

# TEACHING RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: THE ETHICS AND RELIGIOUS CULTURE PROGRAM AS CASE STUDY

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## **Abstract**

Responding to religious diversity and the new reality of schooling, the Ethics and Religious Culture (ERC) Program was introduced as a mandatory subject for all students in Quebec, Canada. Now in its tenth year, the ERC has faced both challenges and successes in its implementation. Though many studies have been written around the wider concepts of religious education and religious literacy in the public system, few studies have included voices from educators. Jafralie and Zaver's qualitative research study examines the potentials and struggles of the ERC Program, and by doing so, raise important considerations around the effective teaching of religion. The findings point to several consistent themes that teachers grapple with regarding curriculum and pedagogy and highlights that in-service teachers are not thoroughly prepared to teach about religion, nor are teacher education programs effectively preparing pre-service teachers entering the field to deal with the complexities of teaching about religion in a secular setting. The authors suggest avenues in which teacher education for ERC teachers, and all religious education teachers, can follow for students and teachers to engage meaningfully with religious diversity.

**Keywords:** Ethics and Religious Culture program, Professional Development, Religious literacy, Quebec, Teaching

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### **Introduction and Purpose**

Our world is growing increasingly more multicultural and multi-religious, and through the influence of globalization individuals are becoming more interconnected. Globalization has had varied impacts, and in some cases mass information without context, adequate verification or authentic connection has perpetuated discrimination, Islamophobia and racially motivated attacks (see Giddens 2018; Owolabi 2001, Said 2001; Yang 2012).

From an educational standpoint, several academics and researchers have argued this phenomena stems from a lack of knowledge. We therefore agree with other scholars who have disputed Samuel Huntington's (1993) controversial Clash of Civilizations thesis in which he suggests such clashes are inevitable, and instead agree with Said (2003) that such clashes are a result of a Clash of Ignorance. By learning more about each other and our various religious traditions and beliefs, we can begin to minimize discrimination, which results from either misinformation or lack of information.

American scholar of religion, Stephen Prothero, suggests that all individuals should know the basic beliefs of all the major religions. He argues that we can make a concerted effort to learn about religious traditions without having to accept or believe them (Prothero, 2007). Increasing our knowledge can provide a deeper understanding of the neighbor next door, eliminating bias and prejudice. Furthermore, Prothero proposes that all public high schools require one course on the Bible and one on the world's major religions. Additionally, all colleges should require all students to take one course in religious studies, which Prothero believes can be done without proselytizing. Rachel Rueckert (2016) adds that the skillset of religious literacy is essential, especially in the context of conflict across the globe. Expanding one's religious literacy not only develops an understanding of religious texts, practices, rituals, and beliefs, but also helps promote understanding of how religions shape and are shaped by ever-changing political, social, and cultural contexts. Religious literacy, as defined by Harvard scholar Diane Moore, is the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion (Moore, 2007).

The authors suggest that religious education courses are important for all students so that they can gain conceptual understanding of religion, which can heighten empathy and understanding. While this article gathered data from the Quebec context, the debate over the need for religious education courses in schools and the challenges that come along with religious education is one that other countries are also engaging in. There is expanding research on teachers' perspectives of the validity and challenges of religious education in the UK, Sweden, Norway, Australia and Germany, where such courses are mandatory.

In Sweden, Berglund (2010) argues that despite having a robust religious education program, the teacher training is limited and needs reform. There are similar concerns in Quebec when it comes to the quality of teacher training (Jafralie, 2017). Copley (2008) and Conroy et al (2015) both scholars from the United Kingdom, discuss why teacher training is so vital to the teaching of religion. For Conroy et al, teachers are the main factor in the success of any religious education program. Copley (2008) adds that trained teachers of religious education serve two purposes: 1) they are better able to deal with challenges in a pluralist setting and 2) religious education is an essential component in raising democratic citizens. Additionally, Australian scholar Buchanan (2005) suggests that in order for teachers to be effective in religious education, they must be trained and exposed to relevant pedagogical techniques. He further adds that the pedagogical techniques available for teachers must reflect the trends in the teaching about religion and bear in mind how it influences the study of religious education. Moreover, Skeie (2006) from Norway and Schreiner (2014), writing from a German context, discuss the political aspect of the teachers'

perspectives. They agree that teachers are key to advancing religious education in public education and in the public sphere. Skeie advocates that established teacher training is part of creating loyalty to the subject. Skeie also believes that loyalty to the subject improves the lifeworld of children. Schreiner adds that religious education makes a vital contribution to identity formation of students in a pluralist society.

In the case of this article, the authors look specifically at the Canadian experience with the teaching of religious education in public schools. Education in Canada is provincially mandated and thus policies, curriculum and practice differ province to province. The authors draw findings from Québec's mandatory Ethics and Religious Culture (ERC) program. This course is unique in Canada and while it has been successful in some regards, it has also been fraught with challenges. When looking more closely at the need for educational change by introducing religious literacy into the classroom, we can learn from the Québec experience and the Ethics and Religious Culture program.

Religion and education have a complex history in Québec. The historical context of schooling in Québec has always been defined across religious lines. Yet the advent of the Ethics and Religious Culture program in 2008 marks a significant change in the history of religious education in Québec. Prior to 2008, courses in religion were designed as either Catholic or Protestant, and, later, Moral Education, marking a distinct demarcation for students when the Ethics and Religious Culture program was inaugurated. The social impetus for this change can be traced back to the Quiet Revolution in Québec. With the onset of the Quiet Revolution in the 1960's and the concurrent push for secularization (Bourdeau, 2011), the power of the Catholic Church significantly diminished. Québec society began a movement toward a secular and more pluralistic society. Change penetrated every aspect of society, including its identity, culture, and institutions. The most notable structural change was the advent of kindergartens, activist elementary schools, polyvalent secondary schools, post-secondary Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel, "Cégep". Cégep is an academic opportunity to students between teenagehood and young adult life to explore their choices before starting and entering into a possible career program in university, or to embark on a vocational program. The vast majority of Quebec students start Cégep at age 17.

As the once-dominant influence of the Catholic Church continued to decline in Quebec, the provincial government established the Parent Commission in 1961. The Parent Commission, also referred to as "The Royal Commission of Enquiry on Education in the Province in Québec," was mandated to investigate the state of the current education system and make recommendations (Bourdeau, 2011). The commission's most notable change was the establishment of the Ministry of Education in 1964. The Ministry acquired authority over education from local church boards (Bourdeau, 2011). Although education was no longer under the auspices of religious authority, religion remained an integral part of the curriculum. The Catholic and Protestant committees retained some of their regulatory power and responsibilities; however, their main charge was to create the curriculum for religious education in schools.

The Quiet Revolution, "Révolution tranquille" was a period of intense socio-political and socio-cultural change in, characterized by the effective secularization of government, the creation of a state-run welfare state and sparked societal secularization. However, public schools remained confessional, designed primarily as Catholic or Protestant. However, the several attempts to secularize the education system during the 1970s and 1980s ultimately failed (Bourdeau, 2011). School continued to offer a non-confessional moral option for those

parents who did not want confessional religious instruction for their children. The complete secularization of the Québec education system would take several more years. The year 1995 marked major secularization of the entire Québec education system. The Québec government mandated a special Commission entitled the “Proulx Report” (Bourdeau, 2011), which was mandated to examine the place of religion in public schools. The establishment of the Commission signaled changes to Québec’s approach to religious education. Resulting from the Proulx Report and its subsequent recommendations was a new curriculum known as the Québec Education Curriculum (QEP). Notably, another recommendation stemming from the Commission was to replace all confessional religious instruction courses, along with the non-confessional course in moral education, with a single course called Ethics and Religious Culture. This course was mandatory across all grades and in both public and private schools. The ERC program has two goals: 1) to pursue the common good; and 2) the recognition of others (MELS, 2008). The first goal goes beyond the satisfaction of personal interests and involves the greater welfare of both the collective and the individual. This goal speaks to three main purposes: “1) the search, along with others, for common values; 2) the promotion of projects that foster community life; and 3) respect for democratic principles and ideals specific to Quebec society” (MELS, 2008). The second goal is connected to self-knowledge and the principle that all people possess equal value and dignity.

The ERC program states that the two objectives consider the increasing diversity of the population and contribute to further enhancing community ties and the development of a common public culture. Ten years later, the ERC program remains the only mandatory religious education program in Canada. One of the implicit goals of the ERC is the promotion of religious literacy. Though the program does not make any explicit reference to religious literacy, its goals and aims align with the definition and philosophy of religious literacy. The program aims to offer the tools that will allow citizens to “live together” (Moore, 2007, p. 27) in a pluralistic democratic society. It allows the development of a set of principles that can be adopted in order to co-exist in a productive and mutually beneficial manner. Religious literacy helps citizens to develop their sense of identity and belonging in a plural society. Religious literacy promotes values and attitudes needed for citizenship in a democratic society by helping students to understand and respect people of different beliefs, practices, values, and cultures. Teachers of the ERC Program are expected to contribute to the larger goal of an education for co-existence in an increasingly pluralistic society. Maxwell, Waddington, McDonough, Cormier, and Schwimmer (2012) argue that the religious competency of the ERC program contributes to dialogue and community building and assert that when citizens have a substantial knowledge of religious diversity it better equips students to live in a pluralistic society where they will interact purposefully with different people. Maxwell et al. argue that societies can only flourish if citizens develop a capacity for resolving conflicts. It is therefore necessary to prepare students from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds with the skills and attitudes for dialogue and a respect for the differences of others. They contend that all three competencies reinforce interculturalism and therefore also reinforce how to justly live in pluralistic Québec society. Interculturalism thereby highlights the educational function of ERC, particularly in terms of preparing students to be capable of respecting difference.

While our data highlights some challenges in the implementation of this program, it is an attempt to promote pluralism and foster appreciation for diversity through increasing knowledge of various religions and their respective traditions. These are certainly much needed skills and attitudes in a world that is growing increasingly more diverse and globally connected. In this article, the authors provide insight into the systemic challenges that

currently still impede the success of the ERC Program, and make recommendations that are applicable to all courses that promote religious literacy.

### **Researcher's Perspective**

Before delving into the study undertaken, one author shares an “on the ground experience” to give context to the challenges faced by ERC in the field. Even a decade after the implementation of the Ethics and Religious Culture Program, I (Dr. Sabrina Jafralie) continue to be exposed to controversy surrounding the ERC Program. As a researcher, in-service teacher and Head of Department, I have a professional interest in understanding any challenges my colleagues have in their implementation and larger philosophical understanding of religious education. Within my professional roles, I more than identify with the frustrations raised by teachers. Specifically, there are challenges with the selection of the teacher and their credentials. Often I have witnessed teachers who are not qualified to teach<sup>2</sup> this course, asked to add it to their course load despite the availability of more experienced and suitable teachers. These teachers, however, cannot be assigned the course because managerial imperatives take precedence.

As an ERC teacher and Department Head, the lack of qualified teachers and larger administrative issues impede me from effectively fulfilling my professional responsibilities that include teaching my own classes, while also providing high quality support and mentorship to other ERC teachers given the various levels of experience and comfortability they have. In fact, the lack of qualified and experienced ERC teachers has led me to spend most of my time creating resources specifically for non-specialized teachers. In addition to this challenge, the lack of excitement or motivation displayed by teachers who are assigned to teach ERC is evident and further compromises the quality of the course. Although this situation is frustrating, I understand the lack of enthusiasm for ERC when the course is an additional subject, and hence not a priority. It is an illusion to think that because the course is required, well-qualified teachers teach it. It is my experiences in the field that lead me to conduct a formal research project in this area, of which the results are presented below, along with findings from my colleague.

Consequentially, we note that teachers are deprived of the opportunity to teach a subject they value, and students are deprived of highly motivated teachers who could provide meaningful learning experiences for them. Seen from the perspective of the wider school culture, the predominance of managerial imperatives undermines the goal of learning to live together in a diverse society. This also places a burden on teachers who have a lack of familiarity with or qualification in religious studies, and thus they must plan for a course that is outside of their specialty area, in addition to planning for other courses as part of their instructional workload. This directly affects the quality of teaching, and subsequently, the experience of the students. However, in the Montreal region, specifically in the English school boards, the specialized ERC secondary teacher is almost non-existent. Undoubtedly, the rarity of the specialized ERC teacher is one of the major challenges to the successful implementation of the ERC program. Only a handful of teachers are full-time ERC instructors.

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<sup>2</sup> In Quebec, education degree programs offer a specific qualification in Ethics and Religious Culture, which includes specific coursework. Theoretically, only teachers with an ERC distinction are qualified to teach the course.

### **Theoretical Framework and Methods**

Given the authors' backgrounds as educators, emphasis was placed on including the voices and perspectives from teachers when researching the successes and challenges of the ERC program. Additionally, scholarship in the area of ERC and the broader discipline of religious education has been limited solely to an academic audience and has excluded the perspective of secondary practitioners (Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 2008). As such, this research uses phenomenology with its emphasis on the lifeworlds and lived experiences of individuals in all facets of their lives as the chosen theoretical framework for this study. The aim is to provide a balanced and nuanced discussion on the realities of secondary level teachers.

Phenomenology is both a philosophy and a method. In this research, the authors used phenomenology from a philosophical perspective, aiming to acquire a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon studied. This methodology is particularly appropriate for understanding the experiences of secondary school ERC teachers and how they make meaning of these experiences. Phenomenological research is a way of examining how different people consciously experience the world in different ways. It is used in order to understand the meaning of a person's actions. Rossman and Rallis (1998) explain, "Phenomenology is a tradition in German philosophy with a focus on the essence of lived experience" (p.121). Those engaged in phenomenological research focus in-depth on the meaning of a particular aspect of experience, assuming that through dialogue and reflection, meanings of experience will be revealed.

The purposes of phenomenological inquiry are description, interpretation, and critical self-reflection into the "world as word" (Van Manen, 1990). Central are the notions of intentionality and caring, and thus the researcher enquires about lived experience. Schwandt (2000) notes that phenomenological analysis seeks to understand "how the everyday, intersubjective world is constituted" from the participants' perspectives. Thus, for Girogi (1998), phenomenology does not necessarily engage in "sciences of facts" (p.97) because there are no absolute facts; instead, it can only establish knowledge from the perspective of the knower.

Phenomenology attempts to uncover or understand the meanings ascribed to lived experience by the knower. The phenomenological approach will help us understand how the participants ascribe meaning to their experiences with the phenomenon in question, namely teaching the ERC program. Presently, there is very little literature that depicts and tells the "lived experience" of secondary ERC teachers, including their experiences with teaching religion. In quantitative research, the voice of the participants is rarely taken into consideration. In qualitative research, however, the emergence of voice in context is critical to educational inquiry (Bogden and Bilken, 2003). It is especially important to give voice to those who have not been given an opportunity to express themselves on matters that concern them directly.

The researchers conducted twelve in-depth semi-structured interviews. There was an interview guide for both the participants and interviewers to review and guide the research and to explore the research themes. Overall, the participants were selected based on their experience with teaching the ERC program. For the research parameters, the participants had to have been teaching in the program for at least one year or more. Interviews lasted for forty five minutes on average. The participants had a variety of backgrounds and the main qualifier was their familiarity with the ERC program and experience teaching it.

Once the interviews were completed, the researchers used thematic analysis as it is one of the effective forms of categorizing the data after the interviews. Thematic analysis is flexible and provides the ability to uncover different possibilities in lieu of the research and

in the process of analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

The researchers were able to find the codes from the dataset leading to the themes. Furthermore, undertaking an inductive thematic analysis allows the data to determine the codes and themes to emerge from the data set. An inductive thematic analysis allowed the researchers to review the data, make notes, and sort it into categories, helping them to move my analysis from a broad reading towards uncovering patterns and developing themes. Thematic analysis was the selected tool because it can be used in many kinds of qualitative data and with many goals in mind. In this research study, thematic analysis was a way to get close to the data and develop a deep sense of appreciation of the content.

### **Participants**

Using a qualitative research methodology, both authors collected data from six participants, for a total of twelve participants from Montreal and the surrounding area. Participants were recruited in two ways, firstly, through researchers' personal contacts and, secondly, through snowball sampling in which participants recommend interested colleagues who may be willing to participate. It is imperative to mention that there are inherent limitations with the snowball effect. In general, it can limit any meaningful generalization in the research. The researchers also did not increase the number of participants because the researchers saw similar findings, which made them confident that their categories were saturated and could proceed with their analysis.

Teachers all belonged to the English Montreal School board but represented five different schools with very different school climates. Participants comprised of both teachers with a background in teaching ERC, as well as non-qualified ERC teachers who were given ERC to supplement their teaching load. All teachers participated in two semi-structured interviews, from which these findings are drawn. The first interview was one held between the teacher and researcher with specifically designed questions, followed by a group interview with all the participants. The questions centered on their views on the ERC, their teaching style, their professional conduct in the classroom and their comfortability with the subject matter.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Though the participants were from different schools, had varied backgrounds in teaching ERC and ranged in years of experiences, several common themes regarding the program emerged. According to the data collected, while all the teachers felt that the ERC was necessary in promoting religious literacy and had much potential, they expressed concern and tensions over the teaching of the course. We focus on three themes in our discussion, specifically:

- 1) The perception of religious education;
- 2) The need for robust and continuous professional development;
- 3) The challenges with prescribed educational policies.

#### **Theme One: Frustration over the way religious education courses are perceived**

One of the prevailing themes discussed among participants, regardless of whether ERC was their teachable subject or not, was frustration over the way religious education courses were perceived. The teachers suggested that disdain over religious education courses carried forward from the time the Catholic- and Protestant-specific courses were taught, alongside Moral Education. Though a clear shift in education occurred in Québec, the ERC

was still perceived as an unimportant course and therefore not taken seriously. The teachers interviewed discussed the lack of value placed on ERC and the fact that the course was treated as “filler.” By “filler” we mean a teacher who teaches a primary subject, but is given ERC to complete a teaching load of a 100%. Consequently, the ERC course is the last to be assigned and therefore then given to teachers who had room in their schedule, rather than the necessary experience, skill or interest. In fact, it is often the case that teachers who have a professional qualification to teach a specific subject (Math, History, Physical Education) are given ERC (a course they have never taught and do not have subject knowledge of) to complete their teaching schedule. The lack of importance placed on religious education and the subsequent dismissal of ERC as a valued subject has led to other detrimental consequences.

Prior to 2008, ERC’s predecessor came in the form of three courses available to students: 1) Moral and Religious Education Program; 2) Moral and Catholic Education, and 3) Moral and Protestant Education. After the Quiet Revolution in the 1960s, religion took a second place to secularism, which trickled down to the role of religion in education (2011; Ghosh 2004; Laplante 2006). The frustration of the ERC course being treated as an equally undervalued course is expressed by Rob<sup>3</sup> when he states, “Because there has to be one program, that’s the last one to be scheduled, it tends to be ERC. You see what I’m saying? One course somewhere has to be that filler option, and I think it’s really problematic that it’s ERC. They can get away with it when it was Moral Ed but not with ERC.”

So why is such little value on the ERC? We argue that one of the primary reasons for this perception of ERC as a subject is due to the apparent lack of interest by the Ministry of Education since its implementation. This is especially interesting since ERC is considered an avant-garde program, as it is the first mandatory religious education<sup>2</sup> course introduced across public and private schools in Québec and the only mandatory religious education course in Canada.

A second point of consideration is that professional development, in Quebec, is the responsibility of school boards, and in turn the school boards pass this responsibility to their schools. However, as the interviews have indicated ERC is viewed as undervalued at the administrative level, therefore what message is being sent to teachers about the program? As highlighted above, the lack of value placed on ERC demonstrates that ERC is not as valued as are core subjects such as Math and English. In turn, schools do not provide teachers with the opportunity to increase their knowledge competency in the subject matter. This leads to more heightened tension on the part of teachers when given ERC as part of their teaching load. One teacher remarks,

In many schools at this school board, the smaller ones especially, it seems ERC is just given to us as just filler I suppose. So, no formal training in it or courses taken. I didn’t take a single Ethics course at McGill. I did Multicultural Education my first semester, which is mandatory for everyone. That’s the extent of it. It was just given to me. Basically to make up my load.

Therefore, because of the Ministry of Education’s apparent lack of interest post-2008, the professional days designed by school boards do not focus on topics surrounding ethics, religious literary or religious education.

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<sup>3</sup> All names have been changed to protect the identity of participants.

While the majority of participants viewed ERC in a positive light, the general sentiment was the major problem of the lack of training in religion. The result of the ERC as a filler course, and the subsequent lack of trained teachers has thus led to ERC being taught by teachers who are under-qualified, and perhaps may even not cover aspects of the course they are uncomfortable teaching. Nina highlights this when she states, “Different schools do different things with ERC Program. Sometimes it’s dumped on the teacher as a filler course and they have to pick it up and they just go about and do it some of them just do ethics and don’t feel comfortable teaching the religion part.” This statement shows the catch-22 of the program: At the ministry, school board and school level, ERC is the least valued subject and therefore given little attention during in-service Professional Development days. Thus, due to this lack of training, teachers do not see the value of the course and feel apprehensive teaching it. As we will discuss in our second theme, the religion competency is the source of discomfort for teachers. The goal placed on increased student dialogue in the course must be approached with expertise and delicacy given the sensitivities associated in discussing religion. This places an even greater demand for the school board to provide quality training in this area.

We maintain that despite the negative perception of ERC, it remains a mandatory course demanding a high level of competence to teach it effectively. This leads to our second theme, the need for rigorous and ongoing professional development for teachers who teach religious education.

### **Theme Two: Disappointment with the lack of robust and continuous professional development**

Regardless of subject perception, teachers still have the responsibility to teach the ERC program. This demands that in-service teachers are prepared and feel confident in teaching the broader goals of the program and in addressing controversial topics that come up in this course. Despite the resources and funding spent at the onset of the ERC program (Boudreau, 2011) many teachers of ERC do not feel adequately prepared. Rob illustrates the linkage between the ERC course as filler and the way the ERC is approached in the classroom when he states,

What’s unique about this school is that we only have two or three actual ethics teachers and the rest of the teachers are just put into an ethics class because it fits their schedule. The problem there is that they’re not familiar with the program or the competencies or the themes, so they just show movies, ask questions. That is not what the program is.

This calls to our attention the lack of in-service training, which has detrimental effects to the program. The larger challenge in this, as we suggested, is that though the ERC is a mandatory course, little attention is given to the continued professional development of in-service teachers. The common perception is that in-service teachers are already qualified teachers and have a certain level of experience, and therefore professional development at this level is not as important for in-service teachers as it is for pre-service teachers who are just entering the field of education.

Out of the twelve participants, only four have academic qualification in religious studies and/or moral education. Sunita cites her Master’s degree in theology as one of the reasons she feels confident teaching the course. Similarly, the other three teachers who also

have an academic background in religious studies mention this as one of the reasons they are able to approach topics with confidence, given their greater content knowledge in various religious traditions as well as their experience in discussing topics on religion with others. Furthermore, teachers who have a strong academic background in ERC talk about how they are able to offer support to their colleagues. Nina mentions, “I’ve been teaching ERC for as long as it’s implemented and I’m also the Department Head within the school so I facilitate other teachers, I help with the program and any issues they may have.” Nina goes on to state that some issues include teachers’ uncertainty over how they should approach certain topics or where to find more resources to increase their content knowledge. Nina helps these teachers with lesson planning and planning their curricular journeys. However, she also notes that many teachers who do not have experience teaching ERC decline her offer to support them. Manny, whose teachable subject was not ERC reveals:

Manny: In hindsight I wish there was a university course in the later years that would deal with this.

Researcher: With what exactly?

Manny: With specifically the curriculum, the Québec curriculum, or at least how to put forward the profession of learning.

This discrepancy in professional training is a point of contention for many teachers who view the ERC as an undervalued program. In fact, the difficulties presented in the ERC program pose challenges to their teacher identity. In Manny’s case, he feels unprepared in understanding the curricular content of the ERC as well as the application of the material. While teachers who had an academic background in religion, theology and the like were equipped with a breadth of theoretical knowledge, teachers who lacked this training felt ill-equipped to understand the content areas, as well as how this content could be applied in practical strategies.

The danger of placing unqualified teachers into the religious education classroom is highlighted by Reid who says,

I think that should be some better training first of all. Because right now people are getting thrown into it with no background in RS [religious studies], so if you’ve never read a book about Islam for example, you shouldn’t be teaching about Islam. If your only ideas about Islam are coming from the mainstream media, that’s a huge, huge problem. And in fact, I think the issue is that they treat this as a course that requires less training than other subjects. I think it’s a course that requires more training than other subjects. Because frankly, I think you can throw just about anyone into the Canadian history course and read from that textbook and teach it to kids, but you can’t do the same thing when we’re talking about teaching world religions, So I think that there should be a higher standard of training.

What this brings to light, is the larger danger of unqualified educators teaching religious education. These teachers may come in with biases or negative stereotypes that are passed on to students. In these cases, the larger program goals and objectives are compromised and students are walking away with misinformation. Reda & Reid (2017) suggests that professional training for religious education courses must be even more rigorous in order to ensure that teachers have the philosophical orientation to teach aspects

of religious education. The danger of placing teachers in the classroom who may have biases or carry negative stereotypes associated with certain religious groups is further discussed in theme three.

In examining the voices of our participants and addressing their concerns, we recommend that professional development needs to be twofold. Moore (2007) asserts that if religion is excluded from pre-service or in-service training, which we see with ERC, it is likely that religion will be left out of the class. Therefore, teachers need to be thoroughly religiously literate, both in terms of content knowledge (Prothero, 2007) and the ability to foster religious literacy skills in the classroom. Prothero adds that in order to be able to fully engage with issues one needs to be informed about the issues. Both Moore and Prothero advocate for religious literacy, and, even more so, religious literacies. He argues it is necessary for people to understand that there are narratives within narratives in the grand scheme of religion.

Secondly, for Prothero, religious literacy involves the content of religion. From the interviews, it is clear that most participants want and need more religious knowledge. Prothero asserts a religiously literate person is one that has “the ability to understand and use in one's day-to-day life the basic building blocks of religious traditions, their key terms, symbols, doctrines, practices, sayings, characters, metaphors and narratives” (p. 12). Prothero's definition of religious literacy does not address the skill needed to teach religion. Here, it is helpful to turn to Moore's understanding of religious literacy. She explains that religious literacy is when one understands the basic tenets, the diversity of experience and beliefs within traditions, and understand the roles that religion plays in all aspects of human life (Moore, 2007). Based on this understanding, religious literacy is dependent on the ability to discern and analyze the intersection of religion with social, political, and cultural life.

Moore further explains that educators also have to understand the approaches to teaching religion. She explains that the most common ways to teach religion are historical (teaching the historical origins), literary (teaching the stories or the novels), and tradition-based (where students ask questions about their own experiences and knowledge). Moore further adds that the method that the teachers choose depends on their subject specialty, training and personal views. Based on the interviews, one can see that participants choose one of these approaches, depending upon their confidence with the material and skill. However, Moore recommends another approach, the cultural studies approach (an approach that uses a multicultural lens of religion while also using the other approaches to give a full account of the complexity of religion). Yet our participants have yet to be exposed to this latter approach and often rely on their primary subject approach to dictate their approach to teaching the ERC program. The cultural studies approach is a tool to build upon all three approaches, emphasizing that religion is embedded in cultural and cannot be understood in isolation.

The teachers in this study, who may be unfamiliar with both Prothero and Moore, still recognize the need for training in order to teach religion. Despite limited or no training, it is evident from the interviews that most teachers understand that religion is part of the fabric of the human experience.

### **Theme Three: Teaching about religion neutrally is difficult.**

In addition to the discussions of the subject status of the ERC and the lack of professional development opportunities for in-service teachers, another layer of complexity is that ERC teachers have explicit instructions from the Ministry of Education (MELS) to

maintain a stance of neutrality. The Ministry of Education outlines the parameters of teacher professional conduct with the following guideline:

The implementation of the Ethics and Religious Culture program places new demands on teachers with regard to the professional stance they adopt. Since this subject matter touches upon complex and sometimes delicate personal and family dynamics, teachers have an additional obligation to be discreet and respectful, and to not promote their own beliefs and points of view. However, when an opinion is expressed that attacks a person's dignity or if there is an action that is suggested that compromises the common good, the teacher will intervene by referring to the program's two objectives (QEPSC 2008, pg. 15)

This professional stance has been referred to as "neutral impartiality" by educationalists (Morris, 2011; Kelly, 1986), which means that in the interest of procedural fairness, teachers do not openly express their personal preferences.

To elaborate, MELS instructs ERC teachers not to "promote their own beliefs and points of view" and maintain a critical distance with "respect to their own convictions, values and beliefs" while at the same time fostering values of "openness to diversity, respect for convictions, recognition of self" (Kelly, 1986). In our final theme we discuss this required professional stance, and some challenges with this stance. While it may seem that neutrality as a mandated approach is prescribed to ensure that negative bias and viewpoints are eliminated from the classroom, and to ensure teachers are objective, the policy of neutrality has been fraught with challenges. In our discussion, we discuss the lack of clarity on how to enact this stance, the relationship between lack of subject knowledge and neutrality as guise, and finally, the teachers' experiences with neutrality in the classroom.

While most participants were aware that the Ministry had some required guidelines for ERC teachers in the classroom, they were unsure of the specifics or had not thought much about neutrality or their teaching stance. One new teacher, whose teachable subject was in Science and was assigned ERC, commented, "That [the professional conduct requirements for teachers] wasn't something I looked into when the course started. I looked at the progression of learning, the [Quebec Education Program (QEP)] and some of the resources other teachers have done and that's it." Another teacher responded, "I am aware that it is important for us to be neutral. Have I looked word for word of what it is supposed to be? I have not, I'll be honest." In the following discussion, we show that teachers have various understandings of neutrality and had different opinions on it.

Of the teachers interviewed, only a minority had professional qualifications in religious studies or theology. Because neutrality allows teachers to distance themselves from conversations and prohibits them from sharing their own world views and opinions, teachers facilitate student conversations, and the responsibility of dialogue falls primarily on students. Thus, some teachers expressed that neutrality provided them with some sense of comfort in teaching the ERC assigned to them.

One participant prefers being a professional neutralist and stands by the program's neutrality due to the fear of accusations of indoctrination. The participant asserts that "I think the challenge in ERC...there is a fine line, fear of indoctrination, of the fear: Are the kids going to say something? They know that's what I like and they want to please me, or is it really what they believe?" This excerpt draws attention to the complexity of teaching the program. The teachers are trying to ensure they do a good job. Under normal circumstances, a

mandated curriculum acts as a safety net, meaning that there is a level of implied accountability such as a ministerial or school board exam. Furthermore, a mandated curriculum also means that there is a legal ground for teachers who may face a backlash on topics that could be deemed inappropriate by some. However, in the case of ERC, the teacher's work is susceptible to interpretation and critique. Despite its compulsory status, the topics are chosen at the teacher's discretion, leaving the door open for parental attacks. Rather than risking parental complaints, appearing unprofessional, or leaving oneself open to disciplinary action, teachers prefer to make safe choices in ERC.

Additionally, because teachers were unaware of the way the Ministry understood and defined neutrality or had their varied experiences in teaching the ERC, they were divided on the necessity and effectiveness of neutrality in the classroom. Some teachers felt that neutrality was an acceptable approach and highlighted why this approach was well suited to the program goals. Some participants commented that neutrality was a non-issue for them and the way the course is taught does not require teachers to provide their worldview. This is shown in the following participant comment: "I didn't find there was even an occasion where I was able to give a worldview. It's also a bit difficult, but I feel like I'm a very tolerant person so I don't think there's anything outrageous or super biased I could even say really at all." Another teacher who had experience in teaching ERC for over a decade shared that it was an effective way to approach the course. When speaking about their understanding of what is meant by "neutrality," the teacher commented:

I understand it as the job of the teacher is to provide learning opportunities for the students and not to influence their opinion about those subjects. Rather, to open up the dialogue between students so that they can discover for themselves each other's opinions and come to an understanding for themselves based on a range of different perspectives. And, it is not my job to tell them what that perspective is. It is their job to examine various points of view to come up with their own understanding.

When asked if this was difficult to do in the classroom, the teacher replied, "It's fairly easy to do." These quotes demonstrate that teachers feel that their own worldview is not biased and that their own approach in the classroom is aligned with philosophical underpinnings of neutrality.

Of those teachers who critiqued neutrality or did not abide by it, two interesting observations arose. First, teachers felt that neutrality conflicted with their identity as teachers, and, secondly, neutrality was equated with lack of care on the part of teachers. Paul suggests that neutrality is an impossible undertaking, claiming:

This [policy of neutrality] makes no sense to me...Everybody comes from somewhere! And to deny that is in my mind ridiculous and I think you're better off being honest about that and ...because if you're not and then they find out...it could get... "Oh he's a Christian or he's this or that...Why didn't you tell us?" To me, it's a recipe for well, not disaster, but I don't think it would necessarily lead in the direction that MELS has sort of intended in that sense...no one is neutral. Everybody come from a culture and to pretend otherwise is ridiculous and ...sinister."

Another teacher also found neutrality to be an "impossible" undertaking because:

It's the particular topic that I choose it, how I chose to teach it and why they choose this topic over that topic. It's biased. It basically tells the kids what my beliefs are or what my values are, so I choose this particular topic, another teacher might teach something else. Why? Because of their interest? Because of their bias. And why do they have that interest? Because of their values and beliefs."

This demonstrates that a teacher's body language, chosen themes and resources would convey their biases, because as one participant noted, "You bring yourself to the classroom and you bring your personality into the classroom. So, the things you care about as a human being, influences what you are about as a teacher. And your philosophy of life also influences the way that you perceive the classroom and the way you interact with students." Other teachers spoke to how neutrality suggested the teacher's lack of passion and care for the topic, which was problematic given the high level of care the teachers had for this subject. One participant noted:

I don't feel that I could get the point across to the kids for several reasons. One, they don't take ethics seriously, and if they see we don't take it seriously, that's the majority of the case, if it's just given to you because it fits your schedule, they don't care. But if it's an ethics teacher, we have to share them we do care about the material, it is something we are passionate about and we are conveying that passion onto you. So, how can a student take something seriously, or why should they care if it looks like I don't care?

Thus, teachers found that disguising their opinions and avoiding direct participation in topics discussed in class translates to a lack of care for the subject which, in turn, impacts the students' level of care for the subject. Teachers also identify that one of the characteristics of effective teaching is conveying a sense of passion for the subject matter, and that neutrality prevents or cloaked their passion. One teacher corroborates this idea of effective teaching as showing care and passion when they stated:

It [neutrality] may be possible but I don't think it would be effective...I think that an effective teacher is going to be passionate. I think a non-passionate teacher is easy to be seen in a classroom, that kids recognize when a person cares about what they're teaching and regardless of the subject it's the same for any teacher who comes in and they care about their subject the students respond to that. If you want your students to respond you have to demonstrate that you care about what you're talking about. And I think it's very difficult to demonstrate passion without having some part of yourself in it. You don't have to expose everything but it's very difficult to absolutely disconnect and be passionate about something if you don't have any personal connection to it.

Therefore, the idea of care and passion is an element of one's teacher identity and, as discussed, teachers find it difficult to separate their teacher identity from their subject.

The variations in the way that teachers defined, approached and applied neutrality in their professional stance highlights the need for the Ministère de l'Éducation du Loisir et du

Sport (MELS) to clearly define the implications of neutrality for ERC teachers and to specify which type of neutrality they require. Kelly (1986) initially had introduced various forms of neutrality into scholarly literature on neutrality and pedagogy. These include: exclusive neutrality (avoids anything controversial), exclusive impartiality (teaches one perspective as the truth), neutral impartiality (teacher remains viewpoint neutral; do not openly present their personal point of view) and committed impartiality (impartiality norm, teacher as personal witness). While scholars have suggested the kind of neutrality the Ministère de l'Éducation du Loisir et du Sport proposes is "neutral impartiality" given the participants confusion over this term, it is important for MELS to further develop it so that teachers can understand it from a practical lens rather than a theoretical one.

This oversight is poignantly commented on by one teacher who said, "I think that what people of the program fail to see is that there are different types of neutrality and I think they've chosen this type of neutrality because religion is such a hot potato, that people don't realize its hot... I think what could enhance the program is perhaps some teacher training on different types of neutrality and perhaps the mention of different types of neutrality in the program." Moreover, given the resistance to neutral teaching highlighted by some teachers, further scholarship in this area must examine whether this is the best approach to teaching religion. Scholars such as Warnock (1975), Nodding (1993) and Moore (2008) question the feasibility of neutrality and suggest alternative approaches to the teaching of religion.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

As shown through the preliminary findings, the teachers, even those who do not have an academic background in ERC, expressed great passion in teaching the subject. Teachers spoke about the necessity for the fostering of religious literacy, especially in Québec with its pluralistic and diverse population. The scholarly literature clearly shows that religion is embedded in our human experience and yet in Québec, in schools and in practice, its educational and societal value is still overlooked and ignored. As an evolving pluralist society, politics, culture, race and religion will continue to dictate Quebecers interactions and, thus, need to be taught effectively in schools. And while the ERC program is a formidable tool to do so, it is plagued with a lack of training and knowledge.

Another issue, which stems from the lack of training, is an illusion about ERC teachers. This illusion revolves around the belief that there are a plethora of full-time ERC teachers. In actuality, few can claim to be full-time ERC teachers in Québec. The data shows that most teachers are assigned ERC as a secondary course, one to fill their schedule to meet a 100% teaching load. The reality of teaching ERC is that there are few subject specialists, which leads to the issues have been raised in this article. We assert that it is necessary to create training that will qualify in-service teachers who are assigned contentious courses like ERC. Likewise, in other countries where religious studies is a course, teachers must be properly trained to teach it.

This illusion leads to other issues, including the challenges of in-service training and the larger question of what such training should look like. Given the program is in its tenth year, it is clear to us that MELS needs to introduce in-service training. Like most subjects, there is always professional development, and ERC is no exception. Moore (2007) points out that religion is organic and ever-changing and therefore training for religious education is even more essential to ensure that teachers and students have the opportunity to learn the most current facts of any given religion. This will help them become religiously literate

individuals themselves, and fulfill the program goals of preparing their students to live and work in pluralistic societies in which knowledge, acceptance and respect are the backbone.

As seen from this example in Quebec, Canada, effective religious education programs face numerous challenges. Among them are the challenges of teaching religion neutrally, providing adequate teacher training, and broader, sometimes negative perceptions about religious education courses. The data and perspectives provided within this study elucidate the challenges faced on the ground, which can help curriculum developers, administrators and policy-makers learn more about these challenges and thus better support teacher needs. Additionally, this research and findings contribute the larger discourse around the effective teaching of religious education for students to ensure engaging, and academic sound learning environments as well as suggesting how ongoing and rigorous teacher training can enable educators to feel confident, prepared and equipped to teach controversial material. Finally, given that much research on religious education comes from the U.K and American context, Quebec's ERC Program has much to contribute to literature in the areas of religious education, pluralism and multicultural education.

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