

ANGLO-SAXON AND FRANCO-EUROPEAN CONCEPTIONS OF CURRICULUM, KEY PLAYERS IN THE 1997 QUÉBEC CURRICULUM REFORM

Denis Royer examined the formulation of the 1997 elementary and secondary curriculum policy *L'École tout un programme*, finding that the Superior Council of Education – a group consulted by the Ministry of Education - exerted the determining influence. The key players were Robert Bisailon and Paul Inchauspé.¹ Royer starts his story in the autumn of 1997 when Pauline Marois, then Minister of Education, made public the curriculum reform that prescribed a new elementary and secondary curriculum for Quebec schools, including its mission as well as content, the nature of the desired educational environment, its prescribed organization of teaching, and assessment.²

While the Ministry had the authority to make policy, Royer notes that it nonetheless “must seek the largest possible consultation in order to legitimate its choices,” in this case (1) those representing powerful political interests, (2) the Working Group on Curriculum Reform, (3) the Commission for the Estates General on Education, and (4) the Working Group on Training Profiles at the Elementary and Secondary Level, as well as the Centrale de l'enseignement du Québec, l'Association des Cadres Scolaires du Québec, the Québec Federation of School Boards and the Federation of Parents' Committee of the Province of Québec, as well as the Superior Council of Education.³ Policy, then, represents the “end point of influence games and alliances,” played by “actors” who work with the “assets they have at their disposal, and this, within a given space-time.”⁴

The 1997 reform occurred in the context of the curriculum reform that had been implemented at the start of the 1980s.⁵ The context was also extra-curricular: Royer lists broad influences, including the emergence of the knowledge society, increasing globalisation, and cultural diversity. The result was a curriculum overwhelmed by too many pressures, as if it were a “catch all.”⁶ The political ascendancy of the Parti Québécois in the mid-1990s – it had been in power before and had served as the official opposition during 1985-1994 – meant Lucien Bouchard became Prime Minister, who declared in January 1996 that education was be one of the three priorities of the government. He appointed Pauline Marois as Minister of Education.⁷ Not only the Parti Québécois agreed that education was a priority; support for curriculum reform ran across the political spectrum.⁸ As an advisory body with permanent status, the Superior Council of Education made its presence felt by positioning curriculum reform as central to school reform,⁹ emphasizing efforts to

combat underachievement and reducing drop-out, even deciding to undertake its own review of existing examinations of elementary and secondary curricula.¹⁰

The 1997 policy specified the general requirements of the revised curriculum - the “mastery of knowledge, taking into consideration global issues, and the development of a responsible society” – as well as its enactment and expected effects - “to instruct, to socialize, and to become qualified” – as well as its specific features: the “desired educational environment, the training contents, the organization of teaching and learning evaluations,” all in service to the slogan: “Undertake the turn to success.”¹¹ In this formulation the Superior Council of Education – and the aforementioned individuals¹² – exercised, Royer reports, the “determining influence,”¹³ converging concerns over economics, politics, and culture into one curriculum reform.¹⁴

Phillippe Jonnaert contrasts what he terms the Anglo-Saxon conception of curriculum – conceptualized as a “pedagogical action plan, more extensive than a programme of study” with the Franco-European conception (less defined, he suggests¹⁵), wherein “the two overlap.”¹⁶ In fact, he regards the two conceptions as “complementary.”¹⁷ The Anglo-Saxon North American conception of curriculum is preoccupied with “functionality,” Jonnaert asserts, although the student is placed at the “centre,” showing still, he thinks, the influence of Dewey.¹⁸ Despite this definition, Jonnaert implies that the Anglo-Saxon – North-American conception is self-conscious that curriculum is “inscribed in a specific moment and time of a society’s history ... permeated with cultural, social and historical dimensions: a local product, it is difficult to export.”¹⁹ The curriculum thereby becomes the site of adaptation to “educational and formation needs at a certain moment in its history,” an assertion apparently contradicted by his suggestion that the Anglo-Saxon North American tradition focuses on “development,”²⁰ a plausible but also questionable interpretation given how historically and culturally decontextualized the concept of development can be, and how obsessed with functionality (now organized around technology, specifically coding²¹) U.S. curriculum reform has often been.

In contrast, the “current Franco-European curricular proposes a different vision of the concept of curriculum,” one that programs “teaching contents all throughout schooling,” the curriculum conceived as a “body of programs of study constructed on disciplinary basis.”²² Objectives are to “transmitted methodically,”²³ a view implied in the “Tyler Rationale.”²⁴ Knowledge and “what is learned in schools” are primary, requiring an emphasis on “transmission.”²⁵ If transmission is defined broadly - passing knowledge from one person to another – then (like curriculum conceived as complicated conversation²⁶) it incorporates Aoki’s distinction between curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived, ensuring openness concerning “what is learned,” Aoki urging teachers and students to live “in-between” the two.²⁷

That distinction is in play, however, when Jonnart names what is complementary between the two conceptions as the “transposition” of the curriculum,

starting from its inception (as objective or prescription) to its transformation in classrooms, at once didactic (governed by teachers) but also student-centered.²⁸ Such perspective is, he continues, “much broader than simple curriculum development, as it communicates the complexity of curriculum, its “movements,” its “adaptations, its ruptures and its incoherence.”²⁹ So understood, a “curriculum is never injected as such in the classroom,” as it is always mediated by the teacher, a fact that accents the “interpretations, initiatives, and creativity” of teachers in “curricular transposition.”³⁰ Any procedure can be considered “incomplete,” as “it does not permit the understanding of curriculum in its entirety throughout all the levels.”³¹

These formulations, Jonnaert appreciates, question any “automatic character” of curriculum, any conception of a “linear passage of the official curriculum all the way to student learning,” of curriculum as “rigid, rational and fixed structure without any life.”³² Indeed, he concludes, a “curriculum resembles more a dynamic entity evolving and transforming itself from one level to another.”³³ Yet the curriculum is no self-contained enclosure; to “understand a curriculum, the researcher must position it in its social and cultural environment with the resulting implications of inscribing it in a given society,” characterized (after Claude Lévi-Strauss) by “irrationality.”³⁴ That curriculum – a “rational system”³⁵ – confronts society “irrationality” recalls Madeleine Grumet’s theorization of the contradiction of curriculum.³⁶ Jonnaert is left with the question: “is the dynamism of curriculum but a utopia?”³⁷ At the center of these conceptions, he answers, is “curricular transposition,”³⁸ a concept both utopic and empirical.

Invoking an earlier curriculum reform Jonnaert asks: “Is the concept of competence, as defined in the program, reconcilable with a socioconstructivist view of cognition?”³⁹ He judges that the reform documents did not abandon traditional conceptions, including behaviorism,⁴⁰ undermining the Ministry’s intentions. The “first level of incoherence” Jonnaert finds is “linked to the form of the actual program of study ... [and] not without consequence regarding the interpretation that teachers will make and their willingness to develop socioconstructivist learning environments with their students.”⁴¹ In such a scheme, the construction of knowledge (including its appropriation by students) becomes a “core preoccupation,” thereby “moving away” from traditional curricular theories.⁴² Jonnaert posits a concept of “educational situation” to render coherence to this complexity; it is, he suggests, within such situations that students develop “competencies.”⁴³ In this conception, the teacher’s task becomes the organization of educational situations that encourage students to construct knowledge and develop “competencies.”⁴⁴ Social engineering never dies.

COMMENTARY

Denis Royer examined the formulation of the 1997 elementary and secondary curriculum policy *L'École tout un programme*, determining that the key players were Robert Bisailon and Paul Inchauspé. Philippe Jonnaert suggests that the Anglo-Saxon conception of curriculum – concerned with “functionality” - contrasts with the Franco-European conception (more attentive to content), but each “overlaps” with other as each acknowledges the mediating role of teachers and students. An earlier Québec reform Jonnaert describes as communicating contradictory cognitive paradigms: competence and socio-constructivism. Cannot the latter be mobilized in service to the former? All distinctions disappear in technologization I suggest, where software structures content and teachers risk being reduced to technicians, applying “big data” to manipulate (e.g. facilitate) student learning.

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ENDNOTES

¹ See Inchauspé's self-report: research brief #23.

² Royer 2009, paragraph 1. Dr. Bérard worked with the online version, quoting paragraphs not pages, and it is Dr. Bérard's translation I am working.

³ Royer 2009, paragraph 3.

⁴ Royer 2009, paragraph 5

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- ⁵ Royer 2009, paragraph 9. See research brief #20.
- ⁶ Royer 2009, paragraph 10.
- ⁷ Royer 2009, paragraph 12.
- ⁸ Royer 2009, paragraph 13
- ⁹ While the Council considered curriculum as crucial, Royer (2009, paragraph 18) suggests that the Ministry had not until the mid-1990s, when the curriculum became central.
- ¹⁰ Royer 2009, paragraph 17.
- ¹¹ Royer 2009, paragraphs 21 and 22.
- ¹² They were Robert Bisailon and Paul Inchauspé. See Royer 2009, paragraph 24-25.
- ¹³ Royer 2009, paragraph 22.
- ¹⁴ Royer 2009, paragraph 43.
- ¹⁵ See also Egéa-Kuehne 2003.
- ¹⁶ Jonnaert 2011, 135.
- ¹⁷ Jonnaert 2011, 135.
- ¹⁸ Jonnaert 2011, 136. While functionality may be central, in the U.S. its educational end varies, from curriculum aspiring to support a child's growth as a person (so-called child-centeredness) to reconstructing society (social reconstruction) to making society more efficient (social efficiency) and modeled after business: see, for instance, Ravitch 2000. For the technological fusion of functionality, child-centeredness, and social reconstruction, see Williamson 2013, 2017. For my critique of this fusion, see Pinar 2019.
- ¹⁹ Jonnaert 2011, 136. Certainly the so-called Tyler Rationale was exported – forcibly – as curriculum studies in Mexico testify (see Pinar 2011. Given Ratpnale's acontextual character, I have argued for "becoming historical" (Pinar 2019, 32; for the genesis of that idea see Toews 2008). If Anglo-Saxon includes the United Kingdom, British scholars would resist being reduced to one category, as histories and preoccupations vary (and coincide). See, for instance, Moore 2015, 2018.
- ²⁰ Jonnaert 2011, 136. Psychological or intellectual development would seem to compete with functionality, although the two can be, have been (as in industrial psychology) interrelated. In the U.S. curriculum studies field development also implied curriculum development; *understanding* replaced *development* as the key curriculum concept during the 1970s : Pinar et al. 1995.
- ²¹ Singer (2017, June 7, A14) reported that: "One of the broadest philanthropic initiatives directly benefits the tech industry. Code.org, a major non-profit group financed with more than \$60 million from Silicon Valley luminaries and their companies, has the stated goal of getting every public school in the U.S. to teach computer science."
- ²² Jonnaert 2011, 136.
- ²³ Jonnaert 2011, 136.
- ²⁴ I use quotation marks because the Rationale is misnamed: Pinar 2015, 99.

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- ²⁵ Jonnaert 2011, 136.
- ²⁶ Pinar 2015, 109.
- ²⁷ Aoki 2005 (1986/1991), 159.
- ²⁸ Jonnaert 2011, 139.
- ²⁹ Jonnaert 2011, 140.
- ³⁰ Jonnaert 2011, 140.
- ³¹ Jonnaert 2011, 140-141.
- ³² Jonnaert 2011, 141.
- ³³ Jonnaert 2011, 141.
- ³⁴ Jonnaert 2011, 141.
- ³⁵ Jonnaert 2011, 141.
- ³⁶ Grumet 1988, 3-30.
- ³⁷ Jonnaert 2011, 143.
- ³⁸ Jonnaert 2011, 144.
- ³⁹ Jonnaert 2001, 224.
- ⁴⁰ Jonnaert 2001, 224.
- ⁴¹ Jonnaert 2001, 225.
- ⁴² Jonnaert 2001, 226.
- ⁴³ Jonnaert 2001, 227. Jonnaert's conception contrasts with Grumet's; she emphasizes the meaningfulness of situation, in contrast to the blank-slate idea embedded in the concept of learning environment : see Pinar 2015, 28
- ⁴⁴ Jonnaert 2001, 227.