CHAPTER 17

Impartiality of Teachers in Quebec’s Non-Denominational Ethics and Religious Culture Program

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Introduction

In non-denominational programs of religious education, it is generally agreed that teachers must refrain from expressing their personal beliefs, and thus avoid influencing students. It is a question of the credibility and the very nature of such teaching. So, it is (Estivalèzes 2005, 248–259; Jackson 1997, 135–136; Lucier 2006, 210–211) vital that we understand and analyse how an impartial attitude is actually manifested in the classroom. How do teachers fulfil this requirement in professional practice? Despite the importance of the issue, there appears to be very little research that deals with both teaching practices and theoretical aspects. Is it about neutrality, impartiality or objectivity? And how is it possible to not influence students? Even rarer are scientific articles analysing such practices from the standpoint of qualitative research. The purpose of this article is to open a discussion on the subject by providing scientific data related to it.

This data was obtained by examining statements made by teachers of the Ethics and Religious Culture (ERC) curriculum in the province of Quebec (MELS 2008a as the Quebec context offers a unique perspective on the issue. This non-denominational program is compulsory in both elementary and secondary schools in the province, and requires its teachers to adopt a professional stance that is both objective and impartial when teaching about religious culture.

The context is an inductive critical analysis of semi-structured qualitative interviews performed with ERC teachers in French multicultural secondary schools on the Island of Montreal (Van der Maren 1996; Blais and Martineau 2006). After a brief overview of the history of religious education in Quebec, the ERC program and its requirement for professional impartiality and objectivity will be summarised. Following that is a literature review of the subject, and then the research methodology is presented. Finally, research findings are explained, including three major difficulties of ERC teachers in their practice of educational impartiality, and four practices they have adopted.
The Ethics and Religious Culture Program

Other than the UK, Sweden, Norway and Denmark, very few countries have a non-denominational cultural program of religious education that is compulsory and standardised for both elementary and secondary students. In this regard, the Quebec program is especially helpful in offering perspective on the issue. In order to better understand the challenges in this particular educational context, we will look at the history of the ERC program, and then at its content.

History and Content of the Ethics and Religious Culture Curriculum

The secularisation of the Quebec school system took place in three stages. It began in 1963–1964 with the ‘Royal Commission of Inquiry into Teaching’\(^1\) (known as the Commission Parent), when the clergy lost its role as manager of the educational system. Secondly, the recommendations of the Proulx Report (1999)\(^2\) inspired the adoption of Bill 118 (2000),\(^3\) which abolished the Ministry of Education’s denominational system. However, the Ministry continued to

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1 This gave birth to the Ministry of Education of Quebec (Ministère de l’Éducation du Québec) and the Higher Council of Education (Conseil supérieur de l’éducation), compulsory education until the age of 16, the cégep system, intensive training of teachers, easier access to university education for all social classes, the creation of 64 regional school boards in Quebec, of which 55 were Catholic and 9 were Protestant.

2 Government of Quebec, “Laïcité et religions: Perspective nouvelle pour l’école québécoise,” Report of the “groupe de travail sur la place de la religion à l’école,” recommendations 2, 3, 5 and 8, 230. Among other things, the task force recommended that the government: establish a secular public school system at the preschool, primary and secondary levels; revoke the status of denominational public schools; require the primary and secondary educational systems to replace Catholic and Protestant religious teaching with a compulsory cultural religious education program; and amend the Education Act to authorise every school to provide a religious and spiritual guidance program for students from various denominations—all publicly funded.

3 Inspired by the Proulx Report, this bill includes the following elements: creation of the Secretariat on Religious Affairs, prohibition of denominational public schools; replacement of Christian education advisors with advisors on spiritual, religious and moral education; replacement of pastoral guidance programs with spiritual life and community involvement program. This law redefines the relationship between schools and school boards, and especially between various educational agents of education: primarily between students, parents, teachers and principals. It clarifies the rights of regular students, adult students, and students with disabilities. Finally, it defines the rights and duties of the student, the teacher, the role of school management and the school council, the role and powers of the school board and the duties and powers of the Minister.