The future of religious literacy and teacher education in the Montreal classroom
ABSTRACT

In this paper, it constructs an account of the challenges facing secondary school ERC teachers in the Montreal region. The discussion will focus primarily on teachers’ commitment to the program, their frustrations, what I refer to as the “illusion” that there is such a thing as an ERC teacher, the vital need for professional development, and reflection on the question of neutrality and professional postures of teachers. Finally, the paper offers recommendations on how current and future ERC teachers can navigate the program in Quebec.

Introduction

The advent of the ERC program marks a significant change in the history of religious education in Quebec. Prior to 2008 courses in religion were primarily designed as either Catholic or Protestant. Public schools in Quebec were still designated as confessional, as either Protestant or Catholic. These schools continued to offer a confessional course in religious instruction. Changes were happening with the rise of The Bouchard-Taylor report, which generated a great deal of controversy, debate, and even hostility, particularly regarding the issue of reasonable accommodations for religious minorities. The fact that both the report and the program were released practically at the same time contributed to create a climate of resistance toward the new program (Bouchard, Haeck, Plante, Venditti, 2016).

The developments described above say a great deal about the significance of the new ERC program. The program reflects a new social reality as it attempts to cultivate an ethos for the kind of society Quebec aspires to be (Morris, 2011b). Not surprisingly, the advent of the program has generated a substantial body of academic literature. Surprisingly, however, very little of this academic literature is based on field studies. Most notably, hardly any attention is given to the experiences of teachers responsible for the implementation of the ERC program. In their comprehensive review of the scholarly literature on the program, Bouchard, Haeck, Plante and Venditti (2016) conclude that there is “a flagrant absence of empirical data” on the teaching, formation, implementation and the appropriation of the program by teachers (p. 38). The need for empirical research on teachers’ experience is particularly pressing considering that the program was implemented quickly and that teacher training, as a result, was precipitated, and then suddenly abandoned altogether (p.31). To date we know very little about teachers’ experience with the program. How do they view the program? Do they feel prepared to teach it? What challenges do they face? What kind of support do they need?

In their review of literature on the ERC program, Bouchard, Haeck, Plante and Venditti (2016) also found that the religion competency has generated a great deal of resistance, ambivalence and questioning. Although some scholars note that the religion competency of the program is “highly innovative,” most teacher educators worry that teachers do not have adequate knowledge for this competency (p. 36). These reservations expressed in the literature, combined with my own observations of teacher colleagues, is the main reason I have decided to focus specifically on the challenges teachers face with the religion competency. Moreover, as noted above, the research
that has been conducted to date is limited to exploratory surveys of elementary school teachers. No empirical study to date has focused on secondary teachers.

The ERC program’s position on the professional posture of teachers is another area where empirical research is clearly needed. Here the program states that teachers must remain viewpoint neutral, objective and impartial. Teachers are not to convey their own values, positions or beliefs so that students can think on their own. Bouchard, Haeck, Plante and Venditti, (2016) found that this is also one the most discussed and debated aspects of the program in the academic literature.

**Teachers’ Perspectives on the Role and Value of the Program**

The findings clearly indicate that all the teachers interviewed positively embrace the ERC program. Unlike the elementary school teachers surveyed in another study (Morris, Bouchard, De Silva, 2011c), the teachers in this study are especially positive and enthusiastic about the religion component of the program. They view this component as a way to prepare Quebec students for living in a diverse world. At the same time, these teachers are frustrated by the absence of a concrete commitment to the program, on the part of both the Ministry of Education and School Boards. They abhor the fact that this program is often a filler course and, as such, assigned to teachers who have no background, or even worse, no interest in the program. In spite of being enthusiastic about the program, they also wish the Ministry and School boards would provide teacher formation, particularly on the religion component so that they can feel more confident in their teaching. This findings bear out concerns expressed in the scholarly literature over the lack professional training offered during the expedited implementation of the program (Bouchard, Haeck, Plante, Venditti, 2016). It is particularly striking, and even disconcerting, to see that committed and passionate teachers feel abandoned by the institutional authorities that should support them. It is as if these authorities have offloaded their responsibility for the success of the program entirely onto the shoulder of teachers.

In my positions as a secondary school ERC teacher and Head of Department for the ERC program at my school, I more than identify with the frustrations of teachers. It is maddening to see how most teachers are “selected” to teach a course with little support and guidance. I too have concerns about the way teachers are selected. However, I see the problem from a different angle. As the Head of Department, one of the impediments is the limited input I have in the selection of teachers. I see teachers who are clearly better suited for the ERC program. Those teachers, however, cannot be assigned the course because managerial imperatives take precedence. I do not place the blame the administration because, in most cases, they are doing their best to juggle a number of complicated administrative decisions. However, as someone who is committed to ERC, it is very frustrated to see such wasted opportunities. Teachers are deprived of the opportunity to teach an area 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 society, the predominance of managerial imperatives undermines the goal of learning to live together in a diverse society.
Given this situation, I am often in a position of unpleasantness with some of the teachers who are clearly unhappy and irritated with having to teach ERC. Being in this position, I often find myself reverting to Kelly’s (1986) posture of neutral impartiality. When the teacher is less than happy to teach ERC, as the Head of Department I am more than hesitant to offer my opinion about the situation. Like the teachers in the study, I seek the safe place of neutrality as a way of not having to deal with my conflicting loyalties and commitments. I remain loyal to the administrators because I recognize their efforts and I see that they value the course. They also solicit my input. At the same time, I want to remain loyal to my teacher colleagues because I recognize their concerns and I am committed to the program. So I hesitate to take sides. In this case, the posture of neutrality is my attempt to maintain a professional and amicable relationship with both teachers and administrators.

It is ironic that the ERC program continues to be marginalized in schools given recent court battles. Since 2008, the Quebec government has gone through a number of court challenges from both parents and, more recently, with Loyola High School. In 2015, after a six-year battle, seven years after the course’s implementation, Loyola High School won the right to teach their version of the ERC course. The MEERS’ commitment to the lengthy court battles importance of the program. However, in reality the program has been without any investment since 2009. It is ironic to see that MEERS does not hesitate to take on these costly court battles, yet it does not invest the same time and financial resources needed for the success of the program.

The Illusion of the ERC Teacher

One of the concerns expressed in the ERC academic literature relates to the rapid implementation phase and how this exerted a great deal of pressure on teachers. In this study, the burden placed on teachers involves the pressure of planning for a secondary subject, one that is outside the teacher’s subject specialty. In the Montreal region, specifically in the English school boards, the specialized ERC secondary teacher is almost non-existent. An ERC teacher is someone who teaches only secondary ERC. This is a teacher, like myself, who has background in ethics and religion. Undoubtedly, the rarity of the specialized ERC teacher is one of the major challenges to the successful implementation of the ERC program. Currently, I am aware of handful teachers who are full-time ERC teachers. This situation begs the question as to why such an important course, a course the Ministry of Education is willing to go to court over, has so few specialists trained specifically for the program. Is this situation the consequence of Ministerial guidelines, requirements or financial investments in teacher education programs? To what extent are universities committed to the creation of teacher education programs for ERC? Does this situation exist because the few hours attributed to ERC renders the specialty unattractive to future teachers?

It’s helpful to look at this situation through my auto ethnographical lens, as both researcher and member of the group culture. The findings of this study suggest that the community of ERC teachers is both fragmented and disjointed. It is even difficult to identify an actual group, even
more so to identify what binds it. This difficulty is most likely the result of the marginalization of the subject, the absence of a subject specialty and the fact that teachers are left to fend for themselves. If there is a binding element for the teachers interviewed, something that could resemble a community of ERC teachers, it is their commitment and enthusiasm for the subject and their shared concern for students.

Moreover, the teachers all share the experience of working in the margins. This is probably one reason why they were so eager to participate in the study, why they cherished the opportunity to voice their concerns, and why they especially enjoyed the group discussion. I would also add that these teachers are all bound by their shared experience of fear, fear of having to teach a subject that is not their specialty, and this with limited resources and support, and in a context where they perceive themselves to be susceptible to parental attacks. I clearly recognize these concerns. The ERC program is often seen as the “parental sweet spot” due to its sensitive content and the history of public legal challenges brought forth by parents. Because of the sensitive nature of the topics, ERC teachers are more vulnerable and more at risk than teachers in other subjects. This is exacerbated by the fact that they may not have the knowledge required for the program, and by the absence of adequate resources. ERC is the course where parents are more than likely to question, debate, or criticize teachers. The teachers in the study, however, work hard to overcome these challenges.

As an ERC teacher and department head, the problems discussed above challenge me to achieve three interrelated goals: 1) attempt to teach my own classes as effectively as possible; 2) support other teachers in their efforts to teach the program well; and 3) work at reducing the anxiety of my colleagues. The void left by ineffective or absent resources puts me in a position of having to create resources specifically for non-specialized teachers. I need to create resources that are accessible, clear, and exciting for the teachers and their students. However, it is especially challenging to provide in-serve training and support to teachers who view and teach the program with disdain, and, as a result, do not use the resources available in the class. Although this situation is especially frustrating, I understand the lack of enthusiasm for ERC when the course is a secondary or additional subject, and hence not a priority. It is an illusion to think that because the course is required, and because it is taught on a daily basis, that the ERC program will necessarily be taught by competent well prepared teachers.

The Urgent Need for Professional Development

The pressing need for professional development was clearly identified by all the participants. Three of the participants interviewed felt overwhelmingly ill-equipped to teach the program, a state of affairs that is clearly one of the major roadblocks for the success of the program. As noted previously, the Ministry offered professional development workshops in the initial implementation phase. Over a two-year period, some Quebec elementary and secondary school teachers were provided with professional development that included an array of knowledge and pedagogical approaches in the form of McGill workshops and courses, visits to holy places, and conferences. These selected teachers were to train other teachers. Other teachers were offered
professional development ranging from practical in-class teaching, school board workshops spanning over twelve hours, a McGill initiated workshop to in-school training from a colleague. However, since then the Ministry of Education has failed to offer any professional development (Bouchard, Haeck, Plante, Venditti, 2016). For the Ministry this program was to mark a turning point in the history of Quebec education. Yet, in its seventh year of implementation, the Ministry still refuses to take responsibility for teacher formation. This is another chapter in the ongoing paradox of the ERC program.

**The Religion Component**

One of the aims of this study is to specifically uncover how teachers fair with the religion component of the course. The findings indicate that the absence of professional academic formation contributes to the fear of teaching about religion. As Bouchard and her colleagues observe, this fear is exacerbated by the fact that the program was implemented in controversy and the religion component continues to raises strong concerns and resistance from the teachers and university teacher educators (Bouchard, Haeck, Plante, Venditti, 2016).

In my view teachers do not necessarily need a Master’s degree in theology or even, as one participant suggested, a Bachelor in Religious Studies. However, they do need at least elemental professional training given the demands of the program on teachers’ knowledge. The ERC program describes teaching about religion in the following way: “Instruction in religious culture promotes an understanding of the main components of religions that is built on the exploration of the sociocultural contexts in which they take root and continue to develop. Sacred texts, beliefs, teachings, rituals, ceremonies, rules of conduct, places of worship, works of art, practices, institutions, and types of organization are some of the aspects on which it focuses” (MEERS, 2013, p. 461).

ERC teachers have a responsibility to engage with specialized knowledge. They must teach about religious traditions and focus on the religious heritage of Quebec. And they must do this by situating religion in its cultural context. In the scholarly literature on the ERC program several authors emphasize that teachers have the demanding task of conveying the theoretical and cultural knowledge required to understand the various religious representations in Quebec, and this in order to promote togetherness (Gravel, 2015). In the religious education literature, Moore (2007) argues that religion cannot be studied effectively without addressing its political and cultural contexts. This adds another layer to teacher preparation. It is unrealistic to expect that teachers will achieve this kind of religious literacy competency on their own.

And even though teachers yearn for more support, the still enjoy teaching about religion. The participants agree that the religion competency is particularly important. However, considering the importance of learning to live together in a diverse world, and the role religious knowledge can play in this process, they are frustrated by the lack of pedagogical support. They do their best to find first-rate material to assist them with the religious content. At the same time, however, they all recognize that teaching the religious content requires a great deal of background in the
area. In addition, they believe that teachers need to understand what is most appropriate pedagogically for different age levels. In other words, good professional intentions are vital but insufficient.

As was seen above, the teachers consider the religion component important. They enjoy teaching it. However, at times they shy away from teaching about religion. This appears contradictory. However, seen holistically the findings suggest that this is not a contradiction. Teachers shy away at times because they feel that they are not in a position to do the job they need to do or would like to do. In other words, they prefer to avoid it rather than do a bad job. Again, this is an indication of professionalism, of their commitment and respect for the subject matter and the students.

The Ministry is missing the point on this matter. The most difficult part of educational reform is to get the support or interest of teachers for the new programs. The MEERS and, indirectly, school boards and schools, have created a situation where the teachers are underprepared and overworked. As a result, students are missing out on the full potential of the ERC program. Not only are teachers being asked to go above and beyond in a subject that is not their specialty, they are also being asked to learn a specialized knowledge. As such, there are times when some teachers reduce their instruction to the transmission mere comparative facts, as opposed to exploring the rich history of religious diversity.

The Professional Posture of Teachers and the Question of Neutrality

The ERC program’s position on the professional posture of teachers is one of the most discussed and debated aspects of the program in the scholarly literature. Some argue that teacher neutrality is an appropriate goal given the objectives of the program. Others argue that teachers need to be more fully engaged if students are to perceive their teachers as authentic (Morris, 2011, b). I used Kelly’s (1986) typology of professional postures as a heuristic. I found that most teachers argue against the posture of “neutral impartiality.” The teachers really don’t like the idea of being neutral. They suggest that neutrality is neither practical nor possible. They react much more positively to what Kelly describes as the posture of “committed impartiality.” However, the findings show that teacher stances are not fixed. Their posture tends to be circumstantial. In deciding which posture to adopt, they factor in a number of variables, such as the nature of the topic, their own level of knowledge, how they feel about that topic and the classroom dynamics at work in a given discussion.

One participant noted that he would rather avoid a topic entirely if he does not feel comfortable addressing it in class. This applies especially to the teaching of religion. Some teachers emphasize that when faced with highly controversial or sensitive topics, they do not “stick” with one posture. They choose the posture that best suits the situation. One of the teachers who favour committed impartiality emphasized that it is important to know when to divulge one’s point of view in the class. When pressed, even the teacher who sees neutrality as “hogwash” recognizes
that the tensions that pull them in different directions are not always so straightforward. These tensions are apparent in teaching ethics and religion.

The participants’ views on the professional posture of teachers have important implications for teacher training. Teachers need opportunities to engage with these kinds of issues in a formal training context. The complexity of the issues became apparent for the participants as they engaged in conversations with their colleagues. The research gave the teachers the space to explore salient ideas and tensions.

Future Direction

If I were asked to develop a model of teacher formation that takes into account the teaching contexts described above, I would look to Moore’s (2014) model of professional development. Moore’s cultural studies approach proposes atypical training for both pre- and in-service teachers that includes learning from peers, in the model of expert-peer training. This is a model of professional development that can reduce the isolation of teachers by offering courses that are designed, developed, and taught by teachers and facilitators. This approach could be particularly effective for the kind of teachers interviewed in this study, that is, teachers who are highly motivated but long to strengthen their academic formation. These teachers are already drawing from other teachers as a survival mechanism. An approach centered on collaborative ventures could also reinforce and sustain their commitment to the program and help to foster a community of ERC teachers. For teachers who are not ERC specialists, Moore’s model could also be helpful because it encourages teachers to draw on their primary subject as an access point for the teaching about religion. Drawing upon both their primary subject and on the resources of their colleagues could go a long way in reducing their uneasiness with the program.

The question on the professional posture of teachers generated a great deal of reflection. Although the academic literature reflects a common concern about this issue, I did not expect the extent to which the teacher participants would be engaged. Nor did I expect that the issues raised by the teachers would have a significant impact on my own teaching. The interviews generated extensive self-reflection. This is an unexpected finding of the study. The professional posture teachers should adopt for ERC is not so cut and dry. The complexity of teaching highly sensitive and controversial requires a great deal of nuancing. The implication here is that teachers clearly need in-service formation that helps them navigate through these nuances and complexities. Ideally professional development for ERC teachers should incorporate three aspects: 1) content; 2) pedagogical approaches; and 3) training on professional postures.

There is an indication that ERC teachers are in need of ongoing professional development. It is disconcerting to see that highly motivated and dedicated teachers are left to figure out how to teach the program on their own. This is clearly not a recipe for success. The kind of complex and multi-layered knowledge required to teach religion from a cultural perspective cannot be found in an encyclopedia of religion. Nor can it be acquired in a two hour workshop. Moreover, the findings indicate the professional formation for ERC teachers needs to incorporate an element of
self-reflection. Educators need to unpack and evaluate their personal beliefs. As Moore (2007) points out, teachers must be able to recognize their own assumptions. This is especially important for teachers who may have preconceived or stereotypical notions about religion. This is one way in which teachers become religiously literate.

The Ministry of Education needs to take responsibility for teacher formation. It is difficult to reconcile the Ministry’s willingness to go to court over the ERC program with its total disengagement from the process of professional development. If the program constitutes an important turning point in Quebec education, and if ERC teachers are expected to contribute to the larger goal of an education for co-existence in an increasingly pluralistic society, than to abdicate the responsibly to adequately prepare teachers is a violation of the moral contract between the Ministry and teachers. It represents nothing less than moral failure. Universities also need to take responsibility for in-service teacher education. At my current university, the pre-service training for ERC is minimal. In the undergraduate program, students in the elementary education program are required to take only one course in religion. The students in the secondary program, where teachers are expected to be subject area specialists, must take seven three credit courses (21 credits) out of 120 credits over a four-year program. Students applying for a Master of Teaching and Learning can only take minor in ERC minor. This minor requires only one course in religion. Suffice to say, this is far too little. It is no wonder that Morris (2011a) sees teacher formation as the Achilles Heel of the program.

School boards also have a responsibility in this process. Although administrators are often strapped by managerial constraints, to actively petition the Ministry for more support, both in terms of human and financial resources, would go a long way in recognizing the value of the ERC program and in affirming the value of the teachers who are assigned to teach it. Policy that supports teacher efforts benefits all stakeholders. This would give the ERC program a chance for success. Without a shared engagement to professional development on the part of the Ministry, school boards and universities, it is difficult to imagine how the program can succeed in achieving its goals. The pressure presently placed on teachers is difficult to sustain in the long haul. Minimally, it is vital that policy recognize the need for a formal qualification attesting that teachers are adequately prepared to teach the program.

Looking toward the future, I would like to see those committed to ERC set up a pilot program in English universities that would be entirely dedicated to the formal qualification of ERC teachers. Setting up such a pilot program would benefit pre-service and in-service teachers. I also envision a researcher project where academics work cooperatively across groups such as community members, teachers, parents, and students. This project could work at forging international research alliances that could provide exposure to model schools in other countries. For example, countries like the Netherlands and England have successfully implemented effective models of religious education. Knowledge of these programs could guide Quebec policy.


