

The interviews were conducted in the faculty members' offices, which ensured privacy and a comfortable setting. I recorded the individual interviews using both a voice recorder and my own cell phone recorder and later transcribed the recordings using the software application Trint to do the initial transcription, which I then reviewed and cleaned by hand. The data were later analyzed using reflective thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) and coded in an iterative process using NVivo12, eventually creating the themes presented below. In line with my constructivist stance, I do not see these themes as having "emerged" from the data, but rather I agree with Braun and Clarke's (2013) understanding that "searching for patterns is not akin to an archaeologist digging to find hidden treasures buried within the data, pre-existing the process of searching for them. It's more akin to the process of sculpture" (p. 225). I engaged in member-checking via email both after the initial transcriptions were done and after the themes were constructed to ensure that participants had the opportunity to ensure that the data accurately reflected their contributions and to address any discrepancies or concerns they may have had with the data as presented. The participants did not request any changes to the work.

## Findings

While the professors' insights and experiences varied considerably, there were repeated concerns about the role of religious literacy in the context of teacher education.

### Theme 1: "Dismissed": Navigating Peer Silencing in Secular Institutions

"One ex-colleague just called me unenlightened and laughed at my theology background."  
(James)

The quote above speaks to the feeling of being silenced and/or needing to self-censor one's religious or spiritual identity, as expressed by a number of participants, including James. As a Christian academic with a philosophy and theology academic background, he explained this was not one isolated incident but rather something that he had experienced in several different contexts, commenting on a frequent sense of being "dismissed" by peers. Helen noted a similar phenomenon with her preservice teacher students, stating, "There's a perception among students that many of their professors are hostile to their faith backgrounds . . . sort of radical empiricists, or Evangelical atheists." Given that a significant proportion of the students at this university belonged to tightly knit conservative Christian communities of various faiths, there seemed to be a clear perception by these faculty participants that many—and perhaps most—of their colleagues within the academic sphere placed little importance on recognizing this aspect of their students' identities.

Silencing and self-censorship extended beyond the confines of the university classrooms in the teacher education program to the practicum settings for preservice teachers. James, Michael, and Helen commented on how the preservice teachers they worked with engaged in a form of self-censorship regarding their religious or faith identities. There was a common perception that the preservice teachers experienced significant stress around how they would navigate religion and religious identities within

their own future classrooms. As Helen described, she was concerned that her students “are very anxious, they are self-censoring, they are very vulnerable . . . certainly religion comes up in the classroom as one area that they see as very potentially damaging.”

James and Michael both expressed how they were often hesitant to disclose their own religious or spiritual identities or faith commitments. As Michael explained, “I don’t always model religious sensibilities because people don’t feel necessarily that personal religious confession is an open topic for debate and discussion.” James agreed, commenting that when it comes to disclosing his own faith commitments, “It might come up near the conclusion of the course . . . but I never lead with that.” This desire to keep their own religious identities private may seem common-sense within the context of a secular institution, but it raises questions about where religiously identified students may find representation and about the overall impact of such pervasive “silencing” or erasure of an aspect of one’s identity in educational contexts.

Although not religious himself, David noted that “there are many people who have religious beliefs who work at the university . . . but it’s very much private.” This sentiment was echoed by James, who suggested that he was not as comfortable discussing his religious beliefs with his faculty peers as he was with those outside his own department, noting that “people in other departments . . . we talk about the importance [of beliefs] for helping us deal with everything from curriculum development to students in the classroom.” James’ statement highlights the extent to which his beliefs are valuable to him professionally, even if they are not easily expressed among his departmental colleagues. The pattern of keeping one’s religious identity “hidden” and out of the public sphere was found repeated elsewhere in the institution.

Given that feeling silenced or the need to self-censure one’s religious identity was reported not only by preservice teachers but also by those faculty responsible for teaching them, this supports the view that secular universities, including teacher education programs, may not be places where those identities are valued, welcomed, or even recognized.

## Theme 2: Preservice Teacher Harms and Gaps

“Our teachers are walking into classrooms where students of all faiths are represented . . . I don’t know that they feel at all prepared.”  
(Helen)

Helen’s concern cuts to the heart of what emerged most clearly in the data, across interviews: that religious illiteracy poses real, practical harms to preservice teachers, and that teacher education programs are frequently ill-equipped to address it. This worry was not abstract; rather, it was grounded in what she observed daily in her students, many of whom, as she noted, “might know something about their own [tradition] but [are] not particularly understanding of others.” For preservice teachers heading into diverse classrooms, this gap between their own religious knowledge and the communities they will serve is more than an inconvenience. It is a professional vulnerability.

This vulnerability became particularly visible during practicum placements in faith-based schools. Faculty participants described many preservice teachers in these placements as underprepared and

uncomfortable. The discomfort was not limited to those without a religious identity; it extended to those whose faith tradition did not align with the school community's tradition. In both cases, participants described students entering these placements as lacking foundational knowledge or pedagogical tools to navigate those contexts.

Matthew named the structural dimension of this gap directly: "It's really hard to prepare our students to teach a course in world religions . . . we don't have certification, we don't have a minor, we don't have a way of recognizing that within our current organizational structure." His frustration highlights something beyond individual comfort or preparedness: it signals a systemic absence. CRL is not simply underrepresented or not taught in our teacher education programs; it is frequently, in many respects, unrecognized within the institutional structure of teacher education. Matthew elaborated on what this looks like in practice: "There's a real resistance . . . our faculty never, or very rarely offers those courses . . . independent studies are the only way." The fact that independent study, conducted privately in a professor's office, is the primary available pathway to learn the skills and knowledge of CRL speaks volumes. It mirrors the broader pattern identified in Theme 1: that religion in the teacher education context is something most often dealt with in private, and rarely in the open, structured, institutionally sanctioned spaces where professional preparation happens.

Together, these accounts suggest that the harms preservice teachers experience are not incidental or treatable through individual efforts alone. They are, in fact, the predictable outcome of a system that has not yet begun to fully reckon with the wide spectrum of religious and spiritual diversity as a dimension of equity in our contemporary K–12 contexts.

### **Theme 3: Dialogue as Disruption**

"We have to deal with those questions. Is it possible for students to feel heated? Absolutely!"  
(Matthew)

For these faculty participants, dialogue was not incidental to their teaching; rather, it was the primary site of disruption.

Matthew described how he leaned into embracing difficult conversations in his classroom, commenting that "We have to deal with those questions . . . Is it possible for students to feel heated? Absolutely . . . My role is to be a facilitator of the discourse and offer the validity of other perspectives." His comments draw attention to the disruption students often feel when confronted with alternate perspectives in conversation that do not align with their own. This cognitive dissonance that is experienced by students in dialogue is echoed by James when he encourages his students to examine their own comments in dialogue carefully. He describes telling his students, "let's play with that . . . say my right-wing economic belief is inconsistent with this particular Christian belief which says I need to care for the poor . . . I don't say 'you're inconsistent.' I say, 'What do you do?'" Rather than confronting the student's inconsistency directly, James turns it back on them, using their own values as the starting point for examination. The question "What do you do?" isn't rhetorical; it invites the student to sit with genuine tension rather than resolve it prematurely. This move requires instructors who are willing to create spaces for students

to share their views, values, and beliefs with each other, including their deepest held religious beliefs. Creating this space must be modelled intentionally, as Matthew notes, “We try to model a culture of being willing to share and challenge . . . creating a context of dialogue.” However, this is not a simple endeavor. Indeed, creating an educational community in which students have both the skills to engage in critical dialogue and a sense of cultural safety or trust that their views will be recognized and respected is a significant challenge. Matthew reflected on how teachers, “have such an interesting role of trying to arbitrate those values and discussions . . . it’s incredibly difficult.” Ultimately, teacher educators must provide the skills and opportunities to practice critical dialogue, and, crucially, they must model those same skills in their own classrooms.

## Discussion

What these teacher educators described, in terms of the silencing and the powerful uses of dialogue, points toward a clear set of implications for how teacher education programs might begin to take CRL seriously as a dimension of equity. These implications are organized here around Gorski and Swalwell’s equity literacy framework of recognize, respond, redress, and sustain. First, teacher education programs and all those who contribute to their practices and policies, must recognize that religious-based inequities exist in both our K–12 classrooms and our teacher education classrooms. Moreover, they should understand the nuanced ways these inequities are created and maintained, often through avoidance or silence. It is not enough to either hope that individual instructors will take on this challenging task with no support or to assume that faith is a personal matter that has little impact or place in our K–12 classrooms. Teacher educators must be willing to recognize the challenges and opportunities that come with educating for CRL as a part of teaching for equity and justice. Second, teacher education programs should provide their faculty with tools and support for helping faculty develop classroom practices that will equip their preservice teachers to respond critically with religious diversity and students with or without strong faith convictions. Examples of these responses could be to create structured dialogue circles, case study analysis and creation, or simulation development within the context of teacher education (Wright-Maley, 2018). However, as the participants from this study described, even if individual teacher educators have the skills, knowledge, and volition to engage with CRL in their classrooms, when there are no specific curricular requirements within the teacher education program for preservice teachers to be religiously literate, it is highly unlikely that it will happen in a sustained way. And with the increasing complexity of K–12 teachers’ roles in today’s classrooms, finding room in an already overly congested curriculum is a significant challenge (Patrick & Chan, 2022). Within the Canadian context, the provincially mandated K–12 program of studies (POS) largely determines what teacher education programs must cover. As several study participants noted, if religious literacy is not an explicit part of a POS, it is difficult to justify its inclusion within the existing program, particularly within the contemporary context in which many higher education institutions are facing significant financial pressure and uncertainty (Jack, 2025). But if teacher education programs hope to educate their teachers to be champions of equity and justice, they must begin to redress the gaps that exist within their own programs regarding all facets of diversity, including religious diversity.

Finally, while many faculties may have a small number of faculty members with specific research interests in equity and social justice to ensure critical religious literacy is part of their own individual courses, without a sustained, organized, and cohesive plan to ensure CRL is addressed on a program level, teacher education programs may ultimately fail to create lasting change. Indeed, the oft-used strategy of entrusting the important work of engaging with the “thorniest” topics for preservice teachers in areas of equity and social justice to one or two faculty members all too frequently results in a glaring gap when those members leave, or when the bulk of courses are taught by contingent faculty (Stewart et al., 2024). Two possible solutions for this absence are as follows: 1) Teacher education programs must audit their own curricula and programming to identify the gaps related to religious diversity and identities. While it may be unlikely that overloaded programs can afford the time or space to create an individual course on CRL, ensuring CRL is contained within the outcomes for equity-focused courses is a concrete and achievable goal; 2) Teacher education programs must create long-term professional development for all faculty to ensure this knowledge-building work is sustained. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that increasing capacity for CRL requires not only knowledge, but also skills in facilitating dialogue across differences. Yet as Matthew observed, creating such spaces requires more than pedagogical skills or tools—it demands that teacher educators “model a culture of being willing to share and challenge.” This quote highlights what the participants returned to repeatedly: that dialogue across religious difference is only possible when students experience genuine cultural safety. Building this cultural safety, so that students feel recognized and respected rather than dismissed, cannot be addressed through one-off workshops (Patrick & Chan, 2022; Leung et al., 2024). Rather, it requires a sustained, program-level commitment that must be modelled by teacher educators before it can be practiced by preservice teachers.

As with any study, there are some recognized limitations in this research. First, there was an obvious homogeneity in the participants’ backgrounds, as they were all white, heterosexual, and mostly male, reflecting the inequitable structures that persist in higher education in North America. That the participants were mostly Christian was also a limitation, although it is not unusual for those who choose to participate in a study about religion to have a religious background themselves. Third, the limited number of participants from this smaller semi-rural university context means that the relevance to larger urban institutions may be limited. Mostly, the limitations of the research design and participants point to the need for a larger scale study, ideally using mixed methods such as surveys along with interviews and focus groups to extend the impact of the findings.

The findings of this study contribute broadly to the field of teacher education, and specifically to teacher educator and preservice teacher identities, along with professional identity formation. The results of this study confirm other scholarship that draws attention to the impact of personal beliefs on professional identity formation for teachers (Subedi, 2006; Patrick & Chan, 2022), extending this to include religious beliefs and identities. Theoretically, this study contributes to social justice and critical pedagogy scholarship in the Freirean and hooksian traditions through applying Gorski’s equity literacy framework to the domain of teacher education in a Canadian context. Additionally, this study contributes to the burgeoning field of religious literacy scholarship in addressing the complex ways religious identities and issues manifest in teacher education programs, ultimately assisting administrators and policy makers develop policies to create more fully equitable K–12 classrooms, schools, and school districts. Finally,

this study contributes to extending current educational curricular scholarship in demonstrating that for teacher education programs to be successful in equipping their preservice teachers with the skills to address all forms of discrimination and oppression in their future classrooms, social justice- and equity literacy-oriented programming cannot exclude religion as a facet of diversity.

## Conclusion

These shared experiences offer an account of both the tensions and possibilities currently experienced by teacher educators whose work requires them to navigate the complexity of religious identities, preservice teacher education, and equity-based pedagogy. While small scale, the responses from these teacher educators nevertheless demonstrate important yet often overlooked perspectives on religious identities and issues in teacher education programs. This article makes the case that CRL is a crucial component for equity-focused teacher education not only for preservice teachers, but also for the teacher educators themselves. The narratives shared by these five educators illuminate how fostering the conditions for cultural safety in which students with religiously and spiritually diverse identities are recognized and respected is central to this work. Informed by Freire's critical pedagogy, hook's pedagogy as freedom, and Gorski's equity literacy framework, this study repositions religion not as a source of silencing or heated conflict in the classroom, but rather as a site of liberatory transformation.

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