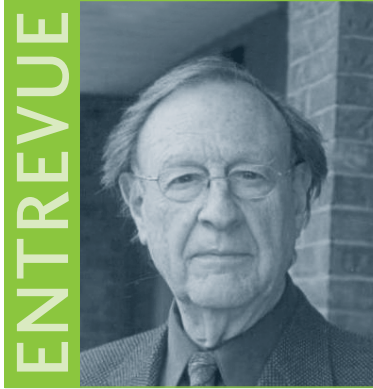


A SCHOOL FOR ALL TALENTS

Remarks gathered by Stéphanie CARLE, Editor-in-Chief of *Pédagogie collégiale*



Guy ROCHER holds a master's degree in sociology from Université Laval (1950) and a doctorate in the same discipline from Harvard University (1958). He initially taught sociology at Université Laval from 1952 to 1960, then at Université de Montréal from 1960 to 2010, as a full professor. He is now emeritus professor at the same institution. Since 1979, he has also been a researcher with the *Centre de recherche en droit public* at Université de Montréal.

Professor Rocher also sat on the Parent Commission (1961-1966), which rethought Quebec's education system and was the driving force behind the creation of CEGEPs. Guy Rocher was additionally a deputy minister in the Government of Quebec on two occasions (1976–1978 and 1981–1982). In addition, he has published several books and numerous articles.

PÉDAGOGIE COLLÉGIALE:

The Parent Report, which you co-wrote in the 1960s, profoundly redefined Quebec's education system and took the standpoint that education was no longer a privilege but a right. In doing so, the document proposed greater access to studies for all, and especially greater access to higher education. This came to be known as democratizing education. Today, some 50 years later, what is the status of access to education?

GUY ROCHER:

Access to education, for me, is both an achievement and a goal to work toward. It is an achievement, because we have made tremendous strides over the past 50 years, especially for the French-speaking population. Access to higher education, which was a result of the Parent Report, ushered in a sort of social revolution. It's a revolution that helped young people, particularly those from rural areas or socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. It facilitated adult education, and above all, it benefited young women throughout the province. This democratization is a symbol of the social and cultural transformation that Quebec has undergone. As a result of this transformation, new generations have been able to take advantage of general and vocational education that their parents did not have access to. Greater accessibility made it possible to develop a labour force that could modernize Quebec economically, industrially, and technologically. Without an education reform, there would likely have been a shortage of qualified workers, and the economic development we have witnessed could not have taken place.

Access to education has also helped to level the playing field in society and shrink many of the cultural gaps. "Being cultivated" used to mean that someone had received a "classical education."

Accessibility has changed this perception, because people have realized that humanism and culture have more than one face: scientific, philosophical, social, professional, popular, and so on. The "education system" of the future that the Parent Report proposed relied on openness to the various cultures in order to offer education for every talent. Before that, education only promoted one type of talent—a very intellectual one—for learning and mastering Greek, Latin, other languages, history, and philosophy. Yet only a minority of young people were predisposed to learning these subjects. The democratization project at the heart of reflections on educational access required a diversification of the meanings given to culture, and an openness to pluralistic humanism. It was an important revolution. The education system envisioned by the Parent Report aimed at a more egalitarian society and at raising the level of education of the population. People would be able to understand, communicate, and discuss national and collective issues. This was the perspective of a new humanism.

That being said, accessibility has not been fully achieved, and there are still some problem areas. As a result, access to higher education also remains a goal to strive towards.

If we have fallen short in one area, it is versatility. We now have comprehensive schools, but we haven't really established the versatility for secondary school as portrayed in the Parent Report. At the time of the report, we put forward a model that provided for the integration of workshops into these institutions, so that education would also interest those with manual talents. But, unfortunately, these workshops were expensive and due to cost of equipment, they couldn't be maintained, to the detriment of a segment of the young population that would probably have continued their education if these structures were still in place. There would likely have been less attrition had there been a



culture of “working with your hands,” in all its forms, that valued vocational and technical training. This is an important idea. A secondary school open to all talents has yet to be created.

In spite of the democratization of education, we’ve also continued to favour the “best” students. Private schools tend to “steal away” the good students from public schools. To try to retain these students, the public-education sector has imitated the private sector by introducing international sections or concentrations. So, we’ve created a fairly elitist system that is at odds with the aims of the reformers in the 1960s. A versatile public school needs mixed classes, with strong, average, and weak students, because the top students help the others. A class without top students weakens because the brightest aren’t there to intellectually stimulate their classmates. Students are also part of the education process. In a classroom, there’s a special culture, an educational culture, created as much as by the students as the teacher. The classroom is greatly enriched by the participation of stronger students.

There also remain financial obstacles to access to higher education. For some segments of society in large cities and rural areas, accessibility appears to be an impossible goal, because, in spite of the principle of free education, school is seen as too expensive (indirect expenses, materials, etc.). In this case, it is not so much the economic barrier that matters, but the perception of this barrier. Many students don’t attempt CEGEP or university because their self-image leads them to think that higher education isn’t for them. It becomes a symbolic obstacle. There remains a need to value and promote higher education, especially among young people who might be interested in vocational and technical fields.

Can society reach a point where higher education is too accessible?

gr Good question! We’re still a long way off from this. We could take major steps in that direction if secondary-school students had better guidance, that is, if they had a better system of guidance and tutoring that would improve the transition to higher education. To me, secondary school doesn’t seem to give students proper guidance; when it comes to important decisions about their future, they are often left to their own devices. They do not get the advising they need, which would help them choose their courses and areas of study as well as prepare them for vocational, technical, or pre-university education. This is a major shortcoming in our current education system.

I mentioned tutoring a moment ago. What we had in mind when we wrote the Parent Report was to provide individual

assistance for all secondary students, to help them find their way, to give them advice, and to identify learning problems. This would have allowed all students to discover their talents, to choose an education suited to them, and to find the support they need to overcome difficulties. This would have greatly improved student persistence. All teachers would have been prepared to play a tutoring role to provide guidance and direction, and they themselves would have had the help of specialized advisors. This guidance and support could also have been extended to CEGEP students. Mass education cannot be successful without these personalized services. And yet, this assistance is lacking at all levels, even in university: I have taught students who struggled to read long texts or who had speech impediments. Some were unable to finish their education because of a problem that wasn’t identified in time. Access, today, needs to aim for long-term objectives and to help create an education system that benefits both individuals and the community. It’s a concept of social philosophy.

We have undergone a huge revolution, from an education system reserved for a minority to another education system intended for everyone. We aimed for education for all. The initial idea was a world in which every individual could study and realize their full potential, but the project has yet to be brought to fruition. We still have a challenge before us: to create mass education adapted to the needs of all and open to all talents. Creating a universal and individual system that is respectful of all talents—I see that as an amazing human revolution, one that Quebec society has not fully assimilated. So, we do not know where the limits of accessibility are, because we have not fully experienced such a system. The limits of full accessibility are still a long way off.

We still have a challenge before us: to create mass education adapted to the needs of all and open to all talents.

What observations can we make in terms of the roles of colleges and their mission of making higher education accessible in Quebec?

gr Colleges have the great virtue of guiding students and helping them to mature. I often used to say to my university students, “tell me about what you have already studied.” Nearly all of them had responses such as “nonlinear,” or “changed directions many times.” One important quality of college is that it lets students change paths and mature, search for their own identity, and discover a wide range of



possibilities. CEGEP students view this positively. And that has always impressed me! My university students would tell me that their CEGEP studies were an important time in their lives; it is when they acquired their study habits and so on. I have rarely heard them say it was a waste of time.

They also told me that CEGEP was an important stepping stone between high school and university. In fact, during the Parent Commission, we met with American academics to assess their system. They felt the transition from high school to university in the States did not work well. It was—and still is—a huge leap. Students are not used to large classes. They have a lot of trouble adapting. As a result, they often fail. The Parent Commission led us to reflect on the benefits of creating an intermediate, transitional level that would be different from university: hence, the founding of CEGEPs—and they're an unqualified success!

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This intermediate level also had to be vocational. At the time of the Parent Report, CEGEP had not been conceived as a higher-education institution. It had to be created to be different than university. It was supposed to be independent from secondary school and university. Progressively, and reasonably I think, the college and university levels became linked together in the context of higher education.

I remember a French delegation that visited us a few years after the creation of CEGEPs. They were worried that the CEGEP level would create eternally frustrated teachers who would have preferred to teach university. Their prediction couldn't have been more wrong! I find it remarkable today how CEGEPs have succeeded in creating teaching teams that identify with CEGEPs and that are happy there. The vast majority of these teachers would not want to teach at the university level, with its constraints that do not apply to college teaching. CEGEP teachers have also succeeded in forging a relationship with students that is not seen in university: a friendly and welcoming climate that plays a very important role in student success.

Over the years, the quality of college studies has also greatly improved. College teaching staff have become very professional. CEGEP teachers are concerned with education. Whenever I was able to attend the AQPC Symposium, I was always pleasantly surprised by the number of participants. The journal *Pédagogie collégiale* is another clear indication of the wide variety of experiences

discussed by teachers. I have always been impressed by how imaginative CEGEP teachers are!

What do you think about the Demers Report¹?

gr While the Parent Report predicted that the majority of CEGEP students would enroll in technical programs, the opposite occurred. The distribution of students between pre-university and technical sectors has not worked itself out. The education system has not sufficiently valued vocational and technical education. There is still a lot of work to do in this respect. We can count on the Demers Report to help with this effort. This report finally brings to light the issue of CEGEPs from a global delocalized perspective, and suggests that we have to bolster the entire college system throughout Quebec. The report promotes complementarity and a spirit of global planning.

This planning should also include private colleges, which are not sufficiently integrated into the system. I support the Demers Report in this sense. The college system as a whole needs to be better managed. The vocational and technical options need to be reviewed and better planned out. A great deal of imagination was leveraged to develop technical programs. Now, this imagination needs to expand, to take on a more regional, provincial and complementary scope. Cooperation needs to be promoted between CEGEPs and private colleges. It is time to break them out of their isolation and put them to better use: Why don't they, too, offer technical courses, to complement the programs in the public system? We are heading toward a demographic crisis. CEGEPs, especially in more rural areas, need to work together instead of competing with one another.

In certain publications, you have referred to the “utopia of equality.” What do you mean by this?

gr A utopia is a goal we know is unreachable, yet we continue to strive for it. Equal access to education has a utopian spirit to it, because we will always be trying to think of ways to bring it about. The Demers Report is interesting in that it re-examines this utopia and the means by which we can achieve it. The report looks at methods adapted to economic, demographic, scientific, and technological developments. It also stresses a means to focus on, namely distance learning, which we will need increasingly and will be expected to use. We have evolved by leaps and bounds in this area in Quebec, especially at the college level. But

¹ See the information inset on the Demers Report in this interview.



work still needs to be done, since distance learning needs to be planned carefully; it doesn't just happen. There are no magic formulas in education. One missing element in distance learning is the physical dimension—the student's relationship to the teacher and to other students. But, at the same time, a privileged and personalized relationship is created, even more so than in classrooms (especially large ones!). Courses need to be designed with these particularities in mind.

CEGEPs have a lot to think about in terms of the future, especially with the up-and-coming generations that are immersed in technology. This creates a major issue: we are being beset by new gigantic worlds of information. The education system now has a responsibility to transform this information into knowledge. To my mind, information and knowledge are not the same. Information must be subjected to a process of critical thinking to be synthesized and become part of a body of knowledge. Young people often have access to reams of information that has not necessarily become knowledge. With the arrival of massive amounts of information, we must address this major challenge.

What do you think about the structure of the MELS and the MESRST? Is the division of responsibilities between the two ministries consistent with your vision of governmental management of education?

gr I hope we will continue to have two ministries! The Parti québécois put two ministries in place in the 1980s, which were merged back together a dozen years later by a Liberal government. Co-managing an education system is a huge responsibility: a given ministry already has its hands full with preschool, primary school, and secondary school. Higher education has different and distinct requirements. It is a good idea to split the two. This division provides a means by which to fully take charge of all the aspects of managing higher education, which, in my opinion, are increasingly necessary in our modern world.

What is the outlook for accessibility in the future? Are there concrete solutions that could promote access to higher education for the greatest number of students? If so, what are they?

gr What we need to do now to improve access to education is to promote education. We are not currently placing enough value on education. Especially with the recent electoral campaign... And yet the student protests of the Maple Spring weren't that long ago! At that time, everyone seemed to be talking about higher education. Today, it

seems to have fallen by the wayside... or nearly so. Our society needs to reassert the value of education, especially public education. Health and jobs are important, but education is decisive for the future.

... the society of tomorrow will be economically and culturally rich insofar as education will be reconsidered, and ... the teaching profession will be given full recognition at all levels.

This is why the value of education needs to be reasserted through proper funding at all levels of our education system, including adult education. I would say that it's a societal decision that needs to be made. Political leaders will not make the decision themselves if they are not driven to do so by public opinion. Teachers' unions have a responsibility to remind us that expenses in education are not really expenses, but investments for the future, for people, and for communities. I am convinced that the society of tomorrow will be economically and culturally rich only if education is reconsidered granting the teaching profession full recognition at all levels. We do not give teachers the prestige they deserve. In order to do so, we need to tighten the requirements for entering the profession, whether in terms of training or the quality of written and spoken language. ◀

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THIS SUBJECT

MINISTÈRE DE L'ENSEIGNEMENT SUPÉRIEUR, DE LA RECHERCHE, DE LA SCIENCE ET DE LA TECHNOLOGIE. "Sommet sur l'enseignement supérieur. Chantier sur l'offre de formation collégiale." Québec, Gouvernement du Québec, 2014 [www.mesrst.gouv.qc.ca/le-sommet/les-chantiers-de-travail/loffre-de-formation-collegiale/?no_cache=1].

DEMERS, G. *L'enseignement supérieur pour tous. Rapport d'étape du chantier sur l'offre de formation collégiale*. Québec, Gouvernement du Québec, 2014 [www.mesrst.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/administration/librairies/documents/sommet/Rapport_etape_chantier_offre_formation_collegiale.pdf].

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT PROFESSOR ROCHER'S IDEAS AND SPECIFICALLY THE CREATION OF CEGEPs, THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF RECOMMENDS THE FOLLOWING ARTICLE:

ROCHER, G. "À la défense du réseau collégial." *Pédagogie collégiale*, vol. 17, n° 4, 2004, p. 4-9 [www.cdc.qc.ca/ped_coll/pdf/Rocher_17_4.pdf].



◇◇◇ SNAPSHOT OF THE DEMERS REPORT

Following the *Sommet sur l'enseignement supérieur* organized by Minister Pierre Duchesne in February 2013, the Government of Quebec appointed Guy Demers as chair of the *Chantier sur l'offre de formation collégiale au Québec*.

This group has been tasked with producing a report that sets out recommendations on the following:

- Program offerings at the college level in Quebec
- Definition of regional educational niches
- Optimization of professional-development offerings

The objective is to:

- Promote access to college education throughout Quebec
- Aim for greater complementarity between program offerings in different regions
- Maintain the viability of programs in rural areas

The status report published in January of last year came on the heels of a consultation between representatives of educational institutions, association groups, unions, and civil-society organizations. The final report is expected to be released in June 2014.

To enhance the appeal of college education and to promote student persistence, the status report sets out recommendations in connection with three broad themes:

- Student trajectories, student mobility, and foreign students
- Program offerings and their relationship to the ministry approval process and private education
- Distance learning

Both the English- and French-language versions of this article have been published on the AQPC website with the financial support of the Quebec-Canada Entente for Minority Language Education.