

MORE SIMILARITIES THAN DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ANGLOPHONE CANADA AND QUÉBEC CURRICULUM?

At the 1995 annual conference of the Canadian Historical Association, Christian Laville participated in a roundtable comparing the teaching of history in French and English Canada, the text of which was published the following year in *Canadian Social Studies*. The focus for the discussion (and the text that followed) had been an article by Graham Fraser in the *Globe and Mail*; Fraser wrote: “Canadian history has always been seen and taught differently in Québec.”¹ Laville also cited an article by the journalist John Ibbitson who, in the same newspaper, had written: “Studying Canada’s past is parochial – not to mention divisive.”² Laville suspects this view – that history is taught different and divisively in Québec and contributes to the ongoing tension nationally – is widely held in English Canada.³ In his comparison of history teaching at the secondary level in French and English Canada, Laville found “more similarities than differences.”⁴

In his 1995 comparison, Laville found that what many might regard as an instance of nationalism in the Québec curriculum – that it focused on Québec and ignored the rest of Canada – but which, Laville suggests, “could simply be the application of an old pedagogical principle which consists of starting from the lived situation, to move from the known towards the unknown, and the concrete to the abstract.”⁵ The national history curriculum, titled “History of Québec and of Canada,” was, Laville concedes, “indeed centered on Québec and Québécois, [including] ... the concrete traces of French colonization in the 17th century or the contemporary reality of immigration.”⁶ But he judged this represented no “withdrawal (on oneself) since this was meant to convey the ‘main conditions that have shaped Québec in the Canadian context,’ a focus he says characterizes the curriculum elsewhere across Canada.”⁷

Reflecting “important historiographic tendencies of the time,” Laville continued, the curriculum tended toward “social history,” a concept enabling study of First Nations, women, workers, peasants, diverse minorities, [including] notable cultural communities, Québécois and Canadians coming out of immigration.”⁸ Like the rest of Canada, in Québec too the curriculum had “opened itself to a multicultural perspective (or intercultural, the term favored in Québec),” history became “national,” incorporating “all Québécois, no matter their ethnic, linguistic, social or religious origin.”⁹ In Québec, as “elsewhere in Canada, the objective of forming citizens through the teaching of history was central,” although Laville allows that “it was perhaps stronger in the Anglophone provinces due to the tradition of the social studies which were largely defined in relation to this objective.”¹⁰ In Québec, however, history had been the main route to citizenship, understandable given the primacy of history in

formulating the identity of the Québécois. Elsewhere, the citizen was one focused on the present, educated to stay informed, “capable of free, active and reflexive participation in the multiple aspects of life in a democratic society.”¹¹ Now Québec joined the Anglophone provinces in structuring curriculum around the concept of “skills,” including “knowing-how-to-do and knowing-how-to-be,” cast as “competencies,” leaving the recitation of historical facts to the “discretion of teachers.”¹²

“In Québec, as in the other provinces,” Laville continues, “learning these skills and know-how is channelled by a special attention to the development of their capacity for historical thinking,” a conception of curriculum that taught “students to apply [to the present] various historical and social realities of the past,” enabling them, presumably, to reflect and act autonomously “during their life as citizen.”¹³

By 1995, Laville reports, there were “more compulsory history courses” – one every year for five years - in the Québec curriculum than elsewhere in Canada, and their successful completion was a prerequisite for the high school diploma.¹⁴ “[N]o other province” required so many; only three deemed history so important as constituting a prerequisite for high-school graduation.¹⁵

“In Québec as in Canada,” the curriculum is characterized as “social history,” emphasizing “economic history” over “political history,” as stated in Newfoundland.¹⁶ Moreover, the “English provinces” continued to embrace “multiculturalism” (including historically); by 1995 Québec was “attentive to pluralism,” emphasizing “cultural communities and minorities,” including the First Nations.¹⁷ While there is an “entire unit” in Grade 3 devoted to the First Nations, followed by acknowledgement in the curriculum of the grades that follow, their presence in Québec curriculum “remains much less than what is offered in Anglo-Canadian provinces.”¹⁸

“In Québec, as elsewhere,” Laville tells us, “what is desired is an informed, aware citizen, one able to respond to the complexities of social life, while being a democratic citizen,” adding that Québec is like “elsewhere” and now “everywhere”: “Thus everywhere, developing the capacity to think for one-self and to act socially is preferred to the simple acquisition of information.”¹⁹ To accomplish this objective, now (“even more than in 1995”) the curriculum emphasizes “historical thinking,” in Laville’s judgment no “skill,” but an opportunity for “students to gain knowledge by themselves and to solve complex problems, in the same way we do in life, but by practicing these objects of history.”²⁰

Again emphasizing Québec’s equivalence to the rest of Canada, Laville reports that “Québec shares this approach, but it goes further as it clearly underscores the association between the study of history and citizenship education,” the latter comprised of three “competencies” (a term replacing “know-how and abilities”): (1) interrogate social reality historically, (2) interpret social reality using “the historical method,” and (3) “consolidate one’s exercise of citizenship with the help of history.”²¹ Laville notes that to “interrogate and interpret are the same intellectual operations

mentioned in the Ontario program,” adding that the Québec curriculum shares “the same spirit as those elsewhere in Canada.”²²

Reviewing his presentation at the 1995 meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, Laville notes that he then reported that the teaching of history in Francophone Québec “showed similarities, in spirit at least,” with the teaching of history in Anglophone Canada. Fifteen years later, the same situation obtains, e.g. that Québec (as elsewhere) emphasizes its own history, the “consequence being that regional history often takes precedent over the national history of Canada.”²³ Moreover, “social history” remains prominent - including the history of First Peoples and other “minorities” - and citizenship education remains the “main goal” of the Québec history curriculum, to be achieved by the development of “historical thinking.”²⁴ “Under these conditions,” Laville concludes, “to pretend that the teaching of history is different in Québec than the rest of Canada ... could be an exaggeration, if not an illusion.”²⁵

COMMENTARY

Laville makes clear that there are more similarities than differences between Québec and Anglophone Canada in the teaching of history, linked as it is citizenship, historical thinking, and the inclusion of cultural minorities. I am reminded of George Grant’s question for Québec: “how can a French society continue to survive on this continent in the face of the homogenizing power of the North American technological empire—particularly when this capitalist empire is English-speaking?” (quoted in Pinar 2019, 7)

REFERENCES

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- Pinar, William F. 2015. *Educational Experience as Lived: Knowledge, History, Alterity*. New York: Routledge.
- Pinar, William F. 2019. *Moving Images of Eternity: George Grant’s Critique of Time, Teaching, and Technology*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Lavelle 2010, 22..
- ² Lavelle 2010, 22.
- ³ Lavelle 2010, 22.
- ⁴ Lavelle 2010, 22.
- ⁵ Lavelle 2010, 23.
- ⁶ Lavelle 2010, 23.
- ⁷ Lavelle 2010, 23.
- ⁸ Lavelle 2010, 23.
- ⁹ Lavelle 2010, 23.
- ¹⁰ Lavelle 2010, 23.
- ¹¹ Lavelle 2010, 23.
- ¹² Lavelle 2010, 23.
- ¹³ Lavelle 2010, 24.
- ¹⁴ Lavelle 2010, 24.
- ¹⁵ Lavelle 2010, 24.
- ¹⁶ Lavelle 2010, 25.
- ¹⁷ Lavelle 2010, 25. Lavelle uses “Amerindian.” In a note to me, Bérard indicated that it is a term preferred in Québec. My UBC colleague Peter Cole prefers (as least on March 25, 2020, as he expressed in a meeting on Zoom) “First Peoples.”
- ¹⁸ Lavelle 2010, 25.
- ¹⁹ Lavelle 2010, 25-26. Without information, one is ignorant, a point pedagogists who emphasize “process” – such as “historical thinking” – over “product.” The terms split what is one phenomenon: study (Pinar 2015, 11).
- ²⁰ Lavelle 2010, 26. If the “objects of history” are simply another arena to practice problem-solving, why not cooking or gardening or physics? Why emphasize history if its function is only the practice of problem-solving, something any subject offers?
- ²¹ Lavelle 2010, 26. Given efforts to achieve “truth and reconciliation” through a historically-minded citizenship education, Québec may not in fact being going “further” than “elsewhere” in Canada.
- ²² Lavelle 2010, 26.
- ²³ Lavelle 2010, 26.
- ²⁴ Lavelle 2010, 26.
- ²⁵ Lavelle 2020, 26.