

THE NEW CURRICULUM REFORM: WHAT DOES IT REALLY MEAN?

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ABSTRACT. One important element of the present educational reform in Québec is a set of major changes in the elementary and secondary school curriculum. A new curriculum structure has been established and a new process of curriculum development and implementation is being initiated. In this article, the author outlines the major aspects of the curriculum reform and then discusses the implications of these changes for schools in general and English schools in particular.

RÉSUMÉ. Un élément important de la réforme actuelle de l'éducation au Québec est un ensemble de profonds changements dans le cursus du primaire et du secondaire. On a ainsi établi une nouvelle structure curriculaire et entrepris un nouveau processus d'élaboration et d'adoption des programmes. Dans cet article, l'auteur souligne les principaux paramètres de réforme des programmes et discute des répercussions de ces changements pour les écoles en général et les écoles anglophones en particulier.

INTRODUCTION

One important element of the present educational reform in Québec is a set of major changes in the elementary and secondary school curriculum. A new curriculum structure has been established and a new process of curriculum development and implementation is being initiated. These changes will have important implications for how schools are organized, how teachers do their work, the way in which programs are adapted to individual and community needs and the types of learning that are given priority in schools.

This is the third wave of curriculum reform in Québec in the past thirty years. The first was the educational reforms of the Quiet Revolution in the 1960s which arose from the recommendations of the Parent Report.

That reform introduced a new structure of elementary and secondary education, abolished separate secondary streams, recommended "activist" methods in elementary school, and established comprehensive high schools and subject promotion, all in keeping with the progressive educational spirit of the era (Henchey, 1972). If this first reform was a modernizing and opening up of curriculum, the second wave which occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s involved centralization of control and detailed programs, reflecting the back-to-basics movement of that era (Henchey & Burgess, 1987, chapter 4).

The current reform is an attempt to address the major criticisms of the existing programs which were expressed in the Estates General and elsewhere, in particular: the excessive detail in programs, too much centralization; too little opportunity for schools to adapt to local needs; too little rigor especially in basic literacy and numeracy; low rate of school retention; and a mismatch between schooling and the labour market (Commission for the Estates General, 1996). On the other hand, it should be noted that Québec leads Canadian provinces in mathematics performance (Ministère de l'Éducation [MEQ], 1998) and is one of a few provinces in which literacy levels are only loosely linked to socio-economic status (Willms, 1997).

The curriculum reforms in Québec share the same general orientation as reforms currently taking place in Canada, the United States and other industrialized nations. These include: greater stress on standards, accountability and student success; definition of essential learning expectations (or outcomes, results or benchmarks) to be attained at different levels of the system; shift of responsibilities from the bureaucracies of systems and school boards to the individual school; recognition of the importance of the role of the school staff in curriculum development; rethinking of the focus and essential content of various subject areas; emphasis on cross-curricular and interdisciplinary learning; integration of information and communication technologies; introduction of new approaches to assessment and reporting; more effective involvement of parents and the community; and closer links among objectives, programs, teaching and assessment.

The Québec reform evolved through a series of reports and policy papers beginning in 1994 with a brief by the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation [CSE] (1994) and the Corbo report on learning profiles (Task Force on Elementary and Secondary School Learning Profiles, 1994). This was followed by the report of the Estates General on

Education (Commission for the Estates General, 1996) and the Inchauspé report on curriculum reform (Task Force on Curriculum Reform, 1997). These three documents provided the "raw material" for the reform.

The Ministry then issued a major policy document entitled *Québec Schools on Course* (MEQ, 1997) which became the basic blueprint of the reform. The Commission des programmes d'étude [Curriculum Council] was established which drew up a schedule for the development and implementation of programs and a set of general guidelines (Commission des programmes d'études, 1998a, 1998b). An analysis of the general curriculum policies was made by the CSE in two briefs (1998, 1999a) and two research reports (1999b, 1999c). During the spring of 1999, teams made up mainly of teachers were established to develop programs in different areas, MEQ personnel held sessions for school board officials and the sector responsible for services to the English community created a design committee and developed a special web site.¹ More recently, the Proulx report on the place of religion in schools has been released, recommending the secularizing of Québec schools, and this will also influence the ongoing curriculum debate (Task Force on the Place of Religion in Schools in Québec, 1999).

GENERAL STRUCTURE OF THE CURRICULUM

Mission of the school

An official Ministry document (MEQ, 1997) defines the mission of the school as follows: (1) provide instruction (transmission of knowledge, intellectual development); (2) socialize (sense of belonging to the community, democracy, responsible citizenship, concerns about the meaning of life); and (3) provide qualifications for further studies and occupational skills. These can be interpreted in a narrow sense – imparting knowledge, discipline, and career training – or in a broader sense of the necessary knowledge and intellectual skill needed in modern society, values related to meaning and sense of identification with community, and skills of lifelong education and independent learning necessary to continue one's learning and work. It is in this second sense that the mission of the school is the starting point for the new curriculum.

Cycles

The school system is divided into preschool education and five cycles, three elementary school cycles, cycle 1 (years 1 and 2), cycle 2 (years 3 and 4) and cycle 3 (years 5 and 6). These are followed by two

secondary school cycles, cycles 4 (years 7, 8 and 9) and cycle 5 (the last two years, 10 and 11).

Although there are cycles in the present structure, the proposals represent important changes. First, the cycles are numbered continuously (1 to 5) from first year to the eleventh year, stressing the continuity of the structure. Second, the present structure of two three-year elementary school cycles is replaced by three two-year cycles. Third, the first four cycles (grades 1 to 9) constitute common basic education, with the last cycle involving greater differentiation with more options. Fourth, cycles replace individual grades or years from grade 1 to grade 9 for purposes of curriculum development and instructional organization. Curriculum is being built around results expected at the end of each cycle and teacher teams must determine the organization of programs and activities within the cycle.

Programs of study

The general curriculum design has two dimensions: (1) programs of study or subject disciplines (*programmes d'étude*) and (2) cross-curricular programs of themes and skills (*programme des programmes*).

The programs of study include subjects grouped in five domains:

- (a) languages (English, French, other languages);
- (b) technology, science and mathematics;
- (c) social sciences (history, geography, citizenship education, contemporary world);
- (d) arts (music, visual arts, dance, drama); and
- (e) personal development (physical education and health, moral and religious education).

These do not represent major changes from the present structure but there are some differences: the grouping of subjects in five clusters; linking areas such as science and technology, history and civics, physical education and health; emphasis on the links among subjects in a cluster and among clusters, as well as emphasis on links within a subject from one cycle to another. This stress on links addresses the criticism that current subjects are too isolated one from another and poorly coordinated.

Cross-curricular programs

A major innovation in Québec curriculum is the formal introduction of cross-curricular programs which seek to develop the integration and transfer of learning and which are expected to define the particular character or philosophy of a school. These programs include competencies and themes. There are three types of cross-curricular competencies: (1) intellectual and methodological competencies such as problem solving, research, exercise of creativity, the planning and evaluation of projects; (2) personal and social competencies, including self-knowledge, sensitivity to others, promoting the well-being of oneself and others; (3) language competencies involving relationships with others, the use of language and various technologies.

A second type of cross-curricular programs includes themes that involve more than one subject area or are not emphasized in any area. Examples are personal identity and world view; health and well being; personal and vocational options; social relationship; the environment; consumer rights and responsibilities; the media; citizenship and community life.

These cross-curricular programs are to be the responsibility of the staff of the school as a team under the leadership of the principal. They are to be presented to the governing board of the school as part of the school's educational project. Students acquire these competencies, attitudes and ideas in a variety of ways: through individual subjects (e.g., problem solving in science and in the arts); by participating in extra-curricular and community activities (leadership in sports, community service, work-study programs); by the structure of student government (civic responsibility); by using the counseling services (peer mediation, emotional intelligence, knowledge of careers); through the school regulations (behavior codes and academic policies); and through the school's teaching and evaluation methods (cooperative learning, problem-based programs, independent study, portfolios).

Time allocation

At the preschool level, there is a single integrated program and time is allocated by the teacher. The elementary school program is based on a school week of 23.5 hours, of which 16 hours are allotted to language of instruction and mathematics in the 1st cycle and 12 hours in the 2nd and 3rd cycles. This leaves between 5.5 and 9.5 hours per week to be

allocated to other subjects with two hours set aside for moral and religious instruction.

At the secondary level, the proposal is based on a week of 36 credits (1 credit = 25 hours of teaching over the year). There are 6 optional credits in cycle 4 (grades 7, 8, 9) and 24 optional credits in cycle 5 (grades 10, 11); that is, one-third of the cycle 5 program of 72 credits is elective, permitting considerable differentiation in courses preparing for further study and careers.

An important principle of the proposal is that official programs determine 75% of the learning activity of a school. The remaining 25% (that is, the equivalent of over one day per week) is left to the initiative of the school for enrichment activities and remedial work. A similar principle was supposed to guide the previous curriculum regulations of the early 1980s but it remained unclear how this weighting of programs was determined in designing programs and in school practice. It remains to be seen whether this concept of 75% has any meaning in the current curriculum plan.

General principles of the reform

There are a number of other important principles expressed in the various reform documents (especially MEQ, 1997; Commission des programmes d'études, 1998b).

1. FROM ACCESS TO SUCCESS There is a shift in emphasis from access to learning to success in learning. This implies clear expectations, clear indicators of success, and clear responsibilities of schools and the education system.

2. DIPLOMA The Diploma of Secondary Education at the end of secondary school will be the same for everyone: youth and adults, French and English.

3. RESPONSIBILITIES Programs are prepared by the MEQ and approved by the Curriculum Council and the Catholic and Protestant Committees of the CSE. The MEQ is responsible for developing programs of study: planning, writing, translating into English, field-testing, and submitting the programs to the Curriculum Council prior to approval by the MEQ (Commission des programmes d'études, 1998b).

4. THE PROCESS The process includes four phases: (a) design; (b) field testing; (c) implementation; and (d) ongoing development. Stress is

placed on the involvement of all partners in education, especially teachers and school administrators.

5. PREPARATION OF PROGRAMS Programs are to be prepared by teams which include a majority of teachers as well as administrators, consultants, and subject matter specialists. Programs should include: (a) intellectual and methodological approaches; (b) relevant cross-curricular competencies; (c) work inside and outside of schools; (d) relevant documents and works; and (e) use of information and communications technologies.

6. FOCUS ON ESSENTIAL LEARNING Programs should include relatively few essential objectives; they should not include methods and detailed specifications (like intermediate objectives) nor any specific teaching approach, but they may suggest enrichment objectives. Programs include information on the evaluation of objectives.

7. COORDINATION Results should be coordinated with expectations in the same subject in the previous and subsequent cycles and with other subjects in the same cycle.

8. ADAPTATION Schools must have the leeway needed to adapt teaching "to various contexts" and to ensure mastery of the learning defined in the programs.

9. TIMETABLE Provisional program specifications are sent to the Curriculum Council for approval according to a fixed timetable, beginning in March 1999 (e.g., elementary English, language of instruction) through August 2001 (e.g., Cycle 5 mathematics and science). When approved, provisional programs are field tested throughout Québec. Programs are corrected, sent to the Council for review and to the Minister for approval. Program implementation will begin in September 1999 (but individual schools may wait until 2000) and the process is expected to be completed in 2002-2003 for elementary programs and 2005-2006 for secondary programs.

10. LANGUAGE AND MATHEMATICS Greater stress is placed on the language of instruction and on mathematics than in existing programs.

11. IMMERSION French immersion programs are recognized as an option within the overall program framework.

12. CONTENT Curriculum content is selected "on the basis of research data and widely shared views" (Commission des programmes d'études, 1998b). The content of all programs needs to be re-examined to take

into account current thinking, practice and research in the subject and to build in new links with cross-curricular objectives or other subject areas. There is a need to "propose new perspectives and to question received ideas" (Commission des programmes d'études, 1998b).

13. **CULTURAL COMPONENT** Emphasis is placed on the cultural component of curriculum in all areas. "Learning context formally includes cultural appreciation, especially of the most noteworthy cultural works and productions of various origins and from different eras" (Commission des programmes d'études, 1998b).

IMPLICATIONS OF THE PROPOSALS

Focus on the school

The proposals represent a major change from the current policy and practice in curriculum which has been the pattern for the past twenty years. Within a broad framework, curriculum decisions are being shifted from the ministry and to a lesser extent from school boards to individual schools. Within the school there is a shift in emphasis from the individual teacher and the classroom to the whole staff and to teacher teams of the school, led by the principal. There is also the suggestion of more active involvement of the governing board especially in the priorities and emphasis in the cross-curricular programs.

In the school curriculum there is a change in approach from objectives (as teacher intentions) to learning results (as student expectations and results), and from the individual year or grade as the unit of planning to the cycle. The teaching team or teams of the school are invited to rethink the focus, priorities and content of different subject areas, to develop local programs for cross-curricular competencies and themes, to coordinate learning expectations in different curriculum areas and cycles and to stress the cultural content of different subject areas. Behind all this is the clear implication that the school carries an important responsibility for the success of its students.

Process and substance

Although there have been program changes over the past twenty years, this is the first comprehensive program reform in Québec since the régimes pédagogiques and new programs of the early 1980s. In many respects the current curriculum reforms are comparable to those of the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s which changed not only the structure of programs but also the philosophy behind them and the teaching proce-

dures associated with them. In both reforms there is a movement from centralization to decentralization and from detailed program requirements to more open-ended and adaptable provincial guidelines. Both reforms place a good deal of reliance on the competence and initiative of teachers and principals.

There are two differences. In the 1960s the curriculum reforms were part of a larger social, political and economic revolution in Québec which gave special meaning to the educational changes and also there were resources to provide upgrading of the academic knowledge and professional skills of teachers. This time, there is less firm social consensus on many important issues and resources for professional development are very limited.

Until now the emphasis in the current reform has been on procedural knowledge and competencies like problem solving and team work which have not generated too much controversy. It will be interesting to see how much agreement endures when issues of substance and content arise – what works of literature should be stressed, which precise mathematical skills are crucial for high-technology careers, how much emphasis there should be on the cultural implications of science and technology, whose view of Québec history and its importance in relation to world history should prevail, who defines good citizenship, whether every student should be taught to be an entrepreneur, and what value is placed on multiculturalism in Québec schools, especially those outside the Montréal region. Many of these questions remain contentious elsewhere in Canada and in the United States where conflicting ideologies – progressive and conservative, academic and pedagogical, political and psychological – seek to influence the content of the curriculum and the content standards against which programs and students are to be assessed.

The search for resources

Resources of money and expertise are limited at the present time and can provide only modest professional development and support for adjusting to the new programs. Years of budget cuts and government downsizing have reduced the professional expertise in the MEQ and in school boards. Most boards have few if any trained curriculum consultants and the directors of curriculum and instructional services typically have a wide range of responsibilities. Because of demographic patterns and attempts to open positions in schools, many senior administrators and teachers have retired, causing a loss of institutional memory in

government agencies, school boards, schools and professional organizations. Nor does the fact that teachers' unions are now in the process of negotiating a new collective agreement with the government create a positive climate for enthusiastic curriculum reform.

It is still early in the process of developing new programs and learning resources, so it is difficult to know how the crucial issue of expertise in curriculum development will be addressed. Individual schools and school boards may form consortia to collaborate on developing programs and materials. Links may be established with the academic communities of the CEGEPs and universities, with cultural organizations and with the business community. Québec teachers and curriculum leaders may look outside to other provinces and countries for exemplary programs and practices, examples of which are the framework for science programs developed under the sponsorship of the Council of Ministers of Education (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 1997), and the Integrated Resource Packages of British Columbia (British Columbia Ministry of Education, n.d.). However, there is little indication at the moment that these initiatives are being given a great deal of consideration.

While a general intention is expressed to re-examine the content of all programs to take into account current thinking, practice and research, to select content "on the basis of research data and widely shared views," and to "propose new perspectives and to question received ideas," it is not clear what procedure is contemplated to ensure that these things will happen or who has the responsibility to do them. If the curriculum reform remains administrative and procedural, and does not get down to matters of substance and content renewal, the promise of the reform will not be very deeply embedded in schools and programs. At the moment government bureaucrats, school board administrators and practising teachers are the main architects of the emerging programs. This pool of expertise needs to be enlarged if the cultural, intellectual and ethical issues of a 21st century curriculum are to be engaged. Research in curriculum, as in other fields, must extend beyond the boundaries of Québec if we are to have a world class system.

There is no doubt that the curriculum reforms, if they are to be taken seriously, imply a major transformation in the work of teachers – expectations, task definitions, style of work and the working culture of the school. New skills will be required, including program development, a search for multi-media learning materials and resources, communication with parents to explain the new approach, evaluation

procedures and methods of reporting student progress. This implies time, will and support and it depends for its success on the emergence of a corps of teacher leaders across Québec.

From objectives to results

The results-based approach to curriculum and the cross-curricular competencies and themes constitute major curriculum innovations in Québec but they are not unique. Other provinces have developed graduation expectations, common essential learnings, benchmarks and results, and there are the various "standards movements" in the United States which are influencing curriculum development in that country. Although these approaches are being used in some Québec schools, they represent major changes in mentality for most educators. Nor is it clear at this point how far the curriculum leaders in the Ministry and school boards are prepared to go to adopt a results-based curriculum model with exit profiles, achievement indicators, criteria for evaluation, assessment of prior learning, flexible entry and exit, and variable duration for learning programs (Canadian Vocational Association, 1998). The reforms may mean a true and increasingly profound change in how learning takes place in schools and how teachers do their work, or it may mean little more than new terminology to describe old processes and assumptions.

Terminology does pose a problem. The current structure has been built around the language of teaching objectives, general statements of intent for goals and key steps in achieving these goals. The reform purports to change this to the language of learning results or success. This moves it more in the direction of similar trends in North America, towards such concepts as expectations, outcomes, results, standards and benchmarks. The current trend in Québec reform documents is to use "objectives" in French and "competencies" in English; the former fails to distinguish the current emphasis on learning results from previous approaches to teaching intentions; the latter reduces learning expectations to issues of skill and behavior, without embracing results such as understanding or values. The solution may be to adopt a less ideologically-laden term such as "results" or "expectations."

Questions of emphasis

LANGUAGE AND MATHEMATICS. Given Québec's major preoccupation with language and mathematics, it is not surprising these subjects receive heavy emphasis in the new curriculum. English as a second language in French schools will be introduced in cycle 2 (third year),

tradition of Québec. There is little acknowledgment of the contribution these communities can make to the overall vision and narrative of the curriculum nor the way in which the substance and tone of the curriculum should be changed to meet their needs. Issues such as "citizenship education," "the cultural content of curriculum" and "intercultural education, citizenship and international understanding" are not given very serious analysis in the official documents.

Development and implementation

The proposals underestimate – in my opinion – the time and expertise needed, the cost, the importance of a sophisticated and accessible information system, and the staff development required to implement the goals of the reform. Significant changes in the definition and scope of teacher work load may have to be negotiated. After two decades of "MEQ programs," schools, communities and especially principals and teachers need to acquire "ownership" of the new programs. Thanks to the work of Fullan and others (Fullan, 1993; Hargreaves 1997) we have learned a great deal from research about educational change, and the importance of combining "top-down" and "bottom-up" approaches. There needs to be more reflection and discussion on the change process and how it can ensure successful educational reform in Québec. Otherwise we will remain at the level of the "intended curriculum" and never get to real change in the "taught curriculum" and especially in the "learned curriculum."

ENGLISH EDUCATION IN QUÉBEC

There are approximately 100,000 children and young people attending English-language preschool, elementary and secondary schools offered by the nine new English school boards. Each board has a director of curriculum, instructional services or equivalent. There is an assistant deputy minister of education for the English community, a section of the MEQ to provide liaison and services to this community, and an Advisory Board on English Education.²

In recent decades, English education in Québec has been in survival mode. Restrictions on access to English schools and the emigration of many English-speaking Québécois have caused a precipitous decline in enrolments, resulting in closing of schools, few opportunities for new teachers, budget cuts and a general anxiety about the future of English education. French immersion programs and attempts to integrate many

students with learning difficulties have challenged schools and teachers and dominated the curriculum agenda. In addition, the program requirements introduced in the early 1980s involved detailed curriculum prepared almost exclusively with the French community in mind, with the result that English schools had difficulty finding appropriate English-language teaching materials that matched the curriculum requirements, and translations of French examinations posed problems for English students. Although these problems have been largely corrected by now, important challenges remain.

The creation of English school boards, the empowering of schools, and the structure of the new curriculum are promising developments for English education. The English schools have a complex mission: help young people integrate into the society and job market of Québec with the necessary linguistic and career skills but also to help students compete in a global job market with graduates of other English systems elsewhere in North America; balance the needs of French immersion programs with those of ensuring a thriving culture and literature built around the English language; compete for students with French schools and private schools; link a thinly distributed English population outside the Montréal region; and ensure equality of access for all students.

English schools have the task of defining their distinctiveness in Québec through how they shape the programs of studies and the cross-curricular learning activities, how they handle the cultural context of such subjects as social studies, the arts, thinking skills, citizenship education, current events and intercultural relations, and how the culture of the English school celebrates its distinctive cultural and linguistic character. These tasks can only be accomplished by close and continuous collaboration among the various school boards and associations and between them and our post-secondary institutions of colleges and universities, the cultural and business communities, and the resources in the communities served by the schools. The alternatives to a distinctive and dynamic English-language curriculum are a pale imitation of the French curriculum or a mediocre English one.

CONCLUSION

The current curriculum reform in Québec is just beginning to unfold. While it shows originality and considerable promise in the approach as well as in the overall design, it is too early to tell whether the promise will be realized. This article has suggested some issues for question and

concern, but two points need to be underlined: first, the reform is clearly in the direction of coherence, adaptation, participation, flexibility and diversity, and every effort should be made to encourage these qualities; second, the reform is a work in progress and its strengths and weaknesses will be products of the intelligence and initiative of those who participate in its development and implementation – not only administrators, bureaucrats and teachers appointed to committees, but the thousands of principals, teachers and students who must breathe life into programs and regulations.

NOTES

¹ Québec English Schools Network: www.qesn.meq.gouv.qc.ca.

² See MEQ: www.meq.gouv.qc.ca; Advisory Board: www.meq.gouv.qc.ca/cela/anglais.htm.

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