

Elementary School Teachers
and the
Quebec Ethics and Religious Culture Course

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Abstract

In 2008, a new course entitled Ethics and Religious Culture was introduced in Quebec for students from first grade to secondary five, with the exception of secondary three students. The implementation of the course was controversial and many parents and private schools were vocal about their dissatisfaction with the new course. A certain number of teachers were also dissatisfied with the arrival of the new course.

The following study focuses on the perceptions of elementary school teachers on the new Ethics and Religious Culture course. Unlike secondary school teachers who teach the course, elementary school teachers have limited training on the subject. Interviews and a focus group discussion were conducted with seventeen participants from March 2012 to June 2012. The results show that while the majority of participants agree with the course's objectives, the training offered for the course was seemingly insufficient since many participants question their level of knowledge on the subject or their ability to properly evaluate their students.

Résumé

En 2008, un nouveau cours nommé Éthique et culture religieuse fut introduit au Québec pour les élèves de la première année jusqu'au cinquième secondaire, à l'exception des élèves du troisième secondaire. L'implantation du nouveau cours s'est fait dans la controverse et de nombreux parents et établissements scolaires privés firent connaître leur mécontentement par rapport au nouveau cours. Un certain nombre d'enseignants étaient également insatisfaits de l'arrivée de ce nouveau cours.

L'étude présentée vise à mieux comprendre la perception des enseignants des écoles primaires par rapport au nouveau cours d'Éthique et culture religieuse. Contrairement aux enseignants spécialistes des écoles secondaires, les enseignants de l'école primaire ont une formation limitée sur le sujet. Des entrevues ainsi qu'une discussion de groupe furent conduites avec dix-sept participants entre mars 2012 et juin 2012. Les résultats démontrent que bien que la majorité des participants supportent les objectifs du cours, les formations offertes pour enseigner le cours étaient vraisemblablement insuffisantes puisque plusieurs participants doutent de leur niveau de connaissance sur le sujet ou de leur capacité à évaluer adéquatement leurs élèves.

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Elementary School Teachers and the Ethics and Religious Culture Course

Introduction

In 2008, the Quebec government introduced the Ethics and Religious Culture¹ course - a new course offered to all elementary and secondary students, in both public and private schools. The course replaced the province's confessional religious education courses and its moral education course. The ERC course's curriculum combines two subjects: the study of religions from a cultural perspective and ethics education. Throughout elementary school and high school, the course requires students to develop skills that are organized under three competencies that touch on the ability to reflect ethically, the ability to understand religious cultures, and the ability to engage in dialogue.

The exclusion of confessional religious education from Quebec's public schools marked an important change for education in Quebec, which had a long history of confessional education in the public schools. The compulsory implementation of the ERC course resulted in strong reactions from groups of parents, private schools, and teachers. The following study focuses on elementary school teachers and their perception of the ERC course. Unlike most high school teachers who teach the course, elementary school teachers are not specialized in religious education or ethics education. As an elementary school teacher, I have encountered many fellow teachers who expressed negative opinions or concerns regarding the new course. More rarely, there have also been coworkers who displayed genuine enthusiasm towards the course. Since it is mandatory for elementary school teachers to teach the ERC course, their ability to teach the course and their comfort teaching the course become significant factors that directly affect the successful achievement of the course's three competencies.

In order to better understand the mixed reactions the ERC course faces from elementary school teachers and to learn about their various perspectives, seventeen teachers participated in interviews

¹ Will now be referred to as ERC

addressing the ERC course. The elementary school teachers who participated in this study discussed their perceptions on the course and described the training provided to them by their employer or by universities. The participants' perceptions of the course offer outsiders a chance to understand the multiple challenges teachers face while teaching the course, to look at how the participants perceive the place of Christianity and other religions in education and to learn more about the benefits of the course as they are perceived by teachers.

In order to better understand the ERC course, the following section will present a concise history of the context preceding the creation of the course as well as the context in which the course was conceived and inaugurated. A second section will describe in detail the course's content and objectives, as described in the elementary school Quebec Education Program². Finally, a literary review will discuss various academics' work on the ERC course, on religious education from a cultural study perspective, and on ethics education.

1.1: Context

A) History of religion and education in Quebec

Education and religion have always gone hand in hand in Quebec's history. From the start of the French colony, religious orders were put in charge of educating children (Boudreau, 2011). Under the guidance of members of religious congregations, schools were founded in the 17th century in Quebec City, Trois-Rivières and Montreal (Boudreau, 2011). The management of schools and school boards would remain under the influence of the clergy throughout the following three centuries, with little change. Following the provincial elections of 1960, Jean Lesage became Prime Minister of Quebec and introduced various measures that would usher in the political liberalization of the province of Quebec (Boudreau, 2011). The era, which would later be described as the *révolution tranquille*, marked a change in the administration of schools, as the government founded the provincial ministry of

² Will now be referred to as QEP.

education, the *Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec*³ (Ministry of education of Quebec), which has since been renamed the *Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport*⁴ (Ministry of Education, Leisure and Sports of Quebec) (Boudreau, 2011). After the provincial ministry of education took away much of the decisional powers from religious authorities, Quebec schools adapted to the evolving identities of its students and teachers by offering moral education courses as an alternative to confessional religious education and by allowing elementary school teachers to opt out of teaching confessional religious education (Boudreau, 2011). Although the creation of the MEQ had been established in 1964, the reform to secularize school boards (which were still classified by religion) only began in 1997 and came to term in 1999, with school boards now being identified linguistically (Morris, 2011, Boudreau, 2011).

In the same year that school boards ended their religious affiliation, Quebec's ministry of education formed a task force headed by Université de Montréal Professor Jean-Pierre Proulx to reflect on the place of religions in schools (Boudreau, 2011). Proulx's report formulated fourteen recommendations that addressed the secularization of school boards, the funding of religious and spiritual advisors available for students of all confessions, the development of extracurricular religious activities outside of school hours, the replacement of the MEQ's Catholic and Protestant committees by a religious affairs committee, and the introduction of a course to replace moral education and confessional religious education (Boudreau, 2011). The recommendations pertaining to the new course were the following:

We recommend that the basic school regulations for elementary and secondary education provide for the study of religions from a cultural perspective in place of Catholic or Protestant religious instruction, and the study of religion be compulsory for all children.

³ Will now be referred to as MEQ

⁴ Will now be referred to as MELS

We recommend that the programs of study of religions from a cultural perspective be developed and implemented in keeping with the guidelines and frameworks proposed by the Commission des programmes d'études of the Ministère de l'Éducation, and with the relevant provisions of the Education Act.

We recommend that the Ministère de l'Éducation, encourage flexible measures for teacher-in-service training for the study of religions from a cultural perspective and allocate the necessary financial resources for such measures (Quebec Government, Ministère de l'Éducation, 1999. P.86).

The report presented by Jean-Pierre Proulx's task force was acknowledged and validated by the Quebec government, who announced in 2005 that all confessional religious education courses were to be replaced by the a new non-confessional course in 2008 (Morris, 2011). Unlike most reforms in the Quebec education system, the introduction of the ERC course was implemented for all levels in one year. Because the province only offered Catholic and Protestant religious education, it had used for decades its notwithstanding clause, a legal clause allowing provinces to override certain elements of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, in order to avoid violating Canadian and Quebec human rights charters, which privilege equality for all citizens, regardless of religion (Boudreau, 2011). By not renewing the non-withstanding clause, the Quebec government was forced to reform its religious education course at once to avoid potential lawsuits.

B) Parents react to the reform

The government's announcement caused numerous reactions, including a significant amount of negative feedback from different associations and pressure groups. Parental organizations such as the *Coalition pour la Liberté en Éducation* (Coalition for Freedom in Education) and the *Association des Parents Catholiques du Québec* (Association of Catholic Parents of Quebec) publicly positioned themselves against the new course (Morris, 2011). At the heart of the parents associations'

dissatisfaction was the unilateral nature of the religious education reform. While both the *Coalition* and the *Association* recognized that the binary system of confessional religious education and moral education did not work in all contexts, both organizations supported the idea that the large number of parents who still chose confessional religious education for their children could not simply be ignored by the government (Coalition pour la Liberté en Éducation, 2008, Morse-Chevrier, 2008). *The Coalition pour la Liberté en Éducation's* manifesto presents the organization's position on the ERC course as the following:

To impose a state-managed Ethics and Religious Culture program trespasses the government's legitimate powers and fails to respect students, parents, churches, the liberty of religion and faith as proclaimed by the Canadian Charter (article 2a) and the Quebec Charter (article 3).

(Coalition pour la Liberté en Éducation, 2008, p. 3)⁵

Defending the position of the *Association des Parents Catholiques du Québec*, then-president Jean Morse-Chevrier wrote in 2008:

The Catholic Church teaches that parents must be able to consciously choose the moral and religious values that will be taught to their children, with access to a real choice of confessional private schools and with the possibility to choose moral education or confessional religious education in public schools (Morse-Chevrier, 2008, p.4)⁶.

In total, approximately 1 300 parents requested that their child be exempted from the course according to the MELS (Bouchard, 2009).

Two Drummondville parents took the issue to court, challenging the abolition of confessional religious education (Bouchard, 2009, Boudreau, 2011). The lawsuit filed by two parents reached the Supreme Court of Canada (the country's highest court), where their appeal was dismissed (*S.L. v.*

⁵ Translated by the author

⁶ Translated by the author

Commission scolaire des Chênes, 2012). Judge Marie Deschamps justifies the Supreme Court of Canada's judgment on the appeal of the Drummondville parents:

Exposing children to a comprehensive presentation of various religions without forcing the children to join them does not constitute an indoctrination of students that would infringe the freedom of religion of L and J. Furthermore, the early exposure of children to realities that differ from those in their immediate family environment is a fact of life in society. The suggestion that exposing children to a variety of religious facts in itself infringes their religious freedom or that of their parents amounts to a rejection of the multicultural reality of Canadian society and ignores the Quebec government's obligations with regard to public education.

L and J have not proven that the ERC Program infringed their freedom of religion, or consequently, that the school board's refusal to exempt their children from the ERC course violated their constitutional right. They have also shown no error that would justify setting aside the trial judge's conclusion that the school board's decision was not made at the dictate of a third party (*S.L. v. Commission scolaire des Chênes*, 2012, p.5-6).

Loyola High School, a private Catholic high school in Montreal, opposed the introduction of the course, denouncing the fact that the MELS rejected their proposition to teach the ERC course from a Jesuit perspective. The school took this issue to court. At first, the Superior Court of Quebec sided with the parents, with Judge Gérard Dugré describing the imposition of a secular religious education course on the private Catholic High School as an attempt to skirt the Constitutional rights of the students attending Loyola High School (*Loyola High School and John Zucchi v. Michelle Courchesne, in her quality as Minister of Education, Leisure and Sports*, 2010, Boudreau, 2011). However, the Quebec government appealed the decision, brought the case to the Quebec Court of Appeal, who then annulled Judge Dugré's decision. Explaining the Court of Appeal's decision, Judge Jacques R. Fournier writes:

In this circumstance, I do not believe that to require Loyola to teach the religious beliefs in a

global way and ethics, without having to subscribe to them, causes real harm. The “relativism” asked from teachers do not impede on their liberty to teach Catholic religion in school. As Loyola writes in its memoir, it requires putting aside, for one course, the Catholic perspective. (*Quebec (Procureur général) v. Loyola High School*, 2012)⁷

At the time of the writing of this work, the Supreme Court of Canada has granted leave for Loyola High School to appeal the 2012 decision of the Quebec Court of Appeal (Seidman, 2013).

C) Proponents of secularity

Supporters of the *Mouvement Laïque du Québec* (Quebec Secular Movement) also took a stance against the new course (Morris, 2011, Bouchard, 2009). Following the 2005 announcement that the Ethics and Religious Culture course would be introduced by 2008, Daniel Baril, then-President for the *Mouvement Laïque du Québec*, wrote an open letter to Montreal daily newspaper *le Devoir* denouncing the continuing presence of religious education in schools. Baril said regarding the new course:

The idea to counterbalance religious ignorance with a course on religious culture comes from the same people who are offended by the fact that young people do not know what the Holy Trinity is or that they confuse Moses with St. Joseph. If all ignorance is undesirable, it remains difficult to believe that the lack of knowledge regarding these myths is such a serious social problem that schools must implement a religious culture course throughout elementary and high school (Baril, 2005)⁸.

Aside from questioning the usefulness of in-depth knowledge of religious cultures, the *Mouvement Laïque du Québec* accused the MELS of giving priority to religions over humanistic values and critical thinking:

The truth is the new ERC program is clearly a part of the anti-Enlightenment movement

⁷ Translated by the author

⁸ Translated by the author

thanks to its tendency to deny the primacy of individual rights over tradition, to promote spiritual growth instead of critical thinking and, consequently, to invalidate all attempts at defining universal humanist values that protect basic rights (Poisson, 2009)⁹.

D) Teachers' reaction

Quebec teachers' reaction to the religious education reform did not get much attention from the media. The unions representing teachers did not occupy a large place in the public debate. The vast majority of teachers unions were already members of the Coalition for a Non-denominational School System by the time the demise of confessional religious education was announced by the Quebec government. The Coalition, formed in 1993, featured community organizations, various associations, and the vast majority of unions serving education workers. Its two principal objectives were to secularize school boards and to replace confessional religious education (Laurin, 2005a). Following the 2005 governmental announcement, Coalition spokesperson Louise Laurin declared that the Coalition approved of the transition to a culturally-oriented religious course (Laurin, 2005b).

In June 2008, Nathalie Morel, then-president of the *Alliance des Professeures et Professeurs de Montréal* (The Montreal Alliance of Teachers, a teachers' union representing 8 800 members), supported the cultural orientation of the religious education course in *le Bulletin d'Informations Syndicales* (Union Newsletter):

The Alliance has been supporting for over fifteen years the development of secular schools in a non-confessional school system. We developed this decision with other members of the *Coalition for the secularization of schools* and we reiterated that schools cannot be a place where proselytizing can take place, but that they must welcome the teaching of the history of major religions for all students, regardless of their origins, their culture and their religion, [...]

⁹ Translated by the author

(Morel, 2008)¹⁰

While the editorial published by Morel supports the religious culture aspect of the new course, the same newsletter contains a short blurb detailing the position of the union regarding the September implementation of the course:

Considering that the new Ethics and Religious Culture program, which is set to be implemented in September, deserves an in-depth analysis and that teachers will have to prepare its integration, especially at the elementary level, while the school books have yet to be approved by the MELS, the federative council will request that the ministry of education cannot require the evaluation of this school subject until next year for the three elementary school cycles.

(Alliances des professeurs et professeurs de Montréal, 2008)¹¹

The *Fédération Autonome de l'Enseignement* (Autonomous Federation of Education), a provincial federation of various teachers unions including the *Alliance des Professeures et Professeurs de Montréal*, will establish its position on the ERC course as well as all issues pertaining to secularity and reasonable accommodations in its 2013 congress (Fédération Autonome de l'Enseignement, 2012).

1.2 Framework

A) The Quebec Education Program

Introduced in 2001, the QEP presents itself as the cornerstone one of the most important large-scale education reform of the province. The QEP prioritizes competency-based learning, through which students will access new knowledge but also develop competencies that they can use in their environment. Learning, as defined by the QEP, is “an active, ongoing process of construction of knowledge” (Quebec government, Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec, 2001, p.4).

The QEP is divided in three categories: cross-curricular competencies, broad areas of learning,

¹⁰ Translated by the author

¹¹ Translated by the author

and subject areas. Cross-curricular competencies include “intellectual, methodological, personal and social, and communication-related competencies” and they provide the students with skills that can help them in all subject areas present in their education (Quebec Government, Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec, 2001, p.6). Since the implementation of the new program, cross-curricular competencies have been the source of dissatisfaction and their evaluation is no longer required since 2010, when the Quebec government removed any mention of cross-curricular competencies from its pedagogical regimen for preschool, elementary, and secondary education (Quebec government, 2013, Bennesaieh, 2010). The broad areas of learning included in the QEP represent elements that are taken into consideration by the program in order for students to gain a better understanding of the society they live in. The broad areas of learning are divided in five categories: health and well-being, personal and career planning, environmental awareness and consumer rights and responsibilities, media literacy, and citizenship and community life (Quebec government, Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec, 2001, p.43-50). Finally, the subject areas are divided into five categories: languages, mathematics, science and technology, social sciences, arts education, and personal development (Quebec government, Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec, 2001, p. 7). Catholic religious and moral instruction, moral education, Protestant moral and religious education and physical education and health were originally found within the personal development subject area (Quebec government, Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec, 2001, p. 268). Following the implementation of the ERC course and the exclusion of confessional religious education, ERC became a part of the personal development subject areas category, along with physical education and health (Quebec government, Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir, et du Sport, 2008, p. 268).

B) Constructing a World-view

The QEP specifies that the ability to construct a world-view is the element that ties together cross-curricular competencies, broad areas of learning, and subject areas. The education program,

which defines this ability as “the focal point of all student learnings”, stresses the importance of learning about other world-views:

The development of a world-view, which is related to the sense of judgment and conscience, is fostered by reflection on the great existential issues (life and death, love and hate, success and failure, peace and violence, etc.). It also depends on the extent to which students are willing to compare their world-view with those of others and to look critically at themselves and their actions, reactions, opinions, beliefs, values and attitudes (Quebec government, Ministère de l'Éducation, 2001, p. 6).

It is interesting to consider the importance placed on the ability to construct a world-view when analyzing the eventual exclusion of confessional religious education courses and the moral education course. In the first published version of the QEP, references to religions other than Christianity are almost entirely absent, save for references to open-mindedness to other religions mentioned within the Protestant moral and religious education curriculum (Quebec government, Ministère de l'Éducation, 2001. p. 336-341). In the second version of the QEP published in 2008, the revised Personal Development section states that the two subject areas it covers “contribute to young people’s development of a world-view that helps them understand the concepts, rites and symbols that are part of their lives, as well as a variety of other concepts, rites and symbols inherent in an increasingly multicultural society” (Quebec government, Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir, et du Sport, 2008, p.268). Later on in the education program, the concept of a multicultural and diverse society is again brought up:

This instruction is aimed at an informed understanding of the many forms of religious expression present in Québec society and in the world. It is considered “cultural” because it is aimed at the ability to grasp the field of religion by means of its various forms of expression in time and space. It allows for understanding the signs in which the religious experiences of

individuals and groups are conveyed that contribute to shaping society (Quebec government, Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir, et du Sport, 2008, p.293).

The transition from confessional religious education to a culturally-oriented religious education course reflects the desire of the 2001 reform to drastically change the aim of education in order to focus on the construction of a world-view and the understanding of other world-views. Similarly, the transition from moral education to ethics education further addressed the place of religious cultures within moral dialogue and ethical reflection by making ethical education “take into account elements related to religious culture” (Quebec government, Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir, et du Sport, 2008, p.293). In conclusion, it is essential to remember that the introduction of the ERC course is only one of the initiatives taken by the MELS in a generalized movement towards an education system that acknowledges cultural diversity. The ERC course's description includes the following sentence: “The objectives [of the ERC course] are instrumental in attaining the three aims of the Québec Education Program (QEP): the construction of identity, the construction of world-view and empowerment.” (Quebec government, Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir, et du Sport, 2008, p. 296). The MELS introduced the ERC course while acknowledging the QEP's desire to prioritize the students' development of a world-view.

C) The course

The ERC course is taught at every school level from first grade all the way to secondary school graduation, with the exception of secondary three (ninth grade). The QEP for elementary schools provides a framework for the course from first to sixth grade. The education program presents the course's two main objectives: the recognition of others and the pursuit of common good (Quebec government, Ministère de l'éducation, du loisir, et du sport, 2008, p. 296). The two objectives are present for both religious education and ethics education. The teaching and the evaluation of the ERC course are based on three competencies: reflects on ethical questions, demonstrates an understanding of

the phenomenon of religion, and engages in a dialogue (Quebec government, Ministère de l'éducation, du loisir, et du sport, 2008, p.296). For each competency, the QEP provides a description of its key features, the progress students are expected to accomplish, evaluation criteria, and a description of the complementarity of the competency with the other competencies. Also included in the education program are detailed charts of the content teachers must explore with their students. As a part of their task, elementary school teachers are required to evaluate the aptitudes of their students to attain the ERC courses' three competencies.

In ethics, six themes are explored with students. First and second grade students learn about the needs of humans and other living beings and the demands associated with the interdependence of humans and other living beings. Third and fourth grade students then study interpersonal relationships in groups as well as the demands of belonging to a group. Finally, fifth and sixth grade students focus on the themes of individuals as member of society and the demands of life in society (Quebec government, Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir, et du Sport, 2008, p.335-340).

In religious culture education, first and second grade students explore family celebrations and stories that have touched people. Third and fourth grade students then learn about religious practices in the community, as well as the forms of religious expression in the young person's environment. Finally, fifth and sixth grade students develop an understanding of religions in society and the world and religious values and norms (Quebec government, Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir, et du Sport, 2008 p.342-347).

While Quebec's pedagogical regimen does not specify the amount of time that needs to be spent teaching the Ethics and Religious Culture course, it does present various time regulations. For first and second grade groups, seven hours per week are spent on language education, arts education subjects and the ERC course (Quebec government, 2013). For the other elementary school grades, eleven hours are available to teach language education, arts education subjects, the ERC course, the geography,

history, and citizenship education course, and science and technology (Quebec government, 2013). It is to be noted that there are no structures to enforce the time regulation.

1.3 Literature Review

Much of the literature published regarding the introduction of the ERC course addresses the nature of the course itself and its relation to Canadian multiculturalism, while few authors address the course's content or the role of teachers within the course. In order to gain a better understanding of the relation between teachers and the ERC course, the following section will discuss the literature addressing the ERC course and its framework, its content, the role of teachers within the course, teacher education as well as the perspective of teachers.

A) Religious Education Framework

The desire of the Quebec government to eliminate confessional religious education from the QEP brought the MELS to choose among various replacement possibilities for the retired courses. In the end, education authorities made the decision to introduce a course addressing major religions and spiritualities, as well as ethical issues. Commonly referred to as the study of world religions, non-confessional religious education exists in many forms and can cover a wide array of content. Richard Rymarz identifies non-confessional religious education as the study of religion within a phenomenological framework. Rymarz characterizes Quebec's ERC course as particularly oriented towards the study of religions as a sociocultural manifestation, rather than a study of its dogmas and ideologies. For Rymarz, the ERC course's approach to religions consists of two elements: the study of diverse religions and the study of Quebec's religious heritage (Rymarz, 2012).

Fujiwara defines the ERC course as a non-confessional multi-faith religious education program. She describes the course as a product of secular liberal democracy. Because of its origins as a product of secular liberalism, Fujiwara suggests that the course presents its own set of values, thus making it another form of confessional education rather than a universal approach (Fujiwara, 2011). Meanwhile, Andreassen presents the transition from confessional religious education to the ERC course as a transition from separative to integrative religious education. He presents the course as a product of

globalization and modernization whose objective is to connect students to local, regional and global culture. Andreassen proposes the idea that the course uses an inductive approach, putting an emphasis on Quebec's religious heritage before expanding its scope to diverse religious traditions. This approach, according to the author, increases the chances that “other religions” will be placed in a position of otherness rather than as a legitimate part of Quebec society (Andreassen, 2011).

B) Content

i) Vast content

Rymarz (2012) suggests in his work that religious education courses taught within a phenomenological framework can vary greatly from one to another. As an example, he points out the the phenomenological framework developed by Diane Moore in *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, published in 2007. Moore's framework is developed on the principle that “religion is best understood not as an abstraction that can be broken down into a series of common phenomenon but as a lived and integrated whole” (Rymarz, 2012, p.303). Religious education courses taught in accordance with Moore's framework focus on a particular religion for an extended period of time (Rymarz, 2012). As Rymarz remarks, the ERC course's aims cover a large amount of knowledge, including numerous religious traditions, spiritualities, and the religious traditions present in Quebec's history. Highlighting the complexity of such a task, Rymarz notes that among the various religious traditions that are part of Quebec's identity, most religions also include an impressive diversity. For instance, Judaism in Quebec is expressed in various ways and includes the presence of Hasidic communities, Orthodox communities, as well as the presence of secular Jews. Additionally, Rymarz also remarks that many Eastern religions, Eastern philosophies and indigenous beliefs discussed in the ERC course can hardly be analyzed from a Eurocentric perspective. Considering the quantity and the complexity of the mandatory content taught by teachers, Richard Rymarz questions the relevance of Quebec teachers' training and suggests that more time might be needed to form teachers (Rymarz, 2012).

Anne-Marie De Silva is an elementary school teacher who became a pedagogical advisor for the ERC course. Facilitating training sessions on the ERC course, she noted that teachers expressed doubts about their level of knowledge. While the content is admittedly vast, De Silva supports the idea that the ERC course moves away from the pre-Deweyian conception of teachers as the core element of the classroom. Instead, students and teacher become a community of research and inquiry in which all classroom members can teach and learn (Morris, Bouchard, and De Silva, 2011).

ii) Controversial Content

At times, religions are discussed because of the controversial issues that surround them, rather than for the traditions associated with them. While the ERC course does address various issues that can be a source of controversy, most of the focus is on the various customs and the foundational elements of each religion. Sakoto Fujiwara refers to this tendency as *the 3 F's*. An expression developed by Japanese pedagogues, the *3 F's* stand for festival, food, and fashion. For Fujiwara, non-confessional religious education often focuses on attractive and accessible content rather than complex ethical questions. By avoiding sensitive matters such as inter-religious conflicts or oppression, the ERC course might be failing to actually develop the ability of students to understand these conflicts and to avoid attitudes that favour inter-religious tensions. Instead, the *3 F's* contribute to the exoticisation of cultural minorities, defining them as “others” and using traditional customs as a way to categorize them (Fujiwara, 2011).

Andreassen also questions the lack of content on religions that addresses the more controversial aspects of religions, such as conflicts and violence. According to Andreassen, this approach creates an image of religions as being constituted of ethical ideals, which might leave students with the impression that only religions can provide ethics. This becomes particularly problematic because the ERC course is placed under the Personal Development section of the QEP. Andreassen questions this categorization, arguing that it becomes ambiguous to know whether students are expected to learn from

religions to develop or simply to learn about religions (Andreassen, 2011).

C) Teacher Professional Stance

To be able to engage in dialogue is one of the three competencies that students must develop to achieve success in the ERC course. Because students are expected to engage in dialogue, elementary school teachers take on the role of moderators for these discussions. The QEP, in the *Professional Stance* section of the ERC course, prescribes various actions teachers must take to foster dialogue. Among other things, teachers are expected to conduct discussions with objectivity and impartiality, to create an environment conducive to free expression, to present students with the tools necessary for dialogue, to prevent students from attacking others' opinions, and to ensure that discussions follow the aims of the ERC course, the pursuit of the common good and the recognition of others (MELS, 2008).

Natalie Knott questions the ability of teachers to remain impartial and objective in her work *Teacher Professional Stance and the Québec Ethics and Religious Culture Program* (2010). Knott's experience as a teacher and as a pedagogical advisor for the ERC course informs her work. While the QEP calls for teachers to act with impartiality and objectivity, Knott suggests that the predominance of teachers who are white and educated in Christian culture is an obstacle for the objectivity and impartiality of teachers (Knotts, 2010). Because the cultural identity of teachers remains much more homogenous than the identity of students, teachers struggle to acknowledge their students' culture, perceiving the non-Christian religious traditions as exotic (Knotts, 2010). The author also remarks that teachers struggle to detach themselves from the dominant culture. She recounts a recurrent situation in which teachers use exclusive language:

Students who do not share the beliefs and religion of the teacher are excluded from the dialogue and are made to feel left out, strange and lonely. I often hear teachers use phrases such as “*we believe this and we use prayer beads, do other people use beads to pray?*” The teacher includes herself in the majority and affirms the importance of the dominant culture and therefore

marginalizes students whose world-views and practices are not of the mainstream (Knotts, 2010, p. 66).

Sakoto Fujiwara suggests that the course itself fails to be neutral. While it is best described as secular and multi-faith, the religious education aspect of the ERC course is rooted in secular liberalism. Consequently, the course consists of various values that are presented to students as a proper way to understand religious traditions. Fujiwara remarks that secular multi-faith religious education, because of its non-confessional nature and because of its own values, often offers a very subjective take on the religions it addresses. Consequently, humanistic values found within religions are more often presented to students than traditional content found in religious texts (Fujiwara, 2011). Considering Fujiwara's analysis of non-confessional religious education, teachers are faced with the daunting task of teaching objectively and with impartiality a course that can be perceived as subjective itself.

Richard Rymarz questions the impact of the Professional Stance framework elaborated by the MELS. According to the author, the demands formulated to teachers by the QEP are an obstacle to the analysis necessitated by the course. By asking teachers to remain impartial moderators, the QEP keeps teachers from analyzing phenomenon with the help of a specific religious framework. The author suggests that the complexity of religious issues is best analyzed by researching information on religious traditions from a confessional perspective rather than a secular one. The author argues that the desire to study issues pertaining to the course through the prism of secular worldview keeps teachers from using the valuable help of confessional frameworks (Rymarz, 2010).

D) Teacher Education

Teacher education is an essential part of the development of the ERC course. Morris presents it as the Achilles heel of the course, arguing that the course risks becoming ineffective if training for the course remains insufficient. Currently, elementary school teachers at McGill University are required to attend only two courses on the subject, while in-service teachers attended one or two workshops.

Morris finds the current teacher education insufficient for the ERC course and reiterates that the course seeks to go beyond the simple acquisition of knowledge, but also to develop an understanding of religious phenomenon and its place within a sociocultural context. Consequently, Morris suggests that researching information on the fly or attending a few workshops cannot possibly prepare educators to move beyond information transmission (Morris et al., 2011).

Teacher education pertaining to the ERC course is now offered to pre-service teachers in Quebec's universities. The transition from confessional religious education and culturally-oriented religious education is a gradual process. Andreassen discusses teacher education for culturally-oriented religious education as a *Longue Durée* transition. *Longue Durée* represents the fact that underlying power structures continue to exist even though institutional reforms are implemented. Andreassen writes that while reforms can be implemented rapidly, university faculty members, school administrators, as well as school teachers often need more time to detach themselves from established teaching techniques and to embrace new content and methods. (Andreassen, 2011)

Morris also suggests in his work that the structures in place have not completely adapted to the reform implemented. Because of the ERC course's particular alliance of ethics and religious education, faculty members often come from either philosophical or theological backgrounds. Because of this divide between faculty members, the courses offered to pre-service teachers are taught by teacher educators who are not necessarily comfortable teaching both ethics and religious education (Morris et al., 2011).

E) Teachers' perspective

To this day, only two surveys have been conducted with elementary school teachers to find out more about their perception of the ERC course. The MELS published the results of a survey on the subject in 2007, while Nancy Bouchard, a Université du Québec à Montréal professor and founder of the *Groupe de recherche sur l'éducation éthique et l'éthique en éducation* (GRÉE, the research group

on ethics education and ethics in education), conducted a survey in 2010, with complete results that have yet to be published (Morris et al, 2011).

The survey conducted by the MELS suggests that teachers perceive the content, the pedagogical context and the competencies positively. They also agree with the aims of the course towards openness and dialogue. However, it is to be noted that teachers believe they require additional resources to properly teach the content pertaining to religious culture (Morris et al., 2011, p.261)

The survey conducted by Nancy Bouchard and her team suggests a larger dissatisfaction. Only 53.3% see the religious education reform as a positive change, while 18.7% see it as a negative change, and 28% do not find the change significant. There also seems to be a divide between the teachers' perception of the three competencies. While the dialogue and the ethics competencies are viewed as very important by most participants (84% and 72% approval respectively), only 44% of the teachers surveyed viewed the area of religious culture as very important (Morris et al., 2011, p.261).

The qualitative data found by Bouchard shows that elementary school teachers are generally divided in two groups regarding the place of non-confessional religious education. On one hand, many teachers view the new religious education course as a sign of openness to other cultures, while another group of participants finds the new course diminishes the importance of Christianity within Quebec's culture (Morris et al., 2011, p.262).

Concerning the ethics and the dialogue competencies, the majority of participants find that the two competencies are inter-related. However, numerous participants find that a course on those two competencies is not necessary, as teachers foster these aptitudes in their classroom on a daily basis. Finally, the survey conducted by Bouchard signals that students between the ages of 6 and 8 are considered too young by some teachers to be learning about ethics and religious culture. The participants argue that the course requires aptitudes that younger children have yet to develop and that the students often lack proper knowledge on their own religion (Morris et al, 2011, p.262).

F) Conclusion

The various analyses formulated regarding the ERC course offer an insightful look at the challenges the course faces, as well as provide a portrait of where the course stands in comparison to other non-confessional religious education. Based on the works of the authors who analyzed the ERC course, the course is portrayed as oriented towards the presentation of religions as sociocultural manifestations, as opposed to the understanding of religious ideologies. Various authors also observe that the course broadly addresses a large number of religious phenomena, which is perceived as both an ineffective way for students to learn about religions, as well as an immense challenge for teachers. The latter observation is supported by teachers themselves, with a majority of teachers claiming they would need better training and additional resources to teach the course. Finally, many authors question the pertinence and the feasibility of the professional stance suggested by the Education Ministry, which dictates that teachers are to remain neutral.

Methodology

2.1 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the training offered to Quebec elementary school teachers as well as their perceptions of the Ethics and Religious Culture course. This work provides an analysis of the relationship between the course and elementary school teachers, which involves a considerable number of teachers who are often unwilling, unmotivated, or feel unable to teach the ERC course in their class. The aim of this study is to know why a number of teachers struggle to embrace the new course. By presenting and analyzing the testimonies of elementary school teachers, this project attempts to define how the MELS, school boards, pedagogical advisors, as well as elementary school teachers can better attain the objectives of the ERC course and what training would be necessary to do so.

2.2: Framework

The research conducted for this work is based on a qualitative framework. The choice of this framework was primarily based on the desire to present the narrative and the perceptions of the participants, with their input as the focus of the project. The data collected via interviews presents the experience of teachers and allows outsiders a chance to learn about the specific context in which teachers were trained to teach the ERC course and the classroom context for the actual implementation. The purpose of the study was to present more detailed narratives by fewer participants, as opposed to obtaining briefer answers from a larger group of elementary school teachers.

2.3: Research Question

The research question developed for the study is the following: “What are the perceptions of Quebec elementary school teachers regarding the Ethics and Religious Culture course and what training is offered to them to teach the course.”

2.4: Context

In order to assess responses from teachers working in both urban and rural environments, participants were selected in two administrative regions of Quebec: Montreal and the Mauricie. Montreal is the most populated administrative region of Quebec, with 1 981 672 residents out of a provincial population of 8 054 756 (Institut de la statistique du Québec, 2013). The Mauricie is one of Quebec's rural administrative regions and it includes cities such as Trois-Rivieres, Shawinigan and La Tuque. The Montreal participants worked in five different neighbourhoods; Mercier-Hochelaga-Maisonneuve, Montreal-Nord, Plateau-Mont-Royal, Rosemont-Petite-Patrie and Ville-Marie. Because most of the Mauricie's participants work in small municipalities, their specific regional district will not be discussed here.

Mercier-Hochelaga-Maisonneuve is inhabited by 129 110 residents. It is one of Montreal's poorest neighbourhoods, with a per capita household disposable income of 23 704\$. Of the nineteen neighbourhoods in Montreal, Mercier-Hochelaga-Maisonneuve residents have the fifth lowest average personal gross income. Twenty-four percent of the population consists of first or second generation immigrants, slightly over the provincial average of twenty percent (Service de la mise en valeur du territoire et du patrimoine, 2009a, Institut de la statistique du Québec, 2009).

Montreal-Nord is home to 83 911 residents. It is another one of the city's poorest neighbourhoods, with a per capita household disposable income of 20 301\$. The neighbourhood's average personal gross income is the second lowest in Montreal. The neighbourhood's population is largely multicultural; fifty percent of its residents are first or second generation immigrants, thirty percent over the provincial average (Service de la mise en valeur du territoire et du patrimoine, 2009b).

Plateau-Mont-Royal is a Montreal neighbourhood populated by 101 154 residents. The per capita household disposable income for Plateau-Mont-Royal is 26 354\$. Forty-three percent of the neighbourhood's residents are first or second generation immigrants (Service de la mise en valeur du

territoire et du patrimoine, 2009c).

Rosemont-Petite-Patrie is inhabited by 133 618 residents. The per capita household disposable income for Rosemont-Petite-Patrie is 24 287\$. First and second generation immigrants constitute thirty-two percent of the neighbourhood's population (Service de la mise en valeur du territoire et du patrimoine, 2009d).

Ville-Marie, the neighbourhood which encompasses downtown Montreal, has 78 876 residents. Ville-Marie per capita household disposable income is 28 658\$. Ville-Marie's first and second generation immigrant population represents fifty percent of its population (Service de la mise en valeur du territoire et du patrimoine, 2009e).

The Mauricie is an administrative region with a population of 263 269 (Institut de la statistique du Québec, 2013). The Mauricie's per capita household disposable income is 22 664\$. Of the seventeen administrative regions in the province, the average personal gross income of the region's citizens is the third lowest (Institut de la statistique du Québec, 2012). The Mauricie's population is very homogenous, with less than four percent of its residents being first or second generation immigrants (Institut de la statistique du Québec, 2009).

2.5: Participants

The process of recruiting participants for this research project was an arduous one. Montreal's three francophone public school boards, *Commission scolaire de Montréal*, *Commission scolaire de la Pointe-de-l'Île* and *Commission scolaire Marguerite-Bourgeoys* stated that they either did not wish to work with masters' students, or they did not wish to work with graduate students at all. Meanwhile, the English Montreal School Board, Montreal's largest English-language public school board, charges fees to university researchers, which made collaboration impossible because of this research project's lack of funding. Of the nine school boards contacted, the only school board willing to collaborate on the research project was Mauricie's *Commission scolaire de l'Énergie*. In total, over eighty elementary

schools, both private and public, were also contacted individually by phone and by e-mail. Of these, only two responded positively. The majority of school principals did not return phone calls or e-mails while a considerable number expressed doubts about the interest of teachers in participating in research projects. The teachers' lack of time to participate in research projects was also a common answer from school principals.

As a result of the recruitment process, seventeen participants were interviewed. The willingness of the *Commission scolaire de l'Énergie* to collaborate on this project (this request was one of the first they had ever received) facilitated the participation of four of their teachers. Meanwhile, one private school in an urban part of the Mauricie region and one public school in an urban area of Montreal granted permission to conduct interviews, which allowed the researcher to work with nine other participants. Finally, four participants were selected among the researcher's former coworkers for a total of seventeen participants. All participants, excluding former coworkers, were recruited through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is a type of sampling in which a researcher interviews participants who have been suggested by other participants. Generally, a participant would ask the researcher if he needed more participants, after which the participant would refer colleagues who might be interested in participating. Sometimes, participants directly asked their colleagues if they wanted to help a research project by participating themselves.

The participants required for this research were elementary school teachers with more than five years of teaching experience and elementary school teachers with less than five years of teaching experience. This choice was motivated by the fact that elementary school teachers who have attained their teaching licence in the past five years were required to take a course on the Ethics and Religious Culture course, while more experienced elementary school teachers were trained to teach confessional religious education rather than Ethics and Religious Culture. The research's participants' age ranged from early twenties to late forties. Their experience as elementary school teachers spanned a single year

to twenty-one years.

The participants of the study are listed in Table One. The table includes information on the participants, including: Grade taught, location of their workplace, number of years of experience, and university education. Brief descriptions of some of the participants' particular work situation are also included.

Table One

Participant	Grade	Location	Years of Experience	University Education	Additional Information
Teacher A	4 th	Montreal-Nord	12	Kindergarten and Elementary Education	
Teacher B	5 th	Montreal-Nord	11	Kindergarten and Elementary Education	
Teacher C	5 th	Montreal-Nord	4	Kindergarten and Elementary Education	
Teacher D	6 th	Montreal-Nord	21	Kindergarten and Elementary Education	
Teacher E	6 th	Montreal-Nord	0 (university student)	Kindergarten and Elementary Education	University student completing her final field experience
Teacher F	3 rd	Montreal-Nord	25	Kindergarten and Elementary Education	
Teacher G	3 rd	Montreal-Nord	15	Kindergarten and Elementary Education	
Teacher H	5 th -6 th	Mauricie	12	Comparative Literature	Worked as an ERC pedagogical advisor
Teacher I	6 th	Mercier-Hochelaga-	1	Kindergarten and Elementary	

		Maisonneuve		Education	
Teacher J	3 rd -4 th	Plateau-Mont-Royal	1	Kindergarten and Elementary Education	
Teacher K	3 rd -4 th -5 th	Montreal-Nord	1	Kindergarten and Elementary Education	Works with four different groups and teaches ERC in fourth and fifth grade
Teacher L	5 th	Ville-Marie	3	Kindergarten and Elementary Education	
Teacher M	4 th	Mauricie	21	Kindergarten and Elementary Education	Worked as an ERC pedagogical advisor
Teacher N	3 rd	Mauricie	10	Kindergarten and Elementary Education	Works on a four-day schedule and no longer teaches ERC
Teacher O	1 st	Rosemont-Petite-Patrie	21	Kindergarten and Elementary Education	Her first grade colleague teaches ERC to all first grade students
Teacher P	6 th	Mauricie	17	Kindergarten and Elementary Education	A part-time teacher replaces her to teach ERC
Teacher Q	6 th , Principal	Mauricie	16	English as a Second Language	School principal who teaches ERC to sixth grade students

2.6: Instruments

In order to gain a better understanding of the training offered to Quebec elementary school teachers as well as their perceptions of the Ethics and Religious Culture course, interviews were used to

collect data.

The interviews were based on a set of eleven open-ended questions about the teacher's experience, his/her students, his/her training to teach Ethnic and Religious Culture, his/her solutions to the training's shortcomings, his/her perception of the challenges in teaching the course, his/her own religious education, his/her appreciation of the resources available to teach the course, his/her solutions to the courses' shortcomings, his/her perception of the place of Christianity in the course, his/her perception of the benefits or lack of benefits in teaching the course and his/her personal appreciation of the course (see annexes). The questions were asked in the same order for all participants. Participants were sometimes asked additional questions to clarify their statements.

The teachers participated on a voluntary basis and could choose where and when the interview took place. A majority of interviews were conducted in the teachers' classrooms during lunch, when their students were with other teachers or before the start of the school day. Three interviews were conducted in an empty cafeteria. Participants had no time constraints when responding to any of the questions. The interviews lasted from thirty-three minutes to sixty-three minute and the average length of the interviews was forty-eight minutes.

The audio of the interviews was recorded digitally so that the researcher could concentrate on the interview and interact with the participants. Several measures were taken to ensure that the teachers' responses would remain confidential. Interviews were mostly conducted in empty rooms, ensuring that no other teachers or the principal were likely to interrupt the interview. In order to ensure strict confidentiality, the identification of the participants as well as that of the schools are not revealed. The audio recordings of the interviews were kept in one location and were password-protected, as were the transcriptions.

The first interview was conducted in March 2012 in the form of a focus group in a Montreal-Nord school with four teachers and a university student completing her final field experience. These

five participants are referred to as Teacher A, Teacher B, Teacher C, Teacher D, and Teacher E. An interview was also conducted in May 2012 with two third grade teachers from Montreal-Nord, who were interviewed together. These two participants are referred to as Teacher F and Teacher G. The remaining interviews were conducted individually with ten elementary school teachers, from April to June 2012. These teachers are referred to as Teacher H, Teacher I, Teacher J, Teacher K, Teacher L, Teacher M, Teacher N, Teacher O, Teacher P, and Teacher Q.

2.7 Data analysis

In order to analyze the data collected through the eleven one-on-one interviews, the interview with two participants and the focus group discussion, all the interviews' audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. The transcription of the data was done to allow the researcher to browse through the data with ease. In order to select information from 117 pages of interview transcriptions, the researcher first marked the data pertaining specifically to the questions participants were asked during the course of the interviews. Following this first step of data organization, the researcher identified perceptions that were shared by various participants even though they were not necessarily directly related to interview questions. Finally, the third step of data organization was to seek out the answers of participants that opposed those of the majority of participants, in order to highlight the significant differences between the participants' perceptions, even in cases where there was consensus among the majority of participants.

The data selected for presentation in the study was information that was deemed to be the most pertinent regarding the research question as well as the interview questions. At no time was data rejected to censor negative or controversial opinions. Because the identity of the participants is kept private, the perceptions of participants regarding school officials, the education ministry, parents, and students are also included in the results section.

The data collected through the interviews was divided in four distinct categories: training to

teach the ERC course, challenges involved in teaching the ERC course, Christian heritage and secularity, and the benefits of teaching the ERC course. Subcategories were added to further organize the data.

RESULTS

The results of the interviews and the focus group discussion will be presented in the following four categories: 1) training to teach the Ethics and Religious Culture course, 2) challenges involved in teaching the Ethics and Religious Culture course, 3) religion and education, and 4) benefits of teaching the Ethics and Religious Culture course. The teachers will be identified as Teacher A to Teacher Q, as presented in Table 1.

All interviews were conducted in French, due to the fact that all of the participants' first language and workplace language was French. The interviews were then translated to English by the author.

3.1 Training to Teach the Ethics and Religious Culture Course

All seventeen participants interviewed for this study attended mandatory training sessions or university courses in order to teach ERC. The following section will be divided according to the three categories of training the participants received: 1) pre-service teacher university training, 2) in-service teacher university training, and 3) in-service teacher school board training.

A) Pre-service teacher university training

Five participants of this study attended a course on the methodology of ERC as a part of their Bachelor of Education's program: Teacher E, Teacher I, Teacher J, Teacher K, and Teacher L. These participants are all recent graduates; they have all matriculated within the past three years. Teacher J attended an additional course pertaining to religions, an elective course on world religions. The following section will present the teachers' descriptions and appreciation of the training they received.

Teacher E, who was part of the focus group discussion, comments: "I attended a forty-five hour course on the ERC course but we didn't really talk about evaluation; we looked at the main characteristics of each religion, various myths, what we should criticize, what is a false conception."

When asked by Teacher C if there was any information about evaluation, Teacher E replies: “Nothing at all on evaluation. We had no course on the evaluation of Ethics and Religious Culture.”

Teacher I describes her university course on the ERC course as the following: “An ERC course in which we spent much more time on the religious aspect than on the ethics aspect. They taught us much more information. I remember that [the professor] really went through all the religions and then we had to learn by heart what were the religious signs, who were celebrating the masses. It was really... you learned by heart. Religious objects and everything. Then you try to remember that.” Regarding the ethics part of the ERC course, she adds: “Seriously, I don't even remember what we did.”

Teacher J, who attended two university courses, one on the ERC course and one on world religions, describes her experience as the following: “They taught us to teach ethics and then they taught me what religion is. I learned more about religions. I remember, I did a second course on world religions, so I had two semesters on religions. But that was a course focused only on learning things about religions. The other course [first course] was more 'I learn about religions' but the ethics part was 'I teach ethics'. It was closer to methodology.” Regarding the second course, she adds that it was “given by the Department of Theology so there were people from different programs who had that course at the same time, so it wasn't a course focused on methodology.”

Teacher K attended one university course on the ERC course. She describes her experience as the following: “It was with a really competent professor, who was really engaged; I think he even worked on the conception of the new ERC program. And we really worked, went through the program, played in it, built evaluation projects. We divided the group to really work on each aspect of the program and we each built an evaluation project based on it. And that's it, in the end we pretty much discussed every aspect of that course.”

Teacher L also attended one university course on the ERC course. Having graduated before the other four participants, he witnessed the university course's beginnings. According to him, the course

was not ready: “It mostly felt like an improvised course. And at the time at which professors were required to teach it, there was very little material available. So even for them, it was difficult to teach that course, unless they had a vast knowledge of history and general culture.”

The five participants had different perceptions on the quality and pertinence of the courses they attended. Teacher E mentions that the course “wasn't structured and the professor who was teaching the course was retiring that year and she was tired of it.”

Teacher I was disappointed that “[the professors] wouldn't tell us stories.” She mentions that “in other courses, they told more stories about religions. We had to learn by heart.” When asked if the course was pertinent to her as a future teacher, she answers: “No, we did not really learn through the course how to build evaluation projects or things like that, with our students in Ethics and Religious Culture. So... No, I didn't use anything from the course.” Regarding the course's usefulness in learning to teach ethics, she says: “It was more about my own experiences, about ethical questions and all... I was looking at my own knowledge.”

Teacher J has a different appreciation of the two courses she attended. On the course addressing the methodology of ERC, she says: “It was relatively pertinent. I didn't think it was pertinent while doing it but I admit that I really use the material and the notebooks that I obtained during that ERC course because I cannot find that information in any other resource at my school. Information on other religions, on important facts, on the names of divinities, all kinds of information I wish to give to my students...I cannot find them in my books. So had I not attended that course, I could not properly teach, in my opinion, that course.” When questioned on the usefulness of the course on world religions she attended, she replies: “Moderate, because the work we had to do was only about one religion. I am now, somehow, a Islamic holidays specialist! But it is the only thing I remember because it was an online course so there was an enormous amount of reading and I don't have the memory for that either.”

Teacher K believes the course was “pertinent because I am able to visualize what I have to teach

and we even created content while at it.” The course also brought her to use the website *Récit* to find new activities. Looking back on her experience, she adds: “I remember very well that course and it was far from being the least pertinent in my degree. I would say it was a course that was well-adapted to reality.”

Teacher L, when asked if his university course was pertinent, says the following: “A little bit. Because in the end, in my opinion, the interest to teach ERC must come from the teachers. There must be a certain motivation to become an 'engine' and to transmit. You have to be curious and you have to want to learn so it requires a big open-mindedness.”

B) In-service teacher university training

Two participants of this study are experienced teachers who voluntarily attended university to learn about the new ERC course in 2006 (before its introduction in 2008), in order to be able to train their peers to teach it. The following section will present descriptions of their training, their appreciation of it as well as accounts of their experiences as ERC pedagogical consultants.

Teacher H describes her training as the following: “It was always divided in two categories, the religious and the moral, ethics and all that. It also obviously included a complete study of the [Quebec Education] Program, from top to bottom.” She says on the course that she attended that “75% was theory. At the beginning, in the first year, the program was not completed so there was a lot of restructuring in the program. So the people teaching us knew little more than us, they started off with what they would normally do in university.”

Teacher M's description of her training shares similarities: “Obviously, it was complex university content. You know, we really dug deep. For example, we dissected Catholicism, then Protestantism, Hinduism...” The participant also adds: “And we were witnessing the baby steps of that program. When we started attending the course, the course's number did not even exist! We did not have a syllabus. At UQTR [Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières], profs taught us if they felt like

getting involved.”

Regarding the pertinence of their university training, Teacher H explains: “Obviously, it wasn't always pertinent. However, we did many seminars, which allowed us to make it concrete.” Teacher M, for her part, says the following about the complexity of her training on religious culture: “In my daily life [in the classroom], I do not go that far. We were taught so much content.” She adds that “the ethics philosophy part was... completely useless. I learned more from my personal research and by finding ways to teach it to teachers, how to explain it to teachers.”

Both teachers experienced being ERC consultants and trained other elementary school teachers to teach the course. Teacher H remembers her experience as the following: “We had to explain the program, to present the program, and quickly it became governmental gibberish that was not very concrete so I think that is where we missed the mark. But we had never taught it so... that's it, it was done quickly, again, I think. But had I only received the [school board] training, no, I don't think I would have been able to teach it, honestly.” Regarding the teachers' reactions, Teacher H remembers that “some people were really really opposed to that type of program for 'x' reason. School had to be completely secular and all that.” She adds: “It was a lot of extra work [for teachers]. 'How will I do it', 'I don't know that', 'I don't know anything about religion', 'How will I do it'. It introduced many concerns. 'I don't know anything about religion, how am I supposed to teach something I don't know'. These were concerns that were often mentioned, all the time, throughout the training.”

Teacher M describes her experience as the following: “You had the teachers who said: 'Do I have to remove my crucifix while I teach?' You know, it was these types of questions we would get during the training. 'Now I don't have the right to pray, if we have a moment of prayer, I won't have the right to!' Well you can do what you think is good for you! That is what we want every child to do!”

C) In-service teacher school board training

Since the ERC course was only introduced in 2008, the majority of Quebec's elementary school

teachers attended a university course on confessional religious education during their Bachelor program instead of a university course on the ERC course. Since they were already in service before the introduction of the ERC course, Teacher A, Teacher B, Teacher C, Teacher D, Teacher F, Teacher G, Teacher N, Teacher O, and Teacher P attended mandatory school board training sessions on the new course. As the only participant teaching in a private school, Teacher Q attended optional training sessions provided by the province's association of private schools. The following section presents their description and appreciation of the training sessions they attended.

The four teachers of the focus group, Teacher A, Teacher B, Teacher C and Teacher D attended a first training session. Teacher A describes it as “a day of training, all of Montreal-Nord's teachers, in a big gymnasium.” Teacher B specifies that this training was “to explain the main characteristics, not to go into details.” Teacher A later adds that “the pedagogical advisor gave us documents at the beginning of September, by cycle, in order to create evaluation projects related to the two competencies.” While the training for the new course ended there for Teachers A and C, Teacher D describes a second training session he attended: “[Teacher B] and I attended two days of training in order to build evaluation projects and it clarified things that we hadn't yet completely understood.” However, he later adds: “In reality, I never did any of these evaluation projects, which are...” “Too long!” quickly finishes Teacher B.

Teacher F and Teacher G, who were interviewed together, give a similar account of their training session. Teacher G says: “We had a pedagogical advisor for ERC who came to see us for three hours. That's it. We also had something else in another school.” Teacher F adds: “Yes, it was broad, it was about to be introduced. The half-day you were talking about, we looked at school books.” Like Teacher B and Teacher D, Teacher F and Teacher G were offered additional training. Teacher F mentions the following: “We had the opportunity to work if we wanted, I think it was six half-days. Mornings and afternoons, working to activities and all that. I didn't do it.” “Neither did I.” adds Teacher G.

Teacher N remembers two training sessions about the ERC course. Of her second training session, she says the following: “We had training here at school by a colleague who, basically, had received training from the school board and then she gave us an afternoon training session about... She presented resources to us made by the education ministry and that was pretty much the only training I had. An afternoon or a half-day.” She adds later: “Presentation of the program, how to define dialogue, the ethics aspect, all that. And there was also a presentation of the books that had just been created by the education ministry. [The course] was brand new so she presented those brand new books to us so that she could know if we wanted to order them. And that was it, actually, the whole school equipped itself with new books. But there was no methodology aspect, to show us how... I remember we talked about the [ERC] content and all that and then she gave us some school board websites through which we could find religious symbols, illustrations, a little bit of resources to help us but that was pretty much it.”

Teacher O remembers the training she attended as the following: “The school board might have offered us training, and then they sent us the program and a slideshow. We talked about it a lot between us. And then we had readings to do but there wasn't really any big training considering the new things it brought.” Teacher P, who, like Teacher O, decided not to teach the course, remembers the training as the following: “Yes, we had a training offered by the school board a couple of years ago, I don't remember which year, when we had the new program. We actually had a lot of training.” She later adds: “We had several days. It was mostly during pedagogical days.”

Teacher Q describes her training as “very minimal, I will admit. It was very minimal. And I can't hold it against anybody. We had a private school, we had access to certain training sessions offered by the federation of private schools. I went to one of these training sessions that were two days long. However, I could have continued, persevered. I believe UQTR [Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières] was offering credits regarding that course.” Further describing her training experience, she

adds: “It was mostly about the program, the reason that program was there. It was mostly to see it, to know what it was, to inform us too because I have to admit that, for us, world religions weren't something that people necessarily knew. There was a large amount of knowledge involved. Transmit knowledge, where to find it, values, competencies, what the competencies of that course were. But it didn't focus on methodology, it was very traditional.”

Teacher D, who was one of the two participants of the focus group discussion who received additional training, gives the following answer when asked if his initial training included information about the content of the course: “No, and I will admit that, had I not attended those two [additional] days, I would have found it more confusing.” Teacher B believes “the content is still ambiguous, to know in ethics how to evaluate, it's complicated.”

Teacher F and G also share a similar perspective on the training offered to teachers. Teacher G believes the training offered “was nonsense.” Reflecting on how the new course was introduced, she says: “It's always like that in education. It's always thrown at you and then 'organize it yourself and straighten it out'. Each time there are reforms, [pedagogical consultants] are not prepared any more than us to teach it. They don't even know what to tell us.” Teacher F perceives her training as the following: “‘You won't have to convert, don't worry. Just because you have ten Hindu [students] doesn't mean you have to throw away your religion', all that stuff [is said]. It's always the same thing... And when I think about it, we still don't know where we're heading with this [ERC course], like you asked us earlier. Really, they never ask us: 'How well does it work, are there things that need to be changed?'”

When asked if the training received to teach the ERC course was useful for her teaching, Teacher N answers: “No. Obviously I don't find two or three hours is enough time. Obviously I liked that we were given resources, since at first, we weren't supposed to receive anything. Then I would have felt really unprepared but, at least, with the teachers' handbook, we managed to know where to go... It helps too but... Obviously a little more training would have been appreciated.” When asked the

same question, Teacher O had a similar answer: “No. We are very, very, very trained in mathematics and French, we have the newest material, readings, discussions... They send us to a bunch of training sessions but ERC, no. Not much.”

Similar to Teacher N and Teacher O, Teacher P did not find the training useful for her teaching: “We mostly rely on school books so I was eager to see the school books because that's what we rely on, rather than a training like that. So, in my opinion, teachers look at the school books and work with the resources they receive. More so than with the training sessions we have. Obviously it's the basis, we don't forget about it. But we mostly rely on the school books and then select activities from them.”

Teacher Q describes the training session she attended as the following: “They handed me information. They could have easily given me a book to read. It would have been the same thing. But for me, what I am currently experiencing... It is the central problem of all the training sessions we have, even at the university level. In my experience, there is a huge gap between what we are supposed to do with the children and how they teach us! 'I'll tell you to act like this but I will not teach like this.'”

3.2 Challenges Involved in Teaching the Ethics and Religious Culture Course

The participants of the study were asked to describe what they perceived to be the main challenges of teaching the ERC course. When answering questions pertaining to other subjects, they also sometimes commented on the course's shortcomings. The following section will present the main challenges described by the participants, including the evaluation of the ERC course, the amount of knowledge required, the lack of time for planning and teaching, interactions with parents and the reality of urban and rural contexts.

A) Evaluation

The evaluation of the three competencies developed in the ERC course has been described as a challenge by the majority of the participants. Members of the focus group unanimously agreed that the evaluation of the course's competencies is problematic. Teacher A describes evaluation as the

following: “To understand religion' is easy, the 'dialogue' competency too... But it's really 'being critical' that's hard to evaluate... How do you evaluate that?” Teacher D adds: “But... even understanding the religious context, it isn't easy to evaluate.” He later mentions another concern regarding evaluation: “How can you evaluate a child when he's shy, when he does not talk, when he does not participate in the discussions?” This reflection is echoed by many other participants. Teacher I also questions the evaluation of reticent students: “There's the fact that some children have difficulty writing, some children have difficulty reading. So yes, in the religious part, there are children who have difficulties reading and all, but I am sure it's not as important as it is for ethics. People who don't know how to properly express themselves might have great ideas in their head, but when they have to say it verbally and to write it, it's more difficult.” Teacher M also supports this point of view: “I saw children who almost suffered from muteness, they did not want to talk with me, they did not want to participate in interviews, they did not want to participate in discussions, they did not want to participate in debates. Nothing, Nothing, Nothing. What do we do? We give them 30%? Personally, I find that competency to be tiresome. That's what I find hard with the ERC program, it has to be verbal.” Teacher P is also concerned with this issue: “There are always students who never speak, so how do we evaluate these people? It's hard.”

Teacher G mentions that she believes evaluation is the hardest part of teaching the ERC course: “I think it was really neglected.” She later adds: “I can evaluate because I have fifteen years of experience, you know? But if I was beginning to teach, I'm not sure I'd know where to go!”

Teacher H says that one of the challenges she faced as an ERC pedagogical advisor was to explain evaluation because “it's very tiresome to evaluate, whether it's the ethics part or the religious part. That's because we tell them there are no wrong answers and then we ask them to evaluate the students!”

Teacher K mentions that the evaluation of the ethics part of the course is often difficult due to a

lack of clear evaluation criteria. She says: “I find it really difficult because we have absolutely no criteria to evaluate. How much do we evaluate? Is it because he answered this that it's good? Should he elaborate or should he write about connections with his own life. I'll admit that I find it very hard.” Sharing a similar point of view to Teacher K, Teacher L mentions the following during his interview: “What would help the most would be to have a bank of evaluation grids on different subjects. One evaluation grid for discussions, one for interviews, because really, it is what we are missing the most.” Teacher L later adds: “It's hard to say 'Is the student more ethical in the way he acts with others?' It's a very abstract way to evaluate.”

Teacher N holds an opposite point of view on the matter of the number of criteria. She says: “At the beginning, when we started talking about that program, I thought it was really interesting because it left you a moment during your week to sit down with your students and talk about many interesting subjects with the students, about diversity, about plenty of things. It's still interesting but I find that often we have our hands tied down by evaluation, we have to see this thing or that thing, it's hard to just let go and talk about subjects with our students because we always have to think: 'Oh yes, that needs to be evaluated'. If there were fewer criteria, I think it would be easier to go into interesting subjects.”

Teacher P disapproves of how the course is generally evaluated: “ERC's evaluation... I find it questionable. It's rare that anybody gets a bad grade in ERC, unless something went wrong. You know, when I look at my daughters in high school, it's like a course where you know you'll have a good grade. You don't make the effort and it'll be okay.” For these reasons, Teacher P says: “I would never do it [the evaluation]. It's a course I would remove.”

Teacher Q offers a positive perspective of the evaluation process: “Personally, I think that when we use criteria of success with the children on what proper argumentation is, we prepare them for plenty of other things, we prepare for opinion texts later. When the criteria for success are clear, the argumentation quickly develops.”

B) Knowledge

Along with evaluation, the lack of knowledge on the topics being taught was one of the main challenges mentioned by participants. Teacher D, a participant in the focus group discussion, explains that he sees the amount of knowledge required to teach the course as a major obstacle: “Personally, I find the subject to require an enormous amount of general knowledge. You have to know your own identity, you have to know the general characteristics of world religions, and you have to understand them. You have to be able to make your own comparisons.” Teacher A adds: “We should also have more knowledge. I read in the books and I learn with them, I find it really interesting and I find it beautiful, to learn about wedding rites but... I learn at the same time as them.” Teacher G shares a similar concern: “There are a lot of things I don't know. I can't lie... Personally, I don't know everything about all these religions.” Teacher I, a new teacher, explains that she also feels like she doesn't possess the right knowledge but believes this is mostly due to her inexperience: “I'm at the beginning of my career, it's obvious I will not know everything exactly and in great detail. Obviously, as years go by, I'll read more, I'll know more.” Another new teacher, Teacher K, says something similar: “When we teach all the religions with which we have to work, obviously I'm totally not prepared.”

Teacher J mentions that she feels knowledge is a challenge particularly because of her students' eagerness to learn: “With religions, I find it difficult to teach them if you don't have all the knowledge because students are very interested by that subject and as soon as you start talking about it, they have a lot of questions! And if you keep on saying 'I don't know', 'Ah well... We should look that up', 'Ah well... We'll have to do research', you will lose their interest and you look a bit dumb because you don't know the answers.” Teacher N also mentions that her students' question require her to be well-prepared. When asked if religious culture is harder to teach than ethics, she responds: “I believe so, yes, because... I don't have much knowledge. It is pretty limited so I don't feel skilled. Obviously we have the resources but we like to be able to add more information, to be able to answer the students'

questions, all that. For that part, I feel less equipped.” Finally, Teacher O, a first grade teacher, also mentions this challenge: “You have to know a lot of things. With the little ones, it doesn't show as much because they have fewer questions. But when you reach third, fourth, fifth or sixth grade, it becomes very important, especially once you start discussing the essence of diverse religions, you have to know a lot because questions are coming from all sides.”

C) Lack of Time

Along with the difficulties regarding the evaluation and the amount of knowledge necessary to teach the course, the lack of time to plan and to teach the course is mentioned as one of the biggest challenges by a majority of the participants. In the focus group, Teacher B mentions that what teachers need most is “to have planning time, by cycle or by grade, to be able to plan ERC... Because let's not fool ourselves, it's the subject we brush aside, we do not take much of our personal time to plan it. If we had more time, we would delve into more interesting projects.” Teacher G shares a similar point of view: “It's not the subject on which I'll spend an endless amount of time. I won't inform myself, read... It's the subject we neglect, you know?” About the lack of time to teach the course, she adds: “Our programs in French and math grow so much. We have so many other requirements that it's where we save time. It's not that it's bad, quite the opposite. Yes we talk about it, but obviously I don't go through the entire ERC program during the school year because I shorten it a lot. It would be unrealistic to say that I will do an hour of it per week. I don't do it an hour a week.” The pressure to work on the main school subjects is also echoed by Teacher L: “It's a question of time and if the group, from the start, is weaker in French and math, the teacher will obviously prioritize those two subjects. Again, it takes away the chance to invest time in it, unless you do multidisciplinary teaching, which is the best way to do it.” Teacher P also finds the subject to be less important than French or mathematics: “Personally, it's a subject I would remove. I have too many important subjects to lose an hour a week or every two weeks. We do it already in our classes without saying it's ERC.”

Mandatory exams prepared by the *Ministère de l'éducation, du loisir et des sports* (MELS) are partly responsible for the pressure to succeed in major subjects, according to Teacher O: “What I will say is lame but... We have so much pressure in French and mathematics due to the education ministry's exams. Right now, second graders constantly write exams. And the fourth graders and the sixth graders. So there are things you have to put aside. During ten months, there is always something happening, especially at the end of semesters, so often these subjects are put aside.”

On the lack of time to plan the course properly, Teacher H says: “I'm like the majority of teachers, I run out of time but I would love to take the time. I love the philosophical side of it and I find that the children are natural philosophers. They tell you things... It seems like adults forget those reflection habits. Personally, it's a course I love but I don't have enough time to plan it because it's always the one that comes last, unfortunately.” Similarly, Teacher J mentions that lack of time has a direct impact on her preparation: “I don't have enough time in a week to be able to read carefully the teacher's manual and to understand what we are supposed to work towards.” Teacher N mentions that she wishes activities were already made since she has little time to plan them herself: “If [the activity] is ready, it's fun, because if it's not... It's one of the last subjects I'll invest time in, let's not fool ourselves. I will invest much more time in French, math, because actually, there are many subjects I don't mind spending time on.,, But ERC goes last.”

Teacher M, who was also an ERC pedagogical advisor, recalls that “there were very few requests coming from teachers for advice following the training sessions we hosted. Very few requests, very little interest for the subject. It's a subject that is easily a second or third priority.”

Teacher K is the only participant who disputes the argument that teachers lack time to teach and plan the ERC course is not valid: “I don't think it's because we need more time, it's more like we need to give it the necessary time. It's not that we're running out of time, it's that we prioritize other things.” She also adds that the importance of the ERC course is “not valued, what's the most important is 'we do

French everyday, math everyday, it's not pointless.”

D) Parents

The participants of the study commented on the parents' appreciation of the course. The participants' description of the parents' appreciation varied among the various participants. In the focus group discussion, the five participants shared different experiences related to the parents' reaction to the ERC course. Teacher C remembers encountering problems with parents when she planned a visit to a local church with her students: “You want to organize a field trip and then... One time, we [teachers] wanted to go to a church. They [parents] didn't want us to go to church. Not everybody, I'm talking about four of five parents. I will not tell you which religion [they belonged to]... But they didn't want us to go!” Teacher B also shares an experience related to her students' parents and the course: “I was making them work on an assignment on world religions and there were parents who didn't want their child to work on a specific religion. I had to put him in another team.” Teacher D does not recall similar incidents but remembers that “when the program began, there were parents who were asking questions but we did not have the answers. We still don't have them today as a matter of fact! It was mostly insecurity about what we were aiming for with the course, like we saw in the media recently, parents who don't know what will be taught...”

Teacher G describes her relation with parents with respect to the course: “I never heard 'you don't talk enough about this', you know? Anyways, here, I never experienced that. But I do not address touchy subject matters either. Because I know well enough to tell myself: 'I don't want to go into that, there are parents who will intervene.' So, you know, I just avoid it.”

Many participants described a complete lack of parental interest. Teacher H says she “never heard any comments from parents in our school. Even after trainings, the only question we would get was when we would write ERC on the schedule: 'What's that?'. 'Ethics and Religious Culture, it's the new course, if you have questions, don't hesitate.' Nothing, nothing ever. Never a comment, positive or

negative. It's a bit of a shame.” Teacher I has a similar perception: “Sadly, the ERC course... Parents do not really give any attention to that subject. I don't know where [the lack of interest] comes from. I think it's a social phenomenon, but generally, people don't give it as much attention.” Teacher O also remembers a smooth transition from confessional religious education to the ERC course: “No, I didn't see this [negative reactions] here. As you say, maybe it was easier here but it was done very smoothly.” Teacher Q, who is also a school principal, mentions that the lack of negative feedback from parents could be explained by the teachers' behaviour: “There were no problems here. Really, I never had any parents asking me questions because when they asked a question, I felt at ease saying: 'Here, we teach it'. The teacher did not show fear so parents did not feel fear, they didn't question it.”

In her interview, Teacher J brings forward the idea that parents are uninterested because of their own relation to religion: “Either parents are not part of a religion, so it's not a subject that interests them, or the parents are in one religion so other religions are not a subject that interests them. They don't necessarily want their children to learn about everybody's opinion regarding their God.” On ethics, she adds: “I think parents find it interesting, but I think that it's also something done at home, because it's something that's supposed to be taught at home as well.”

Teacher M remembers that she had to offer more information to parents to reassure them when it came to the ERC course: “I think parents were scared. They were scared that I would try to convince their children that a religion was really better than the others or that I would try to downplay the behaviour of religious extremists from any religion, to tone these things down, to soften things, to be soft, 'everybody's nice'.” While she does not recall major issues with parents, Teacher N remembers some early reluctance from parents: “At the beginning, during the first year ERC was introduced in schools, people would ask questions to know what it was exactly. I think there were parents who had fears. 'Won't you indoctrinate this or that religion?’”

E) Urban and rural contexts

Participants of this study came from both urban and rural contexts. A number of teachers commented on the impact of their work environment. Teacher H, Teacher M, Teacher N and Teacher P work in small Mauricie cities and they all mention the impact of their homogenous work environment on their students' ability to develop the competencies required by the ERC course. Teacher Q, who also works in Mauricie, works in the one of the region's two urban cities and did not mention her context as a significant factor for her teaching.

Teacher H describes the homogeneous cultural environment of her students as the biggest challenge to teach her students about religious culture: “They have no idea what we're talking about. A Muslim, a Jew, they don't have any image in their heads. No image. So it becomes increasingly complex to teach them. You have to show them a lot of movies, you have to show them a lot of images... But often, when you go online, movies are biased.”

Teacher M suggests that it is hard for students to understand the usefulness of the course since it often seems removed from their homogeneous environment. She perceives her students' lack of interest to be her biggest challenge while teaching the ERC course: “They do not see how it can help them in everyday life. They don't see the point. 'Why am I learning this?' Especially when we talk about Jews. You know, for them, other religions, other individuals, those who dress differently, for them it's like costumes. 'They dress themselves like Arabs'. But... They don't see them in their daily lives. So that's really it, it's to make them understand when it will be useful in their lives. I don't teach that subject to them for nothing. It's recurring: 'What is it for, what will it do for me?' It's disconnected [from their reality]. Here, intolerance, with my current class and during previous years, I don't feel it much. They aren't intolerant, they're very curious but they wonder how and when it will be useful.”

Teacher N shares a similar perception of the impact of the rural context: “For the children, it's not concrete, they don't know any [other cultures]. You can talk about this religion or that religion... It'll be the first time they hear about it. They don't see it as 'Oh yes, it could be my neighbour.' No. I find it

hard. It must be more interesting in my opinion when you're a teacher in Montreal to teach ERC than in the country.”

Teacher P, while acknowledging that her students are not familiar with other cultures, is unsure homogeneity is an advantage or a disadvantage: “Obviously when we talk about religions, they don't know what it is. So they might be more interested about talking about other religions... but it's also good when you have some [students from different confessions] in your class. Then the kid can discuss his religion.” Thinking about how this could affect the classroom climate, she adds: “Maybe it [a heterogeneous group] can create small conflicts... I think it's easier to teach it in my class. There are less controversial discussions than if there were many people that had different ideas.”

Various participants based in Montreal also discussed the impact of their school's environment on their teaching of the ERC course. In the focus group discussion, Teacher C asserted the belief that the heterogeneity of the students creates new barriers: “It could be interesting to go to places of worship but we live with a problematic multicultural situation in Montreal. When we were teaching catechism here, we would go visit the church and there were a lot of students who didn't want to come because, well, it isn't their religion. But really... what the heck? We're not going to a mass, we're just going to visit a place of worship. All this... This barrier... This multi-ethnicity that we have... Multi-ethnicity is like that! For example, I want to visit a Buddhist temple. 'Well... No. We are Muslims.' Let's say I want to visit a mosque. “Well... No. I am Catholic so I don't want my child in there.”

Teacher F mentions that she appreciates that there are “students from certain religions who can come forward and talk about it. And the children are interested to talk about that part, to do a little research, what is a Muslim and all that.” She adds: “I like it. Learning little things and them telling us how they see things, how they celebrate at home and how they compare all that. How they feel about the fact that during the holidays, they don't celebrate Jesus, they don't believe in Jesus and all that but that they will celebrate a bit.” Teacher G on the other hand, seems to disagree with her colleague and

later mentions the following experience: “When my students tell me the things they experience with religion and how they are indoctrinated and how... [Expletive]... We bullshit them and they ask me for my opinion... That's when I struggle. Actually, I experienced a situation with a little girl last week when she said to me: 'Allah will come down to save us'. And then she asked me: 'You, you don't believe in that, eh?'. Where is my limit? I said: 'No, I don't believe in that kind of thing.' But at the same time, my students admire me, you know? What is my role? I would never say it but I wish I could tell her: 'What your parents are telling you is bullshit!' They pray that many times a day because the end of the world is coming and they're accumulating points! When I'm told about things like these, I can't tell the students in my class about this. I find it hard to talk about [similar religious practices]... Sure, it's part of a religion but I find it so pathetic that I ask myself: 'Do they really have to know about this?' It sickens me. It pushes my buttons. It's human stupidity. I can't believe that as a teacher I have to talk about it. Allah Allah... I have a lot of things I am completely against. You know, it just reminds me of Christianity back in my father's youth... [Expletive]... When you couldn't do anything! They [religious extremists] are doing the same thing and they keep them [children] ignorant. It's complete brainwashing. When you have to pray six times a day, there is a damn problem.”

Teacher I is one of the participants who mentions Montreal's heterogeneity as a positive element: “It's around us. All the religions are around us in Montreal. There are all kinds of things that are available to us.” Teacher J also sees urban heterogeneity as a positive tool: “I have students from many cultures, which doesn't exist if you go to Saguenay. I have students from other religions who are also practicing, which opens up discussions. And I am not an expert of Islam, I am not an expert of Buddhism, but I have experts [practicing students] in my class. It helps a lot because they can explain to the others how it works when they go to a wedding. And the other one who is Buddhist can explain how it works when he goes to a certain event. And the religion no one knows, I can explain it because I have resources.” Teacher K shares a similar point of view: “In Montreal, I find it is much easier,

because whether I want it or not, I also rely on my personal experience as a Montreal citizen who faces it [multiculturalism], so it's easier for me to talk about it. And I am around Islamists [sic] and Buddhists.” Teacher O also believes an urban environment's heterogeneous nature is an advantage for teachers: “I come from the suburbs and black people are almost an attraction so it's different in the suburbs... But in Montreal, there are so many kinds of people coming from everywhere, it makes for different interactions. I think it's an asset, because they [students] don't start from scratch and what you say speaks to them. When you actually start from nothing, it's hard to understand that people live like that, that they do this, that they eat that, that they don't do that...”

3. 3 Christian Heritage and Secularity

Much of the media coverage surrounding the introduction of the ERC course has been based on the dissatisfaction of numerous parties who denounce the elimination of its predecessors, the confessional religious education courses and the moral education course. The participants were asked about their perception of the importance of Christianity within the ERC course. Some of the participants of the study also shared their perspectives on the place of religion in education during their interviews.

A) Christian Heritage

The vast majority of participants describe the importance of Christianity as appropriate within the course. Among the study's seventeen participants, only Teacher G and Teacher P perceive the place of Christianity as inadequate.

Teacher G perceives the place left for Christianity in the course as a symptom of a larger problem: “I find that there isn't enough. But personally, I find that we're literally being invaded. I find it very very hard, even though I'm open-minded and I don't have anything against other religions, when they require me to remove my crucifix in my classroom or to avoid talking about Christmas. I find it absurd!” Similarly, Teacher P says: “Personally, I would put more of it [Christianity] but there are now

[catechism] courses provided by the city, at the church, it's like that everywhere now.”

B) Secularity

While most participants agreed with the importance of Christianity within the ERC course, some of the participants also shared different views on the place of religion in education. In the focus group discussion, Teacher C and Teacher D share their opinion on the place of religious religion in public education. Teacher C says: “Before, it was either religious education or moral education, well why don't we go back to moral education. Religion is so personal.” Teacher D also believes religion “can be taught at home.” Teacher E, who is finishing her internship in Teacher D's class, also disapproves of the place of religion in education: “I find it unfortunate because I find that teaching it [religion], we are working against the secular society we chose to have.” Teacher L also supports complete secularity within schools: “In my opinion, religions should be practiced at home and not in school. They should be two different things and school should only serve to facilitate learning and develop working skills.”

One participant of the study also unambiguously expresses her discomfort with certain religions. When asked if she feels discomfort regarding specific religions, Teacher G answers: “I feel discomfort with certain religions, yes, actually. And I don't talk about it because I don't want to be transparent and it's not my place to say... I have already intervened regarding some practices my students were doing. One example, during a field trip, I had fifth grade students who brought along their [prayer] mat and they would pray and miss activities. I had enough. 'Here, you put this away, I don't want to see it. When you're in school, you don't have a mat. Here you won't have a mat as well.' At a certain point, look... It's alright to each have a religion, but you also have to put your foot down.”

3.4 Benefits of Teaching the Ethics and Religious Culture Course

A) Benefits

The participants of the study were asked to share what they perceive to be the benefits of

teaching the ERC course for society and democracy. Teacher A suggests that the ERC course is useful to “develop open-mindedness, to be open to others and to understand certain behaviours.” For Teacher D, the course simply serves to “break taboos”, while Teacher C believes the course is useful for acceptance. She says: “I think it's acceptance of the others with their differences. It's really what we want for them because we want them to live in an open-minded world where everybody respects each other.” Similarly, Teacher B proposes that the course is useful to understand others: “Certain religions have a hard time accepting other religions, [they believe] it's theirs that's the best, and I think that the goal of ERC should be to show that it's not only theirs that is good.”

Teacher H and Teacher M, who both attended a university course in order to become pedagogical consultants to their peers, share a very positive perspective on the benefits of the course. Teacher H cites Quebec's 2012 student strike as an example of the importance to teach students about democracy: “These days we talk a lot about the common good thanks to the student protests. Well it's exactly what we want to teach, how to live together and respect each other. And like I tell my students, it doesn't mean we have to accept anything from someone who comes to our country, but it means you have to try to understand it, to talk to them, to engage in a dialogue in order to better coexist, that's all.” Teacher M offers a similar answer, saying that what she sees for future generations is “the understanding of the pursuit of the common good. How can you evolve while considering the reality of others, without forgetting your values.”

Teacher I sees potential for both the ethics and the religious culture aspect of the course. She believes that, being educated about world religions, students “will be less likely to judge others according to their religions.” Meanwhile, she sees the ethics part of the course as her chance to teach her students to “be able to wait to talk, be able to listen to others, be able to respect the others' opinions.” Teacher I also says she sees potential for conflict resolution: “We have to make students autonomous, enable them to manage their conflicts alone, to become critical to what happens in the

classroom.” Teacher N also discusses the benefits of the ethics part of the course: “It is an important learning, to be able in a dialogue to say 'look, there is a person listening and a person talking'. You listen to the others, you hear them, you are able to calmly respond.”

Teacher J believes the course has a strong connection to society, “because all the social problems that we currently experience, anywhere, whether it be wars or what we live here with the population's disenchantment towards the government, all of that can be addressed by ERC.” She adds that “if the children are curious and become interested by society, it's because you include them at one point in their life and you show them they can have an impact on society. All the environmental debates, all the social debates, they all fit within the program.” Similarly, Teacher O suggests that the benefits of the ERC course can have a significant impact on society because “you understand the people who surround you every day and you are not ignorant of their reality, it makes a difference, society can be different.” She adds: “There are a lot of conflicts caused by ignorance. You don't accept someone's religion because it annoys you that they think like that. That is a small-scale problem but it can also cause horrible and horrifying wars.”

Teacher L is also one of the participants who believes the ERC course can influence society and help to “deconstruct the prejudices students have, the negative things they hear of that nourish racism and categorization.” He adds that by creating categories, “we classify [people] and when we classify them, it's because we use oppression.”

Teacher Q proposes that the ethics part of the course empowers students with regards to their lives but also develops their critical thinking abilities: “Ethics addresses what they are so it becomes a part of each choice they will make. When they involve themselves, it isn't a distant thing anymore. 'I am a part of the future. I can't be a victim or say it's about the others, so I constantly have to make choices'. It's not easy. But it surely promotes democracy, it brings forward critical thinking, it brings forward plenty of things, it makes it obvious that there are shades of grey.”

B) Doubts

Although the majority of participants were able to describe what they perceive to be benefits from teaching the ERC course, there were also participants who expressed doubts regarding the usefulness of the course. Asked about the course's possible benefits, Teacher G answers that “obviously there are prejudices and there always will be even if they implement new programs in schools, there always will be cultural shocks.” However, she believes the course can be useful to some extent and that “if one person can be saved by the Ethics course, that's good.” Teacher K also doubts her teaching can influence her students: “When you teach it because you have to and when you fill paperwork because you have to evaluate, I don't believe it really equips students and they don't really put a lot of effort in it themselves. It has to come from them and since it's imposed, it's not always pertinent.” While Teacher P believes the course can help students, she also believe teachers have always taught respect to their groups: “Personally, it's a value that no matter what the subject is... I always transmit that to my students right from the start. You have to respect others.”

Among the participants who perceive various possible benefits to teaching the ERC course were also participants who expressed doubts about the concrete efficiency of the course. Teacher I says that even though the course cannot be an obstacle to understanding religions, it might not work for all students: “Ah! What's that religion? I don't care!” Even in a very *québécois* environment like here, I've heard that.” Similarly, Teacher L argues that “if I'm a dedicated Muslim, whenever I have to look at other people, will I really listen when they will talk about Christianity and Jesus? I'm not so sure. I'm not in their heads but I'm not sure that they have similar listening skills and open-mindedness.”

Teacher J believes the course can possibly have great benefits but she questions the lack of information and resources available to teach the course. When asked if the course could have a future impact, she answers: “I don't know, I don't think so. If it [the course's content] was well-done, it would be interesting to see. If they had a program, if they would offer us something more substantial. Nobody

even made ERC exercise books.”

Discussion

The following section will first present a analysis of the data presented in the results section.

4.1 Training to Teach the Ethics and Religious Culture course

The participants of this research experienced very different approaches to training in order to teach the ERC course. As the interviews show, elementary school teachers in Quebec generally were trained in one of the three following ways: (1) university courses for pre-service teachers, (2) university courses for in-service teachers, and (3) training sessions offered by the ministry, school boards or by private school associations. The three types of training described by the participants seem to share very little in common. It seems likely that the significant differences between the training sessions and courses offered to teachers would result in elementary school teachers having different approaches to teaching the ERC course, and ultimately, different levels of ease teaching the course. Each participant also had a different appreciation of the training session she or he attended. The following section discusses the time allocated for each type of training, the content seen in the training, and issues of motivation in relation to the training offered to teachers.

A) Time

Among the participants, the variance in the number of hours provided for training regarding the ERC course is noteworthy. While Teacher H and Teacher M, two in-service teachers, attended university on a part-time basis for two years to complete a masters-level university course worth nine credits, many participants who were also in-service teachers were given two hours of training. The opinion of these in-service teachers is clear: more time should have been allocated to training ERC teachers. Teacher G describes the training session as a good example of how reforms are usually thrown together irresponsibly while Teacher N perceives the few hours of training as insufficient. Teacher B and Teacher D, for their parts, comment that the mandatory training was short and relatively

useless and that complementary training is what allowed them to understand the course slightly better. The in-service teachers who did not attend university-level courses describe their training session as short and mostly focused on the ERC course's framework or on the new material provided for the course. It can be assumed that had more time been allocated for the training sessions regarding the ERC course, more content could have been approached. The average mandatory training for in-service being half a day (two or three hours), it seems safe to assume that the teachers who had not attended university-level courses addressing culturally-oriented religious education were ill-equipped to teach the ERC course approximately one hour a week, unless they did in-depth research on their own.

While a number of the in-service teachers who received only a few hours of training denounce the lack of time allocated to training sessions, the issue of the length of training was not raised with teachers who attended university courses on the ERC course as pre-service teachers or as in-service teachers.

B) Content

The content offered in the three types of training the participants received differed greatly from one to another and the participants' appreciation of their training is equally varied.

The university courses for pre-service teachers that various participants attended did not necessarily share many similarities with each other. While participants such as Teacher K and Teacher J describe their pre-service course as useful to their practice, Teacher E, Teacher I, and Teacher L found few redeeming qualities to the training offered to them by the universities they attended. Among the strengths of university courses offered to pre-service teachers regarding the ERC course, it should be noted that the course allowed most of the participants to learn more about religious cultures, providing them with key facts on the content taught in the course. Additionally, certain participants mention that the course they attended taught them teaching methods useful to their teaching of the ERC course. If the participants who attended university courses for pre-service teachers mostly have a positive outlook

on the course they attended, there were also weaknesses that were mentioned by the participants. Three of the participants mention that the issue of evaluation was not sufficiently addressed. Teacher E and Teacher L also mention that the course they attended suffered from a lack of structure. Additionally, Teacher I and Teacher J mention that, in their course, the transmission of knowledge on religious culture far outweighed the development of teaching methods useful for the ERC course.

The two participants who attended university courses for in-service participants both share positive opinions on the course they attended. Among the content seen in the university-level course they attended, the two participants note that the course allowed them to explore the framework of the ERC course, to learn a significant amount of information on religious cultures, as well as learning about teaching methods for both ethics and religious culture. While the two participants mostly appreciated what they learned, they both note that the course was too often theoretical and did not necessarily allow them to develop practical abilities. Teacher M even believes that the ethics part of the university course proved to be useless to her. The experience of Teacher H and Teacher M demonstrates the usefulness of a higher number of hours of training. Unlike most in-service teachers, the two in-service teachers who attended university-level courses believe they have a better understanding of the content related to the ERC course. However, the weaknesses listed by the two participants signal that university-level courses have yet to offer a satisfying amount of concrete practical content.

It is difficult to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the training sessions offered to in-service teachers, considering that most participants describe the course's length as a half-day long. For some participants, the training sessions were simply ludicrous; Teacher A's description of the training session as a day with all of Montreal-Nord's teachers in a big gymnasium offers an accurate portrayal of the little care taken into offering useful training. According to the participants, the basic mandatory training focused on explaining the framework of the course (without exploring its content) and looking at school books that could be used for the new course. Two of the participants who attended training

sessions provided by school boards or private school associations specifically mention the lack of didactic content transmitted by the training sessions. Only Teacher B and Teacher D attended an optional training session, in which they learned more about the evaluation of the ERC course.

In light of the observations made by the participants, it seems that, save for the participants who attended additional sessions, the training sessions offered to in-service teachers had significant flaws and did not provide teachers with information on the methodology of the course, the content of the course nor its evaluation. Instead of exploring these possibilities, pedagogical consultants mostly presented the course's framework, which could have simply been distributed to teachers. “They could have easily given me a book to read. It would have been the same thing” says Teacher Q when describing the usefulness of the training session she attended.

Considering that the majority of teachers working in schools did not graduate within the past five years, it is worrisome to consider that the majority of the province's elementary school teachers are ill-equipped to teach the ERC course, unless they took it upon themselves to further their understanding and knowledge of the course and its content.

C) Motivation and Confrontation

Although many of the participants saw little value in the training offered to them, it is worth noting that there was a lack of motivation perceivable from certain participants to obtain better training. Teacher A, Teacher C, Teacher F, Teacher G and Teacher Q are among the participants who were disappointed by the quality of the training sessions offered to them. However, these five participants refused to attend complementary training sessions, whether it was provided by their school board or universities. Participants mention in their interviews that a lack of time is one of the challenges they face as teachers. Perhaps it could explain their decision to decline further training.

Teacher H and Teacher M attended a university course destined for in-service teachers in order to become pedagogical consultants for the ERC course. After completing their course, both worked as

consultants who introduced the course to their fellow teachers. The two participants' testimonies show that some teachers' reluctance to teach the new non-confessional course hindered the progress of the training sessions. The sessions helmed by Teacher H and Teacher M became discussions on the merits and the flaws of the course rather than a training session. While teachers should ideally be able to express their reticence to the introduction of the new course and could arguably be increasingly involved in reforms, the confrontations experienced between pedagogical consultants and teachers did not contribute to the effectiveness of the short training sessions offered to teachers.

4.2 Challenges Involved in Teaching the Ethics and Religious Culture course

As we have seen, The ERC course offers many challenges to elementary school teachers. The testimonies of the participants of this study demonstrate that the course's content and framework are responsible for some of the difficulties elementary school teachers have teaching the course. Equally important are challenges caused by matters independent of the ERC course such as the lack of time to prepare and teach the course, the intervention of parents, the lack of interest from parents, as well as the difficulties encountered because of the rural or urban context teachers work in.

A) Evaluation

When questioned on the challenges involved in teaching the ERC course, the majority of participants expressed their concerns and doubts about the evaluation of the course. The most common concern expressed by the participants is the difficulty in evaluating the course's three competencies. Teacher A, Teacher D, Teacher H, Teacher K, and Teacher L all question the feasibility of grading a student's understanding of the religious phenomenon, his/her understanding of ethical questions or his/her ability to engage in a dialogue. Teacher K and Teacher L found this task complex and argue that the MELS did not provide useful evaluation grids and a list of criteria relative to the course's evaluation. For other participants, such as Teacher A, Teacher D and Teacher H, the evaluation of these competencies is simply too abstract and cannot be graded correctly. As Teacher H remarks, the nature

of the course itself is that there are no wrong answers, which makes the evaluation of the course even more puzzling.

The evaluation of the course is also perceived by some of the participants as problematic for students with weaker communication skills. Teacher D, Teacher I, Teacher M, and Teacher P all remark that the current tools used to evaluate the ERC course are not adapted to the needs of students who experience difficulties expressing their thoughts orally or in writing. Although this difficulty is also faced teaching subjects other than ERC, it seems particularly present in a course where students are asked to present their understanding of complex concepts and to discuss their own beliefs on complex subjects. While this problematic situation may surpass the boundaries of the ERC course, it is nonetheless a question that has yet to be addressed by both pedagogical consultants and teachers themselves.

While the QEP addresses at length what should be evaluated in the pedagogical context section of the ERC course, it fails to discuss which evaluation tools can be used for the evaluation of the course. The introduction of the QEP articulates that the course is based on active and integrated learning but little is said on how teachers can concretely evaluate students. Considering that the participants who mentioned this difficulty attended different types of training, it seems likely that most training sessions and university courses offered to in-service teachers and pre-service teachers did not sufficiently address innovative ways to evaluate students.

In conclusion, it seems that many questions have yet to be answered regarding the evaluation of the ERC course. Considering the course's philosophical nature and its subjective content, it might be interesting to reconsider if a traditional evaluation system is relevant to the course's aims. Since the ERC course is relatively new, it could also provide pedagogical consultants a chance to create new evaluation tools that acknowledge the fact that a number of students have difficulties expressing themselves orally or by writing.

B) Knowledge

While confessional religious education required teachers to possess in-depth knowledge and understanding of a particular confession (Catholicism or Protestantism), the introduction of the ERC course requires teachers to have a sufficient level of understanding of Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, Native Spirituality, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Many of the participants admitted that they do not feel prepared to teach their students about these religions and philosophies. In the interviews conducted for this study, Teacher A and Teacher I mention that they are learning about religions as they are teaching them to their students. Meanwhile, Teacher G, Teacher K, and Teacher N admitted that they know little about the content pertaining to religions.

While teachers were not asked to become “specialists” of all the religions covered by the course, the students' participation makes it difficult for them to only rely on basic knowledge of the religions. Teacher J, Teacher N, and Teacher O all point out that they are challenged by the questions students have. According to these participants, the numerous questions asked by students are complex enough to make it unreasonable for them to teach the ERC course with only rudimentary knowledge of the course's content.

Considering these testimonies, it would appear that a significant number of elementary school teachers do not feel sufficiently prepared to teach the compulsory content of the ERC course. In addition to the fact that training sessions offered to in-service teachers did not always address the content taught in the ERC course, no official documents were published to prepare teachers to teach students about world religions. As Teacher J indicates, she could not find resources offered by schools, school boards or the MELS that could provide teachers information on the content they have to teach. Due to this lack of official documents, newly-published ERC text books often become the only resource used by elementary school teachers.

While it cannot be expected that the provincial ministry of education or school boards provide

information to teachers on every subject they teach, the lack of knowledge teachers have on world religions has resulted in a number of teachers having insufficient or vague knowledge of the subject they teach. Unlike all other subjects taught by elementary school teachers, the ERC course is composed almost entirely of brand-new content that the majority of teachers have not studied in their youth nor studied in university. It is a questionable decision for the MELS to expect elementary school teachers to take it upon themselves to acquire extended knowledge on all major religions, without any significant help from their employer.

Although understanding the content pertaining to religious culture was portrayed as a challenge by the participants, no participants mentioned feeling unprepared to teach the content pertaining to ethics.

C) Lack of time

Along with other subjects such as visual arts, music or physical education and health, the ERC courses (and its predecessors) are sometimes perceived as being less important subjects, second in importance to mathematics, sciences and languages. A number of participants of this study echoed this belief and states that the ERC course is not necessarily a priority for teachers, parents, or students. Teacher G, Teacher L, Teacher N, Teacher O, and Teacher P admitted that the requirements and the pressure to perform well in mathematics and French are the main reasons why they perceive the ERC course as an expendable one or as a course that they cannot invest a lot of time in. While they do not mention mathematics and French, Teacher B, Teacher J, and Teacher H also mention that lack of time is the main reason they cannot put more effort into planning and teaching the ERC course. The participants identify planning for the course as the first victim of the lack of time they experience as elementary school teachers.

Sadly, the second consequence mentioned by the participants is more alarming; the course is sometimes put aside altogether. “It's the subject we brush aside”, “it's the subject we neglect”, “I

shorten it a lot”, “I don't do it an hour a week”, “I have too many important subjects to lose an hour a week or every two weeks”, and “often these subjects are put aside” are some of the statements participants used in interviews to express how the course often becomes a casualty of an overloaded schedule. These affirmations are disquieting in that they highlight a problematic situation; although obliged to teach the ERC course, elementary school teachers can easily avoid teaching the course if they favour other subjects or if they are not interested in teaching the course. The fact that the course is poorly planned or taught irregularly by teachers obviously can have a significant negative impact on its relevance. Like all subjects included in the QEP, the implementation of the ERC course is based on the students' progress, with students evolving in their achievement of the competencies based on their previous learning. With a significant number of participants admitting that they lack the proper amount of time to plan or even teach the ERC course, it is perhaps possible that a number of students do not follow the progression planned by the MELS and that the ERC course framework becomes irrelevant. This problematic clearly illustrates the impact elementary school teachers' motivation and ability to teach the ERC course can have on the course's success.

D) Parents

One of the most widespread beliefs about the ERC course is that parents vehemently opposed the introduction of the course. As it was mentioned in the introduction of this work, two parents fought the MELS in court to acquire the right for parents to request an exemption from the course. However, the data collected through the interviews show that disenchanted parents were a small minority. Teacher D, Teacher M, Teacher N, and Teacher Q remember receiving questions about the course but all remark that the parents mostly inquired about the new course and did not protest its introduction.

Although the introduction of the ERC course has seemingly not caused parental dissatisfaction, some participants mention that parents are sometimes opposed to the activities involved in the course. Teacher C cites the example of parents opposing the visit of a church while Teacher B recalls that two

parents refused an assignment on a specific religion that was given to their child. Both problematic situations are quite different and show the constraints teachers face. While parents have little authority over the MELS-mandated content taught in class, the situation presented by Teacher C shows that parents can stand in the way of more elaborate activities. The interference of parents with field trips is an unfortunate consequence of parents' dissatisfaction with the course, but they remain a rare occurrence.

Instead of sharing anecdotes about parents being dissatisfied by the course, participants mostly discussed the lack of interest of parents. Teacher H, Teacher I, Teacher J, and Teacher O admit that parents show little interest for the course. For Teacher H, who was also a pedagogical advisor, the obvious lack of interest from parents is perhaps even more discouraging than receiving negative comments. The portrayal by the participants of parents as being completely uninterested in what the course offers students is alarming since a significant number of participants also admitted that the course is often neglected and that teachers find themselves lacking time to teach it. With parents and teachers alike seemingly not concerned with the ERC course and its objectives, it seems possible that the course could be trivialized and its quality can only be diminished by this general lack of interest.

E) Urban and rural contexts

Although the participants of this study all shared similarities, the data collected from the interviews shows that the location of the participants had a significant impact on their experience teaching the ERC course. Participants from both a rural context and an urban context discussed at length what they perceived to be the challenges and the advantages of the environment in which they teach the course. Their reflection not only touched on the impact of their own environment but also on how they perceived the reality of their peers who teach in a different context.

The homogeneity of their classroom and of the population surrounding their school is the focus of most of the observations formulated by the participants of the study who work in a rural area.

Concretely, the participants who come from a rural context believe that this homogeneity makes it difficult for students to relate to the ERC course's content, which addresses diversity and multiculturalism. Teacher H, Teacher M, and Teacher N all remark that students are complete strangers to cultures that differ from theirs. According to Teacher H and Teacher M, other cultures are something they have only had access to through fiction works. Because students have no basic knowledge or references regarding cultures other than theirs, the motivation to learn about other cultures can also be problematic, according to Teacher M. None of the participants implied that intolerance is a challenge for teachers who teach the ERC course. Teacher N mentions that she would appreciate having a more diverse classroom and that urban teachers must experience teaching the ERC course differently than rural teachers.

The opinions of the participants who work in urban areas is split in two groups, with a group agreeing that the urban context is useful to teach the ERC course while other participants voiced a negative perception of their heterogeneous work environment. Participants from urban regions appreciate that resources are available for them, whether it means visiting communities or receiving experts in the classroom. Also mentioned by various participants is the fact that students from urban areas have a basic knowledge of other cultures and even possess a different ethnocultural identity than the majority of the population. Teacher J and Teacher O remark that the ethnocultural diversity prevalent in Montreal is an advantage for teachers.

Although many participants view homogeneity as a challenge and heterogeneity as an advantage for teachers, there are also participants who perceive heterogeneity as problematic, to varying degrees. Teacher P is a teacher in a rural area and she views the homogeneity of her classroom as a possible advantage because she sees urban heterogeneity as a potential source of conflict between students. Teacher P's concerns about possible conflicts are very moderate and do not necessarily present themselves as a criticism of heterogeneity within classrooms.

Surprisingly, two of the participants from Montreal shared more radical points of view on the question of the heterogeneity of their environment. Teacher C describes multiculturalism as a “barrier” for her, describing the opposition parents have to visiting places of worship as a tiring obstacle to her teaching. She expresses her belief that visiting places of worship of other religions is absolutely normal and should not offend anyone. Teacher G, at various times in her interview also condemns heterogeneity. She explains she sees one of her students' conservative Islamic religious practices as a form of “brainwashing” and as “bullshit”, adding that she feels uncomfortable discussing such practices with her students.

Both Teacher C and Teacher G present opinions that are not entirely uncommon among teachers. By voicing their disenchantment with multiculturalism and diversity, the two participants highlight the fact that students' varied backgrounds can be seen as a challenge or even a threat to some of the teachers who teach the ERC course. Although the secularization of public schools and the removal of confessional religious education might have limited the importance of Christianity within public education, the Quebec government never intended secularity in the province to be based on the French's *laïcité* model. The refusal of Teacher C and Teacher G to accept adapting their teaching to the various cultures represented in their classroom represents a refusal to acknowledge that while schools have become secular, teachers have to acknowledge the religious and culture identity of their students.

4.3 Christian Heritage and Secularity

Surprisingly, while the media coverage regarding the elimination of confessional religious education gave extensive media exposure to supporters of confessional religious education, the majority of the participants of this study agree with the place reserved for Christianity in the new course. Among the participants, there is no indication that confessional religious education is missed. Interestingly, various participants are supporters of complete secularity and would prefer to eliminate religious education altogether. One participant stands out as being uncomfortable with the removal of

confessional religious education and with the presence of a specific religion in the ERC program.

A) Christian Heritage

Fifteen participants out of seventeen find the place of Christianity to be appropriate within the ERC course. This clear majority, coupled with the fact that no participants mention a preference for the confession religious education course, supports the idea that elementary school teachers accept the fact that, although Catholicism is still the confession of the majority of the population, it is appropriate to teach other religions.

The open-mindedness of the majority of the participants stands in sharp contrast to the position of Teacher G, who believes her environment is “invaded” by others. Teacher G believes that Christianity is not sufficiently represented in the ERC course and that she should not have to remove her crucifix from her classroom or stop discussing Christmas with her students. Her position on the issue demonstrates that there exists a small group of teachers who did not necessarily wish to adapt religious education to address other religions. Considering that Teacher G describes her environment as being “invaded” by others (most likely ethnic and cultural minority groups), it seems unlikely that she would be unaware of the growing diversity present in schools, which could hypothetically signify that she is also uncomfortable with the fact that her students come from different ethnocultural backgrounds. Her discourse about the place of crucifix within classrooms and the right to celebrate Christmas demonstrates a reluctance to change the way schools interact with religions. It seems reasonable to question whether or not elementary school teachers who are frustrated by the changing reality of schools can embody and foster the open-mindedness to diversity that the QEP and ERC promotes.

B) Secularity

As discussed in the introduction of this work, the replacement of confessional religious education by a culturally-oriented religious education has been met with disapproval by the proponents

of secularity who argue that religion is still present in schools and that it should be excluded altogether. As the data collected for this study shows, a number of elementary school teachers also share this opinion. Four participants argue that religious education should be removed from schools. Among those, three argue that religions should be a subject addressed by the parents. These affirmations are interesting, considering that the QEP's objectives clearly aim to educate children and to help them develop their identity. If religion, even from a culturally-oriented perspective is too much of a personal matter, it could be argued that a considerable amount of the QEP content is also very personal. An “impersonal” approach to education seems diametrically opposed to the aims of the QEP, but surprisingly, Teacher L supports the idea that “school should only serve to facilitate learning and develop working skills.”

The participants who support the removal of all religious content from the QEP do not aim to remove specific religions from schools. Teacher G's admitted discomfort with specific religions is more alarming. Because of her previous statements, Teacher G was asked if she felt uncomfortable with a specific religion. She answers positively, explaining that while she stays discreet about her discomfort, she has previously forbidden some of her students' religious practices. The fact that Teacher G experiences discomfort with certain religions and their practices is not entirely surprising, considering some of her previous statements. Considering that the choices Teacher G made regarding her Muslim students' religious practices were influenced by her discomfort with Islam, it brings forward the problematic of professionalism and the need for teachers to develop a strong professional stance not only regarding the ERC course, but also regarding the religions present in their school environment.

4.4 Benefits of Teaching the Ethics and Religious Culture Course

The participants of this study expressed many concerns about the pertinence of their training and the difficulties associated with the course. Regardless of these challenges, the majority of participants believe that the course is pertinent and benefits students. This apparent enthusiasm toward

the possible benefits of the course hints at the fact that elementary school teachers approve of the course's existence. A minority of participants also expressed doubts about the benefits of the course or addressed obstacles that could prevent the course from being pertinent.

A) Benefits

It should come as no surprise that the two objectives of the ERC course, the recognition of others and the pursuit of the common good, are considered as the principal benefits of the course by a majority of participants. Participants of the study describe the course as being a way to introduce students to cultural differences, to different behaviours, to different religions, as well as an opportunity to discuss taboo subjects. Teacher H and Teacher M, who also served as pedagogical consultants, perceived the pursuit of the common good as the primary benefit of the course. They both argued that the pursuit of the common good essentially means that students should be able to understand other people's reality and their values and to understand their own personal values in order to evolve.

Teacher H, who supports the idea that the pursuit of the common good is the primary benefit of the ERC course, mentions that political events such as the Quebec Student Protests of 2012 are directly linked to the pursuit of the common good. This perspective is also shared by Teacher J, Teacher L, Teacher O, and Teacher Q, who argued that the course can serve to introduce students to critical thinking and an analysis of social issues. This perspective is interesting in that it could be argued that the ERC course shares similarities with the citizenship education course. Although most participants do not use the same vocabulary as the QEP, their perception of the benefits of the ERC course matches closely the objectives of the program.

Teacher I and Teacher N are the only participants who mentioned the development of dialogue abilities as an important part of the ERC course. Both participants explained that the course allows students to develop the skills necessary for proper dialogue, which facilitates more civilized relations between students. It is worth noting that few participants referenced dialogue as a competency that is

developed in the religious culture section of the ERC course. Instead, the competency is seemingly associated with the ethics section of the course.

The benefits of the ERC course, as perceived by the participants of this study, are very similar to the stated objectives of the course and the competencies it aims to develop. Considering this, it seems as though elementary school teachers and the MELS are pursuing similar objectives with the ERC course. While the benefits of the course as perceived by the participants do not guarantee that the course itself is necessarily well-taught, it is promising to see that elementary school teachers are standing behind the aims of the course.

B) Doubts

Three of the participants interviewed for this study were less enthused about the possible benefits of the course. For Teacher G and Teacher K, the course and its structure may intend to do good but it does not necessarily affect the behaviour of students. Meanwhile, Teacher P remarked that the values that are supposed to be promoted by the ERC course were already a part of the way she teaches her students. It seems that Teacher G and Teacher K shared the perception that students are unlikely to develop open-mindedness and to work toward the pursuit of the common good due to a single course. It is interesting to consider that the ERC course is perhaps one of the only courses which is seen as “unnecessary” by certain elementary school teachers. It seems unlikely that any teacher would deem French, mathematics or history to be useless. Perhaps complete training sessions with competent consultants could allow more teachers to understand the course and its content, and in turn, to embrace its objectives.

Among the participants who perceived significant benefits in the introduction of the ERC course are also participants who expressed doubts about the possible success of the course. Teacher I and Teacher L both express doubts similar to those expressed by the three participants who could not perceive significant benefits to the course. Teacher J, who believes the course offers interesting benefits

to students, remarks that it still risks becoming inefficient or useless due to what she perceives to be the course's limited content and its vague framework, as well as the lack of resources for teachers. In a sense, Teacher J's observation reflects the perception that the majority of the participants shared on the ERC course - a course that has yet to be clearly explained and defined for elementary school teachers but that can potentially greatly benefit students.

Conclusion

Before it had even been introduced in Quebec's classrooms, the ERC course had been the target of much criticism from various parties. Most of the discontentment regarding the course did not come from teachers, education professors, pedagogical consultants, or school administrators, but from associations who represented the interests of religious groups and from advocates of secularity. These groups' discourses failed to discuss the course's framework or its content and little was heard from teachers who were themselves exploring the course on a weekly basis. The aim of this work was to shed some light on the experience of elementary school teachers who have had to teach the course since 2008.

The participants of this study offered their perceptions on the course in great detail and with no reserve. They were willing to voice their concerns and even their frustrations about the course, but they also did not hesitate to discuss the doubts they had about their abilities to teach the course and the challenges they experienced teaching it. Fortunately, the interviewees were at times brutally honest, avoiding a complacency that could have diminished the relevance of the results of the study. While the participants might have come from different backgrounds and have different appreciations of the course, they offered an interesting portrait of the experience of teaching the ERC course as an elementary school teacher.

The participants' testimonies show that the training offered to pre-service and in-service teachers has generally been unsatisfying and irrelevant to the reality of elementary school teachers. For many participants, the training session offered lasted all but a few hours. Whether it was a training session presented by pedagogical consultants or a university-level course, the training offered to the participants rarely addressed methodology, the content of the course, or its evaluation, instead focusing

on the basic framework of the course and its competencies. In the end, for most participants, the course did not prepare them to teach the course. The lack of proper training and education offered to teachers is perhaps the most alarming problem that the ERC course faces today.

Among the challenges mentioned by the participants, evaluation is one of the primary challenges teachers meet. Most participants feel puzzled by the lack of criteria and the subjective nature of the course when the time comes for them to evaluate their students. They also remarked that the course demands a lot of verbal expression from students, which does not necessarily work with all students. Also mentioned by many participants is the fact that they believe the course, especially in religious culture education, demands a significant amount of knowledge that is often not available in training sessions or in the resources offered to teachers. Participants from a rural context remarked that students from their classrooms are often unfamiliar with ethnocultural diversity, which becomes a challenge for teachers who have to address diversity with their students. Considering these challenges, it would be reasonable for the MELS and pedagogical consultants to increase their support of elementary school teachers by providing numerous resources pertaining to the course's content and its evaluation.

The majority of participants portrayed the course as one that is neglected because teachers lack time to prepare it and to teach it. Some of the participants also portrayed parents as being uninterested by the course. The fact that both teachers and parents apparently place little importance on the ERC course should be a source of concern since the course risks quickly becoming poorly organized and taught hastily if neither group supports it.

Surprisingly, the interviews show that the place of Christianity in the ERC course is accepted by the majority of participants and that there is little or no regret regarding the demise of confessional religious education. However, a small group of teachers find that religious education, whether it is taught from a cultural or confessional perspective, should be removed from schools. On the other hand,

a few participants seem overwhelmed by the growing importance of cultures and religions that differ from Quebec's traditional Judeo-Christian culture. For these participants, adapting to the reality of their students and their parents is an intimidating challenge.

Finally, it is very interesting to note that although participants shared various doubts and concerns about the ERC course, the majority of them perceive the course to hold many benefits that can help students to grow. This encouraging trend shows that the participants still stand behind the course's objectives and believe the course has a positive purpose.

In order to improve the success of the ERC course, it seems logical that the first step the MELS should take would be to improve the training offered to teachers, in particular pre-service teachers. By offering pertinent training to teachers, much of the current confusion about the course's content and its evaluation could be addressed. Learning more about the course's objectives and learning about the professional stance proposed by the MELS could also help to prevent counterproductive attitudes or misunderstandings similar to those illustrated by the testimonies of some participants.

Secondly, the course suffers from a lack of interest from both teachers and parents. While the participants showed their belief in the course's usefulness, they also admitted that it is not a priority for them. It should be noted that out of the seventeen participants of this study, three participants decided to give the course's responsibility to a colleague or to a part-time substitute teacher, which illustrates the extent to which some teachers are uninterested by the course. To modify this unfortunate situation, the MELS and school administrators need to help create a climate in which teachers feel comfortable taking the required time to plan and to teach the ERC course. The testimonies of the participants show that most teachers feel a strong pressure to spend most of their time concentrating on mathematics and French. Pedagogical consultants can also facilitate the planning of ERC course activities by sharing resources that are easily adapted to a classroom environment. If teachers need to be helped in order to develop an interest in teaching the course, teachers must also transmit to parents an enthusiasm about

the course. By discussing the ERC course with parents and explaining what is done in the class, parents might become more interested in what the course has to offer to their children.

Thirdly, the subject of identity needs to be further addressed by the MELS, as well as teachers. The ERC course came at a time during which Quebec politicians and citizens alike were discussing multiculturalism and the accommodations necessary to address the needs of different cultural and religious groups. Years after the implementation of the course, cultural and religious accommodations are still a very contentious subject in the province. The testimony of Teacher G particularly highlights the possible barrier between the aim of the course and the diametrically opposed vision of certain teachers, but also the culture shock between traditional *québécois* culture and the culture of students who are first-generation or second-generation immigrants. Academics and teachers alike should reflect on their understanding of the place of identity within the course. Teachers in particular will have to reflect on notions of professionalism. The refusal of teachers such as Teacher G to acknowledge the evolving identity of Quebec students is not only unprofessional but represents an attack on the rights of students to be educated without having to leave behind their cultural heritage.

Finally, it is essential that elementary school teachers become more involved in decision-making related to the curriculum. Throughout the interviews, the participants voiced their discontentment at the way the course was introduced or how the MELS does not provide sufficient information for the course. The current dynamic, as it is illustrated in the interviews, is that teachers distrust the work accomplished by the MELS, questioning the motives of governmental decisions. In order to improve the education provided by school, both the MELS and teachers would need to develop a relationship that includes more collaboration and one that takes into consideration the concrete reality of teachers.

This study obviously has various limitations. The number of participants interviewed was relatively small and the participants were recruited on a voluntary basis with no reward, which made it

less likely for uninterested teachers to participate in the study. It is likely that teachers who are dissatisfied by the course and those who feel unequipped to teach the course were also less likely to take personal time to participate in an interview on the matter. It should also be noted that the participants came from a similar francophone and Christian background. Due to a lack of collaboration from English-language school boards, all the interviews were also conducted with participants who work in French-language schools. Although the vast majority of Quebec's schools are French, the input of participants from English-language schools would have been pertinent to this study. Similarly, even though there were multiple attempts made to interview private school teachers, only one participant came from a private establishment.

The ERC course is only in its infancy and has much more time to develop. Future research on the subject should look at the difference in the quality of teaching between teachers who attended a university-level course and those who attended a training session offered by their school board. Considering the controversy surrounding Loyola High School's denied request to teach the ERC course from a Jesuit perspective, future research could also look at how private schools' religious identity can affect the teaching of the ERC course. Finally, the relationship between teachers and government should also be studied in order to discover what causes tension between the two parties and what possibilities are available to improve collaboration between the two of them.

This study allows us to discover the perceptions of elementary school teachers regarding the ERC course. The input of the participants allows us to gain a better understanding of the ways they experienced the introduction of the course and the reality of teaching it. The data collected through the interviews shows that the introduction of the course was seemingly *maladroit* and precipitated, which can be explained by the fact that the course is the first to be introduced for all students within a single year, due to the legal constraints brought forward by the non-renewal of Quebec's notwithstanding clause. The consequences of the course's precipitated introduction, such as the questionable quality of

the training offered to teachers and the lack of pertinent resources available to them, have an impact on the ability of elementary school teachers to teach the course that lasts to this day. Encouragingly, elementary school teachers show a good understanding of the course's objectives and the majority of them approve of the course's aims. In light of this, the course has a promising future if the support given to teachers and the training offered to them is considerably improved so that elementary school teachers can gain confidence and become completely equipped to teach the ethics and religious culture course.

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Annexes

A.1 Focus Group Discussion Questions

Introduction Questions

1-What is your teaching experience: Where have you taught and for how long have you been a teacher?

Interview Questions:

What type of preparation/training was offered to you regarding the Ethics and Religious Culture course?

Do you feel the preparation/education offered to you was pertinent to the reality of your classroom? Why?

What preparation/education would be the best way to prepare teachers to teach the ERC course?

What are the major difficulties in teaching the ERC course?

What solutions could address these challenges?

What do you think of the current resources about the ERC course (manuals, websites, other...) available for teachers?

Is the competency of demonstrating an understanding of the phenomenon of religion more difficult to teach than the competency of reflecting on ethical questions? Why?

How do you see the place of Christianity in the course? Is it appropriate? Is it too important? Is it too small?

How is teaching ERC different than teaching confessional religious education

Do you think the ERC course can be a mean to teach students about democracy and social life? How?

What is your general perception of the ERC course?

A.2 Individual Interview Questions

Introduction Questions

- 1-What is your teaching experience: Where have you taught and for how long have you been a teacher?
- 2-How would you describe your students in terms of age, ethnicity, culture, origins and gender?
- 3-What is the biggest challenge you face, teaching your students?

Interview Questions:

What type of preparation/training was offered to you regarding the Ethics and Religious Culture course?

Do you feel the preparation/education offered to you was pertinent to the reality of your classroom? Why?

What preparation/education would be the best way to prepare teachers to teach the ERC course?

What are the major difficulties in teaching the ERC course?

What solutions could address these challenges?

What do you think of the current resources about the ERC course (manuals, websites, other...) available for teachers?

Is the competency of demonstrating an understanding of the phenomenon of religion more difficult to teach than the competency of reflecting on ethical questions? Why?

How do you see the place of Christianity in the course? Is it appropriate? Is it too important? Is it too small?

How is teaching ERC different than teaching confessional religious education

Do you think the ERC course can be a mean to teach students about democracy and social life? How?

What is your general perception of the ERC course?