

QUÉBEC ELEMENTARY-SCHOOL CURRICULUM REFORM 1861-1992

Between 1861 and 1992, Gauthier, Bédard, and Tardif explain, Québec underwent numerous elementary-school curriculum reforms, in fact one almost every ten years. Before the Quiet Revolution, school programs had been reshuffled in 1861, 1973, 1888, 1898, 1905, 1923, 1937, 1948-1959; new curricula were also put in place in 1969 and 1979.¹ These shifts in school curriculum, even when simple (reorganizing existing curricula or making additions to them) brought shifts in the teacher's role as well as in expectations of those skills and knowledge that were to be mastered by students, including dispositions and attitudes.² Gauthier, Bédard, and Tardif found that teacher education curricula have followed not preceded these shifts; after teacher education was absorbed by universities during the 1960s, however, teacher education separated somewhat from school curriculum; it varies from university to university.³

Gauthier, Bédard, and Tardif start their story in 1861, although the Act of Union in 1840 – when Upper and Lower Canada became the Province of Canada – figures prominently.⁴ Before 1861, schools were not uniform; there were Royal Institution schools, trade schools, syndicated schools, philanthropic private schools, and schools supervised by religious communities, each type with more or less elaborate programs. Teaching was then a part-time job; each teacher chose his or her curriculum.⁵ Moreover, rural residents tended to be indifferent toward formal education, so schools were few, attendance low, teachers disrespected.⁶

Coordination of schools and their curricular offerings commenced in 1851 with the creation of the new Superintendent of Education position; teacher training schools were established in 1857; Québec's Catholic school system had come into being after the Education Law of 1846.⁷ Not a curriculum per se, the Review Program (1861) established what prospective teachers needed to know in order to obtain a teaching license.⁸ The first official "teaching program" was put in place in 1873; its function was to order what was taught in schools, prescribing the "general themes" to be taught in all schools,⁹ revised "periodically" during the decade 1888-1898.¹⁰ Beginning in 1905 and for sixty years following, "very precise programmes" – called Catalogue Programs – were issued; these contained "pedagogical directives."¹¹

After the Quiet Revolution, "Framework Programs" contained objectives for each grades; these programs represented, Gauthier, Bédard, and Tardif suggest, a determination to break with the catalogue-programs associated with the "old regime."¹² The Skills-Programs (1979-1989) were "detailed," aiming to correct imprecisions in the Framework-Programs; as their name indicates, objectives were formulated in terms of "skills" and included "essential and compulsory content" as well as "study guides."¹³

Before the Quiet Revolution, Gauthier, Bédard, and Tardif report, every curriculum reform had been made under the sign of "continuity" not "rupture," due,

they suggest, to the Catholic composition of the committee in charge of curriculum reform, assessment, and teacher training.¹⁴ From 1856 through the 1960s, to be a teacher in Québec required presentation of a “certificate of morality,” a record of “religious instruction” (signed by a parish priest), and a record of baptism.¹⁵ Each reform corresponded to a “modification” of the exams of the Board of Examiners and of the teacher education curriculum.¹⁶

After the Quiet Revolution, curriculum reform was made under the sign of “rupture,” evident in the “spirit” of the Parent Report. Also key was the transfer of teacher education to the universities.¹⁷ In 1979, “skills programs” were introduced, marking a shift from keywords such as “democratization” and “accessibility” to “quality” and “excellence.”¹⁸ These “progressive transformations” meant not only “modifications” in what teachers were required to know but also in the organization of schools and the coursework they offered. In addition to *what* to teach, teachers were instructed on *how* to teach (attending to “attitudes, personal dispositions, values, behaviors, ways of being, e.g. “knowing how to be”).¹⁹ During the period between 1861 and 1968, Gauthier, Bédard, and Tardif summarize, teacher preparation programs required teachers to know more and more: knowledge of child development, of those organizational “principles” governing the time schedule and grade levels, of the art of questioning, composing lesson plans, teaching protocols and, “most of all, knowing the disciplinary content, whose list keeps getting longer, especially since 1905.”²⁰

Judged “too dense,” teacher preparation, between 1969-1978 (the framework programs), suddenly “required less from teachers,” no longer addressing the question of curriculum content, focusing instead on the “curricular orientations of one’s school” and (still) child development. But after this period, the skills-based preparatory programs (1979-1989) once again increased the number of requirements, focusing on “objectives” (including how to formulate them), grade-level specific curriculum content, and knowledge of child development.²¹

Summarizing the period between 1861 and 1968, Gauthier et al. tell us that teachers were supposed to know how to classify students so as to form classes, to maintain attention (1861-1904), to be able to adapt to the child (1905-1968), to be able to punish and reward students (1981-1939), to revise curriculum, to use intuitive methods in their teaching, to prepare lessons (1861-1968) and, “most of all, to be able to teach according to disciplinary perspectives (1861-1904) as well as didactic ones (1905-1968).”²² The “framework programmes” (1969-1978) emphasized teachers’ capacity to adapt their teaching to their students, using “appropriate” didactic methods.²³

The skill-based programs (1979-1989) demanded that teachers should be able to “elicit the interest of the students” (an echo of the earlier demand to command students’ attention), to use appropriate didactic methods, to formulate and implement “learning objectives” and (of course) evaluate students.²⁴ These shifts - and continuities - in what teachers were required to know followed shifts in “Québec society,” as it

altered from an insulated “religious society” to (after the Quiet Revolution) a secular one, more open to the world, one “dominated by communications.”²⁵

From 1861 through 1968, teacher education curriculum copied elementary-school curricula.²⁶ On May 13, 1903, for example, after the Catholic Committee created a special subcommittee to revise the elementary-school curriculum there followed, in 1911, new teacher qualification examinations, to be administered by the Central Office of Examiners and teacher training institutions.²⁷ In 1923, Bishop Ross, Principal of the teacher training school at Rimouski, participated in the composition of *Theoretical and Practical Pedagogy* (published in 1924), a treatise that mapped closely the new programs of study in Québec elementary schools. Gauthier et al. write that the “same scenario” obtained in 1948 when Roland Vinette (Secretary of the Catholic Committee on Public Instruction, Joint-Secretary at the Québec Department of Public Instruction, and former Director of teacher training schools) led the writing of new curricula and of two pedagogical treatises: *General Pedagogy* (1948) and *Special Methodology* (1950).²⁸

From 1856 through 1968, teacher preparation had focused on “learning the rudiments of the craft,” as teachers’ “academic training” was judged as the most important prerequisite for teaching.²⁹ The “more detailed” program revision of 1906 emphasized the curriculum of Catholic Schools, an emphasis retained until 1953.³⁰ Throughout the focus was double: pedagogy and academic training, with the former split between theoretical and practical pedagogy. The theoretical domain included knowledge acquisition, pedagogical know-how, listing the qualities necessary to be a teacher, learning the distinction between instruction and education, discipline (of student behavior), relationships with students, parents, civic and religious authorities, the methods and modes of teaching, including the program of the Catholic Committee of the Public Instruction for Elementary Schools. Practical pedagogy, Gauthier et al. conclude, was “mostly about know-how.”³¹

Starting from 1953 and continuing through 1969, teacher education was “notably modified,” as less time was accorded to academic knowledge and more time devoted to “learning the craft.”³² In the 1959 regulations – issued by the Catholic Committee – the “normal school” or teachers college was characterized as a professional institution focused on preparing future teachers to “exercise their role and function,” an undertaking that emphasized “knowledge, know-how, and knowing-how-to-be: general culture, development of personality and professional training.”³³ During the period 1953-1969 the field of general pedagogy declined in importance, replaced with more specialized areas (specific teaching practices coordinated with specific school subjects), including didactics (which Gauthier et al. define as the study of textbooks and teaching practices), philosophy of education, school organization. Ascendant was psychology - adolescent, child, developmental, counselling, experimental - well as mental hygiene.³⁴

During 1969-1978, the era of the framework-programs, teacher preparation was (as noted earlier) moved from normal schools to universities,³⁵ ensuring (presumably) a “more scientific” education.³⁶ No longer focused on coordinating teacher preparation with the curricular programs of elementary schools, teacher preparation opened students to “diverse fields of scientific knowledge.”³⁷ The 1964 Parent Report decreed:

The professional training of teachers requires theoretical courses, internships and directed/supervised training. The first, in particular, psychology courses, didactics and philosophy of education must be provided in a truly scientific perspective; they must avoid anything that would bring them close to technical courses, or the simple transmission of best practices (recipes), of anything that would associate them closely to school programs and to official pedagogical directives. Teacher education must not aim to make the latter a blind performer of guidelines and intangible static programs, but rather make a person sufficiently free to take initiatives and assume responsibilities.³⁸

Gauthier et al. suspect that this shift from normal schools (with their proximity to schools) to universities (with their distance from schools) shifted attention away “the real context of teaching,” as future teachers (and professors of pedagogy) became preoccupied with “the importance of research, the demands of publication, the disciplinary affiliation of professors, and the academic freedom.”³⁹ The shift, then, undermined “integrated professional training” as it ensured “fragmentation,” a problem, Gauthier et al. suggest, “persists.”⁴⁰

In the summer of 1992, the Ministry of Education restated standards again, this time decreeing “training with a professional character requiring ... strong overall culture,” including “knowledge” and “skills.” Of the former, prospective teachers were required to acquire knowledge of the school subjects (and their disciplinary contents), “teaching language,” learning processes, various teaching techniques/tools, child development, and knowledge of the organization and history of the Québec school system. Future teachers must acquire those “psycho-pedagogical skills associated with “pedagogical interventions” (lesson planning, student assessment, curriculum evaluation, teaching strategies and didactic tools (themselves adapted to the needs of the student), and conducting classes (classroom management, student discipline, lesson animation), as well as “complementary” skills, such as establishing supportive interpersonal relations within the school and with the parents, fighting discrimination in all its forms, encouraging life-long learning.⁴¹ Moreover, future teachers must be “respectful of the rights of children” and attentive to “individual differences (physical, ethnic, socioeconomic)” always guiding the child in “his/her personal development.”⁴²

Summarizing, Gauthier et al. demarcate the history of “the role and formation of the teacher” in Québec into “three major periods,” the first of which they date 1861-

1968.⁴³ This first period was characterized by a “remarkable continuity” in “programs of study” and in the “organization” of Québec’s school system, by teaching conceived as a “trade,” and by expertise associated with “experience.”⁴⁴ The second period (1969-1978) was characterized by the schools’ adaptation to modern (secular) society, requiring adjustments in curriculum and teaching methods as well as their rationalization and conceptualization. A sharp break with the past was decreed by the Parent Commission and the Superior Council of Education. During this second period, the role of the teacher became that of a “guide.”⁴⁵ The third period (1979-1989) – emphasized “skills” – was marked by “greater uniformity” in teaching, and more detail (objectives, specification of content, assessment) in curriculum planning, all associated with the promise of professionalization.⁴⁶

COMMENTARY

What struck me reading Marie-France Bérard’s summary of this panoramic piece was threefold: the obsessive-compulsive character of curriculum reform (every ten years, Gauthier et al. suggest), the subsidiary status of teacher education (vis-à-vis schools and Ministries’ efforts to control them), and the progressive specification of what prospective teachers must know. While wary of Whig history (if in this case, my assessment is more negative than positive), I’m tempted to see these three as indicative of the progressive devaluation of the family and its authority over children, the extensions of the state into hitherto private domains (such as attitudes, personality, how one should be), and the placement of teachers on a pedestal (implied in the exponential increase what is imagined the teacher must know and do), as (against their will) teachers risk taking the place of parents, becoming guardians of the (absent) public sphere. But (male) politicians seem to be looking down, not up, at this pedestal, as (female) teachers are increasingly scrutinized, even scapegoated (certainly in the U.S.), asked to succeed where even parish priests could not (e.g. saving souls, enforcing justice, ensuring the future). No doubt I am (to some extent) projecting, as this has been the story in the U.S. (or so I suggest: Pinar 2019, 120), but surely it is plausible that into the power vacuum left by the Church the secular state has moved. Can we who teach be completely confident this is (only) an improvement?

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ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Gauthier, Bédard, and Tardif 1994, 87-88.
- ² Gauthier, Bédard, and Tardif 1994, 88.
- ³ Gauthier, Bédard, and Tardif 1994, 88-89.
- ⁴ Gauthier, Bédard, and Tardif 1994, 89-90.
- ⁵ Gauthier, Bédard, and Tardif 1994, 90.
- ⁶ Gauthier, Bédard, and Tardif 1994, 90.
- ⁷ Gauthier, Bédard, and Tardif 1994, 90-91.
- ⁸ Gauthier, Bédard, and Tardif 1994, 91.
- ⁹ Gauthier, Bédard, and Tardif 1994, 92. To order implies an administrative undertaking, even when teachers do the work, as they did in what many designate as the genesis of systematic curriculum development in the U.S., in Denver, Colorado, in

1923, ordered by Superintendent of Schools Jesse Newlon (1923). As (Ravitch 2000, 197) notes: “Denver launched an extensive curriculum revision project under the leadership of Superintendent Jesse Newlon. Teachers were involved in every phase of the work, guided by specialists from university schools of education.”

¹⁰ Gauthier, Bédard, and Tardif 1994, 92.

¹¹ Gauthier, Bédard, and Tardif 1994, 92.

¹² Gauthier, Bédard, and Tardif 1994, 93.

¹³ Gauthier, Bédard, and Tardif 1994, 93.

¹⁴ Gauthier, Bédard, and Tardif 1994, 93-94.

¹⁵ Gauthier, Bédard, and Tardif 1994, 94.

¹⁶ Gauthier, Bédard, and Tardif 1994, 94. For a history of Canadian teacher education curriculum see Christou 2017.

¹⁷ Gauthier, Bédard, and Tardif 1994, 95.

¹⁸ Gauthier, Bédard, and Tardif 1994, 95-96.

¹⁹ Gauthier, Bédard, and Tardif 1994, 96-97. This (to my mind Orwellian) agenda mirrors that (at that time) of the (U.S.) National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). Founded in 1954, in 2013 NCATE was merged with the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC), to form the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP).

²⁰ Gauthier et al. 1994, 98.

²¹ Gauthier et al. 1994, 98.

²² Gauthier et al. 1994, 99.

²³ Gauthier et al. 1994, 99.

²⁴ Gauthier et al. 1994, 99.

²⁵ Gauthier et al. 1994, 99.

²⁶ Gauthier et al. 1994, 100.

²⁷ Gauthier et al. 1994, 101.

²⁸ Gauthier et al. 1994, 101.

²⁹ Gauthier et al. 1994, 102.

³⁰ Gauthier et al. 1994, 103.

³¹ Gauthier et al. 1994, 103-104. An emphasis on the practical antedated the twentieth century, as Tomkins (1986, 63) records: “In Québec, reformers such as Gédéon Ouimet, who served briefly as premier and Minister of Public Instruction during the short period (1867-1875) when Québec had a separate education ministry, demanded a more practical curriculum that would permit French Canada to modernize and compete successfully with English Canada.” Later Tomkins (1986, 287) attributes the emphasis upon the practical to influences south of the border: “The normal school emphasis on professional knowledge at the expense of liberal education exemplified the same American influences, anti-intellectual tendencies and Deweyan uniformity of thought found in the schools.”

³² Gauthier et al. 1994, 104.

³³ Gauthier et al. 1994, 104.

³⁴ Gauthier et al. 1994, 104-105.

³⁵ Moving teacher education to universities began “in Alberta in 1946 when the normal schools ceased to operate and a Bachelor of Education program was established. However, it was not until thirty years later that all provinces required a university degree as a minimum basis for certification” (Tomkins 1986, 420). This move from normal schools to universities was gendered: normal schools were woman-identified, as Tomkins (1986, 62) notes: Attendance at normal school, a form of quasi-higher studies, was the chief type of further education for girls in a period when teaching was becoming a feminized mass occupation.... For most girls, schooling was still training for domestic life.” In the United States, “nationwide, the normal school was viewed by academic men ... as an unprofessional, woman-dominated institution” (Weiler, 1999, 90). Crocco (1999, 55-56) underscores that “schools of education associated with universities promoted the liberal arts and scientific research at the expense of normal school preparation teachers.” She adds: “[E]ducation came to be structured to serve the interests of male administrators over female teachers” ((1999, 56).

³⁶ Gauthier et al. 1994, 105.

³⁷ Gauthier et al. 1994, 105.

³⁸ Quoted in Gauthier et al. 1994, 105-106.

³⁹ Gauthier et al. 1994, 109-110.

⁴⁰ Gauthier et al. 1994, 109-110.

⁴¹ Gauthier et al. 1994, 110-111.

⁴² Gauthier et al. 1994, 110-111.

⁴³ Gauthier et al. 1994, 111.

⁴⁴ Gauthier et al. 1994, 111.

⁴⁵ Gauthier et al. 1994, 111-112.

⁴⁶ Gauthier et al. 1994, 112.