

REPRESENTATIONS OF FIRST PEOPLES IN QUÉBEC TEXTBOOKS

In violation of the International Convention for the Rights of the Child, Emmanuele Dufour reports that the curriculum of Québec's provincial schools – almost half of which are located in Amerindian communities – “tends to exclude” the epistemological, cultural and historical knowledge of the First Nations.¹ Despite “intercultural, multicultural, critical, transformative, anti-oppressive, postcolonial, antiracist” efforts, Dufour judges that “ethnocentric schooling” persists.² She considers that “the curriculum in Québec has truly left vacant the deep cultural gap created by the incomprehension, the disinformation and the stigmatisation of the Other.”³

To narrow this gap, in 1957 Father André Renaud, Director of Research in the Oblate's Commission of Eskimo and Indian Affairs, called for the revision of representations of “Indians” in history textbooks in hopes of effecting a “radical change of ideas and sentiments towards Canadians of Indian origin.”⁴ Later, Father Renaud called for “mutual comprehension,” a prerequisite for “dialogue,” bridging the gap between peoples and nations, resulting in “a successful and satisfying integration,” an aspiration Dufour finds “surprising” given the acculturating role played by the Oblat congregation in the residential schools they managed.⁵

Dufour also reviews the 1979 Vincent-Arcand analysis of 177 textbooks, including 23 history textbooks approved by the Québec Ministry of Education during the 1970s; they found that textbooks were filled with “colonialist, reductive, stereotypical, utilitarian representations.”⁶ Twenty years later – here Dufour reviews studies by Létourneau and Laville – little has changed, as “ethnocentrism” still structures the representations of Aboriginal peoples in Québec textbooks, a finding Dufour's own experience as a student confirms.⁷ This conclusion is also reached in a 1996 review of history textbooks led by the historian Jacques Lacoursière, as Aboriginal peoples were found to remain “stigmatized and reduced to a fixed in the past and [by] stereotypical representation.”⁸

Dufour then turns to the 2001 and 2006 Québec curriculum reforms, asking if their calls for revisions of Aboriginal representation in textbooks had in fact been undertaken and achieved. The answer seems a qualified “yes,” although representation remains “weak.”⁹ Worse, Indigenous peoples were been depicted as adversaries, even “more than Anglophones.”¹⁰ Dufour reiterates the need for “mutual recognition,” requiring that “Indigenous Peoples be given back a voice in the actualization, the re-writing and the repositioning of their media, schooling and institutional representations.”¹¹ No longer can textbooks represent “European colonization as inevitable (and even justified)” and Indigenous Peoples as “disempowered victims (or voluntary participants).”¹² Required, Dufour asserts, is a “serious questioning of our own historical, cultural and institutional perspectives.”¹³

Anthony Di Mascio examined representations of Aboriginal peoples in the Québec History and Citizenship curriculum, noting that the Québec Ministry of Education had decreed an increase Aboriginal history and culture content in the curriculum, moving the emphasis “away from a concentration on the major political actors and events in Canadian history and toward a broader understanding of Canadians and their multifaceted and complex histories,” specifically toward Aboriginal peoples and their significance in Canadian history.¹⁴ To ascertain the significance of this shift, Di Mascio studied representations of Aboriginal peoples in History and Citizenship Education textbooks, asking:

Are the textbooks representative of Aboriginal peoples themselves, or of the dominant Euro-Canadian culture? To what extent have the developers of the Québec History and Citizenship Education textbooks succeeded in producing content that can foster a better understanding and cultural awareness of Aboriginal peoples? Through an analysis of those textbooks, we can come to a better understanding of their strengths, weaknesses, and biases, and the extent to which Aboriginal peoples might come to be understood by Québec students.¹⁵

Clearly questions of representation intersect with questions of consequence, specifically in question two.

Introduced in 2007, the Québec History and Citizenship Education program had three fundamental aims that were converted to “competencies,” namely (1) “students will learn to examine social phenomena from a historical perspective,” (2) “students will then interpret that social phenomena using the historical method,” and (3) through these processes “students will strengthen their ability to exercise citizenship.”¹⁶ Di Mascio notes that in curriculum as “competencies rather than content,” the Québec curriculum had “shifted the learning process away from historical facts and toward historical skills.”¹⁷ One of those skills is students’ capacity to link “learning about Aboriginal peoples themselves [with] “understanding” Amerindians and Inuit issues “today.”¹⁸

Such a skill depends, Di Mascio suggests, on the quality of representations of Aboriginal peoples and culture in the Québec: “In other words, what is the historical perspective being used to shape perceptions today?”¹⁹ Citing (as did Dufour) the 1979 Vincent and Arcand study, at first Di Mascio declares the study “out-dated” (given that two major curricular reforms had occurred since).²⁰ A 2011 Arsenault study had critiqued the Québec curriculum for its underrepresentation of Aboriginal peoples, suggesting that the two major curriculum reforms since the 1970s had addressed the problem. Arsenault did not, Di Mascio points out, investigate how “the increased representation of Aboriginal history and culture has impacted student knowledge about

Aboriginal history and culture,” or if the increased representations were in fact “more desirable.”²¹

Di Mascio reviews other research – a 2013 study of Éthier, Lefrançois, and Demers, for instance – that judged the space given to Aboriginal history and culture in the Québec History and Citizenship curriculum remained “inadequate,” as it “tends to represent Aboriginal peoples in opposition to French explorers and French ambitions in the New World.”²² Moreover, Aboriginal and European peoples were not represented as equals; nor was the complexity of their cultural relationships adequately addressed; instead, Aboriginal peoples had been reduced to obstacles to European settlement.²³

Di Mascio focused on textbooks’ “biased language,” emphasizing its “ideological impact ... on students.”²⁴ He found “little objective truth in that language and in the representations of Aboriginal peoples.”²⁵ He concedes that “not all representations of Aboriginal peoples are negative,” as “all of the textbooks ... offer positive representations of Aboriginal religious and spiritual practices.”²⁶ But Di Mascio cautions that not “all positive representations are desirable ones,” asserting that “the positive representations of Aboriginal peoples are overwhelmingly specific and observable, and, thus, not as easily processed as a characteristic of them as a group over a greater period of time.”²⁷ He notes that: “Aboriginal religion, or spirituality, for example, is a major source of positive representation of Aboriginal peoples in the Québec curriculum,”²⁸ but that the “language ... is specific and observable,” in contrast to “negative broad representations of Aboriginal peoples as warriors,” in contrast to “representations of devotion, peacefulness, and overall spirituality ... [each] depicted in a specific isolated contexts.”²⁹

Likewise, representations of Christianity in these textbooks seemed skewed, as no “negative information” was provided³⁰. And regarding “the most politically charged event in the Québec,” the “Oka Crisis of 1990,” Di Mascio found that “one textbook re-invokes images of Aboriginal peoples as ‘Warriors’ ... with very little context given to the rise of the crisis, [and the textbook] quickly moves into a description of conflict resulting in the killing, by Aboriginal peoples, of a Québec police officer”³¹ adding that no blame is ascribed to “the non-Aboriginal Québec population, despite it being the police, representing the in-group, who first used weaponry through the use of tear gas and ... grenades.”³²

Di Mascio concludes: “Aboriginal peoples tend to be represented in language [that] maintains a negative stereotype of Aboriginal peoples,” focusing “on negative aspects of Aboriginal society and culture.”³³ The “danger,” he continues, is that “Québec students can leave the classroom with little knowledge about how to contextualize that reality outside of negative stereotypes,” [and] “with little knowledge of Aboriginal peoples’ positive socio-economic contributions to Québec throughout history, in areas such as land exploration, trade, arts and culture, which have contributed to the making of modern Québec.”³⁴ The negative representations of

Aboriginal peoples that Vincent and Arcand found in 1979 remain “today,” despite the increase in content concerning “Aboriginal history and culture in the Québec curriculum.”³⁵ Di Mascio recommends that the Québec History and Citizenship Education curriculum “be rewritten,” braiding “Aboriginal history and culture with Euro-Canadian history and culture in a way that synthesizes a singular narrative devoid of any group representations, be they negative or positive.”³⁶

COMMENTARY

Despite the fact that almost half of Québec’s schools are located in Amerindian communities, Dufour find that the Québec curriculum “tends to exclude” the epistemological, cultural and historical knowledge of the First Nations. Moreover, representations of First Peoples tend to stigmatize and stereotype. Like Di Mascio, Dufour reviews the 1970s Vincent-Arcand analysis of textbooks, as well as more recent research, and finds that (despite improvements in the 2001 and 2006 reforms), “ethnocentrism” remains. Dufour reiterates the need for “mutual recognition,” but he follows that call with what non-Aboriginal peoples must do. Evidently Aboriginal peoples already recognize non-Aboriginal peoples. Focused on the History and Citizenship curriculum, Di Mascio studied representations of Aboriginal peoples, emphasizing these upon non-Aboriginal students. He also emphasized language, arguing that when positive Aboriginal qualities or events were cited, these were specific, whereas references to negative qualities or events tend to be general, encouraging students to generalize. Like Dufour, Di Mascio regards representations of aboriginal peoples in Québec as still inadequate.

REFERENCES

- Di Mascio, Anthony. 2014. Representations of Aboriginal peoples in the Québec history and education curriculum: Preliminary findings from secondary textbooks. *Citizenship Education Research Journal (CERJ)*, 4(1), 70-79.
- Dufour, Emmanuelle. 2013. Les Racines éducationnelles de l’indifférence. *Recherches Amérindiennes au Québec*, 43 (2-3), 99-104. + pdf. Online access: <https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/raq/2013-v43-n2-3-raq01489/1026110ar/>

Hare, Jan and Barman, Jean. 2006. *Good Intentions Gone Awry: Emma Crosby and the Methodist Mission on the Northwest Coast*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Dufour 2013, 99. English translation by Kiera Brant-Birioukov; modified by Pinar.
- ² Dufour 2013, 99.
- ³ Dufour 2013, 100.
- ⁴ Quoted in Dufour 2013, 100.
- ⁵ Dufour 2013, 100.
- ⁶ Dufour 2013, 100.
- ⁷ Dufour 2013, 101.
- ⁸ Dufour 2013, 101.
- ⁹ Dufour 2013, 102.
- ¹⁰ Dufour 2013, 102.
- ¹¹ Dufour 2013, 102.
- ¹² Dufour 2013, 102.
- ¹³ Dufour 2013, 103.
- ¹⁴ Di Mascio 2014, 70.
- ¹⁵ Di Mascio 2014, 70.
- ¹⁶ Di Mascio 2014, 71.
- ¹⁷ Di Mascio 2014, 71.
- ¹⁸ Di Mascio 2014, 71.
- ¹⁹ Di Mascio 2014, 71.
- ²⁰ Di Mascio 2014, 71. The first reform, in effect from 1982 through 2007, decreed a new History of Québec and Canada curriculum; the second, introduced (as noted in the main text) in 2007, the present History and Citizenship Education (see research brief 21).
- ²¹ Di Mascio 2014, 71.
- ²² Di Mascio 2014, 71-72.
- ²³ Di Mascio 2014, 71-72.
- ²⁴ Di Mascio 2014, 73.
- ²⁵ Di Mascio 2014, 73.
- ²⁶ Di Mascio 2014, 74-75.
- ²⁷ Di Mascio 2014, 74-75.
- ²⁸ Di Mascio 2014, 74-75.
- ²⁹ Di Mascio 2014, 75.
- ³⁰ Di Mascio 2014, 76. For a detailed and nuanced portrait of missionary work, see Hare and Barman 2006.
- ³¹ Di Mascio 2014, 76-77.
- ³² Di Mascio 2014, 76-77.
- ³³ Di Mascio 2014, 77.

³⁴ Di Mascio 2014, 77.

³⁵ Di Mascio 2014, 78.

³⁶ Di Mascio 2014, 78.