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## The Case for Supply-Side Education

### Abstract

*Are we asking the school to assume too great a responsibility for the educational and social development of our youth? Should the school limit itself to certain fundamental responsibilities? If yes, which ones? Who should assume those responsibilities for which the school will no longer be responsible? This article takes an historical approach to examine the socio-political changes of the last three decades that were instrumental in shaping Quebec schools.*

Nearly everyone interested in authentic intellectual activity senses a serious decline in the quality of education dispensed by our schools.

At a recent meeting of the Montreal Chapter of Phi Delta Kappa (PDK), the publisher of *The Gazette* (Montreal), Clark Davey, asserted that in every public opinion poll recently held across Canada, education consistently ranked second to unemployment, as a great concern to Canadians (Davey, 1986). Further sources also show that the quality of secondary education is deemed "just awful". For instance, a 1985 PDK poll demonstrated that 36% of the Canadian population feel "schools have worsened". Forty-two percent (42%) of the respondents could not offer a single example of an area in which schools were "doing a particularly good job" and 67% felt high schools were "not hard enough" (PDK, 1985). Schools are perceived by others as a "wasteland". Education is apparently being viewed as infected with the "British disease", and the foundations of our culture are being eroded by a "rising tide of mediocrity" (Adelson, 1983; Finn et al., 1984).

The catalyst for Davey's discussion was *A Nation At Risk*, a report issued by President Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE, 1982). That, and Quebec's own recent experience with schools, is why the Estates-General on the Quality of Education was convened in April of 1986 in Quebec. Twenty years after the Parent Report, we are reflecting on what happened since its implementation.

Have the schools in Quebec become a catch-all? Behind that question stand three concerns. Are we asking the school to assume too great a responsibility for the educational and social development of our youth? Should the school limit itself to certain fundamental responsibilities, and if yes, which ones? And who would assume the responsibilities for which the school would no longer be responsible?

Unlike Kipling's Mahbub, I will not muddy the wells of inquiry with the stick of precaution. My answer is yes, the schools of Quebec, as in other places, have become an undifferentiated and unfocused catch-all. The contemporary Quebec school has become swollen with a multitude of non-pedagogical callings and is at present not ministering to educative necessity. It is not dispensing a good education to youth. Let me treat each of the above concerns in turn.

### *Too many responsibilities?*

Schools are drifting because they have been asked to assume too many responsibilities for the educational and social development of our youth. The interesting part is how and why this happened.<sup>1</sup>

In retrospect, we can all recognize the enormous stresses imposed upon the schools in the immediate post-war era. The most visible of these was demographic in origin. There was an extraordinary increase in the number of youngsters to be educated, requiring a vast expansion of public schools and, ultimately, universities and colleges. This entailed not only the building of physical plants, but also the recruitment and training of a large body of new teachers and administrators. Having to do so much in education (and, so soon) generated activity and a sort of euphoria that contaminated the idea of education or the philosophy of education itself. Education came to be seen as a universal solvent for a whole array of problems in the polity. This was particularly true in Quebec, on the verge of its "Quiet Revolution".

Generation size also contributed to crowding, fewer opportunities in the marketplace, and, most importantly, to an increase in social pathology: that is, increase in the rate of suicide, homicide, delinquency, illegitimacy, divorce, alcoholism, drugs, and the like. Schools found themselves rather suddenly confronting new and unexpected problems in discipline; in student motivation and morale.

The size of the post-war generation had another effect not immediately apparent. School systems became larger and more expensive, and this accelerated the tendency toward the consolidation of school districts. The figures are astonishing (Tali, 1985). In 1964 "Bill 60" established a Ministry of Education and a Superior Council of Education, while "Operation 55" grouped over 1500 school commissions into 55 Catholic and 9 Protestant regional school boards. In 1967 "Bill 25" imposed a single teachers' salary scale for the province. The outcome was a substantial increase in system size, and with that came a shift to bureaucratic modes of organization. That shift brought with it a series of changes in the nature and practice of authority in the schools as well as the relationship between teaching staff and administrators.

The major change was from a traditional mode of authority – that is, direct and personal – to a legal contractual mode, in which the emphasis was placed upon conformity to formal rules and legal codes. This could not have arrived at a less propitious time, at least so far as school discipline was concerned. When social pathology was beginning its ominous rise, educators (and school leaders) began to find themselves buried in paper, constrained by regulations, and pressed by extraneous modernist claims.

Forces and ideologies extrinsic and alien to the school and education began to penetrate the practice of education in Quebec, not only in the realm of discipline, but in educational policy and curriculum as well. The university graduates of the 1960s, armed with "modernist" ideology, upon graduation carried this spirit along with them through the institutions; from kindergarten to the press; the state and school included. To these institutions they brought with them their "passive revolution" through what one author called a "war of position" (Gramsci, 1971).

More than any other institution in Quebec, the school became an arena of conflict or struggle between the values of *traditionalism* and of *modernity*. Traditionalism refers to qualities of merit, accomplishment, competition, and success; self-restraint, self-discipline, and the postponement of gratification; the stability of the conventional family; and a belief in certain moral universals. The modernist ideology questioned and even scorned the pursuit of success; was egalitarian and redistributionist in emphasis; tolerated or encouraged sensual gratification; valued self-expression as against self-restraint; accepted alternative or deviant forms of the family; and emphasized ethical relativism.

Pressed from the outside, filled with new teachers inside, the school submitted to modernism and accepted the claims of the modernist spirit, usually against the wishes of public opinion. As a result, the school began steadily to lose its historic authority, coherence, and public support, and then inner confidence.

Many people saw these events coinciding with the emergence of an activist, interventionist state in Quebec during the Quiet Revolution.

The most important cause of the school's diminished authority was the growth of governmental and bureaucratic intervention; an intervention also informed by modern ideology and the rhetoric of "change and modernization" based on a distorted and distended idea of equality (Frankel, 1973). Distorted; because it transformed the original idea of moral equality (before the law, and, of opportunity) into total equality or the new egalitarianism; that is, equality of result, outcome, and condition. Distended; because it put equality above all other values. Equality was pulled loose from its context; or its "family of principles". Equality became a homeless, vagrant, prodigal principle, stalking society and looking for total, or, as Lenin called it, "really full (or complete) democracy" rather than "formal democracy" (Lenin, 1974).

Statism, euphemistically referred to as the "public sector", became fashionable and not to have one was to risk being labelled as politically primitive, backward, and inhumane (Harris, 1985). As a result, the school (along with other institutions) was politicized, governmentalized, and, eventually for all intents and purposes, nationalized. The school was made to work under "command conditions" (Harris, 1985).

Its story became one of constant experimentation with revised instructional methods and changing administrative models, without caution or demurral. The school was to do everything at once. It found itself having to serve not only local interests, but also the larger goals of public policy. While it once served *in loco parentis*, it now was an agency of the state; increasingly distant from the expectations of its natural and essential constituency – the family. The school became a "captured institution" (Berger, 1986).

This nationalization of the school has predictably led not to its revitalization but rather to its galloping debilitation. The school has become ambivalent and confused. It was not sufficiently cautious and discriminating to resist the false, meretricious, or simply foolish ideas imposed on it by others. It did not sustain a coherent idea of itself or its essential values, and it failed to frame a cogent response to its ideological modern critics.

As a result, the authority of the school in many ways is weaker today than at any other moment in our history. It does not govern itself, does not freely choose its own goals, and it is not generally guided by time-tested values. It is governed by an agenda based on a modernist egalitarian ideology, the keystone of which is the psychological doctrine of needs which was lifted from a seductive maxim in *The Criticism of the Gotha*

*Program*; "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs" (Hyman, 1962).

*Fundamental responsibilities?*

Should the school limit itself to certain fundamental responsibilities, and if so, which ones?

The answer is an unequivocal yes, but we will not be able to return to fundamentals without a "Copernican Revolution" or a Counter-Reformation in educational thinking. The Parent Report (1963-66) represented a movement away from classical theology and philosophy as the ground of education. Its thinking reverberated with a sense of adventure and the promise of a revolutionary science of education based on psychology and its modernist pseudo-scientific assumptions about the nature of students, learning, sources of conduct (reduced to "behaviour") and development; complemented by what Rev. Bernard Lonergan called a "disdain for metaphysics" and philosophy and their inherent "immunity from revolutionary change" (Lonergan, 1957). Celebrants of constant change became impatient towards the quiet incremental insights of metaphysics and turned to science and psychology.

Yet today, the psychological paradigm on which modern scientific education stands has collapsed. It is bankrupt and has failed because it explains so little when compared to the anomalies it leaves unexplained.

Scientific psychology posited a qualitatively different stage in human life called adolescence. With the "stage of adolescence" (a euphemism employed to describe the postponement or suspension of responsibility) psychological theory posited a separated world of the young which was filled with unique "needs", interests, and wants, and bordered by the so-called "generation gap", and protected by the test of "relevance". Relevance became the test for accepting or rejecting an idea, practice, or policy.

The purpose of school was to cater to this panoply of supposed and insinuated needs, from a theoretical and professional framework of a corrupt or pidgin progressivism. Put another way, in the language of economics, this was demand-side education. Whatever politicians, bureaucrats, ideologues, lobbyists, or special interest groups said or claimed was "needed" (or demanded) by the students, or the times, or our post-industrial society, by the future, or by Alvin Toffler, the school meekly accepted the responsibility to provide it, and those who did not were labelled non-progressive, or worse, ultra-conservative.

This disposition turned the school into a clearing-house of intellectual nonsense and a sort of re-distributionist pork barrel. As a result,

we all know what happened and how the schools were ruined. Eventually the resources, energy, and mission of the school became depleted, diffused, wasted, and spent.

The notion of adolescence and the doctrine of needs are ideas given to us by the modern science of psychology. These notions were created and articulated by progressive professors long before being felt (or demanded) by young people. Demand, in this case, was driven by supply. Supply created demand (Gilder, 1981). The mousetrap, the model-T Ford, the umbrella, the movie camera, the TV, and the computer were not first needed or demanded, and later supplied. These products were first created, supplied, given, and then a demand for them became felt.

Similarly, it is incumbent upon us to provide a contemporary theory of supply-side education grounded on what classical philosophy teaches about reality, the nature of man, and of knowledge.

Eric Voegelin (1952) said reality is composed of two orders; the immanent order of this world, and the transcendental order of the next. To live in one order only is to live in unreality, in an illusion, or in the cave. In aeronautical terms it is like trying to fly with one wing.

As one reflects upon our schools and our curriculum, it is increasingly evident that our duty is to reintroduce the traditional theological Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant senses of the second order of reality, ground education on it and courageously and proficiently supply it in our schools. All else is Gnosticism, because Gnosticism by definition, recognizes only one aspect of reality, the immanent order, and trusts that it is completely knowable by human means; that is, science or reason.

Our education and schools should be oriented away from the present modernist goal of creating the profane "good society" and to the traditionalist goal of the "good life". In a word, away from social engineering, and toward individual virtue. The aim of a serious education is to get students to like and dislike what they ought, not what they will.

The fundamental responsibility of the school is reliable knowledge; that is, our spiritual and intellectual legacy and heritage. Some educational reformers call this literacy and numeracy. Others express it as the 3R's – reading, writing, and arithmetic; "back-to-basics", or "forward with the fundamentals". Others call for the reintroduction of the Great Books and the Big Ideas.

The Heritage Foundation's Herb Berkowitz wrote in 1981, "If Johnny can't read, *cherchez le monopoly*" (Doyle, 1984). Since this seems to be a large part of our problem, my answer, borrowed from William J.

Bennett (1986), is that the mission of the school and the aim of education should be "the 3C's – character, content, and choice." Character would mean the acquisition of individual virtue. Virtue based on content, that is, the best that has been thought and said on important questions. And choice means competition among schools by de-nationalizing, privatizing, and the de-standardizing of our "flexible" and "relevant" demand-side curriculum. That would be the "Copernican Revolution" or the Counter-Reformation of our time. This post-modern dispensation is the challenge of our day.

A thought here on the teaching profession. Teachers feel unworthy and undignified in our demand-side educational system because it is failing; and they know it. Caught between the state and the union, leaderless, they have been reduced to being one of the "caring professions", distributing care and handouts, responsible for and creating very little. Without competition, that is, standards, effort, production, merit, and reward, there is nothing for teachers but the "theoretical" schemes invented by the state or the shop. The highest moral principle of the shop is "seniority". And the highest moral principle of the state is "flexibility" or accomodation. Unable to prospect the market or their natural clients, teachers feel dependant, diminished, and demoralized. Teacher "burnout" and despair are not caused by life or the normal course of events. That is, despair is not caused by maturation or by reaching the age of 40. Despair and humiliation are caused by the dependence, aimlessness and confusion endemic to the culture of poverty, the rhythms and rituals of the protected and subsidized reservation and slum.

The Latin word for teach is *docere*, which happens to be the root of the word indoctrination. If we are to return to fundamentals, what is needed most in education is most warned against and resisted by its theorists – an adult willing and able to teach.

If we are to salvage our schools, this probably means making education and schools "teacher-centred" again. This could be achieved by extricating our schools from extraneous alien claims and our present child-centred ideology, by engaging in what Theodore R.Sizer (1986) called "the politics of subtraction". That is, simplifying administration, thus reducing the number of bureaucrats, and second, refocusing the curriculum around a core of essential intellectual skills and areas of study, and restricting programs that don't directly contribute to this mission.

### ***Who assumes the non-school responsibilities?***

If the school is to do less and do it better, who should assume the responsibilities for which the school will no longer be responsible? We might well wonder who it shall be since one of the classical consequences of an interventionist state is that it disrupts and distorts the society's

institutional ecology, by displacing smaller institutions and disfiguring the institutional landscape.

The only locus for the devolved responsibilities of the denationalized, simplified, and concentrated school, is what sociologists call the "mediating institutions" in society which stood as buffers between the individual and state; that is, church, congregation, neighborhood, association, group, club, family, and the whole array of voluntary associations which can function as alternate centres of authority and loyalty.

When it comes to the present state monopoly over education in Quebec, I have argued elsewhere that the origin of our problem was the euphoria of the Quiet Revolution and its statist thrust (Kelebay, 1984). We forgot that parliamentary "supremacy" should not be confused with the notions of totality or entirety. Supreme means last, ultimate, or highest. It does not mean total, entire, or exclusive.

In 1867, the BNA Act divided parliamentary "supremacy" between the federal and provincial parliaments, and gave to the provincial parliament "supremacy" over education. The division of "supremacy" was intended to exclude only the federal parliament from jurisdiction over education. The provincial parliament was made "supreme", meaning the last, ultimate, or highest authority in education. Not the sole authority. The British Parliament could give "supremacy" because it had that. It could not give totality because it never had it. *Nemo dat quod non habet*. One cannot give what one does not have.

Historically, the "doctrine of parliamentary supremacy" was grafted upon a society grounded on the "rights of Englishmen", the common law, and steeped in a particular tradition in which everything was **permitted unless forbidden** by Parliament. It was not a tradition which assumed that everything was **forbidden unless permitted** by Parliament, which is the case in totalitarian states.

An individual, family, association, corporation, or any other voluntary "mediating institution" had the right to lawfully engage in education, without displacement by the provincial parliament. But under the influence of the modernist ethos, and the "totalitarian temptation", "supreme" was confused with "total", and this led to the exclusion of our "mediating institutions" from the field of education (Revel, 1978). We will have to look to this kind of institution to assume the responsibilities for which the school will no longer be responsible.



### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, because much of what has been done to our schools in the past twenty years has been done in the name of "modernization", I want to leave you with a thought from the Mexican poet and philosopher Octavio Paz on what has been called "le paradox pedagogique" (Revel, 1986). In his new book *One Earth, Four or Five Worlds: Reflections on Contemporary History*, he makes it clear to apostles of rampant modernization that a society cannot with impunity live solely for the future. It needs the balance provided by inherited, ancestral inertias as curbs upon action. In other words, every society needs a taboo system. A backward looking irrationalism can often be dressed up as a new departure. A revolution (even a Quiet one) may very well be a regression. Particularly in our jet age, frontward flight can be mistaken for forward flight.

As we look at our schools today, they may well have become our Picture of Dorian Gray. That returns us to the question of reality. The immanent order and the next. Reality and appearance. Knowledge and opinion.

Remember Socrates and Plato? The "Allegory of the Cave"? Our psychologically-based science, or so-called knowledge of education, may only be opinion in drag.

This paper is a modified version of an address delivered by Professor Kelebay at the Estates-General on the Quality of Education, in Montreal, at the Queen Elizabeth Hotel, April, 1986.

### NOTE

1. My analysis here is indebted to Professor Joseph Adelson, professor of psychology at the University of Michigan. See: Joseph Adelson, "What Happened to the Schools", *Commentary*, Vol. 71, No. 3, March 1981. pp.36-41.

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