The Challenges of Teaching the Religion Component of the Ethics and Religious Culture Program: A Study of Secondary Teachers in the Montreal Area

This research comes from my own experiences in teaching religion and my lived experiences. Having both completed graduate work in the area of religious studies, and then taught religious education to high schools students, it was clear the voices and experiences of teachers are often excluded from scholarly work. This is the case also for the ERC Program. Though in existence since 2008 little research exists on the experiences of the teachers on the ground, and no research at all includes the voices of the secondary level teachers. As such phenomenology, with its emphasis on the lifeworlds and lived experiences an individual brings to all facets of their life frames this research. The aim is to provide a balanced and nuanced discussion on the realities of secondary level teachers drawn from my research.

Using a qualitative research methodology, I interviewed six teachers in Montreal and the area. Teachers belonged to the Montreal English School and Lester B Pearson board but represented 3 different schools with very different school climates. Participants comprised of both teachers with a background in teaching ERC and others who were given the course as a supplement to their teaching load. All teachers participated in a semi-structured interview, of which these preliminary findings are drawn from. The questions centered on their views on the

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ERC, their teaching style, their professional conduct in the classroom and their comfortability with the subject matter, which drew several themes.

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. I will focus on five themes in the presentation, specifically: 1) Reactions to the ERC Course 2) the lack of in-service training 3) content challenges 4) the challenges with the prescribed professional conduct of neutrality and 5) wider issues in the program.
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