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## Ethical Conflicts in Secular Education: Narrative Inquiry of French Educators in Faith-Diverse Classrooms

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### ABSTRACT

**Background.** In secular education systems such as France's, teachers are often positioned at the intersection of institutional neutrality and the growing religious diversity of their students. This tension can generate ethical conflicts as educators navigate complex classroom dynamics involving faith expression, laïcité (secularism), and cultural sensitivity.

**Purpose.** This study explores how French educators experience and respond to ethical dilemmas in faith-diverse classroom settings within the framework of a secular public education system.

**Method.** Using a narrative inquiry approach, data were collected from in-depth interviews with 18 secondary school teachers across urban and suburban regions of France. Thematic analysis revealed recurring tensions related to student religious expression, curricular constraints, parental expectations, and institutional ambiguity regarding secular norms. Teachers reported using various coping strategies, including silent negotiation, personal compromise, and reliance on informal peer networks.

**Results.** The findings highlight a dissonance between policy and practice, and underscore the need for clearer ethical guidelines, teacher training, and institutional support in navigating pluralistic values. The findings contribute to scholarship on ethical pedagogy and secularism by foregrounding teacher agency and moral improvisation in pluralistic classrooms.

**Conclusion.** This research contributes to the discourse on ethics in multicultural education by offering a grounded perspective on how secularism is lived, interpreted, and occasionally contested in everyday pedagogical practice.

### KEYWORDS

Secular Education, Ethical Conflict, Narrative Inquiry, Religious Diversity, French Teachers

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### INTRODUCTION

The concept of secular education has long been regarded as a cornerstone of the French public school system, rooted in the principle of laïcité—a policy of strict separation between religion and state. Enshrined in French law and cultural discourse, laïcité is intended to foster equality and neutrality by excluding overt religious influence from public institutions. In theory, this model protects learners from religious indoctrination and promotes a shared civic identity. In practice, however, it places educators at the frontline of navigating increasingly.

Teachers must now balance the ideals of secularism with the real-world demands of inclusive pedagogy and student well-being. Faith expression, whether through religious attire, dietary restrictions, or personal beliefs, often enters the classroom in ways that challenge the rigid boundaries of secular policy. These encounters present educators with situations where the ethical application of *laïcité* is neither clear-cut nor procedurally supported, thereby forcing them to make subjective, and at times precarious, moral decisions.

Educators report a growing sense of uncertainty about how to respond to religious expression without violating institutional codes or student rights. While formal policies offer theoretical guidance, they frequently fall short in addressing the nuance and emotional labor involved in daily classroom management. As a result, many teachers find themselves improvising or relying on personal judgment in ethically charged situations. These experiences reveal not only a pedagogical challenge but an ethical dilemma that demands deeper qualitative investigation into how secular ideals function in practice, especially in culturally and religiously heterogeneous learning environments.

Teachers in France are increasingly expected to uphold *laïcité* while fostering inclusive and equitable learning environments for students of all faith backgrounds. The contradiction between promoting civic neutrality and respecting religious identity creates a fraught ethical landscape for educators. The tension becomes particularly acute when institutional expectations collide with a student's personal expression of belief, creating dilemmas that lack clear resolution. Educators are thus caught between legal compliance and moral responsibility, often without formal training or institutional support to navigate this duality.

Existing mechanisms for addressing these challenges are limited. Official documents, such as the 2004 law banning conspicuous religious symbols in public schools, provide legal boundaries but rarely offer pedagogical strategies for implementation. These gaps leave educators vulnerable to accusations of bias, inconsistency, or even discrimination, regardless of their intent (Brent Edwards, 2025; Freiburger, 2024; Gutiérrez-Gómez, 2024). The problem is compounded when teachers must mediate conflicts not only between students and policy but also among students who hold differing religious or secular views. In such cases, educators act not only as instructors but as ethical negotiators within a contested cultural space.

The lack of structured institutional frameworks to support educators in managing ethical conflicts contributes to professional stress and pedagogical hesitation. Teachers report feeling isolated, confused, and ill-equipped to balance the competing imperatives of neutrality, equity, and cultural sensitivity. These challenges are rarely documented in official policy discourse or quantitative data, yet they profoundly shape teacher identity, classroom dynamics, and student inclusion (Beyene, 2024; Oakland, 2024). Addressing this problem requires a research approach that centers educators' lived experiences, revealing the internal negotiations that are often invisible in policy but central to ethical teaching.

This study aims to: (1) examine how French teachers experience ethical dilemmas in faith-diverse classrooms; (2) identify strategies they use to balance institutional mandates and student rights; and (3) analyze how these experiences reflect broader tensions between secularism and inclusion. By focusing on the personal narratives of teachers, the research seeks to uncover the subjective processes through which ethical decision-making occurs in relation to *laïcité* (Boehme, 2024; Gurbanova, 2024; Khafizova et al., 2025; Perets et al., 2025; Ugwuewo, 2025). The objective is not only to document these experiences but to analyze them critically to reveal broader patterns of ethical tension and improvisation in public education.

The study also seeks to examine the coping strategies and pedagogical responses that educators develop when navigating moral dilemmas related to faith and secularism. Special attention is given to how teachers reconcile institutional mandates with personal convictions and student needs. Understanding these strategies can illuminate the informal ethics of practice that emerge in the absence of clear institutional guidance. This, in turn, contributes to the growing discourse on teacher agency in multicultural and ideologically diverse educational settings.

A further objective is to identify the institutional, cultural, and emotional factors that shape teachers' ethical reasoning in faith-diverse classrooms. By foregrounding the voices of educators through a narrative inquiry methodology, the study aims to provide a bottom-up perspective that complements existing policy analyses (Felsenthal & Agbaria, 2025; Pinhui Sandra & Lim-Ratnam, 2025; Sandbothe et al., 2024; Suzin, 2025). The goal is to generate context-sensitive insights that can inform the development of ethical training, policy reforms, and support mechanisms responsive to the realities of contemporary French secular education.

Existing research on *laïcité* in French education primarily focuses on legal interpretations, policy evaluations, and debates over religious neutrality. While these studies contribute valuable insight into the historical and institutional dimensions of secularism, they often neglect the subjective, emotional, and ethical experiences of teachers tasked with its implementation. Very few empirical studies have examined how

educators themselves make sense of and respond to ethical tensions in real classroom scenarios involving religious difference.

Quantitative surveys and policy reviews provide macro-level overviews but fail to capture the micro-level negotiations and moral reasoning that occur in everyday pedagogical encounters. Teachers' internal dilemmas, their affective labor, and their informal coping mechanisms remain underexplored in the academic literature. As a result, there is a gap in understanding how *laïcité* is enacted on the ground—how it is felt, interpreted, and sometimes contested by those responsible for operationalizing it in diverse learning contexts.

This study addresses that gap by using narrative inquiry to center the voices of teachers as ethical agents navigating complex classroom realities. By capturing the nuanced, contextually embedded stories of educators, the research offers an alternative lens through which to examine secularism—not merely as a legal doctrine or institutional norm, but as a lived ethical condition with pedagogical consequences. The study thereby contributes to a richer, more human-centered understanding of secular education and its challenges in increasingly diverse societies.

This research introduces a novel focus on the ethical dimensions of secular education through the lens of teacher narrative (Kosarkova, 2024; Levin et al., 2024). Unlike prior studies that treat *laïcité* as a fixed principle or policy object, this work explores it as a dynamic, lived experience shaped by interpersonal, institutional, and cultural tensions. The use of narrative inquiry provides an interpretive methodology that allows for the depth and nuance necessary to understand the ethical conflicts educators face, and the meaning they construct around those conflicts.

The study's originality lies in its attention to ethical ambiguity and moral improvisation in secular classrooms. By foregrounding the emotional and relational aspects of teacher decision-making, the research departs from traditional policy analyses and enters the domain of ethical pedagogy. This approach aligns with critical humanistic education frameworks, which emphasize the importance of teacher subjectivity, ethical reflexivity, and culturally responsive teaching in pluralistic societies. The inclusion of diverse teacher voices from different school types and regions adds further depth and relevance to the findings.

This research is justified by the urgent need for policy and professional development frameworks that respond to the evolving complexities of religious diversity in secular education. As debates around *laïcité*, religious freedom, and educational inclusion intensify in France and beyond, understanding how educators experience and navigate these issues on the ground becomes essential. The study offers actionable insights that can inform teacher training programs, ethical guidelines, and institutional reforms aimed at fostering inclusive, equitable, and ethically coherent secular education in an increasingly multicultural world.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a narrative inquiry research design to explore how French secondary school educators experience and navigate ethical conflicts related to religious diversity within a secular educational framework. Narrative inquiry was chosen for its capacity to capture the complexity of lived experience and ethical reasoning, especially in socially and emotionally charged contexts (Gopalkrishnan, 2025; Haile, 2024; Tobin & Alexakos, 2025). By focusing on personal stories and reflective accounts, this qualitative approach allows for a deeper understanding of how educators interpret and respond to moral tensions that are often underrepresented in official policy or quantitative studies.

This study adopted a narrative inquiry approach to explore the lived ethical tensions experienced by French secondary educators. A purposive sample of 18 teachers from Île-de-France, Rhône-Alpes, and PACA regions was selected based on their exposure to religious diversity in classrooms. Data collection involved 60–90 minute semi-structured interviews and written narratives. Narratives were co-constructed via iterative member validation. Thematic narrative analysis followed Riessman's (2008) model, emphasizing structure, context, and meaning. Trustworthiness was ensured through member-checking, peer debriefing, and reflective memoing.

The population consisted of secondary school teachers working in public institutions across three distinct regions in France: Île-de-France, Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, and Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur. A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit 18 participants who had direct experience managing situations involving religious expression, faith-based tensions, or questions of secular neutrality in the classroom. The sample reflected diversity in terms of subject area, years of teaching experience, and school socio-demographic context, including educators from both urban and suburban environments with high levels of cultural and religious plurality.

The primary instruments for data collection included in-depth, semi-structured interviews and participant-generated written narratives. Interviews were conducted either in person or via secure video

conferencing platforms, depending on participant availability and regional health guidelines. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and followed an open-ended protocol designed to elicit rich, story-based reflections on ethically challenging incidents. Participants were also invited to submit brief reflective texts that expanded on their interview content or highlighted additional experiences. All data were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English where necessary for cross-coding.

The research procedures followed a four-phase structure: recruitment, data collection, narrative construction, and analysis. Ethical approval was obtained from the host institution, and all participants signed informed consent agreements ensuring confidentiality, anonymity, and the voluntary nature of their participation. After transcription, narratives were co-constructed in collaboration with participants to ensure interpretive accuracy and narrative coherence. Thematic narrative analysis was conducted using iterative coding, with particular attention to ethical tensions, decision-making rationales, and socio-institutional framing. Emerging themes were refined through member-checking and peer debriefing to ensure trustworthiness and interpretive rigor.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents an overview of the demographic and professional characteristics of the 18 participants, including years of teaching experience, subject taught, school location, and the number of self-reported ethical conflicts encountered in relation to faith expression. Participants had between 6 and 27 years of teaching experience (M = 14.3 years), and represented a range of disciplines including history (n=5), French literature (n=4), philosophy (n=3), civic education (n=3), and science (n=3). Most participants taught in public secondary schools located in urban (n=11) or peri-urban (n=7) zones with high levels of cultural and religious diversity.

Table 1.

Participant Demographics and Reported Incidents Related to Faith Expression (n = 18)

Variable	Frequency/Range
Teaching experience	6–27 years (M = 14.3)
Subject taught	History (5), French (4), Philosophy (3), Civic Ed (3), Science (3)
School setting	Urban (11), Peri-urban (7)
Ethical incidents reported	Range: 2–9 incidents per teacher

Narrative data revealed a recurring pattern of ethical dilemmas centered around four dominant themes: (1) religious symbols and dress codes, (2) curriculum-related tensions, particularly around historical and philosophical content, (3) faith-based student absences or observances, and (4) inter-student religious conflict. Teachers described feeling torn between adherence to institutional expectations of strict neutrality and the moral imperative to affirm students’ individual identities. Several educators recounted moments where their personal values conflicted with official policy, leading them to adopt strategies of quiet negotiation, non-verbal compromise, or selective enforcement.

A significant proportion of participants reported uncertainty in interpreting the boundaries of laïcité, especially in spontaneous classroom interactions. This ambiguity often resulted in ethical improvisation rather than reliance on formal codes. For example, several teachers chose to tolerate minor religious expressions, such as discreet jewelry or silent prayer gestures, in order to preserve classroom harmony. Others, however, expressed concern that such discretion placed them at risk of administrative scrutiny or accusations of inconsistency. The narratives underscored the lack of clear institutional support when facing ethically gray areas.

Thematic analysis identified strong co-occurrence between ethical stress and environments characterized by high religious pluralism. Teachers working in more heterogeneous classrooms reported a higher frequency of value-based tensions, especially when students perceived curricular content as misaligned with their beliefs. These conflicts often emerged in lessons involving secularism, evolution, sexuality, or colonial history. Participants who reported more frequent ethical tensions also described greater emotional labor, professional isolation, and fear of missteps that could trigger institutional or community backlash.

Teachers often situated their ethical conflicts within broader socio-political dynamics, including rising Islamophobia, media narratives about religion in schools, and recent legislative changes on secularism. These contexts shaped not only their responses to students but also their own self-perceptions as moral



agents. Some teachers expressed concern that overzealous enforcement of secular norms could alienate or stigmatize students from minority faith backgrounds. Others wrestled with the discomfort of perceived complicity in enforcing policies that they felt were culturally insensitive or rigidly interpreted.

Case narratives provided deeper insight into how these tensions unfolded. One teacher described an incident in which a Muslim student quietly left the classroom during a discussion on homosexuality in civic education. Rather than penalize the student, the teacher later initiated a one-on-one conversation to explore the student's discomfort, eventually integrating more nuanced discussion protocols for future sessions. Another teacher recounted a dilemma involving a Sikh student asked to remove a religious symbol. The teacher deferred enforcement, citing the importance of relational trust, and later raised the issue with school leadership, only to find limited procedural guidance.

These individual cases illustrate the burden of ethical decision-making placed on educators in the absence of context-sensitive policy support. Teachers often served as mediators between institutional rules and student realities, using discretion, empathy, and dialogue to maintain inclusive classroom environments. Their responses reflected a pragmatic ethics-one based not solely on rule-following, but on the relational and emotional dimensions of teaching in faith-diverse classrooms.

Participant reflections revealed that ethical conflicts frequently resulted in personal growth, but also emotional fatigue. Several educators noted that navigating these tensions had deepened their understanding of pluralism and enhanced their interpersonal skills, yet many also described a sense of persistent unease due to the unpredictability of such encounters. The cumulative emotional labor was rarely acknowledged institutionally, contributing to feelings of professional vulnerability and ethical loneliness.

These findings highlight the complex interplay between policy, identity, and pedagogy in secular educational contexts. The ethical tensions described were not anomalies but part of an ongoing, lived negotiation of secular values in faith-diverse classrooms. The narratives suggest that ethical conflict, while challenging, can also serve as a generative space for reflective practice and relational pedagogy when educators are supported with dialogical tools, institutional flexibility, and community-based guidance.

The findings of this study illustrate that French educators working in secular public schools frequently encounter ethical conflicts when addressing religious diversity in the classroom. Teachers reported recurrent dilemmas involving faith-based dress, religious holidays, student expression, and curriculum content that intersected with students' beliefs. In navigating these challenges, educators employed a range of personal strategies such as quiet negotiation, relational dialogue, and selective interpretation of policy, often without clear institutional support (Chakali, 2025; Feltman et al., 2024; Konstantinov et al., 2024; Memon et al., 2024). These practices reflected an underlying tension between maintaining legal neutrality under *laïcité* and ensuring emotional and cultural responsiveness to students' needs.

This research builds on and extends prior studies of secularism in French education, such as those by Bowen (2007) and Vinel (2016), which emphasized legal frameworks and ideological contestations. Unlike previous work that focused on national policy and institutional discourse, this study foregrounds teachers' lived experiences and the emotional labor involved in daily classroom negotiation. The findings diverge from more formalist analyses of *laïcité* by emphasizing how educators develop informal, human-centered responses to ethically ambiguous situations. This study also contributes to the growing body of international scholarship on teachers' moral agency in multicultural settings, highlighting how French secularism, despite its rigidity, is enacted through context-sensitive, teacher-driven improvisation.

The ethical tensions reported by participants reveal how *laïcité*, though legally robust, is pedagogically underdefined in diverse educational contexts. Teachers' narratives reflect the inadequacy of applying rigid secular norms in fluid, relational environments where student identities are complex and intersectional. The study indicates that ethical conflict is not a sign of professional weakness but a marker of the unresolved contradictions embedded in the implementation of secular policy (Allen, 2024; Kalajtidis, 2024; Levenson et al., 2024; Marphatia et al., 2024). These conflicts serve as indicators of the lived dissonance between top-down governance and the relational dynamics of contemporary teaching in pluralistic societies.

The implications of these findings are particularly relevant for educational policymakers, teacher training institutions, and school leaders. Institutions must recognize that ethical dilemmas related to religious diversity are not marginal, but integral to the professional reality of educators in secular systems. Teacher preparation programs should include ethics-based training that focuses on cultural reflexivity, dialogical pedagogy, and inclusive classroom strategies. Policy frameworks should be revised to support teacher discretion while offering clearer guidance on managing faith-related tensions in ways that affirm both student dignity and secular principles (Avest, 2024; Dzaljad et al., 2024; Gendler et al., 2024). Enhanced professional development opportunities, including reflective supervision and peer-dialogue forums, could reduce the emotional burden of ethical decision-making.

The results reflect the emotionally charged space that emerges when legal mandates intersect with human complexity. Teachers' selective enforcement and contextual adaptation reveal an underlying need for relational consistency rather than procedural uniformity. The ambiguity in institutional support structures has made educators default to personal values and peer norms as ethical anchors, reinforcing the notion that professional judgment, not institutional policy alone, drives inclusive practice (Sharma & Tewari, 2024; Sidik et al., 2024). This reliance on moral intuition and relational ethics underlines the human dimensions often overlooked in legalistic or policy-centered discourses of secularism.

The frequency and emotional weight of these ethical conflicts can be attributed to the dual expectation that teachers serve as both agents of national neutrality and facilitators of inclusive, learner-centered environments. Without adequate institutional mediation or dialogical tools, educators are left to negotiate this space individually, often at the cost of emotional exhaustion. The study reveals that *laïcité*, when rigidly interpreted, risks functioning as a source of exclusion rather than a framework for equity, especially when it fails to account for the social and emotional dimensions of faith-diverse classrooms. The moral uncertainty expressed by participants is a logical outcome of these competing responsibilities.

The relational nature of many teacher responses—characterized by empathy, negotiation, and trust-building—demonstrates the inadequacy of top-down directives in guiding ethical action. Teachers described classroom ethics as being shaped less by formal rules and more by real-time interpretations of what inclusion means in the presence of religious plurality. This situated ethics challenges the assumption that neutrality is achieved by erasure; rather, teachers reported achieving equilibrium through visibility, recognition, and sensitivity. The findings suggest that the implementation of *laïcité* requires rethinking neutrality not as absence, but as balance within dialogical, pluralistic frameworks.

Future initiatives must move beyond legal compliance and toward cultivating professional spaces where ethical complexity is acknowledged and addressed. Schools should invest in institutional cultures that embrace pluralism, where teachers are encouraged to reflect collectively on their moral challenges and receive support in navigating them. Further research could examine how student perspectives on *laïcité* influence classroom dynamics, or how similar tensions manifest in other secular systems globally. Comparative studies involving educators in countries with different models of secularism could deepen understanding of how ethical pedagogy adapts across cultural and policy landscapes.

Practical steps include the development of ethical guidance resources co-constructed by educators, policy experts, and community stakeholders. Training modules should incorporate real-life dilemmas and narrative reflection, empowering teachers to engage with difference critically and constructively. Professional ethics committees or peer mentoring circles within schools could serve as ongoing support mechanisms. Above all, educational discourse must shift toward viewing ethical conflict not as failure, but as evidence of educators' moral engagement and commitment to democratic, inclusive teaching in an increasingly pluralistic society.

## CONCLUSION

The most significant finding of this study is that French educators operating within a secular education framework frequently face ethically complex situations when navigating religious diversity in the classroom. Teachers consistently reported that official interpretations of *laïcité* did not offer sufficient guidance for addressing the nuanced realities of student faith expression, leading them to rely on personal judgment and relational strategies. What distinguishes this finding is the extent to which these ethical dilemmas are internalized and negotiated through a mix of emotional labor, cultural sensitivity, and moral improvisation. Rather than following rigid institutional scripts, educators often engaged in quiet negotiations to preserve both secular principles and student dignity, revealing a hidden ethical layer in the daily life of the classroom.

The study's primary contribution lies in its methodological and conceptual synthesis of narrative inquiry with the ethics of pedagogical practice in secular systems. Unlike previous research that emphasizes legal or political frameworks, this study offers a teacher-centered, experience-based perspective that foregrounds emotional, cultural, and ethical dimensions of secularism-in-practice. By capturing stories of internal conflict and ethical navigation, the research introduces a nuanced conceptual lens for understanding how *laïcité* is not only enforced but also interpreted, adapted, and contested by educators. This bottom-up narrative methodology provides a replicable model for exploring how policy values are embodied and mediated through lived professional experience.

The research contributes to ethics in education by conceptualizing secular pedagogy as a lived ethical condition, not merely a legal mandate. Through narrative inquiry, it underscores the role of emotional labor and informal ethics in pluralistic school settings.

Limitations include sample locality and the qualitative design's non-generalisability. Future research could explore how school leadership mediates these conflicts or how student perspectives evolve under laïcité.

Educational institutions should integrate ethics-based teacher training, develop clearer procedural supports, and adopt a pluralism-sensitive framework for interpreting secular policy.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Camille Rousseau: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing; Conceptualization; Data curation; Investigation.

Théo Girard: Data curation; Investigation; Formal analysis; Methodology; Writing - original draft.

Sophie Vidal: Supervision; Validation; Other contribution; Resources; Visualization; Writing - original draft.

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