

# SHOULD THE QUÉBEC CURRICULUM BE MORE LIKE THE AMERICAN CURRICULUM?

The 1999 report issued by Reginald Grégoire Inc.<sup>1</sup> judged the educational policy document *Québec Schools on Course/ L'Ecole, Tout un Programme* to be “ambiguous and confused.”<sup>2</sup> When compared to U.S. concepts of outcomes-based education, the report found “many possible convergences.”<sup>3</sup> In the U.S., since the 1950s, two concerns have been paramount, the report suggests, the “quality of the curriculum in itself,” and the “assimilation and the mastery of its content by the students,” a “double concern” that has spawned four dominant approaches: programmed instruction, competency-based education, mastery learning and outcome-based education.<sup>4</sup>

The authors of the report found that the aforementioned curriculum reform issued by the Québec Ministry of Education was influenced by the concept of “mastery learning.”<sup>5</sup> Even so, they found the policy puzzling and frustrating, judging the “overall framework” weak, its concepts confused, especially “core/basic” and “competencies.”<sup>6</sup> It was not clear, they complained, what the policy document means by “essential core knowledge,”<sup>7</sup> as it posits as “essential skills” the “mastery of a first and secondary language, mastery of key principles of mathematics, knowing history, an initiation of artistic languages, learning basic sciences and developing effective working methods.”<sup>8</sup> This is very wide range of “essential skills,” a point the authors also made in reference to the concept of “competencies,” at once “subject-based, professional, transversal, methodological, intellectual competencies, related to the attitude and the behaviors, linguistics competencies, and certain competencies associated with knowledge” whose meaning would be, in Québec, aligned with “skills.”<sup>9</sup>

Despite these difficulties, the authors believe that most will find satisfaction in this vision of future curriculum in Québec. Those who want little change will be comforted by the occurrence of the terms “core,” “basic,” “essential,” “fundamental,” and “common,” while those who demand change will be encouraged by the phrases “knowledge society,” “pluralist democracy,” curriculum encouraging “diversity,” affirming a pedagogy of “discovery/inquiry and production,” structured by curriculum “integration.”<sup>10</sup> The revised Québec curriculum, the authors imply, promises to change everything while changing nothing.

Summarizing, the future of curriculum in Québec will presumably (1) transmit knowledge and learning, (2) shape (give form to) intelligence, teach students to live in a democratic and pluralist society, (3) prepare to undertake advanced studies, in particular at post-secondary level, or (4) enter the work force after having obtained a professional education.<sup>11</sup> The authors wonder how these promises are related to each other and how they contribute to something whole, a question following the “extremely vague” treatment of the relationship between transmitting knowledge and

forming intelligence, crucial to the curriculum to come but left unspecified in the Ministry document.<sup>12</sup>

Even more disturbing, the Grégoire authors continue, is the apparent inattention to the past, focused, as the document is, on the present and the future. The past is neglected in the mission statement of the school; one can only surmise that “transmission” includes acknowledgement of the past. The authors also note that the sharp distinction made in the Ministry document between students seeking advanced academic studies and those headed for professional training diverges from the American model of mastery learning, a model requiring “all students to become competent, autonomous, creative workers ... [and] responsible citizens.”<sup>13</sup>

After reviewing curriculum developments in the United States, the authors focus on the convergences and divergences of the (American) conception of “mastery learning” and the policy document *L’Ecole, tout un programme*. In the American mastery learning model, they report, the “curriculum is the same for all students,” that it is “demanding” and “not limited to what all students need to know and be able to do”; it allows students follow different “means” to the “same results.”<sup>14</sup> The U.S. has developed at least three curricular approaches, the authors continue, one of which focused on “disciplines/subject areas,” a second organized around the interests and preoccupations of students, and a third “structured around interrogations, problems, school of thought, social movements and major events,” an approach they associate with mastery learning.<sup>15</sup> Clarity of objectives and the omnipresence of evaluation structure learning in this model. The authors conclude that there are both convergences and divergences of the Québec model with the American mastery learning model.<sup>16</sup>

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## COMMENTARY

While the previous research brief found more similarities than differences between Anglophone Canada and Québec curriculum, this report seems to find more differences, not from Anglophone Canada but from the (largely) English-speaking United States, differences the authors seem to lament. Given the authoritarian subtext of mastery learning – as well as American emphases upon outcomes and scripted teaching – I wonder why Québec would want to emulate the United States. Why not France?

## REFERENCES

- Pinar, William F. 2019. *What Is Curriculum Theory?* New York: Routledge.
- Pinar, William F., Reynolds, William M., Slattery, Patrick, and Taubman, Peter M. 1995. *Understanding Curriculum*. New York: Peter Lang.
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[https://www.cse.gouv.qc.ca/fichiers/documents/publications/EtudesRecherches/ren\\_cur3.pdf](https://www.cse.gouv.qc.ca/fichiers/documents/publications/EtudesRecherches/ren_cur3.pdf).

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> The firm Reginald Grégoire Inc. was hired by the Conseil Supérieur de l'Éducation, an advisory body to the Québec Ministry of Education (MEQ); its report is comprised of two chapters, the first summarizing forty years of school reform in the United States, focused specifically on Programmed Instruction, Competency-Based Education, Mastery Learning, and Outcome-Based Education, with special attention to outcome-based education since it is the most recent and the firm judged it as the “most significant” for curriculum reform in Québec. In chapter 2, the report identifies what in the 1997 MEQ document diverges or converges with outcome-based education, thereby fine-tuning the Ministry’s efforts to reform the Québécois curriculum. The report focussed on two recurring concepts in the educational policy: that of “basic/core” [*de base* in French], and “competencies.” See Grégoire Inc. 1999, 107
- <sup>2</sup> Grégoire Inc. 1999, 107.
- <sup>3</sup> Grégoire Inc. 1999, 107. Not inaccurate but the strokes are too broad: see Pinar 2019.
- <sup>4</sup> Grégoire Inc. 1999, 77.
- <sup>5</sup> Grégoire Inc. 1999, 93.
- <sup>6</sup> Grégoire Inc. 1999, 93-94.
- <sup>7</sup> Grégoire Inc. 1999, 96.
- <sup>8</sup> Grégoire Inc. 1999, 97.
- <sup>9</sup> Grégoire 1999, 98.
- <sup>10</sup> Grégoire 1999, 99-100.
- <sup>11</sup> Grégoire 1999, 101.

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<sup>12</sup> Grégoire 1999, 101.

<sup>13</sup> Grégoire 1999, 101-102.

<sup>14</sup> Grégoire 1999, 102.

<sup>15</sup> Grégoire 1999, 102. This is a much more expansive conception of mastery learning than promulgated in the U.S. : see chapter 3, Pinar et al. 1995.

<sup>16</sup> Grégoire 1999, 103-106