

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

FOREVER DIVIDED? ASSESSING THE “NATIONAL” QUESTION AND THE GOVERNANCE IN EDUCATION THROUGH A REEXAMINATION OF QUÉBEC’S 1789 REPORT ON EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT. This paper explores the question of “national” dualism in Québec education through a historical investigation of one of the earliest school reports in Québec history. The report, released in 1789, recommended the integration of Québec’s cultures in a free system of elementary and secondary education crowned with a bilingual university. Why have more than two centuries passed without any sign of cultural integration in education? What does this mean for the future of Québec schooling? Are Québec educational leaders grappling with the same questions that plagued the province in the eighteenth century? Are there any new answers? Or, has Québec forever resolved itself to a “nationally” divided system of education.

À JAMAIS DIVISÉ ? UNE ANALYSE DE LA QUESTION NATIONALE ET DE LA GOUVERNANCE EN ÉDUCATION PAR LE BIAIS D’UNE RÉ-ÉVALUATION DU RAPPORT DE 1789 SUR L’ÉDUCATION AU QUÉBEC

RÉSUMÉ. L’article explore la question de la dualité « nationale » au sujet de l’éducation au Québec grâce à une analyse historique d’un des plus anciens rapports sur l’état de l’éducation au Québec. Déposé en 1789, le rapport du Comité spécial d’éducation, recommanda l’intégration des cultures du Québec dans un système scolaire gratuit de niveaux élémentaire et secondaire avec une université bilingue qui chapeaute le tout. Pourquoi plus de deux siècles se sont écoulés sans aucune proposition d’intégration culturelle en éducation ? À partir de cet état de fait, que peut-on conclure sur l’avenir de la scolarisation au Québec ? Est-ce que le leadership en éducation au Québec affronte les mêmes difficultés qui causaient beaucoup de tracas dans le Québec du dix-huitième siècle ? Est-ce que de nouvelles approches sont proposées ? Le Québec a-t-il décidé de concevoir pour de bon son système scolaire comme étant divisé sur des bases nationales ?

In 1787, Governor-General Lord Dorchester commissioned a committee of the council to report on the state of education in Québec. The committee, headed by William Smith, a loyalist from New York State, presented its findings to Dorchester in 1789 in the form of a published report on education (Report, 1789). The report was eventually shelved and its rec-

ommendations, including a culturally integrated system of schooling, were forgotten by both its contemporaries and posterity; but a reexamination of its contents offers the twenty-first century educator and educational thinker in Québec the opportunity to ask whether any of the challenges faced by Québec educational leaders in the aftermath of Conquest and socio-political restructuring have been dealt with. Indeed, were the problems faced by eighteenth century educationists any different from those facing their twenty-first century counterparts?

The resurgence of manuscripts examining the origins of mass schooling in Québec in recent years provides the occasion to reexamine this monumental educational report (Charland, 2000, 2005; Magnuson, 2005; MacLeod & Poutanen, 2004). The proliferation of scholarship on the origins of mass schooling in Québec illustrates both the complexity of educational development in the early years and the continued perplexity in understanding this development. Combined with present-day debates on nationalism in Canada, it also illustrates the need for new insights that can add to the discourse assessing Québec's educational and cultural history, and how scholars of education position themselves within this history. It provides the opportunity for scholars to reflect upon and resituate themselves within their historical place in a system that has grown over hundreds of years. Educationists today are, fundamentally, linked to the origins of the school system they perpetuate.

In one of the recent investigations of the origins of mass schooling in Québec, Roger Magnuson suggests that government interest in education during the late eighteenth century placed Québec at the forefront of educational development with radical proposals including free schooling for every inhabitant and a bilingual university. He concluded, however, that the proposed changes would have been too revolutionary to work and that it would take years before Québec got its educational house in order (Magnuson, 2005, p. 14). Although his dismissal of the report is understandable, given the lack of educational developments at the time of its writing, it is still regrettable. The report should not be overlooked too hastily. Ideas borne out of the eighteenth century provide us insight into the public school movement that captured both the political and public imaginations that led to the educational initiatives of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In a reexamination of the 1789 educational report, a question that certainly emerges concerns why it is important to undertake such a study. Past scholarship, most notably Louis-Philippe Audet's *Histoire de l'enseignement au Québec, 1608-1971* (Audet, 1971), has shed much light on the 1789 report. However, Audet's study was undertaken at a time when the defining features of Québec culture were changing. Indeed, scholars today have many more questions to preoccupy their thoughts than were prevalent at the time

of Audet's writing. Decades of social, political, and economic changes have translated into educational changes, including the advent of linguistic school boards replacing religious ones in the watershed changes of 1997, which have brought new questions concerning the defining features of culture in Québec that challenge past educational thinking and educational historiography. For this reason, it is time to rethink the educational report of 1789 and situate it within recent educational developments. In doing so, we can consider the extent to which Québec's "two solitudes" have evolved. Central to understanding this evolution is understanding the defining features of culture. These features themselves are constantly evolving, thus offering us questions that are as problematic as they are interesting to engage. Despite years of research, new questions and problems arise and there remains much more to be learned about Québec's educational development.

Understanding Québec's educational future requires us to understand Québec's educational past. That past, as scholars have time and again shown, reeked of national rhetoric, cultural animosities, and perceived racial superiorities. Yet, in the case of Québec's 1789 educational report, the past also reveals an attempt to bridge two cultures and unite the province into a single social entity with, if not a shared identity, at least a shared purpose. What lessons can we draw from a reinvestigation of the 1789 report on education? To what extent do the questions raised, and the answers provided, apply to Québec in the twenty-first century? A reinvestigation of the past serves to remind us of our successes, failures, and limits in progressing towards the goals laid out by the province's early inhabitants.

GENERATING AN INVESTIGATION OF EDUCATION

The committee of the council first assembled on the 31st of May 1787. An address from Dorchester was read to those assembled in which the members of the committee were curtly told that the system of education throughout the entire province was defective, and it was therefore their duty to find a remedy. Thus, the preposition of the report was, and as many educational reports throughout history have been, that the education system was lamentable and needed improvement.

William Smith and the committee, composed of five English and four French appointed officials, drafted three questions that were to be posed to religious leaders throughout the province (Report, 1789, p. 2). The first question aimed to unveil the present condition of education. A list of the parishes and incumbents was to be drawn up, detailing the number of parishioners, the number of schools, and the "kinds" of instruction theretofore offered. Of most importance to the committee was revealing literacy levels: "Can it be true," the committee asked, "that there are not more than half a dozen in a parish, that are able to write or read?" (Report, 1789, p. 2) The second

question posed by the committee reinforced the first, as it addressed “the cause of the imperfect state of instruction”; thus, whether perceived illiteracy rates were valid or unfounded, the system was in any case presupposed to be “imperfect” (Report, 1789, p. 2). The second question also provided the basis for the third, which sought the system’s remedy (Report, 1789, p. 2).

In addition to the three questions of inquiry, the committee sought support for its preconceived proposal of a unified system of mass schooling available to all inhabitants. The committee believed that if the main object of schooling was “the cultivation of knowledge” to all inhabitants, then it proposed a union of Catholic and Protestant students attending free schools in every district, with a bilingual university at the helm. The overarching question found in the report has hovered above the heads of Canadians for two and a half centuries: can English and French be raised together, live together, and educated together within a unified and shared system? The committee believed the answer was yes, and in order to achieve its ambitions it was determined to find “men of learning for the professors chair, free from narrow prejudices” (Report, 1789, p. 3). The committee has been characterized as a “commission,” and even as a type of early “royal commission” on education (Audet, 1970, p. 150; Magnuson, 2005, p. 11). Actually, while the committee had a clear mandate to make recommendations, those recommendations were not binding, nor would the committee’s findings oblige Lord Dorchester and his council to implement a system of education. Real authority would be exerted only by government, and in particular the Governor-General himself. The committee, therefore, knew that if its recommendations were going to be acted upon, they would need to be taken seriously in the public arena, and would therefore need broader support. Thus, before it undertook steps that would shake the cultural dualism that had existed in Québec for the twenty-seven years since the Conquest, it sought support from across the province.

THE VIEW FROM FRENCH QUÉBEC

The bishop of Québec, Jean-Francois Hubert, provided the answers from French Catholic Québec to the committee’s questions, and these answers were incorporated into the final report in 1789. Hubert agreed that “Nothing is more worthy of the wisdom of the Government under which we live, than the encouragement of Science by every possible means” (Report, 1789, p. 6). He immediately began his assessment of the committee’s purposes by addressing the university question: “At the name of an University in the province of Québec, my *native* country, I bless the Almighty for having inspired the Design, and my prayers are offered for the execution of it” (Report, 1789, p. 6). He cautioned, however, that undertaking the task of building a university in a frontier society might be a premature idea: “It is very doubtful whether the Province can, at present, furnish a sufficient

number of students to occupy the masters and professors that would necessarily be required to form an University. While there remains in Canada so much land to clear, it is not to be expected that the country inhabitants will concern themselves about the liberal arts" (Report, 1789, p. 7). Québec agrarian life was conservative, and thus heavily endorsed by the Catholic Church. But Hubert also believed agrarian life in Québec was preservative. Every nation in the world, he was sure, had proven that schooling flourished only when demographic changes occurred resulting in a population with an abundance of labourers no longer needed to work the land. This was not yet the case, he thought, in eighteenth-century Québec.

More importantly, however, Hubert questioned the university proposal upon the grounds that it was conceived as a secular institution; such a proposition, he believed, was incompatible with French Canadian culture. Hubert pointed out that the terms of a union "protecting the Catholic and Protestant Subjects" were extremely vague. He claimed that furnishing the proposed university and system of education with "persons unprejudiced in their opinions" would perpetuate, rather than unite, the cultural divide in Québec. Religion was central to the French identity in Canada, and ignoring it would be too heavy a burden to the culture; a burden that Hubert was not willing to carry (Report, 1789, pp. 9-10). Theology, he thought, will and should always be taught at seminaries for French Canadian students; thus a secular institution was objectionable (Report, 1789, p. 19). The public self and the private self could not be compartmentalized, he thought; public education and religion, therefore, could not be separated. A secular university in Québec, he insisted, would fail.

Hubert did concede, however, that the appetite for elementary schooling was alive and well, even in parts of the province where religion was not taught. In addition to the Jesuit schools run by the church, he told the committee, private schools could be found in Montreal, Québec, and Trois-Rivières. With the basic curriculum of reading and writing, the "schools are regular and daily, and pretty well frequented" (Report, 1789, p. 11). Moreover, the parents, he believed, were well satisfied with the education provided. The Jesuit's Montreal seminary, he furthermore noted, had always supported an additional free school in which reading and writing were provided to children "of all ranks." The school was, he thought, "remarkable for its extreme regularity, [and] has had 300 children at a time" (Report, 1789, p. 11). Even among young women, he noted, the appetite for education was bursting. Both the congregated sisters at Montreal and Ursuline nuns at Québec and Trois-Rivières oversaw schooling; in addition to these schools, other institutions could also be found in these towns with the schools supported by the "communities at their own charge" (Report, 1789, pp. 11-12).

The bishop's acknowledgment that an appetite for elementary education existed begs the question, was his assessment for the expansion of a system

of education accurate? Was he misled? Did he miscalculate the appetite for higher education, despite his confession that a clear appetite for elementary instruction was present and expanding? In order to answer these questions, one must look beyond Hubert's assessment of the state of education in Québec and consider the deeper issue in the report: Hubert could promote education, but he could not promote cultural unity. He operated within an eighteenth century context in which Protestantism and Catholicism were irreconcilable.

Cultural antagonism was made explicit in Hubert's answers to the committee's questions concerning literacy. He insisted that literacy levels in the province were not as low as reported, and such low estimates were unfounded. Whereas the committee suggested that barely a dozen people in each parish across the province could read and write, Hubert insisted that the minimum literacy levels represented at least double that number. The "English" government either misjudged literacy levels in the province, or were badly misinformed. While the committee asked how widespread ignorance was, Hubert suggested that the presupposition of ignorance was itself unfounded and, in fact, objectionable. In order that the committee understand the cultural antipathy in the province, he furthermore pointed out that the preference given to "strangers" in the appointments to public offices should be a cause of discouragement among French inhabitants considering sending their children to school. With no prospect of breaking into the colonial elite, what ends would the pursuit of education achieve? (Report, 1789, p. 15). Finally, the Jesuit College at Québec, which was seized during the Conquest, and theretofore used as a military garrison, was the ultimate sign of cultural intolerance upon the part of the colonial government; it should be returned to the church immediately, he insisted, and rebuilt for its original educational purposes. In time, he suggested as a concession to the committee, the institution could evolve into a university. Whether it would be bilingual, however, Hubert did not say; but it was clear that he was no supporter of secular schools.

CONSOLIDATING CULTURES, DESTROYING DUALISM

The bishop's pessimism concerning a bilingual and non-secular superstructure of education for Québec did not affect the committee's optimism, and rather than accepting the inability to carry out its plans, the committee insisted upon driving forward a scheme which it believed was as crucial to the intellectual growth of the inhabitants as it was to the growth of a united national character in British America.

The committee was bent upon a system composing three levels. First and foremost, it believed that "certainly there could be no division of sentiment, respecting that elementary instruction, necessary to the lower classes in all

countries,” must be provided for (Report, 1789, p. 20). Thus Parish Free Schools with a basic curriculum of reading, writing, and arithmetic would compose the first level of instruction. At the secondary level, County Free Schools would also be established in which additional subjects such as the languages, grammar, book-keeping, and elements of the sciences and mathematics would be added. Third, despite the perceived opposition from French Québec, the committee proposed a university. On this point there was some caution. The chairman “concurred with the venerable Bishop, that the erection of an University, measuring it by European scale, would be extravagant” (Report, 1789, p. 20). Still, the committee would not back down. Once children received an elementary and secondary education, it believed, the appetite for further schooling would be insatiable, and it was better, the committee thought, that Québec children seek higher education within Québec. It was therefore “to be wished,” the committee reported, “that the youth of the province might not be estranged from it, by an Education in foreign parts, but find *at home* sufficient means to qualify them for the trusts, offices and honors of their native *community*” (Report, 1789, pp. 20-21).

The committee had a national vision, and they predicted that Québec would prove to be the cornerstone for all of British America. “A College under one Rector and four tutors, dividing the labour between them, would, in its opinion, be sufficient, for instructing the students to be expected from all the provinces on this Continent, now remaining to Great-Britain, in Grammar, Logic, Rhetoric, Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, Metaphysics and Ethics” (Report, 1789, p. 21). Students, the committee believed, “may be expected from all the provinces under the Governor General residing in this; and the advantage of acquiring one of the most universal Languages of Europe, may be a motive, even in remote countries, for taking the whole circle of the sciences, in a College projected for the commencement of an University in Canada, for His Majesty’s American Dominions” (Report, 1789, pp. 24-25).

The committee believed that it was crucial to establish a university because only with a university could an indigenous body of social and political leaders be cultivated. Without one, it believed Québec would remain “indebted to Emigrants from other Countries,” for social and political leadership, thus hindering the unity of the province (Report, 1789, p. 21). The committee’s vision, to be sure, was of an education system that fostered a self-sufficient province. Although alert to the Bishop’s trepidation, the committee believed there was no reason to insist that a university project was inevitably doomed. Moreover, since it would be built through the funding of the crown, it would not prove a financial burden to the people of the province (Report, 1789, pp. 23-24). Furthermore, the committee believed it had public support: “Abstract from the encouragement of public Bodies,” it argued, “there are instances of private opulence in many places.” Should the state provide “a

generosity equal to that opulence,” then the school system could prosper and be devoted “to enterprises for advancing the honor of the Nation, in interest of learning, and the welfare of the Human Race” (Report, 1789, p. 24). Therefore, it was better to try, the committee thought, lest the people of the province remain subject to imported social and political leaders for years to come.

Old questions? Old answers?

Given the historical context of an eighteenth-century world with few systems of education to model their own upon, the proposals of the 1789 committee were indeed, as Roger Magnuson points out, “revolutionary” (Magnuson, 2005, p. 14). What is more remarkable, however, is not the enormity of the system proposed, but its progressive ideas concerning the promotion of a dual culture and heritage in Québec that would see both English and French – Catholic and Protestant – share the same civil and administrative institutions, including the schools. The cries for caution, however, forced the hand of the government to shelve the report. In the late-eighteenth century, a secular university was found inimical to the cultural ethos of Québec. Strikingly, however, the anachronistic proposals of 1789, after more than two hundred years, have yet to be realized. Have they since been considered?

To a certain extent attempts to address the proposals of 1789 have been made, but with little success. The Education Act of 1801 and the establishment of the Royal Institution for the Advancement of Learning saw an attempt to create a unified system. Unlike the 1789 proposal, the 1801 act did not provide for integrated higher education, nor did its authors attempt to garner popular support. Its success was thus contingent on its acceptance by local inhabitants. In the public arena, however, the effort was perceived as an attempt to assimilate the Catholic and French-speaking Canadians, and thus few royal schools were built. The 1824 Fabriques Act and the 1829 and 1832 Syndics Acts provided for more administrative and state support for local schools, but these acts created systems that were strictly denominational. While the Catholic population was increasingly served, little was said about integrating the French and English populations. The overarching principle was that an assortment of coexisting institutions would be in existence that would be only loosely coordinated by the state. The Common School Act of 1841 proved a watershed piece of educational legislation by providing for minority schools. The impact of this legislation cannot be overstated, as Magnuson suggests, “for it contained the seeds of what was to become a dual denominational school system” (Magnuson, 2005, p. 42). The idea of an integrated system along the lines of the 1789 committee’s recommendations failed to take hold of the imagination of legislators. The legislation would find its way into the British North American Act of 1867 (Section 93, 1), thereafter entrenching not only the right to minority schools, but also the concept of a divided system of education.

French and English schools operated in cultural isolation for well over a century. Recent developments in education have attempted to dissolve old divisions, but in the process have only redefined them. The elimination of denominational schools in favour of language-based schools in 1997 has only redrawn the framework for cultural dualism. The creation of linguistic boards has not provided new answers to the old questions plaguing Québec cultural history, but has instead raised new questions concerning the defining features of culture in Québec. The “revolutionary” proposals of educational thinkers in the eighteenth century suggests that they might have operated within a broader conception of cultural integration than do present school and political leaders. They advocated not only the elimination of denominational schools, but also the integration of linguistic schools into one system preparing students for higher education in a bilingual institution. That an integration of the two school systems in the twenty-first century is unimaginable – that the mere proposition receives scoff – should raise serious concerns for Québec educators. How could two centuries of educational development produce a system that seems more irreparably divided than it did in the eighteenth century? Does this old school report tell us that Québec society at the time of Conquest was actually more culturally ambitious than a present-day society that prides itself on its multicultural heritage and anti-racist values?

What lessons can we draw from a reinvestigation of the 1789 report on education? Do the questions raised in the eighteenth century, and the answers provided, apply to Québec in the twenty-first century? In order to appreciate the report, we might have to begin with a presupposition that many educators today are weary of agreeing with: Québec schooling in the twenty-first century operates to perpetuate cultural divisions that divide and separate the population. If only one lesson can be drawn from the school report of 1789, it is surely that Québec educational thinkers have more questions to ask about their schools and themselves today. What does it mean to be educated in Québec? What are the shared experiences of Québec students? Can Québec’s “two solitudes” be united? The advent of linguistic boards in 1997 suggests that the question is in fact more complex. The “two solitudes” have evolved. Where once they were religious, they are now linguistic. In the eighteenth century, the divide was based on broader characterizations of culture. The French and the English spoke different languages, but also they practiced different religions, laboured in different economies, and functioned in different legal environments. In 1789, the education committee narrowed its definition of culture to focus on language, and to address the divide in Québec it recommended a shared, bilingual education in which an indigenous body of leaders could emerge to govern according to the particular circumstances of the province. It is in this sense that the 1789 report on education was truly anachronistic. Would the implementation of its recommendations today unite the “two solitudes?”

Current debates on nationalism and federalism in Canada make assessing the development of Québec education over the past two hundred years a task that should occupy scholars and educators. Are there two (or more) nations in Canada that cannot share the same social institutions? Are the same questions that were raised over two hundred years ago still being asked? Are there any new answers? In what direction is Québec education heading? Indeed, it is reasonable to ask, will the Québec system of education in the twenty-third century remain culturally divided? If two centuries have passed without a resolution to this divide, can anything suggest that another two hundred years are not on their way?

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