

## **The State of Quebec's Ethics and Religious Culture Program**

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In 2008, the (Ministry of Education (MELS) instituted a new program, Ethics and Religious Culture (ERC). The program is now compulsory in elementary and secondary education, in both public and private schools. The program is a curriculum that revolves around three competencies: dialogue, ethics and religion. It has two global goals: 1) the recognition of others; and 2) the pursuit of the common good. Since the program's implementation it has generated a great deal of controversy and resistance. Articles in the mainstream media tend to dismiss the program for its alleged relativism (Morris, 2011). Some scholars are especially critical of the epistemological foundation of the ethics and religion competencies (Bouchard & Gagnon, 2012; Morris, 2011). Some dismiss the very idea of including a religion competency along with an ethics competency (Weinstock, 2006). Certain parents and schools have enacted legal procedures to obtain the right to be exempted from the program (Morris, 2011).

Studies highlight two major problems with the ERC's implementation. First, most elementary teachers support the goals of the ERC program yet continue to have problems with teaching the religion competency (Rymarz, 2012; Morris, 2011; Morris, Bouchard, De Silva, 2011; Van der Wee, 2011). And second, the research conducted to date focuses only on the experience of elementary school teachers. No research has examined the experience of secondary school ERC teachers and specific challenges they face.

Studies indicate that teachers outside of Quebec, experience difficulties with teaching religion (Temlin, Yeliz, 2011). Although most teachers agree the aims of teaching about religion, they continue to face challenges in terms of how to approach the teaching of religion in secular non-denominational contexts (Temlin, Yeliz, Sen, Derya and Akar, Hanife 2011).

Conceptually, my research is informed by the scholarly perspectives of Ninian Smart (1974), Michael Grimmitt (1978), Robert Jackson (2006) and Diane Moore (2006). Smart and Grimmitt adhere to a constructivist pedagogy that stresses that the building of a student's knowledge relies upon the guidance of an informed teacher (Smart, 1974; Grimmitt, 1978).

Jackson and Moore favour a phenomenological and religious literacy approach that moves away from traditional faith based approaches to teaching religion (Jackson, 2006; Moore, 2006). These perspectives are closely linked to the ERC program's focus on religious culture. This particular lens will help to interpret the needs and perspectives of the teachers in the study.

Hence my research aims to examine the challenges that the religion competency presents to secondary school ERC teachers. Also, with the timely introduction of Quebec's Charter of Values, it is clear that the issues raised by the program are closely tied to larger public debates about the place in religion in secular public spaces. To teach religion in a religiously plural and secular society raises unique challenges for teachers. My main research question is what are the challenges the religious competency raises for teachers? Related questions include: What support is given to address these challenges? What support would teachers like to have in order to address the challenges?

For this study, I plan to use the qualitative methodology of narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry approach is one of analysis, research and understanding the way people create meaning in their lives (Creswell, 2008). Drawing upon such an approach, I plan to paint rich portraits of ERC secondary school teachers.

I plan to secure 6-8 teachers from the English Montreal School Board (EMSB). This is the largest English public school board in Quebec. Presently, the EMSB has both a youth and adult sector of more than 39,000 students and consists of 85 schools and centres. I am currently an ERC teacher with the EMSB and as such have established contacts with other ERC teachers. As ERC is not a core subject in Quebec, and its implementation is in disarray, it is necessary to select teachers who have taught ERC for a minimum 3 years. The ERC program should also represent at least 25% of their previous or current teaching load.

I will conduct my research in 2 phases. In Phase 1, I plan to conduct initial individual semi structured interviews (Creswell, 2008). The volunteer interviews will be ninety minutes and will explore three themes: 1) religion competency challenges, 2) resources and 3) teacher experience. After the initial interviews, teachers will keep a journal to record their thoughts on

more specific questions on the first two themes, challenges (level of subject knowledge, teaching activities, and sensitivities), and the current support received by ERC teachers (resources, instruction and strategies). During Phase 1, data will be collected from the following sources: a) responses from the initial interviews, b) observation notes taken during classroom sessions regarding subject knowledge and resources and c) the journal commentary from the teachers.

Then in Phase 2, I will collate the data in order to identify of the key challenges, strategies and recommended support. Based on the emerging thematic threads and narrative summaries from those sources, I will hold a focus group of seventy-five minutes with all the teachers dissecting the identified key challenges of the religion competency, examine the type of support required by ERC teachers (resources, learning techniques and to deeply explore the experiences of teachers (sensitivities, implementation).

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