

# THE EDUCATIONAL RENEWAL AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL: LOOKING BACK TO BETTER UNDERSTAND THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE



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The nature of the interest that the college network has shown for what we call the reform of education is ambivalent. It is not clear whether it is the understanding of the nature of this reform and what led to it that is at the heart of this interest, or rather whether it is a certain fear of the unknown. “Students from the reform are going to arrive in college, how will this affect us? What about the prerequisites in mathematics and science? Will the training of these students in French be different from the training of the past and will this difference call for adaptation on my part? Implementing the reform at the secondary level has led to many debates, how can I make sense out of all that has been said? Is it true that knowledge is no longer transmitted? Is it true that the students we will receive will never have been taught using the lecture format?” Such questions are legitimate. But it is not to them that I will respond, at least not directly.

## THE REASONS FOR THE CHANGE OR WHY CHANGE?

The school curriculum, that which is learned in school, is a ‘social construct’. And, from time to time, education systems change certain elements of their school curriculum because social expectations with regard to what knowledge should be transmitted in school also change. A school curriculum represents, at any given moment, what a generation feels it must transmit to its children and grandchildren to better prepare them to deal with emerging situations as perceived at the time.

Consider the 1959 version of the program of studies for elementary schools which was implemented in Quebec schools during the 1960s, only a little over 40 years ago. Here is the list of school subjects taught in the order presented in that document: religion (half of the 700-page document is devoted to this subject which was taught for a total of five hours a week), the French language (nine hours per week were devoted to this subject), arithmetic, the history of Canada, geography, a second language, etiquette, hygiene, home economics (for girls), manual work (for boys), introduction to music, physical education, handwriting, drawing, agriculture, common knowledge (flowers, animals, birds, our friends, the stars, houses from long ago and today, the horse

and the car, paper, rubber... and never is the term ‘science’ used), as well as information on schools and professions.

And here is the content of the program for Grade 7, a turning-point year in the system back then. It deals not with professions, but with “states of life”, which differ for boys and girls. For boys, the states of life presented are: the priestly life, the religious life (religious priest and religious life but not a priest) and the secular life (family, work). For girls the states of life presented are: the natural vocation of women, the proper role of women, the religious life and the secular life.

You smiled while reading these things and yet, not everything is outdated in that document. Here is how the teaching of grammar is presented:

Grammar is not a formula of definitions and rules that children must learn by heart and be able to recite unperturbed. It is above all knowledge that they acquire by reflective observation and which consists in discovering the laws of language, in spoken and written language and, once these laws have been discovered, well-understood and formulated, in applying them every time they must speak or write. (*Département de l'instruction publique, 1959, p.375*)

So there we have a text which, in 1959, explains for teachers in a clear, concise and eloquent manner, things about what the *Ministère* now calls “the competency-based approach”. Quite a refreshing change from the jargon-ridden introductory pages of the new program that laboriously try to explain – often in a confusing manner, with the same word “competency” being used to say three different things – what the program is in terms of the competency-based approach. “You know you understand something when you can explain it to your grandmother,” Einstein used to say. (And to illustrate these points, stated so cleverly, the introductory pages find no better way than to refer to learning hockey! No one thought to illustrate them using basic intellectual learning that is done in school, in actual classrooms...)

So, the pedagogy of discovery is not a recent invention, and the training provided 40 years ago could be solid, even though some of the program content now seems to us to be outdated. Similarly, we tell ourselves that in 40 years future generations will laugh in the same way at some of the content of our new programs of study. At any rate, from this example taken from the past, no doubt you have a better understanding that, from



time to time, education systems renew the inventory of knowledge that they wish to transmit to children.

At the end of the war of 1939-1945, western countries invested in the quantitative development of their education networks. In the 1990s, these same countries thought it was important to undertake another reform, this time a qualitative one. Why? Because the wrinkles and the failings of the system in place appear more clearly, but mostly because the world changes and the challenges for which our children and grandchildren must be prepared are not the same as those we saw decades earlier. We must remember these things in order to understand the reform undertaken in Quebec. This reform, here as elsewhere, took place against the backdrop of calling into question a system which seemed inadequate to cope with challenges that new generations would have to face.

## ► CHANGES MADE TO THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM

### BUT WHAT CHANGES WERE ACTUALLY MADE?

Too often the new program of studies is presented without any reference to the old program, as if all this was self-evident and was justified by important principles and theories. That is what the Ministry of Education usually does and, in my opinion, this way of operating has hindered the implementation of the reform. The mobilization of the very great majority of actors in the field is not done on this basis. We do not change to conform to new theories, to a new dogma or – and God knows how often we have heard this from the mouths of promoters of the reform – “to change the paradigm”, as we might change religion, to become ‘socioconstructivist’ after having been ‘Skinnerian’ for such a long time.

A school curriculum is a complex business. We do not change it in the name of theories. We change it because new situations require corrective action. And it is here that we must first seek agreement. Also, we can only grasp the new curriculum correctly if we know the old one and the important points that were changed and why they were changed. This is the approach I have chosen in order to present to you a few characteristic traits of the new school curriculum.

### CHANGES IN THE ORGANIZATIONAL LOGIC OF WHAT WE CALL THE “CURRICULUM PATH”

To counterbalance the negative effects of segmentation and to foster deeper understandings and collaboration among teachers, the sequence of the subjects in the program of study is no longer divided up by year but rather by cycles of two or three years. The subject grid has been thoroughly

revised. Some subjects disappear, others are reconstituted, others are expanded. Here are the principal changes:

- an increase in the amount of time devoted to French in Cycle 1 of elementary school and in the first three years in secondary school (in this case, for these three years, this subject goes from 450 to 600 hours);
- the introduction of the possibility of a third language in Secondary 3;
- an increase in the amount of time devoted to history and to subjects of the social world (for history at the secondary level, it goes from 200 to 350 or 450 hours);
- the introduction of a national history course starting in Secondary 3, thereby allowing all students to take this course, which was not the case previously.

These gains were made to the detriment of what were referred to as “minor subjects” which were eliminated.

The first eight years constitute basic schooling in which there is little differentiation among the paths. After that, three different paths are proposed: one leads directly to employment, the two others provide a general education (one a so-called “applied” itinerary and a so-called “regular” itinerary).

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### CHANGES RESULTING FROM RESEARCH ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUSTAINABLE KNOWLEDGE IN STUDENTS

Anyone who compares the new curriculum to the old one will notice that greater importance is placed on the development of the student’s intellectual know-how, as well as on the mastering of generic concepts.

This is an approach to intellectual training that should not faze college teachers. The question of developing sustainable knowledge has been an ongoing preoccupation of the network since its very inception.

It was almost 24 years ago, during a lecture given at *Cégep Limoilou* on the subject of teaching in college, that I took my turn to broach the question of sustainable knowledge by using a quotation by Renan as a point of departure: “It is true that knowledge disappears to a great degree; it is the march that the mind has taken in the process that remains”. And I



put the question: What then is this 'march of the mind' that remains? My answer will permit you, I think, to understand better the provisions of the new secondary school curriculum which aims at the development of sustainable knowledge, even more so because at that time we spoke of such matters not as experts, but as practitioners and with a simple vocabulary.

The entire pedagogical tradition has known for centuries that training does not consist of the accumulation of knowledge. But let us do the exercise of looking at what we retain from school in order to identify this knowledge that remains. If in my own case I look back, what do I find?

In the most general terms, I find things as elementary as self-control (learning to write correctly, learning to solve problems in a limited amount of time, learning to work in silence); having a critical mind (knowing to monitor oneself, knowing how to look at a problem from all angles, taking a step back from a solution in order to examine it better, challenging oneself which leads to taking into consideration the opinions of others); the habit of analysis (considering the world and situations to be complex and grasping elements among which we must discover links in order to formulate new syntheses) etc.

In less general terms, what remains are the more or less substantial techniques that are required during school training (techniques of exploration, of training and of hypothesis verification which are developed, among other ways, by the practice of the scientific method); techniques for establishing a diagnosis based on indicators or symptoms [...]; techniques for validating data (control using sampling, cross-checking); techniques for reading (knowing how to read quickly, knowing how to read while skipping passages while still following or guessing the general gist of the text); knowing how to organize one's notes; knowing how to speak not to express oneself but to explain what one means, [...] etc.

On a level that is even less general, I am left with ideas and concepts borrowed from disciplines I have frequented: mathematics, biology, sociology, philosophy, linguistics, etc. As for the rest, that which has not subsequently been put to use in a profession, it is forgotten. (Inchauspé, 1992)

To translate this same type of preoccupation that we had at the college level, the new program of studies identifies some general abilities the development of which is no longer relegated to one course, but which now must become the concern of each of the teachers: to make use of information, to exercise

critical judgement, to learn effective work methods, to make the most of information and communication technologies, to cooperate, to communicate in an appropriate manner... These are the "cross-curricular" competencies, the targets of sarcasm in some media; they are never named specifying what they are, because if that were done, they would no longer be a laughing matter.

In addition, the program of studies also indicates the know-how which is specific to each discipline that the teaching of this discipline develops in students. But this is not all. In order to transmit 'sustainable knowledge' it is not only know-how which must be developed. We must also focus more on having students master, within the course content of the various subjects, generic concepts, concepts that have extensive fields of application and that will be useful for a long time. So we must identify them. But to do this work, the general economy of the program of studies that had been in use for 20 years had to be changed by moving the disciplinary dividing lines in an arrangement which was characterized by the Balkanization syndrome. Therein lies the immense piece of work that was accomplished by teams of teachers. That work has all my admiration and it also elicits the admiration of other countries. But it is little known at home and not featured in the ministerial documents themselves which have so much to say about "competencies" and the "competency-based approach" that we wonder if there still is such a thing as "knowledge".

But if, in terms of the official curriculum, these changes are appealing to specialists in these fields, not so in the field where, when it comes to the real curriculum, they are confusing for teachers. Not so much with regard to disciplinary competencies (they had already been using them without naming them since for all time and for all good teachers, has it not been the case that doing mathematics has been about teaching students to solve problems, to use reasoning, to know and to know how to use the symbols of the language of mathematics; and, for every good French teacher, has it not been the case that doing French has been about teaching students to read, to write and to evaluate literary works?) but rather with regard to developing cross-curricular competencies which in itself seems to cause more problems.

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But do these problems really arise from the difficulty there would be to evaluate these cross-curricular competencies, as some say? Could it be that the real problem is something else? What makes it possible to evaluate them is observation and the judgement on what is observed. However, in order for there to be observation of intellectual abilities, students must have an opportunity to put them into practice, and that is what may require teachers to change their practice. If the teacher and the manual are the only sources of information in the class, students will scarcely have an opportunity to develop the capacities to go and get information and to make use of it. If the teacher does not make any room in class for collaborative work among students, developing the capacity to cooperate may not take place. The problem with cross-curricular competencies does not lie primarily in their evaluation, but in the change in practice that it presupposes for teachers.

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As for consolidating program content around more generic concepts, you know from the experience of recasting your programs in CEGEPs that this is not easy and that very rational justifications can sometimes serve to mask the refusal to change the structure of one's course because it would be necessary to redo it. Do you think that the content which was previously distributed among the various courses in the first cycle of secondary school (physics, biology, ecology, technology) and which brought together elements of the contents of geology, astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology and technology can easily be reorganized into a single course? Faced with these course elements newly reorganized around central concepts in relation to four worlds (The Material World, The Living World, Earth and Space, and The Technological World), do you think that teachers who are used to the previous courses can immediately and easily find their way?

The same is true for general history. In the past, in 100 hours in Secondary 1, at their own discretion and at their own pace, teachers could cover human history from prehistory to today. Today, in 200 hours in Secondary 1 and 2, they must make the same journey in time, but for the selected periods they must focus on an element of the social world that is still visible in society today: Greece and the first experience of democracy, Rome and the introduction of the State and the Civil Code, the building of the West and the Christianization of Europe,

the American or French Revolution and the importance given to rights in the Declarations of these countries, etc. Such an approach to general history in order to find in it the roots of the present is intelligent and stimulating for students, but it demands qualities other than those that make a teacher a good transmitter, especially of culture.

#### CHANGES IN THE APPROACHES TO THE PRESENTATION OF CONTENT FOR SOME SUBJECTS

It is a well-known phenomenon that from time to time the presentation of the content of a course studied at school changes to the point that we no longer recognize any familiar items from our own school books in those of our children. From this point of view, the greatest shock of this type experienced in Quebec to date was what we called "The New Math" at the beginning of the 1970s. This issue gave rise to debates and this new approach to teaching mathematics was caricatured by many comedians of the day. Thousands of teachers then enrolled in the PERMAMA program (*Perfectionnement des maîtres de mathématiques*) which was established by the very young *Université du Québec à Montréal*. And if students from our schools are performing well on international tests, it is thanks to the care taken at that time to prepare teachers for this change and thanks to the consequences we drew from this, later, for the initial training of teachers. Alas, this time an analogous preparation was only undertaken for courses in ethics and religious culture.

#### CHANGING THE REPRESENTATION OF TEACHERS AND THEIR ROLE: ONE OF THE AMBITIONS OF THIS REFORM

##### CHANGES RESULTING FROM THE FREEING UP OF THE PROFESSIONAL SPACE OF TEACHERS

The shackles of the program are no longer there, even though they also provided comfortable guidelines which marked out learning processes by means of many objectives and sub-objectives and they made it possible to validate student progress by means of objective tests based on the steps prescribed for this learning.

The professional space is freed up. However this situation, even if desired, does not work without placing the weight of decisions and responsibility on the shoulders of teachers going forward. They must be taught or reminded how to carry out their role in this new system and the workload becomes more burdensome, more involved. The difficulties are many, but I would like to focus on three in particular.



First of all, that of **re-appropriating the exercise of judgment in evaluation**. And the battle of the report card is a symptom that shows that this appropriation is not easy.

A second difficulty comes from what constitutes a preferred teaching tool in secondary school: the instructional **manual**. In previous manuals, everything was organized in a hierarchy, spelled out, ordered. However, the composition logic of many new manuals is concentric; the knowledge to be acquired is not always clearly distinguished from the learning situations in which it is to be discovered or applied. In order to be efficient, teachers must now supplement such manuals with course notes that specify what it is essential to remember, something which they rarely did in the past.

The third problem comes from the **lack of a tradition of teamwork among teachers of different subjects**. In the conception of the old programs, the various components are isolated from one another, the very notion and organization of time and space in the comprehensive school did not go as far as having a group of teachers of different subjects assume responsibility for a group of students, whereas the new program, in order to have its full effect, requires it. Here too it is necessary to change, to go from working in isolation to working together.

All these things may seem trivial to you college teachers. Yes, they are normal in the context of a professional teacher. They were not required to the same degree in the case of the teacher practitioner. The transition from one context to the other requires the creation of new behavioural standards and this will take time. But there is also the need to create the connective tissue that the life of a body of professional teachers presupposes: fabric that is woven from a culture of professional development, of organizing conferences, of publishing journals on the discipline of teaching or of pedagogy, of the production of pedagogical material, all things that do not derive from initiatives of the Ministry but from teachers themselves and from their professional associations. These kinds of things exist in the CEGEP network, but they were not there initially when CEGEPs were created. These are grassroots initiatives that come from the colleges themselves where they were created over time. And they have contributed to building and reinforcing the professional identity of the CEGEP teacher.

#### **CHANGES DUE TO THE CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE UNDERLYING THE GENERAL ORIENTATION OF THE PROGRAM OF STUDIES**

If the structural changes that I have discussed so far all tend, at least initially, to make the teacher's task more complex and

heavier, there is one change that, if it is well understood and if what it represents is well exploited, could, on the contrary, lighten this load because it would make it more meaningful. This change is that of the cultural perspective, the perspective which was chosen to underlie the general orientation of the Quebec Educational Program (QEP) and this is what makes it original. One has only to peruse the content of the subjects in the program of studies to see in them their constant association with cultural elements and references. And these elements, far from burdening the programs, aerate them by giving meaning to them.

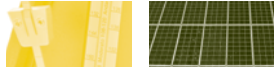
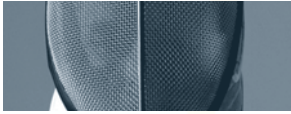
*One has only to peruse the content of the subjects in the program of studies to see in them their constant association with cultural elements and references. And these elements, far from burdening the programs, aerate them by giving them meaning.*

The transformation possibilities opened up by this reform are enormous. The task will be tough. It will only be accomplished if all the actors who work there have a keen awareness and recognition of the roles they play. Moreover, elementary schools and especially secondary schools are currently lacking in this matter. The perception that the school itself has of its role is vague, and so is the perception that teachers have of their roles, particularly in secondary school. However, a lot changes when we become aware of what the selection of a cultural perspective for the program of studies signifies.

Thus, we see more clearly the meaning of this institution we call school: it is the place where culture is transmitted. It is even, in our societies, the only structured place of transmission. Without an affiliation to a history, without heritage transmission, there is no process of humanization. This is why the role of the school as a structured place of transmission between generations, is indispensable.

Thus, we are also in a better position to explain to students the meaning of their studies: the topics that we study in school definitely come from the past and they were created, invented, to solve practical problems or to comprehend the past, but they are also current realities. These objects of study are right there, in our environment, and the fact of being aware of them will be of use to students not only later on, but right now.

Thus, teachers can also then have a clearer view of their role: that of cultural transmitter and awakener of minds. Both roles at once, because one cannot transmit heritage as we can a package. Heritage is not transmitted automatically; it is won.



(Goethe would say: “You received an inheritance, now earn it”). It is therefore necessary for students to make it their own; but we must also transmit to young people the tools that make us enterprising, inventive and creative beings.

*These changes were necessary, but we cannot claim victory.*

## CONCLUSION

I hope that this overview of the reform of the program of studies gives you some keys to better understand it, to get a better sense of the impact that it should have on the students you will have in class, and also to glimpse the efforts to be made, for some time to come, in order it to produce its full impact.

Two years ago, Bernard Landry put his signature on a petition requesting that the reform be stopped and he justified having done so by evoking the fact that he was a father and grandfather and therefore, as I interpreted it, that he was preoccupied with the education of upcoming generations. I would like to tell him this. I participated, with others, in the elaboration of this reform without ever seeking personally to be a part of these groups and committees. However, when my participation was requested, I accepted. What drove me, and I can testify that it was the same for all the members of the two committees that had to establish the foundations for this reform of programs (the members of the Corbo committee and those of my own) was the preoccupation with educating upcoming generations. That is what drove us. What is more, in the first pages of the Corbo report we find this statement: “We have written this document with Quebec youth in mind and to demonstrate our confidence in them”. (Working Group for the Elementary and Secondary Education Profiles, 1994).

I am sometimes asked if I am optimistic about the concretization of this reform. Optimistic, yes, sometimes, and also sometimes pessimistic. These changes were necessary, but we cannot claim victory. And you have understood, by certain allusions, that I am quite critical regarding two elements of the implementation of the reform – communication and the priorities of professional improvement – but full of praise for the teams of teachers who developed the course content.

So, in this context, optimistic? I cannot provide a simple answer to this question. So, I sidestep it by quoting the statement of an 18<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher, Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742-1799), famous for his aphorisms. From him I borrow one that reflects both the situation and what I think about it: “I do not know if things will get better because they change; but I do know, on the other hand, that things had to change in order to get better.” ♦

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- ▶ In May of last year, the *Conseil supérieur de l'éducation (CSE)* published a memorandum entitled *Regards renouvelés sur la transition entre le secondaire et le collégial (A Renewed Look at the Transition from Secondary School to College)*.

This memorandum emphasizes the fact that the meeting up, in our classes, of the reform of college teaching which has been implemented since the 1990s and the pedagogical renewal at the secondary level is only one of the reasons why colleges should adjust their practices. To sustain the success of students entering college, in this memorandum the *Conseil supérieur de l'éducation* therefore addresses the question of pedagogical renewal at the secondary level; but it also considers other important elements in the transition between the two orders of teaching, among which are the changes made to the conditions for passing from one to the other, social changes and the necessity to meet the needs of all students, including those who have special needs due to a handicap, learning disabilities or mental health problems.

Concerning specifically the linking up of knowledge and practice from secondary school to college, the *CSE* states that we must recognize the continuous development of the curriculum (in the sense that the latter exists in three forms: official, taught and acquired). The *CSE* however focuses on the official curriculum and explains clearly the changes brought about by the pedagogical renewal at the secondary level. Furthermore, it presents linking measures that exist between the two orders of teaching as well as the principal challenges that, according to some college teachers, await them in these terms. Finally, the *CSE* proposes paths for supporting concretely the linking of knowledge and practice within a continuum formed by secondary teaching and college teaching.

The *CSE* memorandum also takes into account the mechanics of the transition between secondary school and college, from the point of view of the student, in addition to presenting existing integration measures and others that could be implemented to ease this passage.

For all the actors at the college level (and, dare we say, at the secondary level too), reading this *CSE* memorandum should prove to be of great value: it provides an idea of the work still to be done in order to better prepare and welcome new college students, beyond making the necessary adjustments required by the pedagogical renewal at the secondary level.