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# The Educational Project:
## from policy to practice

In Quebec, the reform movements of the early 1960's precipitated dramatic changes throughout the educational system: the regrouping of schools into larger districts, the evolution of the comprehensive secondary school, the introduction of the CEGEP level, and the expansion of the university system. Control of the system has shifted from such institutions as the Church to such groups as elected commissioners, professional unions, and a centralized government bureaucracy. Curriculum has not only expanded into new levels and content areas, but is under continuing revision. Not entirely satisfied with these major reforms, the MEQ (Ministère de l'Education du Québec) has developed the concept of the Educational Project. What is the Educational Project and what is its relevance within English-speaking communities in Quebec?

It is our assumption that the concept, though explicit in its intention to situate the school more firmly within its milieu, has been subjected to varying interpretations and remains ambiguous in its application. Additionally, there exists a need for interpreting educational policies primarily intended for francophone schools to the context of English language school systems. While much of the language associated with the Educational Project (i.e. transparence, cohérence, proche du vécu de l'élève) can perhaps be translated, it remains uncertain whether such notions of policy are easily assimilated within the context of educational thought as it currently exists in the English language community.

While it is difficult to establish the exact origin of most educational ideas, the concept of the Educational Project undoubtedly originated from the MEQ.(1) First referred to in the Green Paper as an "educational plan" (MEQ, 1978), its
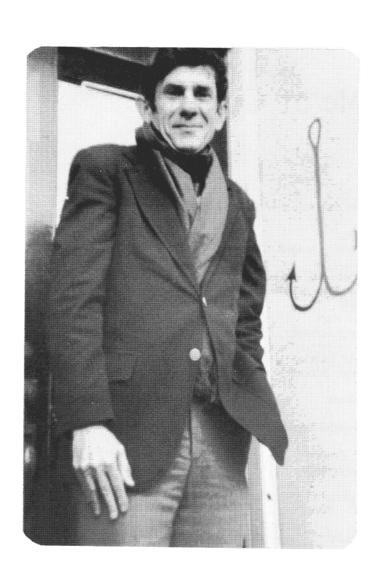
introduction in a document stressing strong central control and
school uniformity suggests that the educational plan may have
been the result of opposing forces.  A possible inference is that
the MEQ was attempting, in its concept of an educational plan,
to achieve equilibrium between patterns of centralization in
matters of curriculum and external pressures resisting these
centralization policies and wishing to maintain school and
board-based autonomy.

The message of a strong centralized decision-making power
runs through much of the Green Paper; it was perhaps felt that
there was a need to through much of the Green Paper and it
was perhaps felt that signal that certain forms of decentralized
decision-making were still to be encouraged.  Within this same
context of concern for the balance of power affecting
educational matters, the Educational Project has also been
viewed as a means for effecting a shift of decision-making
power away from school boards and down to the level of
individual schools.  Since much policy control exists at the level
of the MEQ, such a shift would have as major consequence a
further reduction in the amount of educational control that
school boards can maintain.

An alternative view of the rationale behind the
development of the concept is related to the broader issues of
school excellence.  The Educational Project may represent an
attempt to capture for the public school system those qualities
which seem to be attracting a considerable number of parents
to private schools.  Private schools are often associated with
three major features: competent educational services, rapport
with parent groups, and a high degree of visibility (or
"transparence") associated with the school's underlying
philosophy.  If competent educational services are to be ensured
by the development of a centralized control over curriculum
matters, could the two remaining features be developed for
individual schools through the concept of an Educational
Project?

While all of this analysis is speculative, there is a
suggestion that, from its inception, the Educational Project, or
Plan as it was then called, was intended as a tool to allow
schools, under increasing pressure for conformity, to expand
beyond the dictates imposed by MEQ policy.  The questions
remain: was the Educational Plan meant as an instrument to
further MEQ policy; as a palliative to allow reluctant educators
to cope with the new policies; or, as a policy designed simply
to increase individual school exellence?

The far from enthusiastic response given to the
Educational Plan suggests serious misgivings on the part of many
educators and parents.  Many could not see in what domains the
school was to be allowed to take charge of its destiny, or what
limits were to be placed on school initiatives.  There was also
considerable public concern over the new responsibilities of
professional educators, now required to support and develop an

Educational Plan. While the MEQ took great pains to consult widely on the concept, it is equally true that the concept presented for consultation was a product of the central power, and was perhaps inevitably greeted with suspicion by school authorities feeling a simultaneous incursion on a range of financial and educational jurisdictional matters.

### From "plan" to "project" - a question of definition

Following public response to the "educational plan" proposal of the Green Paper, Ministry terminology changed, reflecting a shift of emphasis from the notion of a plan with its necessary operational steps, to a notion of a **process,** a notion which has become crucial to current MEQ definitions of what is now called an "Educational Project".

All of those definitions share a common weakness, if our concern is to describe what the Educational Project is and to guide school agents in the creation of such a project. They identify the attributes of the Educational Project more clearly than they define its nature. We are led to a position whereby all schools might be viewed as Educational Projects in the making; most schools would subscribe to the values inherent in the concept, to wit the need to link philosophy to practice (**coherence**), the desirability of having a well-understood rationale (**transparence**), and the need to provide students with school experiences relevant to their lives (**proché du vecu**). Such a position leaves us only with the task of measuring the degree to which any given school exhibits these characteristics, but it avoids the issue of **how** a school appropriates the concept and transforms educational philosophy into a set of concrete operational plans.

While elements stand out and the underlying philosophy is explicit (decentralization, accountability from school to community, participation, and relevance within the community) the Educational Project, as a tool or a policy to adopt, remains elusive. This ambiguity may be inevitable at this stage, since the concern which prompted the development of the Educational Project was always made more explicit than the product it was meant to define.

Despite continuing controversy over the process-product issues of definition, efforts to reduce the ambiguity and provide an analytic framework do exist. We take the position of refraining from confirming any one type of definition at this time, in the hope that the case studies reported will be suggestive of what elements a definition must include. Nevertheless we have made use here of a set of criteria which apply both to the Educational Project as a product and to the Educational Project as a process.

Given the elusive nature of a definition, there have been attempts to pin down criteria which can be applied analytically

to the study of any Educational Project. The MEQ publication, "Le projet éducatif de l'école: working document", and working documents of the Equipe Permanente sur le Projet Educatif (EPPE) illustrate these efforts. For example, the former document refers to a school which "defines its specific objectives, prepares and carries out a plan of action, and revises the plan periodically with the participation of the students, the parents and the staff of the school and school board" (MEQ, 1980(b), p. 2). The documents go on to explain the meaning of several of the key terms:

1.1    A Dynamic Initiative

A school's educational project commits that school to a process which has an objective to improve the efficiency of the school's actions and thus provide a better education for students.

1.2    A Plan of Action

The educational project infers a plan of action. Such a plan is prepared with local needs in mind, after reflection, observation, analysis and consultation on the part of the educational agents. Objectives are pursued according to the means available to the school or to those the school can provide for itself. (MEQ, 1980(b), p. 2)

In its work, EPPE has developed a series of indicators which are intended to guide identification of the Educational Project activities of a school. The team sought to clarify the concept and provide key issues for discussion within schools and school systems. Could the concept be operationalized in a manner that would permit evaluation of an existing Educational Project? Could it also provide a framework for school-based initiation? A list of eleven such indicators of the Educational Project is under development and these are reported here:

- respects diversity
- provides a meaningful role for the participants
- establishes logical and consistent links between ideology and practice
- is "transparent" to all, or a school whose orientation and philosophy has been made explicit and is understood by the entire community
- reflects the reality of the child, which is concerned with establishing meaningful links between school life and life within the broader community context
- demonstrates adaptive capacity
- is integrated with its community
- is linked to other units of the educational system
- represents a collective project, in which concerted action leads to consensus

.   facilitates the development of each participant

(EPPE, 1981)

It is clear that these indicators provide a valuable tool for analysis or initiation of an Educational Project.  They lend weight to the assumption that the Educational Project will mean many different things depending on the setting in which it occurs.  These indicators also reinforce a notion of process, rather than product, as a crucial element of the Educational Project.  It is clear that not all indicators may be present in a specific school; it may be that some become more relevant than others depending upon the context.  It is also clear that, while these indicators may each represent desirable features of an Educational Project, a great deal of variance is to be expected in terms of the degree to which any one school demonstrates each of the features at any given time.

In our attempt to clarify the concept we consider it essential to make explicit both the product and process dimensions, and have done so in the discussion which follows.

**Product criteria**

The types of activities and endeavours considered to be an educational project can take place at many levels within the educational system, though the focus is on the school as the central unit.  At the level of a whole school the educational project would normally cut across subject matter disciplines, grade levels, and other traditional divisions within the school.  In our work an attempt will be made to feature this school level of analysis.  However, it should be made clear that it is possible to have activities take place for a part of the school at least while a school-wide initiative is emerging.  By the same token, activities could also be at the level of the whole school system, though we feel that the concept of the educational project is most clear when it is considered to be an activity of the single school and its surrounding community.

We would suggest a minimal, but important, product dimension.  We find a certain intuitive appeal to the notion of **plan** as the central element for an Educational Project.  Thus, we propose that a necessary condition for an Educational Project is that it includes a plan designating some area for development in the educational system.  It is not sufficient for any one person to unveil a plan.  Rather it must be developed by the whole school community and have required process characteristics.  We add, as well, that we are using the term plan to include an action phase.  It becomes cyclical, as initial process leads to a plan which also includes more process dimensions.

### Process criteria

We propose five process criteria which we consider necessary and sufficient for an Educational Project.

1. Initiated from within

An important  attribute of an Educational Project is that it be initiated from within.  The initiation of action comes from within the school, sometimes in response to changing external circumstances, but, whatever the cause, the Educational Project represents a concerted effort on the part of the school to change and improve its educational service and could not be prescribed externally.  The school initiates the action and launches a course of activity which is unique to that school and that milieu.  This quality of taking charge of one's destiny is crucial to the concept of an educational project.

2. Reflecting consensus

An Educational Project should be developed within the context of school-community consultation and participation.  The achievement of consensus may either be an effect of having an Educational Project or the condition precipitating its development.  In either case, the important feature is that participants are engaged in the kind of work which helps clarify the role of the school in such a way that divergent opinions can somehow be reconciled and fruitfully contribute to the formation of a clear school identity.

3. Facilitating the development of participants

An Educational Project is undertaken to make the school more responsive to its milieu and as such, the project must be one which serves the learning and development needs of its participants, either individually or as members of a group.  It is assumed that an Educational Project would facilitate this development both as a result of increased dialogue between groups such as parents and teachers, and more directly in terms of the kind of services the project has set in motion.

4. Evolving through adaptation

The Educational Project is based on the notion of the school adapting to its community, and of the community in turn adapting to the nature of the school.  There are several aspects to this notion of adaptation.  First, it is assumed that the school reflects whatever diversity exists within its milieu and is capable of responding to changes in needs and resources. Secondly, the implicit assumption is that existing or developing

communication systems provide the necessary source of information for such adaptation to occur.

Thirdly, it should be stressed that adaptation does not necessariy mean the adoption of avant-garde positions. The project need not be a dramatic departure from current pedagogical practices. If maintenance of current techniques is, in fact, considered desirable, such a reaffirmation must follow adequate community consultation and involvement in clarifying the nature of the school and its values.

5.  Known about and understood

This quality is closely related to the notion of **transparence.** The school's Educational Project should be one which has been widely discussed within the community. Though it may vary in scope, either across grade levels, curriculum areas, or pupil service programs, the participants should be capable of defining its purpose and nature.

A final process matter which must be mentioned concerns the Orientation Committee as a consultation system, suggested in MEQ documents. While recognizing the important role given this committee in MEQ literature, we do not consider the existence of an Orientation Committee to be a pre-requisite of an Educational Project. There are several reasons for this position: first, it would appear as though some of the resistance to the MEQ Educational Project policy is in fact resistance to the establishment of Orientation Committees, whose role is seen as a source of possible conflict among different groups; secondly, schools may well have established efficient mechanisms for carrying out an Educational Project already.

**What are the assumptions and the constraints?**

As noted earlier, there are conflicting views about both the desirability and the feasibility of the Educational Project. Some of the major assumptions are that

schools do in fact represent homogeneous communities, and are not as  pluralistic as the larger social context. While this might be true in some areas, there are a number of urban schools, both French and English, where such an assumption is unevaluated

schools can achieve efficient balance between pressure for adaptability and a need for stability

a significant participatory role can be found in spite of the need for maintaining power at higher levels for certain

kinds of decisions

the intended participants are indeed available to engage in the suggested processes.

Whether these assumptions are in fact necessary conditions for success, and the extent to which success may be achieved without them, can only be verified in the light of experience in the field.

Much of what has been said so far suggests that by having an Educational Project the school can transform itself into whatever it wishes to be as long as the process criteria are met. Unfortunately such latitude is not permitted. Several constraints are placed on the specific nature of the Educational Project as it will evolve in a given school. Among the major constraints are

. the régime pédagogique of the province
. lack of financial support from the MEQ for Educational Project work at the local level
. lack of available personnel and financial support at the board level
. conflicting responsibilities and priorities at the local school level
. the constraints imposed by settlements regarding the working conditions of school employees
. decline in enrolments and resources
. diversity within communities.

There seem to be two positions which can be adopted with regard to these constraints. The first would suggest that such constraints are inevitable aspects of any context in which action is being planned, that constraints exist in all decision-making situations, and that they are no more than problems for which solutions can and should be found. A position such as this would no doubt sit well with any MEQ concern to prevent schools from developing expectations for support beyond that which the MEQ is willing to provide. The second position suggests that these constraints are in some cases of such a scope as to prevent the implementation of an Educational Project, at least in terms of certain essential features. What remains clear is that schools developing Educational Projects must in fact engage in numerous negotiations and deal with these issues at a variety of levels.

**What promise does it offer?**

Given the ambiguities in definition and a lack of resolution of the issues of central versus local educational control, what promise does the Educational Project offer? Public concern about the quality of education has rarely been greater. There

are cries for higher standards and increased effectiveness, pressure to humanize school environments, and attempts to make schools more relevant to the 1980's. The major question is whether the Educational Project can help individual schools resolve conflicting priorities and thereby increase their educational excellence.

Our analysis suggests that the concept of the Educational Project may be based on an invalid premise, that one can legislate educational individuality and excellence. Accommodating the uniqueness of a school's clientele should perhaps not be done by legislating a process for it. Such a process relies on means that are to be found in the school community rather than in the Ministry's good intentions.

Thoughtful and adaptive educators have always tried to meet local needs; those who have not have remained static, not because of any misunderstanding of requirements or lack of knowledge of the means, but rather because of a lack of will. Those who have possessed the requisite leadership have understood the process to be interactive; means and ends have evolved with the changing situation. Such an educational leader who has succeeded has, through his or her success, attracted a new clientele who have sought out that school because of its project, and have in turn brought their own perspectives to its continual evolution.

In summary, our analysis of the Educational Project leaves us in the somewhat uncomfortable position of being unable to specify any differences to be expected between a school which has adopted an "Educational Project" and one which, for reasons which may have nothing to do with such official formulations, respects differences, accommodates the needs of its participants, seeks appropriate solutions to its problems, and consults effectively with its members. An Educational Project, were it to entail the provision of support in the form of additional resources and high quality leadership, might well help transform a troubled school into a more effective one; but it is unclear what the adoption of an Educational Project could change in a school which currently functions effectively.

Since its stress is so heavily on process descriptions, the Educational Project might serve best as a formula for rating school excellence, rather than as a policy for effecting school improvement. And it is in this sense that the work which has surrounded the Educational Project is most valuable, since it has succeeded in defining important dimensions of a school's responsibility to its participants and the community which it serves.

## NOTE

1. For a detailed analysis of the historical context surrounding the concept as well as a review of the current status of the concept, the reader is referred to Ambroise and Ouellet, 1981.

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