

Tensions Between Teaching Sexuality Education and Neoliberal Policy Reform in Quebec's Professional Competencies for Beginning Teachers

Compétences professionnelles et enseignants débutants : tensions entre l'enseignement de l'éducation sexuelle et la réforme des politiques néolibérales au Québec

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Article abstract

This research draws into question the effects that neoliberal policy reforms — with an emphasis on individual and measurable “competencies” — has on new teachers teaching sexuality education in Quebec. While we examine professional competencies that teachers can use to define their mandate for teaching sexuality education as a beginning professional, we also detail the ways in which the competencies constrain pedagogical practice. Our argument is that while there are avenues for teachers to use the professional competencies for sexuality education, neoliberal reforms atomize teachers in a search for accountability. As a result, for fear of generating controversy, potentially contentious issues like sexuality education are not readily addressed. This atomization restricts both teachers and the field — the policy circumscribes sexuality education as personal rather than cultural. As such, we are left impotent to address cultural issues of sexuality education.

TENSIONS BETWEEN TEACHING SEXUALITY EDUCATION AND NEOLIBERAL POLICY REFORM IN QUEBEC'S PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES FOR BEGINNING TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT. This research draws into question the effects that neoliberal policy reforms – with an emphasis on individual and measurable “competencies” – has on new teachers teaching sexuality education in Quebec. While we examine professional competencies that teachers can use to define their mandate for teaching sexuality education as a beginning professional, we also detail the ways in which the competencies constrain pedagogical practice. Our argument is that while there are avenues for teachers to use the professional competencies for sexuality education, neoliberal reforms atomize teachers in a search for accountability. As a result, for fear of generating controversy, potentially contentious issues like sexuality education are not readily addressed. This atomization restricts both teachers and the field – the policy circumscribes sexuality education as personal rather than cultural. As such, we are left impotent to address cultural issues of sexuality education.

COMPÉTENCES PROFESSIONNELLES ET ENSEIGNANTS DÉBUTANTS: TENSIONS ENTRE L'ENSEIGNEMENT DE L'ÉDUCATION SEXUELLE ET LA RÉFORME DES POLITIQUES NÉOLIBÉRALES AU QUÉBEC

RÉSUMÉ. Ce projet de recherche remet en question les impacts qu'ont les réformes des politiques néolibérales – mettant l'accent sur les « compétences » individuelles et mesurables – sur l'éducation sexuelle enseignée par les enseignants débutants au Québec. Nous explorons les compétences professionnelles que peuvent utiliser les enseignants lors de la définition de leur mandat d'enseignement de la sexualité et ce, en tant que professionnel débutant. Nous examinons en détails de quelle manière les compétences entravent la pratique pédagogique. Nous soutenons que même si les compétences professionnelles offrent aux enseignants certaines pistes en termes d'éducation à la sexualité, les réformes néolibérales les poussent à s'isoler et à s'inscrire dans une logique de reddition de comptes. Par conséquent, des sujets potentiellement controversés comme l'éducation à la sexualité ne sont pas facilement abordés, de crainte de générer la controverse. Cet isolement limite à la fois les enseignants et le milieu, les politiques définissant l'éducation sexuelle comme personnelle plutôt que culturelle. Ainsi, nous nous retrouvons incapables d'aborder les aspects culturels de l'éducation à la sexualité.

Let us begin by asking a difficult question: If you are a beginning teacher, how do you respond when a student discloses that they are a survivor of sexual trauma? Over the past number of years, there have been numerous disturbing cases of assaults, bullying, and even death that have implicated schools.¹ Sadly, these cases are not anomalous. As such, the teaching of sexuality education has taken on an even greater importance – for schools as well as in the broader society. While Quebec’s Ministry of Education does provide opportunities for teachers to address sexuality education through cross-curricular work as part of its education reform, the Quebec Education Plan (QEP, Ministère de l’Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport [MELS], 2001b), the policies are not as robust as in other provinces with mandatory sexuality education.

In this paper, after briefly outlining the reasons for the lack of sexuality education in Quebec, we detail ways in which teachers can, and should, fulfill their MELS-mandated professional competencies by engaging their students with sexuality education. While we note the inadequacies and inconsistencies of ministry and school board policies around sexuality education, the goal here is to offer insights and resources to Quebec teachers to help them better understand how to use existing policies to fight against gender oppression in their classrooms and better equip their students to experience healthy and respectful sexual relationships.

As part of the education reform, the Ministry laid out twelve professional competencies that are used by school administrators to evaluate teachers. Teachers who do not have permanent contracts must undergo these evaluations in order to be rehired the following academic year (MELS, 2006). Teacher education programs are also supposed to be tailored to make students familiar with these competencies; many course outlines reiterate the relevant professional competencies. We will examine how some of these competencies enable teachers in the context of a cross-curricular sexuality education curriculum, while others have the effect of constraining teachers. Specifically, using the document *The Probationary Period for Teachers in Preschool, Elementary and Secondary Education* (MELS, 2006) as the main source, with additional aspects taken from the document, *Teacher Training: Orientations, Professional Competencies* (MELS, 2001a), professional competencies 1, 3, 9, 11, and 12 will be considered.

Working with policy in any professional practice is often rife with tensions. When reforms to school curricula happen, or the expectations for teachers change, any number of groups are implicated in the changes. Scholars of educational policy have noted that one of the current ideological pressures on schools is the emergence of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, as it relates to schools, is the idea that schools should operate in keeping with the logic of contemporary capitalism and related econometric measures. Neoliberal educational reforms share many of the defining features of broader, non-workplace-specific reforms, for example, accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2005), privatization,

public-private partnerships (PPPs, Taylor & Friedel, 2011), and pressures to teach for increased economic gain. Specifically, a hallmark of neoliberal educational reform is the atomization of education, with the accompanying shift from responsibility to accountability, and what Michael Apple (2001) has referred to as the push for entrepreneurial teachers. The waves of reforms across Canada – indeed, the world – over the past few decades have not only contributed to the economization of education,² but this agenda has been significantly advanced by defining teachers and teacher’s roles as individual, measurable, and quantifiable. In this context, recent curricular reforms have shifted the emphasis of schooling to meet the metrics and goals of global markets. Steven Klees (2009) has tracked the increasing marketization of education on a global scale, highlighting many of its pressures and mechanisms. Among these mechanisms has been the prevalence of high-stakes testing as well as a reduction in funding for things deemed to be non-essential, that is to say, those subjects believed to provide a low rate of return on monetized investments.

Solomon and Singer (2011) have articulated the ways in which neoliberalism has impacted teaching and learning in Canada, noting that “ultimately, school environments have increasingly become arenas of conflict as equity-based curricula that integrate issues of diversity and social justice are forced into a contradictory and tumultuous relationship with standards-based, test-driven, and pre-packaged curricula” (p. 1). As high-stakes testing comes to the fore, the individual aspect of neoliberalism is emphasized. The connection between neoliberalism and the teaching of sexuality education may seem to be less obvious. However, atomization runs the risk of framing the discussion of sexuality education as involving *private* individuals, separate from society. It is important that sexuality education addresses the structural, cultural, and relational aspects of sexuality. Our discussion of the professional competencies should be read as a challenge to educators to teach sexuality education as having *public* importance.

The previous points are not to say that reforms such as the QEP have no place for community or culture in the role of the teacher and school – we do see this emphasis in some competencies – but, rather, that neoliberal reforms privilege an understanding of the individual as the location of agency. This is a concern for all aspects of schooling, but it raises a specific concern for the subject of sexuality education. How do we conceptualise and address the links between sexuality and culture? We argue that a major pitfall of the QEP is the absence of links between sexuality and healthy *cultural* participation. The ability for teachers and schools to confront broad as well as contentious cultural issues about sexuality in schools can all too readily fall by the wayside.

It is worthwhile to note, too, that while we have chosen to focus on education in Quebec, these issues exist in other provinces. Sexuality education shares common pressures from atomizing curricula that relegate issues of sexual health to individual units – both units of lessons and units of people. In addition,

the pressures on new teachers to not address critical issues are an unfortunate result of schooled passivity. In linking sexuality education with educational policy, we hope to highlight how teachers can, and should, resist this trend. However, Quebec is the only province in Canada that does not have mandatory sexuality education classes in public schools.

QUEBEC'S PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION

In the reform period of 2001 to 2005, the MELS announced the elimination of the course, "Personal and Social Development," in which sexuality education was originally covered (Feldman, 2011). Since then, the government has instead promoted a cross-curricular approach to sexuality education, in which all teachers become responsible for sexuality education. School boards are also responsible for implementing policies to achieve these cross-curricular ends. For example, the Lester B. Pearson School Board (2011) in Montreal organized FLASH (Friendship Love and Sexual Health) professional development workshops for both elementary and secondary "networks" (p. 18), meaning educators, administrators, councillors, and spiritual community animators. The results of such initiatives have yet to be studied, but news reports have critiqued the lack of success in coordinating a cross-curricular approach to sexuality education (Feldman, 2011; "Sex in the Dark," 2013).

Experience by Dan Parker, one of the co-authors of this article and a teacher in Quebec high schools, has demonstrated that sexuality education is either covered in a single session, roughly once a year, by counselors based at the school board office, or by private educators from groups such as the Sexual Health Network of Quebec or the Stop Program, who conduct single or multiple sessions with the same students. Otis, Gaurdeau, Duquet, Michaud, and Nonn (2012) have documented the often limited and fragile partnerships between schools and public health practitioners who give sexuality education workshops. Between 2009 and 2011, Dan observed that sexuality education was covered in one single session roughly once a year by counsellors based at the school board office, private educators, or nurses. His teacher training program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) had only offered him one class that focused on anti-oppression and gender issues in society, without going into any specific pedagogy on sexuality education. While teaching in Quebec, he did not receive any training in sexuality education from the school board, even though most school boards' official policies encouraged teachers to explore sex or sexuality education in all subjects. He was never informed about this responsibility until at a staff meeting, one and a half years into his teaching career; the staff was reminded that it was everybody's job to teach sexuality education. The announcement was rendered irrelevant by the eye-rolling and sarcastic smiles of the presenter and many staff members. The message was clear: teachers didn't take this task seriously, and neither did administrators or school boards. And even if some of them did, how could they teach about

sexuality education if they were not trained how to do so? Dan Parker began to reflect on and research this issue while a graduate student and teaching assistant with Robert McGray.

Robert McGray, the other co-author, was previously an Assistant Professor in Educational Studies at Concordia University in Montreal. He now teaches at Brock University in Ontario. One of the recurring classes he taught was a pre-service class aimed at exploring the ways in which teachers could develop cross-curricular methods which encompassed the domain of sexuality education. As many of the students were busy fulfilling the requirements of their Education degrees – including time intensive *stage* placements in schools, it became readily apparent that the daily pressures of working with students did not emphasize skills or concepts that were not touched by high stakes testing. In addition, economic realities meant that there was a great deal of pressure on the students in teacher certification to gain employment. Many of the teacher candidates working in the field of early childhood education, for example, were all too aware that raising critical questions around sexuality was not perceived to be the safest terrain for a new teacher to venture into. As such, the question we asked at the beginning of the paper could be seen as a troublesome and career-risky venture. Both authors therefore sought out ways to bridge the role of the teacher with the policies so as to better illuminate sexuality education.

As we have mentioned, sexuality education in Quebec falls within the mandate of the cross-curricular competencies. Readers will note, however, that we have deliberately chosen to highlight avenues for sexuality education in the *professional competencies*. This is done for two major reasons. The first is to identify the ways in which the role of the teacher, as defined by the MELS, relates to teaching subject matter that can be contentious. The second is to examine how the conditions for teachers' work affects sexuality pedagogy. In this particular instance, we posit that this conceptual trajectory implicates neoliberal school reforms, the individualization of the labour of teaching, and the privatization of sexual knowledge. Finally, because the MELS had not defined a subject area for sexuality education, there is imminent risk that the programs that certify teachers in Quebec in post-secondary institutions do not address sexuality education in pre-service training.

In the following sections, we describe five professional competencies as well as recommend possibilities for action by teachers. We have chosen these competencies for their importance as well as relevance to the field of sexuality education.

Professional competency 1: "To act as a professional who is inheritor, critic and interpreter of knowledge or culture when teaching students" (MELS, 2006, p. 38).

This competency is important for educators to justify to their colleagues, principals, students, or students' parents why their lessons cast "a critical look at his or her own origins, cultural practices and social role" (MELS, 2001a, p. 62). As a critic, teachers may incite students to act and fight against racism,

sexism, classism, and homophobia, present in hegemonic sexuality education curricula (Connell & Elliot, 2009). This competency also urges teachers to “establish links with the students’ culture in the proposed learning activities” (MELS, 2001a, p. 62) such as to dating violence in the Twilight Saga series, which is very popular amongst teenagers (Collins & Carmody, 2011), while teen magazines may be used as educational material to critique violence in intimate relationships (Kettry & Emery, 2010). There are plenty of other teen-cherished forms of media (movies, music videos, ads) that can be deconstructed for their caricatures or exaggerated performances of a male-centered (hetero)sexuality. Teachers can help young men and women envision alternative discourses that encourage a larger breadth and depth of sexuality that is “free from violence, discrimination and self-recrimination” (Connell & Elliot, 2009, p. 95).

Professional competency 3: “To develop teaching / learning situations that are appropriate to the students concerned and the subject content with a view to developing the competencies targeted in the programs of study” (MELS, 2006, p. 40).

All Quebec teachers have the responsibility to teach the cross-curricular competencies (MELS, p. 23, 2001b). The fact that sexuality features in a list of thirteen other “focuses of development” (p. 23) may be reflective of the time and resources the MELS originally intended would be spent on the former subject area that was called Personal Development, where sex education had a more prominent role. Although some teachers have not seen, or do not remember seeing, any proposed curriculum for the teaching of sexuality education (“Sex in the Dark,” 2013), the MELS document for teachers entitled *Sex Education in the Context of Education Reform* (Duquet, 2003) suggests (but not does make mandatory) several activities, projects, and learning activities. Standard sexuality education topics are covered such as “teen pregnancy, STDs, equality between the sexes, sexual orientation and homophobia” (p. 22). For example, the guide suggests that primary school students learn to report sexual harassment or exploitation (p. 48). Teachers are encouraged to read a story to their class about the sexual abuse of a child and discuss it with the students. Some teachers might shy away from such an activity, in the same way that they would not feel comfortable responding to teenagers’ spontaneous comments about online pornography by discussing the “massive distribution of pornographic and violent images on the Internet,” and “the consequences of these scenarios on the perception of female and male sexuality” (p. 53). Other examples include an English Language Arts activity where Duquet (2003) suggests students “make a video on violence in young people’s romantic relationships” (p. 53). In an Ethics and Religious Culture course, she proposes a discussion on sexual aggression that can be initiated by the following statement: rape is “the only crime where the victim feels guilty” (p. 53). These examples, approved by the Ministry, can possibly give teachers not only the tools but also the official approval and professional obligation to delve into these controversial issues surrounding rape culture and hegemonic sexuality. But will teachers do so? We will return to this question later.

In terms of “teaching / learning situations” (MELS, 2001b), an abundance of online resources are available to teachers who want to address sexuality in various subjects. However, teachers need to be wary of the abstinence approach, which is currently popular in the United States. The production of “sexual citizens” (Fields & Hirschman, 2007, p. 8) requires that teenagers make healthy sexual choices, rather than being pre-empted in their choices by heterosexist and religious visions of sexuality that exclude sex-positive and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or queer / questioning (LGBTQ) perspectives. For a more inclusive approach, Quebec high school teachers should refer to *The Teacher’s Sex Ed Toolkit* (Aids Community Care Montreal, 2011). Its lesson plans and handouts are specifically designed for different subject areas of the Quebec curriculum. One lesson for later stages of the Ethics and Religious Culture course tackles rape culture and heterosexist gender norms at the same time as dealing with sexual boundaries and the importance of consent between an ambiguous couple (the unisex names are meant to promote discussions about gender). This resource also shows how teachers can fulfill another aspect of competency 3 – recognizing and respecting social differences such as “gender, ethnic origin, socioeconomic and cultural differences” (MELS, 2001a, p. 74). In general, since the QEP encourages teachers to create group learning situations (MELS, 2001b), teachers should also refer to Koch’s (2007) work on cooperative learning in sexuality education, which includes common ground rules for sexuality education, common group member roles and effective leader traits in sexuality education, and tools for effective group / collaborative / cooperative learning in general. Finally, teachers of teens should not shy away from touching on sexual pleasure with the students: Aggleton and Campbell (as cited in Manseau, Blais, Engler, & Bossé, 2007) argue that sexual pleasure must be included in sexuality education, or else teenagers simply lose interest.

Professional competency 12: “To demonstrate ethical and responsible professional behaviour in the performance of his or her duties” (MELS, 2006, p. 49).

This professional competency is important for teachers who seek to stop sexual violence in their school since it recognizes the teacher who “anticipates, develops and implements practices to ensure that students are treated with respect and that their health, safety and well being are secure” (MELS, 2006, p. 49). Beyond sexuality education class activities, teachers can go further to creating safe spaces in their schools. Katz, Heisterkamp, and Fleming (2011) illustrate how the Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) Model in high schools tackles rape culture by training athletes to become engaged bystanders and responsible teammates on the lookout for sexual violence. The MVP also encourages men to name and confront other men’s “verbal, physical, and sexual mistreatment of women” (p. 688). Similarly, Martin (2008) outlines an intervention strategy against peer sexual harassment that is designed to empower adolescent females. Teachers could collaborate with administrators or the school board to implement such programs. Also, educators, regardless of their sexual orientation,

can also fight homophobia and heterosexism by hosting Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs, Fields & Hirschman, 2007, p. 9). Educators can consult the Canadian GSA resource website to find out how to set up their own GSA as well as make links with other GSA teachers across Canada (Egale, 2012).

It is important that teachers are able to relate their lessons and program planning to “major schools of thought” (MELS, 2001a, p. 119) if there are moral or social conflicts that may arise in the class, or if administrators, parents, or other teachers scrutinize their professionalism. For example, if a gender studies, anti-rape, or feminist approach is used, then the teacher should be prepared to cite the literature, theory, and research that back up their practice. This analysis could be explained as a part of queer theory, where sexuality is seen as “a primary mechanism through which inequality is organized” (Connell & Elliot, 2009, p. 84). In this way, teachers need to be ready to justify their “decisions concerning the learning and education of students to the parties concerned” (MELS, 2001a, p. 119). Sexuality education can sometimes arouse fears amongst parents that the transmission of sexually explicit knowledge encourages teenagers to engage in reckless sexual activity. Possibility for controversy can, of course, happen anywhere. The Ontario government’s new sexual education curriculum has faced criticism and protests from parents and religious groups (The Canadian Press, 2015). Many of these groups feel that implementation of the curriculum may lead to increased promiscuity. In response, ministries of education, school boards, and teachers across Canada should be ready to point naysayers to the MELS document (Duquet, 2003) that cites several studies showing that adolescents who receive sexuality education “are more likely to delay their first sexual relation, preferring to wait for the appropriate time” (p. 34). Nevertheless, educators must ensure that their materials and pedagogy are appropriate to the students’ development. There are times when a school community rightly contests acts of sexuality educators. For example, in a high school in Chilliwack, British Columbia, grade 8 and 9 students received a deck of graphic and irreverent sex cards (originally designed for adults) during a guest speaker’s presentation on sexual relationships. Parents contested this, and the school issued a public apology (Chan, 2015). This case demonstrates how important it is for sexuality educators to receive the training that is necessary to navigate through sensitive issues and to be aware of what is being introduced into their classrooms and why.

Professional competency 11: “To engage in professional development individually and with others” (MELS, 2006, p. 48).

Although the MELS’ initial plans were to “set up training sessions in sex education for all educators” (Duquet, 2003, p. 35), such professional development training has by and large been poorly or sparsely implemented. A report on the integration of health clinics (CLSCs) in sexuality education in schools has shown that very few projects were put in place, and that administrators and

teachers found it difficult to squeeze in sexual education with the rest of the curriculum and its content-heavy demands (Otis et al., 2012). Community opposition groups in Quebec have noted that there is no method made available for evaluating the new cross-curricular sexual education, and that most teachers are neither qualified nor comfortable to broach issues concerning sexuality (Feldman, 2011). This trend of poor teacher training in sexuality education has been observed in the U.S. as well, where research has shown that “the majority of teachers assigned to teach sexuality curricula have received little or no training in this area” (Walters & Hayes, 2007, p. 35). What’s worse, for those teachers and student teachers who do receive training in sexuality education with anti-homophobic curricula, teachers and students sometimes “resist or subvert them,” and many student teachers have shared their views that “(homo)sexuality [is] irrelevant or inappropriate to the schooling context” (Connell & Elliot, 2009, p. 91).

The ministry encourages teachers to seek professional development resources such as “research reports and professional literature, pedagogical networks, professional associations, [and] data banks” (MELS, 2001a, p. 116). Will teachers seek to acquire this competency by engaging with such resources and their applications to cross-curricular sexuality education? Maybe. The problem is, there are many other subjects that teachers may also wish to inform themselves on first, starting with their core subject areas. Teachers who are passionate about gender oppression and sexual awareness can use their annual professional development funding to do workshops on sexuality education, but these volunteers are few and far between. Overburdened with heavy workloads, oversized classes, and extra curricular activities, how can they find the time to engage in another layer of professional development? Although this professional competency may serve to motivate critical educators to take on the extra research and training, teachers may not do so since it is not required. This is concerning as Quebec’s sexually transmitted infections / diseases rates have witnessed a steady increase since 2005, with 15- to 25-year-olds designated as the most vulnerable group (Feldman, 2011).

Professional competency 9: “To cooperate with school staff, parents, partners in the community and students in pursuing the educational objectives of the school” (MELS, 2006, p. 46).

This professional competency can present the most difficult obstacle for a teacher who wants to teach sexuality education. However, it is also arguably one of the most important of the twelve competencies when the teacher evaluation and the rehiring process are considered. As such, it is part of why teachers may be afraid of broaching controversial issues in their classes that may provoke questions from the school administration. McNeil (1988) argues that many schools’ bureaucratic organizations inadvertently promote “defensive teaching strategies” (p. 434) which omit controversial topics so that teachers

may assume authoritarian control of their classes. This type of low-risk pedagogy also includes teaching by lists, mystifying information, and dumbing down the material (McNeil, 1988). Thus, this professional competency can serve as a tool to weed out any teachers that may wish to change the school culture or the hegemonic culture of sexuality in radical ways. Of course, this professional competency also points to a deeper hierarchical apparatus that McLaren (2009) suggests promotes a hidden curriculum of docility, compliance, and forms of oppression based on class, race, and gender.

The actual application of the professional competencies, then, can engender contradictions, as it does here. Although the first professional competency encourages teachers to be critical of the normative culture, competency 9 may trump this professional obligation if the critique is deemed to be too provocative. Patriarchy is a heavily protected system of privilege and oppression. If a teacher tries to undermine its systemic authority, they may face fierce reprimands from the school community. Scholars such as McLaren (2009) and Mojab (2005) remind us that race, class, and gender need to be considered when discussing any issue involving power relations. This is a gargantuan task for teachers as race and class are often considered to be out-dated, irrelevant, or divisive words (Mojab, 2005). Carr (2013) describes how pre-service teaching programs lack the curriculum to prepare teachers to comprehend and use concepts such as race and class, as well as their social effects. The avoidance of controversial topics is part of the ethos exemplified in competency 9 – a teacher needs to cooperate with the different actors in the school community, and if they resist too loudly, they may lose their job. For example, what should teachers do when parents and administrators show resistance to queer sexuality being incorporated into the sexuality curriculum? What if the librarians or school board computer technicians set Internet filters on school computers, limiting LGBTQ sites, making the World Wide Web fit into a heteronormative worldview (Connell & Elliot, 2009)? These are the obstacles that exist in all schools.

Teachers who wish to address social justice issues in their classroom can feel enabled if they are fortunate enough to have a school community that encourages such action. So long as the following indicator under competency 12 is respected, then teachers concerned about sexuality education can organize their lessons as they wish: the teacher must appear to maintain “a positive attitude toward all students,” colleagues, and “the principal or director” (MELS, 2006, p. 49). If they are able to produce lesson plans that other colleagues in the school and the school board can use, then their reputation and clout will only increase, giving them more room to push the proverbial envelope. However, in a more restrictive bureaucratic environment where the administration and colleagues enforce defensive teaching strategies, the radical teacher faces an uphill battle, where competency 9 can be unfulfilled. One solution would be to establish “educational rights” with a group of teachers, parents, administrators, and students. Such a group can list “a series of guidelines that reflect the

operating philosophy of the school system” (Walters & Hayes, 2007, pp. 43-44) that would allow the teachers to broach not only issues concerning sexuality but also other controversial material. In certain communities, this may limit the topics that can be discussed, but in other cases, it may empower educators with the mandate and community support to engage in sexuality and social justice issues with their students.

Implications for sexuality education and the professional competencies

As previously alluded to, a significant obstacle in the MELS professional competencies is what is missing – there is no competency that obliges or asks teachers to fight oppression, whether it is based on class, race, or gender. Competency 7 does address students with special needs, but this does not go far enough – it does not oblige teachers to raise awareness about ableism, nor talk about disabled individuals as sexual beings. There is no competency that explicitly asks teachers to break the social reproduction of social inequalities. There is no indicator in the evaluation rubric for smashing the patriarchal sexual hegemony. Despite these missing requirements, teachers can fulfill these unofficial “social justice competencies” (Landreman, Edwards, Balon, & Anderson, 2008) in some of the ways we have tried to suggest throughout this article.

We summarize this discussion with a series of action points; each set of points is addressed to a particular audience: 1) faculties of education in higher education – specifically those charged with professional teacher training programs, 2) administrators of schools and school boards, and 3) teachers and teachers’ unions / associations.

Faculties of education play a key role in the implementation and teaching of professional competencies. By this, we mean that professors should realize that they have a capacity to forward an argument of best practice surrounding what the professional competencies should mean. This is especially crucial for many of the teacher training students in their classroom who will become administrators. This argument should not simply involve the competencies but also sexuality education as a field of study. Second, universities need to have a more robust understanding of how sexuality education fits into their own approach to teaching. That is to say, cultural issues of sexuality should not be relegated out of what is deemed to be core subjects.

School boards must offer professional training on sexuality education to teachers so that they will feel competent and confident while facilitating activities and discussions about sexuality with students. These workshops should go beyond basic sex education, which deals with biological aspects of sexual reproduction, in order to explore the social and emotional aspects of sexuality that will help young people explore their bodies and romantic feelings safely and respectfully. Having teachers incorporate these elements across the curriculum is a

good idea, but the workshops should then offer training and resources geared towards specific school subjects. To ensure that this policy materializes in the classrooms, school administrators would need to make this new program a priority by meeting regularly with department heads and interested teachers in order to mobilize and assist teachers in this sometimes daunting task.

Finally, teachers should be empowered to work in teams, especially with senior colleagues who have more seniority and trust in the community. This would provide leverage if unsupportive administrators side with parents or with other teachers filing complaints about programs. In such cases, unions or teachers' associations should be ready to provide the tools and arguments to defend educators who are fulfilling their job expectations such as those defined in the competencies. Unions could also develop and offer supplementary resources about the risks and responsibilities around teaching sexuality education. The professional competencies, along with a more explicit and obligatory sexuality education curriculum at the levels of the ministry of education and school boards, could serve as the justification and defense for educators who may be challenged; union leaders and representatives should be especially familiar with these interpretations. Finally, teachers should be able to draw support from these partners in their conviction that the implementation of sexuality education is vital to reducing sexual violence not only in schools but also in society. Their bravery will enable and empower students to engage in sexual relationships that are safer and less judgmental.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have introduced avenues for Quebec teachers to teach sexuality education and practice their professional competencies, as set out by the Ministry of Education. Some teachers may not have the same interpretation of their professional obligations. In addition, even if they do agree with the principles of promoting sexuality education, teachers are heavily bogged down with many tasks that are considered to be more pressing. It is difficult for them to approach such issues from a cross-curricular angle when there is little training, when the curricula for their subject areas are already unmanageable due to the time constraints, and when defensive teaching strategies that steer clear from controversial issues are employed. Nevertheless, we have attempted to demonstrate how the ministry's professional competencies can potentially empower and legitimize teachers who choose to muster the courage and find the time to do social justice work as cross-curricular sexuality educators.

We have also attempted to trace powerful, but often unacknowledged, effects of neoliberal policy reforms that Quebec as well as many other areas have experienced. While neoliberal reforms are sold to the public as a form of management and accountability, the implications are far from just. In reality, these reforms have ratcheted up pressures on teachers as individuals, without

an adequate consideration of the social or cultural considerations of working in a school. As such, the poorly defined mandate to teach sexuality education in Quebec means that it should be little surprise if teachers do not address it adequately. Without a renewed discussion about the cultural dimensions of sexuality in schools, we face challenges to address any of its cultural affects.

Many of the daily realities for beginning teachers may seem overwhelming. The training, insight, and energy of beginning teachers will allow them to face hurdles head-on. Knowing the school's policies, not only concerning curriculum but also of their own professional standards, will only aid those early in careers to traverse any issues. Just as importantly, knowing these professional policies can allow for teachers to become public leaders for sexuality education in their classroom and their communities.

NOTES

1. These cases include, but are not limited to, the story of Rehtaeh Parsons whose father, Glen Canning, delivered a powerful address to Concordia's Centre for Gender Advocacy on Oct. 3rd, 2013 in which he highlighted the difficult aspects of systemic rape culture in schools ("Rehtaeh Parsons," 2013).
2. See Harvey's (2005) work for a detailed analysis of the economic aspect of neoliberalism.

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