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Knowledge-based Teaching About Religious Diversity: A New Approach in the “Culture and Citizenship in Québec”

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Quebec’s “Ethics and Religious Culture” program (ERC) was designed to help secondary students gain a better understanding of the province’s major religious traditions, without necessarily demanding a mastery of the foundations of each one. The program adopted a “cultural approach” to the topic, aiming to give students a broad survey of what it referred to as the “phenomenon of religion.” This approach presented several challenges for teachers and their trainers (Hirsch, 2017), not the least of which was the task of mastering the complex curriculum. How could one expect high school teachers to be able to present such a wide range of religions, and take into consideration all of their different tendencies, or even simply look at the ways in which these traditions are practiced in Quebec?

What makes this more challenging is the fact that Quebec is a relatively secularized society (Rondeau, 2018), yet the majority of Quebecers are related more or less consciously to the Catholic tradition in ways

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which can be confusing for outsiders to understand. Many Quebecers, for example, consider their religious tradition to be “patrimonial” (Hervieu-Léger, 2004) and in any case, very few have the theoretical knowledge needed to compare “their” religion with others. The differences between Catholicism and other Christian traditions are seldom considered. For many Quebecers, ideas of religious diversity stay within very general lines. Christianity (mainly understood as Catholicism), Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism are all presented as unitary and coherent doctrines.

This tendency to over-simplify complex faith traditions was most striking in the programme’s approach to Indigenous spirituality. While the 11 different nations (10 First Nations and Inuit) living in Quebec may share some aspects of spiritual practice, the Ethics and Religious Culture program presented a generalized and “pan-Canadian” version of Indigenous spirituality that included features not part of any particular Indigenous faith tradition in Quebec. Thus, the program considered everything that is indigenous to be part of a coherent ensemble, thereby erasing the specific identity of each nation, and contributing to an essentialist image of Indigenous people.

The challenge of presenting complex religious diversity is compounded by the fact that many of the topics covered by the program are perceived to be sensitive (Hirsch & Moisan, 2022). Unless these themes can be properly contextualized in a social, political and scientific debate, there is a risk of provoking emotional debates amongst students about religion and social values that will lack a foundation of theoretical knowledge.

The choice to address the “phenomenon of religion” in this way seems to be imbedded in a political reality. On the one hand, Quebec’s ethno-cultural and religious diversity is unquestionable. On the other, a program that aims to “recognize the other” in the “pursuit of the common good” cannot easily make a choice between the various religious traditions to be presented in the curriculum without being accused of either ethnocentrism on the one hand, or absolute relativism on the other.

In January 2020, Quebec’s Minister of Education announced the revision of the ERC program, which had faced severe criticism in recent years (Baril & Baillargeon, 2016), especially in regards to its religious culture component. The new program—called the “Culture and citizenship in

Quebec” (CCQ)—will be officially available in June 2023, and is set to be tested in certain schools as early as September 2022. The CCQ no longer gives as much room to teaching about Quebec’s different religions, and instead, religion is treated as one theme among others, seen through the twin lenses of sociology and ethics, with specific attention paid to developing critical thinking and dialogue. However, the specific themes in the curriculum have not yet been officially presented.

In this chapter, I propose to examine how powerful knowledge—defined “not only an organization of knowledge, but an organization of resources” (Young, 2021, p. 241) —especially considering that religious diversity is one of those “disciplines where new knowledge is produced in the universities”(p.242), but it is also knowledge about which students have often knowledge from home. Even more so, while this is part of what makes religious diversity a sensitive topic, it is also a condition for successfully evoking this topic in a school setting. I will begin by explaining why religious diversity is a sensitive topic, and then examine the CCQ program as a case study, and demonstrate how it sheds light on some of the rather theoretical considerations of learning about religious diversity with powerful knowledge. Finally, I will end this chapter by looking at some specific examples of the pedagogical tools used to examine religious diversity in schools.

Making Room for Diversity

Taking ethnocultural and religious diversity into account was already a political and pedagogical concern in Quebec beginning in 1998, with the adoption of the Quebec Policy on School Integration and Intercultural Education. This policy, which was reaffirmed in 2014, emphasized the importance of civic education in a plural society, while at the same time making room for Quebec’s heritage and a common French-language culture. The policy referred to the importance of adopting a curriculum that would prepare students for “living together,” but also to the importance of helping teachers and school personnel to be more inclusive, and to recognize the diversity of students’ needs.

Such an intercultural education perspective does not aim to simply ensure the integration of students from immigrant backgrounds, but also endeavours to give all students tools for living together in a plural society (Borri-Anadon et al., 2015). Thus, it makes room for diversity by addressing all students in the classroom, including the suggestion that staff adopt equity practices in consideration of students' diverse life experiences. This means more than learning the importance of accommodating and promoting diversity, and reaches further by trying to make room for introducing different perspectives. Ultimately, the approach dispenses with the idea of a single reality, or a single truth (LeVasseur et al., 2013). Far from taking up a standpoint of cultural relativism, which considers all values and worldviews to be equal, intercultural education means taking a critical distance from the ambient ethnocentrism that often characterizes school programs (Mc Andrew et al., 2011), and giving a certain amount of space to diverse ways of seeing the world.

The primary and secondary school curricula in Quebec have many points of support for intercultural education, both in their statements of general orientation and in their detailed descriptions of competencies and learning content (Mc Andrew, 2010; Mc Andrew & Audet, 2017; Potvin et al., 2006). From a pedagogical perspective, the basis of intercultural education lies in the mastery of three competencies that must be present in all programs: 1) exercising critical judgment, in which recognition of prejudices and putting one's opinions into perspective are emphasized; 2) structuring one's identity, whereby students are asked to recognize their roots in their own culture, and to welcome those of others; and finally, 3) cooperation, which is based on respect for differences, a sensitivity to the Other and a constructive openness to pluralism and non-violence.

The 1998 policy on School Integration and Intercultural Education outlined various programs that could contribute to learning about diversity, and included history and citizenship education programs. Immigrant communities, including some minority religious groups such as the Jewish community, were featured as well. However, our analysis of textbooks (Hirsch & Mc Andrew, 2014) and teaching practices in this regard has shown that the treatment of these communities was sporadic, and often limited to the time of their arrival, rather than showing their

historical development. As a result, the current contribution of immigrant communities to the cultural, religious or economic life of Quebec is not adequately understood or acknowledged.

Despite these and other issues, the Ethics and Religious Culture program nevertheless aimed specifically at a “recognition of the other” for “the pursuit of the common good.” In so doing, the program created an important space for understanding the different cultures, worldviews and ways of living in Quebec society, both in terms of religious diversity and in terms of a broader diversity of values. The practice of dialogue, to which the program devoted a competency, was intended to let students express their point of view within the framework of this pluralism of ideas, beliefs and ways of life.

Over the years, the ERC has become the place where religious diversity is addressed in the school context. Nevertheless, there have been many criticisms of the program, with some scholars arguing that program tended to present the idea of religion in an uncritical and positive light, while others took issue with the folkloric and even essentialist manner in which religious traditions were presented (Hirsch & Jeffrey, 2020b).

The Principles of the CCQ Program

As I write these lines, the CCQ program has not yet been officially published, so what I present here are only the general lines of this program, which we may understand as its “principles.” The purpose of this presentation is not to analyse the program itself, but rather to use it as an opportunity to reflect on ways of teaching religious diversity, based on a perspective that sees religion as simply one theme among others. The CCQ program suggests analysing these various themes related to Quebec’s culture and citizenship through the viewpoints offered by sociology and ethics. Additionally, the program builds competencies in critical thinking and dialogue and thereby aims towards achieving three main learning goals: (1) the recognition of self and others; (2) the pursuit of the common good; and (3) preparing students to exercise citizenship. The interdisciplinary approach is particularly relevant to our perspective of knowledge-based teaching of diversity, since it offers two different ways

of approaching a student's reality by adopting two distinct forms of reasoning. While the ethical competency focuses on values and norms by analysing the principles that underlie them, the sociological competency proposes to observe the social context in which they take shape. Considered as a whole, the CCQ program takes advantage of the complementary nature of these two methods of analysis, particularly with regard to evaluating information, and when it comes to justifying points of view, as well as revising ideas in light of evidence and analysis.

Within both disciplinary perspectives, students are invited to develop their critical thinking by distancing themselves from both themselves and their experiences (Schwimmer, 2015). This critical distance is achieved by using criteria to analyse their observations, and "objectify" their thinking (Hirsch & Jeffrey, 2020a) thereby making it more complex and nuanced. In doing so, students can situate their thinking in their real world—rather than thinking in terms of purely theoretical dilemmas that remain disconnected from their reality. At the same time, students can also distance themselves from their initial and often emotional reactions, and develop a more critical regard for their own prejudices and preconceptions.

The dialogue component in each competency aims to teach students how to evolve ideas by discovering the arguments of others through writing, reading and discussion. Dialogue can take different forms, starting with a simple discussion that allows exposure to other ideas, or going through different modes of debate that facilitate questioning arguments, or finally, engaging in a process of deliberation, which is related to competencies of citizenship and citizen action (Hess & Mcavoy, 2015). Clearly, this facility for dialogue and deliberation not only underpins the learning of critical thinking, but it is of great importance when discussing sensitive themes.

The three learning outcomes of the CCQ program mentioned above are of particular importance when it comes to the issue of religious diversity. However, the larger challenge is to help students overcome the idea that what is good for you is necessarily good for others. Similarly, students must be encouraged not to confuse the notion of the common good with what a majority of citizens may desire at a given moment, and on a particular issue, thereby endangering the rights of minorities. This

challenge is so significant that it is prompting some researchers (Knowles & Clark, 2017) to wonder if the idea of common good is acceptable in the context of learning about diversity and different religious traditions. The risk, of course, is that an untethered debate can reproduce and enforce power relations that exist outside the classroom. This is particularly true when it comes to debates about religious diversity. In the next section, I will examine why the idea of religious diversity is considered to be a sensitive issue, and look at what is at stake in terms of educational practice.

Religious Diversity as a Sensitive Topic

There have been many situations in the last few years in Quebec and elsewhere that have shown how sensitive the topic religion can be in the public sphere. Only recently, questions of wearing a veil in a public place, or while working in the public service, have underlined how heated public responses can be. In our work, we consider “sensitive topics” (Hirsch & Moisan, forthcoming) to be more than simply “hot” issues that are debated in the public sphere. Instead, we are working to a definition that is intended to be operational, in that it seeks to provide a better understanding of what makes different topics emerge as sensitive in the classroom. Equipped with this knowledge, we can then act on these aspects, and mitigate the negative consequences of this perceived sensitivity. Our definition comprises four distinct dimensions, which nevertheless depend on one other. They are an ethical dimension, a social dimension, a political dimension and, finally, a pedagogical dimension.

The ethical dimension arises because discussion of these sensitive topics evokes personal values and social representations—both for teachers, for students and even for parents. This highlights the challenge of emotions in the classroom, for while they can “hook” students and make them engage, emotions can also exacerbate sensitivities, and even lead students away from uncomfortable critical reflection. In the case of religious diversity, this dimension is put to the test as soon as different beliefs are considered, and their role in guiding actions is addressed. For instance, why do Jewish orthodox men insist on the importance of opening

synagogues for community prayers while other faith groups respected COVID restrictions? In order to answer this, one must understand that Jewish belief can be translated into action in complex ways, often in accordance with subtle and specific doctrines. In the face of this difficulty, teachers may be confronted by their own values, which might include the idea that one should first respect the rules imposed by the ministry of health of the Province of Quebec. At the same time, instructors may lack an understanding of how complex doctrine can guide action, with the result that certain faith groups may appear irrational. I will return to this issue later, but for now, we can see that the importance of respecting the common good (one of the Quebec program's objectives) and the role of a teacher as a "cultural transmitter" called on to "present" certain "Quebec values" to all students can produce difficult contradictions and conflicts.

The social dimension contained in our definition of what constitutes a "hot" issue points to the plural character of Quebec society, as with other contemporary societies. This diversity is of multiple origins: religious, but also ethnocultural, linguistic, sexual, ideological, political and so on. These markers of identities are sometimes self-proclaimed, and other times they are assigned (Juteau, 2018). They allow members of society to situate themselves as distinct from, but in relation to, a complex plurality of others. Indeed, in Quebec and in Canada, charters and the constitution guarantee the rights of all in this plural context. This diversity extends well beyond what is easy to "see" on the surface. For example, there are complex diversities within religious communities, which must not be thought of as monolithic, and whose members often welcome different practices and worldviews. Because this diversity is less visible to those on the outside, there is a risk that students belonging to the faith traditions being taught in the classroom may not recognize themselves in the educational material being presented. For example, not all Muslim girls wear the veil, but those who do can wear it quite differently—with different colours, different ways of attaching it, different ways of dressing or wearing makeup, all while wearing the veil. Teachers need to have the knowledge to explain this diversity, but often, this knowledge is lacking. I will return to this issue in the pedagogical dimension of our definition.

The political dimension constituting religion as a sensitive topic refers to the different ways of living together that are addressed by sensitive topics such as those that concern religious diversity and the “power relationships” (*rappports de pouvoir*) that define them. These themes are all the more sensitive in the context of the CCQ program, which, like its predecessor, the ERC program, aims at the pursuit of the common good, and therefore presupposes the possibility of deliberating to reach a common agreement within this framework. Such negotiation is by its very nature political. It becomes particularly sensitive when dealing with religious diversity which, as we have just shown, does not necessarily have a legitimate place in public sphere in Quebec. Obviously, the political dimension takes on a greater importance when an issue is debated in the political sphere, and when partisan politics are involved. This was often the case in regard to religious diversity in Quebec, particularly in the debates surrounding and addressing secularism as a primary civic value (Dalpé & Koussens, 2016). These debates highlighted the plurality of approaches within Quebec society, but also pointed to an increasingly polarized social and political climate. In the contexts of these debates, different worldviews were pitted against each other, and it was difficult—if not impossible—to find a balance between individual rights and what could be considered as the common good.

The final and more strictly pedagogical dimension of our definition is in many ways a consequence of the first three. The first aspect to consider is the complexity of these sensitive topics, which generally require a wide knowledge and an in-depth treatment, often in interdisciplinarity, in the classroom. For example, in order to better understand issues surrounding the wearing of religious symbols, one must first try to understand the belief that requires wearing a religious symbol, in addition to other religious practices, and the meaning of these practices for the believer. One should also try to consider the multiple ways in which a person can interpret religious doctrine and the practices associated with it. It can also be necessary to understand the values that underlie, in a society of law, the protection of individual rights and the limits of this protection. We can also analyse social reactions to the wearing of religious symbols by referring to a particular political and social history, in Quebec and elsewhere, as well as setting out current political issues surrounding these practices.

This complexity demands specific pedagogical approaches. It may be preferable, for instance, to avoid a dichotomous vision of a particular social issue by imposing a debate in the classroom. While this pedagogical approach is supposed to encourage critical thinking, it also runs the risk of introducing social polarization and an uncritical emotional involvement.

Teaching About Religious Diversity in Different Contexts

One of the challenges of treating any sensitive topic in the classroom, and with teaching religious diversity in particular, lies in how best to adopt teaching contexts that take into account the plurality of Quebec's society. The growing presence of immigration outside the metropole of Montreal is contributing greatly to the linguistic, ethnic, cultural and religious diversity of the province. As significant as this may be, there is an underlying historical diversity too, one that is composed of francophones, anglophones and Indigenous people, as well as of past waves of immigrants living in different regions of the province. As a result, Quebec schools, like the society in which they are located, are increasingly characterized by ethnic, cultural and religious diversity.

Just over 25% of students in Quebec are of immigrant background (first and second generations combined) (ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 2013). Admittedly, some regions are less directly affected by recent immigration. Others have a large number of students, or even almost all students from recent immigrant backgrounds (Borri-Anadon & Hirsch, 2021). And in more homogeneous settings, some schools or classrooms may still have as many as 50% of students coming from immigrant communities (Hirsch & Borri-anadon, *forthcoming*). Moreover, this immigration is increasingly diverse from a linguistic, religious, cultural or ethnic point of view, leading to an encounter between systems of meaning that are increasingly distant from the majority language, religion and culture in Quebec (Mc Andrew, 2010).

As we have shown in our project “Keys for a Better Understanding of the Ethnocultural, Religious, and Linguistic Diversity in Schools,”¹ ethnocultural and religious diversity is present in all of Quebec’s regions, although it manifests differently in different parts of the province. By presenting a typology that expands the idea of a simple divide between Montreal and the other regions, we may inspire schools to use teaching practices that respond to their particular realities and experiences and support the academic progress of diverse students (Hirsch & Borri-Anadon, [forthcoming](#)). The challenge for teachers is twofold. To begin with, teachers want to embrace the diversity that surrounds them, but they may not fully understand the particular kind of diversity that exists in their school. In Montreal, for example, religious diversity is linked to the many waves of immigration to the metropole over the years. In more remote areas, however, diversity is linked to the presence of the First Peoples, as well to the legacies of more historical waves of migration. Meanwhile, teachers may feel compelled to talk about Quebec society as a whole, rather than focus solely on a particular region or context. In other words, to fully understand the current Quebec context, it is important to talk about diversity in all its forms and in all its regions.

This is a challenge in both plural and homogeneous contexts. In areas with obvious and visible diversity, the challenge seems obvious: when teachers are confronted with a diversity of religions they may not know enough about, they can be understandably reluctant to engage with this diversity in class, especially considering the amount of time they have to master the demands of the curriculum. In a more homogenous context, teachers might mistakenly believe that religious diversity is absent from the classroom, and therefore neglect to address it. In both cases, the fact that students may appear to represent a certain religious diversity in a classroom does not mean that he or she identifies with it. Teachers must be very sensitive to balance between identifying a student in class by a religious affiliation.

¹ This is an English translation of the project’s original French title “Des clés pour mieux comprendre la diversité ethnoculturelle, religieuse et linguistique en milieu scolaire.” This project was made possible through the support of the Direction de l’intégration linguistique et de l’éducation interculturelle of the ministère de l’Éducation du Québec. The project is available in French through the Laboratoire éducation et diversité en région at www.uqtr.ca/ledir/fichesregionales.

In our research on the teaching of sensitive topics (Hirsch & Moisan, 2022), the theme of religious diversity comes up regularly, first in connection with the question of context, and then when it comes to the question of the knowledge needed to address diversity as a sensitive topic.

Here are some examples.

One teacher said that he was talking about the issue of the veil in class, and that one of his students wore a veil. During the discussion, another student said:

“Well criss, he could hide a bomb in there”. And that for me is unacceptable, so I expelled the students and I called the parents. [...] And when I kick them out, it’s to show that the limit has been crossed. I think I’ve done that once to date. I also warned the parents. [...] The mother was not happy... the youngster apologized too. He did it to make people laugh and he didn’t realize that he could hurt people’s feelings. (E3H)

In this account, the teacher finds the situation difficult to handle. He talks about the students being overly emotional, and as prone to unreflective reaction. Other difficult factors include the overly politicized speech of the student in question, and the lack of respect shown to the Muslim student. Finally, the teacher speaks about his lack of knowledge to recover the discussion “objectively.”

Another example is offered by a teacher who works in a school in an area that is far from major centres and more homogeneous. He explains that in his classroom, he feels like he has to “represent” Quebec’s religious diversity to his students, and their arguments regarding societal debates about religions:

If there was a student or two who was against the law, well...she could be against the law, but she’s a white girl, she’s still part of the most popular ethnic group in the school. She couldn’t counterargue from her personal life. (E2H)

Thus, diversity is noticeable in its presence as well as in its absence from the classroom: as an integral part of Quebec society, teachers clearly understand that they can no longer ignore it in their practices, while at

the same time they may not have the tools to teach issues of diversity adequately.

Teachers also speak about the challenge of answering students' questions about cults. They question the terms used, the definitions of religion and even the number of legitimate religions and how can they tell apart the "real" religions from the "false" ones. One teacher explains that she finds these questions difficult because she is worried about how to answer these and other questions without imposing a Judeo-Christian view on "other" religions. The explicit requirement from ERC teachers—that may extend to the CCQ program—is to be impartial and objective about all topics with regard to the subject material, including expressions of religion. As one can imagine, this is a difficult posture to maintain. Teachers must find a way to negotiate between ethnocentrism, on the one hand, and relativism on the other, and avoid any easy comparison between "us" and "them." However, both "us" and "them" are social constructions for students in the classroom, stemming from misrepresentations of Quebec society and which make little or no room for its real diversity. Moreover, this posture of balance is often misinterpreted as a requirement for neutrality, which is, in fact, untenable for any teacher who belongs to a minority, be it ethnocultural, or religious. The result of a "neutral" posture may be that the teacher sends the paradoxical message that diversity has no place in the school, whereas the program the teacher is working with aims precisely at the recognition of this diversity.

Another teacher recounts discussions on these topics with colleagues who may have completely different interpretations:

For example, the new religious movements. My colleague said, "No, no. You can't bring that up. You can't bring that up, that's cults." I'm like, "No, no. That's the new religious movements. It's not cults." "Yes, there are some in there that are cults." Just because of the discussions with her, I was like, "Okay, I'm going to talk about those groups." (EC4)

Teachers' feelings of discomfort have an impact on the disciplines they may use in order to present the themes of the ERC program. These can include history, sociology or political science. Despite this, all of the teachers spoke of their fear of debate on this subject, which they feel they

know little about, especially considering the wide range of possible themes and questions that teaching about diversity can raise. In the face of this lack of knowledge, teachers may adapt their teaching practices so that debate is minimized, to ensure that an instructor's authority is not contested by their students.

A Knowledge-based Proposal for Teaching About Diversity in a High School Classroom

Our research over the past ten years has allowed us to identify the challenges teachers face in teaching religious diversity. The most important challenge is the knowledge needed to master the subject. Additionally, the explicit expectation in the ERC program (which may be less explicit in the new CCQ program) is to present religions through a certain “hierarchy.” The fact that the curriculum does not impose mandatory themes, but leaves it up to teachers to decide how they want to present diversity in their classrooms makes it an even greater challenge. As Young (2021) states, “any curriculum has both a conceptual basis (in academic subjects) and a resource basis (in the availability of the necessary human resources of well-qualified subject teachers and the appropriate material resources such as equipment and specialized accommodation). A powerful knowledge-based curriculum is also a high resource curriculum and often the necessary resources are not found in [...] schools” (p. 242). This is the same finding that we have made in our various observations (Hirsch, 2018) of teaching about religious diversity in Quebec. Teachers have made it clear that they feel helpless in the face of the breadth of content they must master, and perplexed by the integration of this content into the curriculum that promotes—explicitly or implicitly—the majority experience.

This is why we have developed pedagogical support tools for history and ethics teachers to help them talk about religious diversity in Quebec (as well as other forms of diversity, especially visible diversity). The guides “Teaching the History of the Jewish Community in Quebec” (Hirsch & Moisan, 2018) and “Teaching the History of the Arab and Muslim

communities in Quebec” (Moisan & Hirsch, [forthcoming](#)) aim to present the history of these communities in a way that is adapted to the curriculum in order to meet teaching needs, while expanding the presentation to allow teachers to deepen their treatment of the history and culture of these communities in the classroom.

The guides are designed to support teachers to enable Quebec students to discover the plurality of viewpoints, memories and experiences of all the social groups that have contributed to building Quebec society. They provide teachers with tools and references to help them deal with the various “histories” of Quebec. These tools let teachers discuss different interpretations of Quebec’s history, and help them, and their students, better understand the nature of the province’s social pluralism.

Teaching the history of a community whose members have such different trajectories and cultures is not easy, and requires making choices and simplifications. In order to make their history tangible to students, we have chosen to present it in two themes: 1) the establishment of communities in Quebec; and 2) the contribution of communities and their members to Quebec society and to living together. By following the key elements of these two themes, the guides make it possible to account for various facets of diverse experiences, and understand the complexity of stories within Quebec’s complex diversity. Given the stress on the notion of dialogue in the ERC (but also in the new CCQ course), these tools can contribute to a deliberative approach with students in discussions about religious diversity.

Let’s consider a few examples. The founding of a Jewish hospital in Montreal in 1934 is an interesting one, because it is related to an antisemitic incident involving a young medical trainee who was not allowed to do his internship in any Quebec hospital. His fellow trainees went on strike rather than let him complete his internship; so he was forced to leave for New York. This incident prompted the Jewish community to raise the necessary funds to open their own hospital. The hospital’s goal was (and is) to respect “the principles of the various religions, cultures and ethnic communities,” while ensuring that it offers “an environment that respects the religious, spiritual and cultural values advocated by the Jewish religion.” Few Quebecers know this historical context. The presence of a “Jewish” hospital that has clearly demonstrated its refusal, in recent years,

to respect the constraints imposed by new laws on the wearing of religious symbols has not gone unnoticed. The hospital seems to be against the current of Quebec society, and even in conflict with its fundamental values. However, through the presentation of the history of the hospital, students can better understand how it offered a much-needed response to discrimination against the Jewish community, especially in relation to medical care. This history also helps students understand the importance given by the hospital to the possibility of accepting everyone—employees and patients—regardless of their religious practices.

Another interesting example is the complex nature of communities often considered to be monolithic by Quebecers. This is particularly true in the case of Arab and Muslim communities. Indeed, very often, we speak of “Arab-Muslim” communities, whereas in fact, Muslims are not all Arabs, and not all Arabs are Muslims. The presentation in the guide of the various waves of immigration and their religious and ethnic origins and their settlement in Quebec in the different regions make it possible to better situate this diversity.

Young explains that the concept of powerful knowledge is delimited by two different boundaries, the first “between subject-based knowledge of the curriculum and the everyday knowledge that all children acquire through the experience of growing up before they come to school and during their school years” (2021, p. 243) and second boundary that is located between subjects. The goal is therefore not necessarily to offer a basic religious literacy (Moore, 2012)—an idea that guided for the last years the implantation of the religious studies curriculum—but a historical literacy, or historical consciousness (Lee, 2011) that can shape a student’s understanding of the world they live in. Indeed, as Young notes, “Whereas the former is located, at least in part in the community of historians and their debates and research and its findings, the latter is largely limited to a person’s experience or that of the community or social class of which she/he is a member” (2021, p. 248). In other words, it is a question of going beyond the common knowledge of minority religious communities through presenting academically inflected knowledge that is both complex and dense, but which is nevertheless adapted to the schoolroom context. If they are successful, the guides can provide teachers and

their students with a better understanding of the challenges faced by religious minorities within a society where religion is increasingly excluded from public life.

Concluding Remarks

The reflections developed in this chapter demonstrate that approaching religious diversity as a school subject remains a pedagogical challenge—not only because it is a sensitive topic—but also because it requires using powerful knowledge to ensure the success of this kind of teaching. The objective is not necessarily to understand all religions or all of their internal differences, but to know that this diversity exists, and understand that religions are diverse within themselves. Such an understanding allows both teachers and students to avoid the trap of essentializing others, and of prejudging the people practicing these religions.

In this case, knowledge is both a support to teachers and a challenge. While Young reminds us that this knowledge is by definition constantly being developed by academics, teachers must have the opportunity to access it, and make this knowledge accessible to students.

The tools we have developed over the years attempt to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and the classroom, thereby making complex knowledge accessible to both teachers and students. The promise is that students then discover the complexity of knowledge and the importance of making room for this complexity, in order to fully understand the society in which they live. It is in this sense that the use of knowledge contributes to preparing young people to exercise citizenship in a plural society.

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