

Geoffrey B. Isherwood

The Teacher Probation System in Quebec:

a description and critical analysis*

The purpose of this paper is to describe and discuss a new means of initiating beginning teachers into the teaching profession. The method was introduced through the passage of a regulation by the Ministry of Education in Quebec and made applicable to all beginning teachers within the Province, starting in 1971. In some school boards, the regulation was accepted and put into action, in other boards it was modified before implementation, while in others, to this day, it is not followed. In this paper, the new system will be defined, its implementation will be briefly discussed and then a critical analysis of the system will be presented.

the teacher probation system

Most professions require their candidates to undergo a certain reasonably lengthy period of professional training before admitting them into their ranks on a permanent basis. The term for this period varies with the profession, e.g., internship, residency, clerkship, etc. These terms all signify for the candidate in question a period of adjustment and integration during which he has the opportunity to prove his ability to practice and carry out properly the functions of the given profession.¹

In 1971, the Ministry of Education in Quebec established the Teacher Probation System (TPS) to initiate beginners into the teaching profession in a somewhat novel and hopefully professional way. The TPS had both structural and functional components designed to converge in providing aid and assistance to the beginner (probationer) while, at the same time, integrating her/him into the school culture. In addition, the system provided a means for evaluating the probationer.

*Appreciation is extended to the Ministry of Education of Quebec for partial support of this paper via their FCAC grant entitled Supervision et Evaluation des Professeurs, 1975.

A probation committee (PC) is created for each probationer. The PC has three respondents and the probationer as members. One respondent is the school principal (or vice-principal in larger schools), one respondent is a tenured member of staff selected by the probationer, and one is a tenured member of staff selected by the school council (a group of teachers elected annually by the entire staff to advise the principal). Each respondent has equal status on the PC; no one is designated leader by the TPS and each member has one vote in determining whether the probationer will receive tenure after the two-year probationary period.

Early in the school year, an initial meeting is held where members get acquainted. The TPS is reviewed and the roles of each member are defined. A second formal meeting is held in mid-year to assess how the probationer is proceeding, to enhance rapport among members, and to determine which areas of the probationer's work need improvement. A third meeting is held late in the school year to evaluate the probationer's progress in teaching. If performance is satisfactory, the probationer proceeds to the second year, perhaps with a few recommendations regarding her/his teaching. If performance is unsatisfactory, the respondents must decide whether a second year would be worthwhile and be warranted or whether the probationer should seek employment elsewhere. Procedures are available to respondents to resolve conflicts in their evaluation of the probationer.

During the second year under the TPS, the PC continues to work with the probationer through a series of formal meetings. In the spring of the second year a final evaluation is made and the probationer is either (1) granted a teaching diploma (tenure), (2) given an extension of probation for one more year, or (3) refused the teaching diploma. Procedures are defined in case of disagreement among respondents in the evaluation of the probationer and appeal procedures are available to the probationer if she/he disagrees with the PC recommendation. It should be noted that during both years, respondents are encouraged to supplement the formal meetings with many informal sessions with the probationer both in and out of the classroom.

In addition to these structural arrangements, a set of criteria is established to assist the PC in its functional efforts. These criteria include seven major points of reference (themes) and a series of sub-points (components of competency). Table 1 contains a summary of the themes and selected components of competency. During September, each school is expected to review the themes and components and add or delete any the staff deems appropriate. In this way, each school is encouraged to develop a unique standard to guide respondents and probationers in their functioning.

Taken together, the structural and functional components of the TPS are expected to upgrade the practice of the probationer and to provide a simple, yet effective, means of evaluating her/his performance. When the scheme was introduced, the Ministry of Education seemed to expect school administrators and teachers to welcome the TPS actively. However, in some instances this was not the case and some unusual problems have occurred in the implementation of the system.

TABLE 1

TPS THEMES AND SELECTED COMPONENTS OF COMPETENCE ²	
THEME I:	<i>Teaching</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. A capacity for synthesis2. A flair for organization
THEME II:	<i>Teacher-Pupil Relationship</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Maturity of teacher2. Sincerity, authenticity, integrity
THEME III:	<i>Language of Instruction</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. A concern for correct spoken and written language2. Facility of speech, fluency, diction and articulation
THEME IV:	<i>Teacher-Colleague Relationship</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Team-spirit2. A sense of solidarity
THEME V:	<i>Teacher-Administrator Relationship</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. A respect for contractual obligations2. A spirit of cooperation
THEME VI:	<i>Teacher-Parent Relationship</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. An interest in movements allowing parents an active participation in the educational evolution of the milieu2. Communication of useful or necessary information
THEME VII:	<i>Concern for the Profession</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. A deep desire to promote the interests of the teaching profession2. An interest in research and experimentation

the teacher probation system: as implemented

When the Ministry of Education handed down the TPS to local boards for implementation in September of 1971, boards accepted the policy but some teacher syndicates rejected it. The Provincial

Association of Protestant Teachers (PAPT), for one, completely rejected the system. W. J. Sparkes, then President of the PAPT, wrote to Louis Rousseau, Director General of Secondary Education, the following letter:

Our Association has studied in depth the teacher probation system which the government intends to introduce on a province-wide basis in September, 1971. We have followed with interest the application of this system on an experimental basis during the school year 1970-71. After due consideration, the Annual General Meeting of PAPT declared its opposition to the probation system as proposed by the government "in that it involves us in a purely consultative manner in what is essentially a management function — hiring and firing."

The involvement of teachers in evaluating their colleagues for the purpose of granting teacher certificates implicates them in the decision not to renew the contract of one of their fellow teachers. The teacher evaluator in the probation system would be involved only in the non-renewal process, and then only on a consultative basis, without having any say in the hiring of the teachers whom they are asked to evaluate. If teachers are to participate, even indirectly, in the non-renewal of their colleagues' contracts, they must also participate fully in the process by which teachers are engaged.

It is our view that beginning teachers should be encouraged and helped to adapt to the profession by their more experienced colleagues. A formal system of integrating beginning teachers, involving school administrators and experienced teachers and designed as a learning experience for those new to the profession, should be established. This will serve the beginning teacher in a positive rather than a punitive manner.³

In essence, the letter sets forth the present position of the PAPT in relation to the TPS.

The effect of this position remains significant because the PAPT counts among its membership the vast majority of Protestant teachers in Quebec. One school board and its local PAPT affiliate decided to improvise on the TPS when the local syndicate followed the policy of its parent organization. The Lakeshore School Board in cooperation with the Lakeshore Teachers' Association developed the "Procedure for Classroom Evaluation for Teachers Without Right to Arbitration." The policy had a single goal of probationer evaluation. Evaluators (like respondents) could only come from administrative ranks. Each probationer was given at least two observations and evaluations each year. A system of reporting the evaluations was established along with a right to appeal procedure, but no system of themes or components of competency was included. In sum, the Lakeshore system was not aimed at the improvement of instruction or the integration of the probationer into the school, but at determining if she or he possessed a sufficient "something" to earn tenure.

In contrast, some school boards and their associated teacher organizations accepted the government's policy and implemented it. Probably, some principals saw the TPS as a means to professionalize their staff, while others saw it as yet another paperwork chore. While no official leader was designated among respondents on a PC, it soon

became apparent that the principal fulfilled that role, particularly at the elementary level.⁴ Principals called the meetings which were often held in their offices and teachers saw the principal as "expert" in understanding the system itself. The administrative respondents' attitude toward the system seemed to play a key role in the extent of its implementation. More enthusiastic administrators used the system as intended, while others did not even call all the required meetings.⁵ In short, given school board and teacher syndical support, implementation of the TPS seemed dependent upon the attitude of the local school principal. With such variations, it is still too early to determine whether the new system is a success, but clearly, more study is needed.⁶

a critical analysis

The TPS can be viewed from at least two perspectives. First, in its relationship to specific facets of the establishment — the existing educational institution. Here, comment needs to be made on the general educational climate prevailing in Quebec and on the underlying normative structure among Quebec teachers. The syndical reaction needs to be considered, too. Second, the TPS can be viewed in terms of its internal components. Here, the "laying on of policy" needs to be considered as well as the resources given to support the TPS. The notion of themes vis-à-vis our current understanding of "teacher effectiveness" should be set forth.

The TPS and the Educational Establishment

It would be safe to say that a hostile relationship exists between many of Quebec's teachers and the Ministry of Education. In the eyes of the teachers, a host of issues in the late 1960's were resolved in the Ministry's favor and they contributed to this inflamed atmosphere; in fact, the teachers were even moved to strike. This relationship has continued to the present, reinforced by a recently decreed (not negotiated) teacher contract, by a declassification of teachers (and a loss in pay) and by legislation to end a teacher strike. Furthermore, the reluctance of the Ministry to negotiate in good faith (again, from the teachers' perspective) seems to have solidified the position of the teachers' syndicates. Teachers seem to look to syndicates for support after having developed a strong sense of individual powerlessness. Rejection of the TPS by the PAPT, for example, might be interpreted as a device designed to indicate syndical strength regardless of the potential good the probation system might do. In addition, syndicates only function in terms of a "negotiations model" — how could management just dictate a policy and expect it to be accepted?

From informal unstructured interviews of thirty teachers in 1972, guided by the question, "What do your fellow teachers think of supervision?" four norms became evident:

1. Teachers see supervision as inspection. That is, the supervisor enters the classroom, observes the lesson and then makes a few evaluative remarks to the teacher. At times, no remarks are made.
2. Supervision is an intrusion. Teachers should have autonomy within the classroom.
3. Supervision hinders rather than helps teachers. It makes the teacher nervous. The supervisors do not seem to offer any real help and teachers feel a need to conform to some ill-defined notion of the model teacher.
4. Tenured teachers feel they have already demonstrated their competency.

It is patently clear that teachers do not see supervision as providing aid to the teacher. A teacher who is confronted with the TPS may selectively see only the "evaluation" aspects of the program and block the aid component.

Absent from all respondents' remarks were comments about the teacher as supervisor. Probes in this direction elicited comments about providing "informal" help to the beginning teacher. The underlying teacher norms do not appear supportive of the TPS. In fact, if a tenured teacher actively supported the TPS she/he would risk negative sanctions from peers.⁷

The outright rejection of the TPS by Protestant teachers via their syndical unit was unanticipated by the Ministry of Education. The PAPT first argued that hiring and firing was a "management function" and therefore the school administration should handle it. They further argued that, under the TPS, teacher respondents would act in only a "consultative" manner with regard to firing. If teachers were to be involved, even indirectly, in the firing of a probationer they should also be involved in his hiring. The PAPT position seemed to overlook the voting power of teacher respondents. Since they outnumbered the administrator respondent two-to-one, the teachers had control of the vote. This certainly involves teachers in firing far beyond the consultative level. However, the point made regarding the involvement of teachers in the hiring of beginners seems well founded, yet a separate issue. In fact, involvement in the hiring and firing of colleagues could have a profound effect upon both teachers and teacher syndicates. The notion of peer scrutiny is consistently embodied in definitions of professionalism.

Syndicates are mutual benefit organizations.⁸ As such, their first duty is to the service of their members, but the character of that service can take many forms. Teacher syndicates in Quebec have focused their main efforts on monetary gains for their members. It may seem

dysfunctional to have some members pass on the worth of other members or potential members. While professional groups typically screen entrants to their ranks before giving their approval, teacher syndicates seem to have traded a professional entry procedure for a struggle for salary. Of course, one might argue that the trade-off is not necessary. Perhaps the real issue is unstated. How can a syndicate support its members against management thrusts and at the same time join with management in the evaluation of some of its members? This may be the true dilemma. It may be that for teacher syndicates to play a more supportive role in the TPS or other "entry systems," beginning teachers should not be given membership in the syndicate until they receive tenure.

In any event, the syndicates would do well to consider the alternatives to TPS. With the demise of Quebec's inspectorial system of teacher supervision in the early 1960's, school boards were expected to assume responsibility for teacher entry to the profession. Again, it is fairly safe to say that little supervision (as aid or evaluation) was given by most boards to beginning teachers. After leaving a teacher training institution, teacher candidates were hired, entered the classroom and were typically left alone. Many teachers who began work in the 1960's report one or two visits by a principal or supervisor in their early years of teaching. This entry to practice stands in stark contrast to that afforded the physician who spends years as an intern and resident under the close scrutiny of established professionals. Recent supervisory practice in schools, by tradition, seems to stand against the easy acceptance of the TPS by both teachers and administrators.

While these remarks are concerned with the TPS and its institutional environment, it is also important to look within the system.

The TPS and Its Components

When a part is to be manufactured in a plant, specifications are developed to precisely define the actions of men and machines in order to reach the desired end product. Variations from established procedures are likely to result in a deficient part. However, when a situation exists where neither the end product is clearly defined nor the means to reach that product clearly established, slavish following of a general procedure is likely to produce an imperfect result. We do not know who the most effective teacher is, we certainly do not know the best way to produce one.⁹ For some, teaching is an art, for others a science, and for others it is purely intuitive. If respondents follow TPS procedures closely there is no guarantee that more effective teachers will be screened from less effective ones. At best, we may be able to say that respondents and probationer have been able to relate to each other in a positive way; the

probationer may sense integration into the teaching ranks. Some assistance may be gained from system implementation, but if a high level of aid is to be provided, it seems necessary to have many more than a few prescribed annual meetings. In addition, respondent-probationer contacts can grow from observation of teacher respondents, the conduct of demonstration lessons and through a host of other activities related to teaching.

If the TPS is to be implemented effectively, a respondent's workload should include time to supervise the probationer. Most elementary teachers spend their school day totally in contact with students. When can they find time to act as respondents? Secondary teachers have unassigned time during the day, but this has been negotiated as planning time. Can class preparation time be traded for supervisory time, or rather, should it be so used? Perhaps of more significance is the implicit assumption in the TPS that any tenured teacher can and will act as a respondent. It is clear that teaching and teacher supervision are distinct activities for, while they may share some common skills, they also require some unique ones. For the "instant" supervisor, only two booklets are given to implement the TPS and additional staff members are not provided to cover extra workloads. It seems a mockery of educational reform to think that a supervisor can be created with two hand-outs and that a system as elaborate as the TPS can be supported without additional staff. Too much educational planning seems to consider "benefits" without adequate consideration of "costs."

As mentioned earlier, we do not know who the effective teacher is. To think that the seven themes and their related components of competency can make up for years of research is a second mockery. At best, the themes can act as guides in aiding and assisting the probationer. Mosher and Purpel have noted two thrusts emerging from the literature on teacher effectiveness. The more effective teacher may be the one who is more cognitively flexible (can think on his feet) and the one who can establish a rapport with pupils. While some themes seem to take cognizance of these trends, others do not. In sum, the themes and components of competency need to be treated as guides to action rather than as prescriptions.

Finally, the close supervision implied by the TPS may prove a source of considerable anxiety for respondents. As they work with a probationer, their credibility as teachers will be "on the line." When the probationer needs help and the respondent has little to offer, the respondent's reputation is at stake. On the other hand, *both* respondent and probationer *may* grow as teachers from this experience.

When an innovation is attempted in an established system it is often subjected to forces directed towards limiting the proposed