

QUÉBEC CURRICULUM

QUESTIONS, HISTORIES, SCENARIOS

“Over the years,” Norman Henchey begins, “curriculum reformers in Québec have tried to engage a number of major questions, as have policy makers in other educational jurisdictions,” among them: (1) What is the influence of curriculum policies school retention and completion rates? (2) How should elementary schools adapt curriculum to serve children with special needs or abilities, by separating them in special streams or by integrating them in community schools and regular classrooms? (3) How should curriculum be organized in secondary schools – in distinct programs (academic, vocational, general), according to ability (advanced, regular, basic), core and/or elective courses, interdisciplinary studies? (4) How much curriculum choice should students be accorded at different age levels? (5) How can academic and vocational coursework be linked and should the latter be offered in regular comprehensive high schools or in specialized institutions? (6) Should some public schools specialize in certain subjects (like mathematics and science, fine arts, sports) and/or serve a particular clientele (like high achievers, students at risk of dropping out, students with behaviour issues, students who are academically inclined and proficient)? (7) How can the quality of core areas like the language of instruction and second languages, both French and English, be improved, and what levels of fluency should be expected? (8) How much formal testing is appropriate and what kinds of testing should be used? How do testing policies and practices structure curriculum? Can there be too much testing? (9) What importance should be given to the different bases of evaluation: development or progress of the individual, standing in a group (norm referenced), or mastery of a body of content or skill (criterion referenced)? (10) How much attention should be paid to Canadian and international comparisons of achievement (like SAEP and OECD indicators) and school rankings? Are these reliable indicators of curriculum quality and effectiveness?¹ (11) What is the clearest and most informative way of reporting achievement to students and parents (percentages, letters, rankings, protocols or anecdotal information)? Why is there so much confusion and anxiety about marking and reporting systems? (12) What are the advantages and disadvantages of using communications technologies, especially computers and the Internet? Are they more effective for some kinds of learning and for certain students than for others? (13) What should be the place of different program areas that are not always given priority, like physical fitness, artistic development, spirituality, ethical behaviour, career preparation, environmental concerns, practical experiences in the community and knowledge of other cultures and societies? (14) Should religious education have a place in the public schools of a pluralistic society? What about education *about* religion? (16) Are our curriculum materials and instructional approaches provoking, inspiring and

empowering students? And teachers? And parents? (17) Should certain subjects (once Latin, now advanced mathematics) be used as sorting devices to determine who should proceed onto selective programs and advanced studies? (18) Should alternative approaches to curriculum and schooling (e-learning, self-directed learning programs, projects, practical experiences outside the school) be encouraged to meet the diversity of student needs and expectations? (19) What is the relative importance of learning products (like information) and learning processes (like thinking skills, creativity, curiosity)? (20) How can we balance *equality* of opportunity with *quality* of achievement, or must one be subordinated to the other?²

These questions imply other questions, Henchey continues, including: (1) Who should be involved in studying these issues and making decisions about curriculum? (2) What is the role of the teachers, academic scholars, cultural leaders, administrators, parents, the community, special interest groups, and the students themselves? (3) Who “owns” the curriculum of elementary and secondary schools in Québec? (4) What is the “proper role” of the government – the politicians and the civil servants of the Ministry of Education, Leisure and Sport (MELS) – which is responsible for the quality of public education?³

“Curriculum is more than a body of legislation, a *régime pédagogique*, a set of documents with exhortations, tables, diagrams and lists, a compilation of approved textbooks and learning materials, or a series of official examinations,” Henchey reminds, adding: “It is the script for a dialogue between a society and its young people, a narrative about what we think is important, an idealization of what is significant in our past, a selection of what we know and believe in the present, and a vision of what we would wish for the future.”⁴ He distinguishes between “what is *explicit* – the content of official documents, approved textbooks, examinations – and what is *implicit* – the organization of learning, the culture of the schools, the roles and behaviour of administrators, teachers and students, what is considered important and less important, and the relationships among all these elements.”⁵ Increasing Aoki’s conception of curriculum-as-planned and curriculum-as-lived⁶ by two (adding considerably more detail), Henchey points to “four levels of curriculum: the *intended* curriculum of policy documents and official statements of aims and priorities; the *planned* curriculum of organization, management, schedules, collective agreements, assignments of teachers, content of textbooks and testing; the *taught* curriculum of what teachers really do in their interactions with learners in the classroom and beyond, what they test and how they test it; and the *learned* curriculum of the skills, knowledge and values that students actually acquire as a result of their exposure to our education system, their use of language, social conscience, sense of identity, aspirations and general understanding of the world.”⁷

Invoking a metaphor Maxine Greene⁸ made famous, Henchey writes that “it is within this *landscape* that we need to situate the basic questions of the Québec curriculum: What should be the role of the Ministry of Education regarding the

curriculum of schools? What innovation is possible when governance is centralized? What kinds of decisions are involved in developing, managing and reforming a curriculum for schools? What groups should be involved in these decisions?”⁹ Continuing his detailed almost encyclopedic listing, Henchey asserts that “curriculum decisions need to be made in relation to a number of issues: basic policy (assumptions, priorities), design (research, study of best practices), content (fundamental knowledge, skills, values, methods), implementation (procedures for introducing, preparing and adjusting new programs), management (planning, supervision), evaluation (appraisal of quality and effectiveness, adequacy of resources), and innovation (trial of new programs and approaches).”¹⁰

Have enumerated a series of relevant considerations, Henchey turns his attention explicitly to Québec, whose last half-century history of curriculum development he summarizes as demarcated by four different models of curriculum decision-making. Prior to the mid-1960s, Québec had a “traditional system with centralized non-government control ... in reality two systems, one for Catholic education and one for Protestant education, the former controlled by a Catholic Committee and the latter by a Protestant Committee. The curriculum was “religious, traditional and conservative, and the role of the state was quite limited.”¹¹ The era of the Quiet Revolution (1960-1970) saw the Parent Report and the reforms that followed, characterized by “centralized government control” of the curriculum “at the level of policy and evaluation and a decentralized structure of decisions about content.”¹² He characterizes the government’s role as “designer and leader of comprehensive curriculum reform, illustrated in *Regulation Number One*, extensive professional development for teachers, loose program guidelines for elementary and secondary schools.”¹³ It was an “era of progressive attitudes to curriculum, student-centred learning, activist methods, experimentation, core and elective courses in secondary schools, empowerment of teachers and new kinds of courses.”¹⁴

At the end of the 1970s and during the 1980s what Henchey sees as “third model,” this one characterized by “increasingly centralized government control, the establishment of *régimes pédagogiques* following widespread consultation (Green Paper), policy documents (Orange Paper), working groups, regulations and detailed program materials,” adding that “this model was imbued with the spirit of the back-to-basics movements taking place in the United States and elsewhere in Canada, with a stress on literacy and mathematics, and a trend to centralized curriculum structures for all schools.”¹⁵ The “most recent wave of reform” (mid-1990s onto the early years of the new millennium) was “inspired by the slogan ‘Success for All,’” characterized by “centralized government control emerging from consultations, this time in an Estates General on Education, and a series of complex curriculum working documents,” the “most thorough curriculum reforms since that of the 1960s and 1970s.”¹⁶ They included a “curriculum structure based on a large number of what were called ‘competencies,’ a set of cross-curricular themes like technology, intellectual skills and

social competencies, greater school responsibility for results, and a new approach to the evaluation and reporting of learning.”¹⁷ This reform met “resistance, especially related to the proposals for evaluation and reporting as well as the implications for secondary school programs and certification.”¹⁸

“Despite differences in approach and changing circumstances over time,” Henchy judges that “curriculum decision-making in Québec has had certain stable characteristics,” among them: (1) periodic major curriculum reform more than continuing changes and adjustments, (2) dominant role of the MELS and civil servants in the formulation of general curriculum policy and the preparation of major documents, (3) initial consultation on broad questions, (4) unclear relationship between results of consultation and subsequent proposals, structures and policies, (5) extensive documentation and detailed curriculum guidelines, (6) administrative, technological and management approach to curriculum with less attention paid to philosophical, social, cultural or ethical issues,¹⁹ (7) limited academic, scholarly and professional input of professors in scholarly communities, policy makers in post-secondary institutions, researchers in education and other fields, and the various associations of teachers of different subject areas, (8) stress on a single coherent curriculum system for all schools, urban and rural, French-language and English-language, (9) limited ongoing public discussion and debate after the initial period of consultation, (10) little foresight about consequences of curriculum proposals for student retention and teacher readiness, and (11) limited attention to curriculum research, developments, policies and practices outside Québec and little effort to justify reform proposals on the bases of ideas and precedents outside Québec.²⁰

Québec faces “important dilemmas,” Henchey writes, including (1) balancing the desired equality of opportunity and quality control implicit in centralized structures with the need for ongoing flexibility and adaptation to changing needs and to the different expectations of various communities within Québec, (2) balancing reasonable standards with improved retention and the reduction of the high number of drop-outs, (3) engaging effectively the collaboration of school administrators, teachers, parents and students in curriculum improvement and in the evaluation and reporting of learning, (4) developing curriculum designs and materials appropriate to the needs and goals of Québec society that ensure consistency with curriculum being developed outside Québec, to profit from best practices elsewhere, and to use the wealth of curriculum materials and approaches being developed in other places, (5) continuing the success of Québec students in international comparisons, especially in such areas as mathematics and science, and at the same time raising the relatively low level of school retention, (5) ensuring that the Québec Ministry of Education, Leisure and Sport play effectively its role of responsibility, leadership and oversight?²¹

Regarding the future, Henchey postulates “scenarios,” first among them *Curriculum = MELS*, meaning that the MELS decides when curriculum change should occur, sponsors consultation, designs policies, controls the development of programs,

publishes documents, writes regulations, approves learning materials, and presides over the evaluation and certification of achievement: the tasks of school administrators and teachers are to adapt, manage and apply curriculum; (2) curriculum change is largely periodic rather than ongoing and there is little opportunity for critique and modification and for different perspectives on structures and content, resulting in (3) little sense of “ownership” on the part of teachers, administrators, schools or students; it is not uncommon to hear reference to the “programs of the MELS,” the scenario in which Québec has been submerged until now.²²

In his second – an e-learning - scenario, Henchey envisions the complete elementary and secondary curriculum available on-line, with programs, expectations (requirements, outcomes and benchmarks), and documentation available to everyone, including parents and students. Each school is expected to have its own web site which would include specific learning programs and options, materials available and locally created program variations.²³ In his third scenario, Henchey sees an “outsourced curriculum,” wherein the MELS contracts out curriculum development, including identifying learning materials, management, standardized assessment, research, presumably in service to stimulating competition to produce the best programs available anywhere.²⁴ In his fourth – “partnership” - scenario, Henchey provides leadership and funding to establish both ad-hoc and permanent partnerships of researchers, scholars, community groups, administrators and teachers to design and modify the overall curriculum structure, create individual programs, do ongoing research, evaluate program effectiveness and prepare learning materials and resources to support learning at all levels.²⁵ In this scenario curriculum is a “social project,” inviting collaborations among cultural and academic groups like artists, professionals, and researchers to become involved in curriculum development thereby improving the links between schooling and the real world of scholarship, culture and work.²⁶

The fifth future scenario Henchey envisions is that of “professional control,” wherein the teaching profession, at the elementary-secondary, collegial, university and adult education levels, is recognized as the body with the greatest expertise in all aspects of curriculum development. Teachers’ associations (unions, professional corporations, subject specialists and communities of academic scholars and researchers) assume major responsibility for designing, developing and managing programs, while school administrators and teachers use these programs and adapt them to their particular needs. The government maintains overall supervision, establishes guidelines for all programs, and provides development funds when necessary. This scenario is the most likely one to place ownership of curriculum in the hands of those professionals charged with implementing it.²⁷ The sixth scenario Henchey characterizes as one of “institutional accreditation,” wherein the MELS retains curriculum control but establishes a system of school accreditation based on competence, academic record, performance of students, and proposals coming from the schools, a scenario allowing individual school communities to develop their own programs and market them to

other schools, a scenario consistent with a policy of school-based management and school responsibility.²⁸

A Curriculum Council is established in the seventh scenario, a government-created public corporation to control curriculum and to exercise responsibility for its continuous evaluation and updating. The Council would have regulatory power and would include persons appointed by the government, as well as persons recommended by professional organizations, post-secondary institutions and associations, business and community groups.²⁹ In this scenario the government would be placing curriculum decisions “at arm’s length” from its own structure but retain overall responsibility for program quality and relevance.³⁰

Henchey closes his panoramic portrait of curriculum in Quebec with several questions, including (1) How can the government “most effectively” fulfill its responsibility for providing quality public education? (2) How can the “essential characteristics” of a modern curriculum – “especially program coherence, individual and social relevance, content quality, innovative flexibility and economic sustainability” – be ensured? (3) How can those working with curriculum – especially school administrators, teachers, students, parents and community groups – be encouraged to take ownership and involvement in the curriculum? (4) How can one become assured that the curriculum represents the best of what we know and can do, on the basis of professional expertise, research and “best practices” in Québec and elsewhere? (5) How can the curriculum exhibit “balance – between the intended curriculum and the learned curriculum, the explicit and implicit curriculum, general education and specialization, knowledge and skills, intellectual and moral literacies, quality of program and equality of learning opportunity, human and technological resources, the needs of the present and the needs that we project for the future?”³¹

“Forty years ago,” Henchey remembers, “curriculum reform in Québec was a social project – exciting, engaging, creative.” There was “leadership by the government, involvement by academic and professional groups, innovation and experimentation in activist methods, flexible grouping, cooperative learning, variety of learning projects, comprehensive schools and new approaches to teaching and learning. There was a broad-based effort to expand equality of learning opportunity and diversity of learning approaches, even admitting there were also problems with maintaining coherence, rigour, and public responsibility for quality assurance.”³² He continues: “Today, we need to re-capture some of that excitement, engagement and creativity in our efforts to reform learning programs and improve the quality of learning for all students in our schools. This will require a new social project with broad participation, something of a new Quiet Revolution in education.”³³

COMMENTARY

“An interesting and personal (due to little references) summary of key aspects of Quebec’s curriculum reform between 1960 to 2000,” Marie-France Bérard wrote to me, noting that he “laments the fact that in the 1960s, curriculum was more of a social project, now more technocratic and in the hands of MELS.” She found “it interesting that Henchey’s preoccupations seem rather “different from the Francophone scholars and other stakeholders who took to the barricade regarding the new programme in history – as related to nationalism and the Québécois identity.” I add only that, in addition to providing Québec curriculum histories, Henchey asks an almost endless series of questions, the importance of which I do not doubt, but which inadvertently positions the curriculum studies scholar outside culture, history, and politics, as they seem to originate from outside each of these. Especially in research briefs #20 and #23 the sense of *engagé* was much sharper. Even so, Henchey’s essay should probably be considered canonical.

REFERENCES

- Aoki, Ted T. 2005 (1996). Spinning Inspired Images in the Midst of Planned and Live(d) Curricula. In *Curriculum in a New Key*, edited by William F. Pinar and Rita L. Irwin (413-423). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Greene, Maxine. 1978. *Landscapes of Learning*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Henchey, Norman. 2007. The State and the Curriculum. Questions and Options for Quebec. *McGill Journal of Education*, 42 (3), 443-456.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Henchey 2007, 445.
- ² Henchey 2007, 446.
- ³ Henchey 2007, 445.
- ⁴ Henchey 2007, 446-447. Wise and eloquent, Henchey is here at his best.
- ⁵ Henchey 2007, 447.
- ⁶ Aoki 2005 (1996), 420.
- ⁷ Henchey 2007, 447.
- ⁸ Greene 1978.
- ⁹ Henchey 2007, 448, emphasis added.

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- ¹⁰ Henchey 2007, 448.
- ¹¹ Henchey 2007, 448-449.
- ¹² Henchey 2007, 448-449.
- ¹³ Henchey 2007, 448-449.
- ¹⁴ Henchey 2007, 448-449. Quebec was not alone; Ontario also initiated progressive reforms (ref).
- ¹⁵ Henchey 2007, 449.
- ¹⁶ Henchey 2007, 449.
- ¹⁷ Henchey 2007, 449.
- ¹⁸ Henchey 2007, 449.
- ¹⁹ Henchey 2007, 449.
- ²⁰ Henchey 2007, 450. This last statement would seem to require qualification, given what we learned in research briefs #23, #24, #25, #26, and #31.
- ²¹ Henchey 2007, 450-451.
- ²² Henchey 2007, 451.
- ²³ Henchey 2007, 451.
- ²⁴ Henchey 2007, 452.
- ²⁵ Henchey 2007, 452.
- ²⁶ Henchey 2007, 452.
- ²⁷ Henchey 2007, 452.
- ²⁸ Henchey 2007, 452.
- ²⁹ Henchey 2007, 453.
- ³⁰ Henchey 2007, 453.
- ³¹ Henchey 2007, 453.
- ³² Henchey 2007, 454
- ³³ Henchey 2007, 454