

# ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS' RECEPTION OF THE 2001 QUÉBEC CURRICULUM REFORM

During 2002-2003, Yves Lenoir studied elementary-school teachers' reception of the curriculum revised by the Québec Ministry of Education, noting that few studies had been conducted concerning the "relationship between curriculum and practices in Québec," focused on teachers' "gestures and words," attentive to "temporality."<sup>1</sup> The 2001 elementary curriculum, Lenoir suggests, can be contextualized within successive school reforms that began with the "Quiet Revolution" and that aimed to integrate Québec's economy in the North-American anglophone economic (neoliberal) system.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, the 1980-2000 curricula were structured by behavioral objectives, emphasizing "training" and "hierarchized teaching contents."<sup>3</sup>

Following ten years of critique and debate, in 2001 the Québec Ministry of Education introduced a revised curriculum developed to address two major issues: (1) solve the "grave problem" of "perseverance" and "achievement" (over 30% of secondary-school students drop out in many regions of Québec), and (2) increase "teaching efficiency."<sup>4</sup> The epistemological foundations of the 2001 curriculum were constructivism and behaviorism, characterizing the child as a "learning subject" whose "functional and fundamental learnings" will be "relevant and culturally anchored" as well as "qualifying and differentiated," integrated by "transversal and interdisciplinary perspectives" grounded in "essential disciplinary knowledge," including attention to "environmental education, health, consumerism, and citizenship."<sup>5</sup>

These "transversal competencies" were to be expressed through "learning domains," among them languages; math, sciences and technology, social studies, art, personal development.<sup>6</sup> The "social realities" of "everyday life" were to be studied through "health and wellness, orientation and entrepreneurship, environment and consumerism, media, living together and citizenship."<sup>7</sup> To implement this curriculum, Lenoir continues, the Québec Ministry of Education asked elementary teachers to "adopt new practices," categorized as instruction, socialization, and qualification (or school success).<sup>8</sup>

The revised curriculum rests, Lenoir asserts, on "American conceptions of curriculum," reiterating the questions asked by U.S. curriculum specialists: (1) "What should we teach?" (2) "To whom are we teaching and to whom to we teach what?" (3) "How does one teach what to whom?"<sup>9</sup> Lenoir links the "what" question to "disciplinary competencies" in the new curriculum, and the "how" to its implementation; he distinguishes between the official curriculum and the implicit curriculum, e.g. the "actually taught," as "interpreted by the teacher."<sup>10</sup> Which "representations" of the new curriculum, Lenoir asks, do teachers say they have "met" and "questioned?"- a question followed by two others: "How do they structure their

teaching activities at the discursive and effective level? What place do they provide for teaching knowledge on the discursive and effective level?”<sup>11</sup> The answers, Lenoir learned, are that teachers used the “terms of the reform” (in contrast to teachers’ response to the reform undertaken 25 years ago, which, we are told, they resisted) to modify “their perception of their role as teachers,”<sup>12</sup> even if, Lenoir qualifies, “their definitions remain very vague, if not totally absent,” so much so that it makes it difficult to determine the reform’s actual “impact on ... teaching practices.”<sup>13</sup>

In fact, Lenoir observed “strong tensions regarding the reform’s interpretation, as teachers expressed “frustration, destabilization, insecurity” even as, at the same time, they seemed relieved that the new curriculum positioned them less as “technicians” and more as professionals, as it conferred upon them “greater autonomy” (something many found “disturbing but also rewarding”).<sup>14</sup> More experienced teachers – many of whom were undergoing their third curriculum reform – were “more reserved,” even admitting that their teaching practices have not changed.<sup>15</sup>

Lenoir concludes that while “most teachers claim to adhere to ... the reform,” there is reason to believe that their adherence is limited to the vocabulary of the reform, not to its actualization in practice.<sup>16</sup> While their practices may not have changed, teachers’ appreciation of the complexity of teaching does seem to have been heightened, as Lenoir found evidence (through interviews) that post-reform teachers were emphasizing students’ reasoning (in contrast to the 1980s reform), and that they appreciated that students’ learning was not limited to the curriculum as planned.<sup>17</sup> Teachers understood that (again, post-reform) they are obligated to encourage students’ interests, affirm their sense of autonomy and responsibility, respond to their needs, support interactions among all, encourage cooperation through “team work,” all the while cultivating “affectionate, attentive, warm relationships.”<sup>18</sup>

Appreciating that these modalities of “socialization” are requisite to excellent teaching, those teachers he interviewed regarded their roles as having “changed radically,” as their practice is primarily the practice of “the human,” not narrowly on “teaching.”<sup>19</sup> In alignment with that understanding, “project-based pedagogies” were now primary,<sup>20</sup> enabling teachers to position themselves as “watching over the child,” informed by the Ministry’s emphasis on “preparation, realisation, integration.”<sup>21</sup> To implement the revised curriculum – the conceptualization of which positions learning as primary – teachers now appreciate (even though Lenoir reports that they failed to understand the curriculum’s “constructivist orientation”) that they are obligated to resolve the myriad problems their students face as they (the students) become the “producers of knowledge,” rendering the “crucial question ... the place of knowledge in the teaching-learning process.”<sup>22</sup>

Distinguishing between the “prescribed curriculum and the curriculum as taught” (again recalling Aoki’s distinction between the curriculum as plan and the curriculum as lived: see note 10), Lenoir wonders if the “basic learnings, essential in the elementary grades, could be transmitted according to a neobehaviorist perspective,

the constructivist perspective being reserved for the development of social interactions,” a “scenario” in which “autonomy, creativity, personal development, self-esteem and social harmony would be placed at the horizon of the educational process.”<sup>23</sup> No more than one-third of the teachers participating in Lenoir’s study showed a “radical” understanding of the teaching-learning relation, convinced that “knowledge can emerge naturally from the interaction between students and, thus, it is important to secure a form of anything-goes in their learning,” an interpretation that would explain, Lenoir suggests, teachers’ “perceived valorization of the professionalization of the work” they found embedded in the curriculum reform.<sup>24</sup>

## COMMENTARY

Once again we read Lenoir’s tracing of Québec curriculum reform to the United States, in this study acknowledging its neoliberal character but focusing on how elementary school teachers received the reform. That reception was multivariate: there were teachers who played with the terminology, some modifying how they thought about their teaching, others (often experienced teachers, some of whom were witnessing their third reform) in dissimulation, a form of resistance to top-down directives perhaps, or possibly to the impossibly expansive characterization of teaching demanded by the reform, teachers expressing, as Lenoir observed, “frustration, destabilization, insecurity.” Those three seem entirely understandable, given the “stick” (accountability) embedded in the “carrot” (professionalism). Ever seen *Gaslight*?<sup>25</sup>

## REFERENCES

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Lenoir 2006, 119. English translation by Marie-France Bérard, modified by Pinar.

<sup>2</sup> Lenoir 2006, 120-121. George Grant would seem to be right: without Catholicism Québec cannot remain different: Pinar 2019, 6. See research brief #24.

<sup>3</sup> Lenoir 2006, 121.

<sup>4</sup> Lenoir 2006, 121.

<sup>5</sup> Lenoir 2006, 121.

<sup>6</sup> Lenoir 2006, 121.

<sup>7</sup> Lenoir 2006, 121.

<sup>8</sup> Lenoir 2006, 122.

<sup>9</sup> Lenoir 2006, 122. For me the first one – what knowledge is of most worth? - is the most important; the second and third are subsumed within it.

<sup>10</sup> Lenoir 2006, 122. “Curriculum-as-plan,” Aoki (2005 [1985/1991], 231) knew, “is an abstraction yearning to come alive in the presence of teachers and students. What it lacks is situatedness.” Situation is a concept Lenoir also invokes, if differently defined: see Lenoir 2006, 122-123.

<sup>11</sup> Lenoir 2006, 122-123.

<sup>12</sup> Lenoir 2006, 128.

<sup>13</sup> Lenoir 2006, 129.

<sup>14</sup> Lenoir 2006, 129.

<sup>15</sup> Lenoir 2006, 129.

<sup>16</sup> Lenoir 2006, 129.

<sup>17</sup> Lenoir 2006, 130.

<sup>18</sup> Lenoir 2006, 131.

<sup>19</sup> Lenoir 2006, 132.

<sup>20</sup> Project-based pedagogies derive from the originator of the project method, William Heard Kilpatrick: see Pinar 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Lenoir 2006, 132-133.

<sup>22</sup> Lenoir 2006, 136. Lenoir (2006, 137-138) found traces of 1970s’ Rogerian humanism in teachers’ interpretation of the new curriculum’s constructivism, emphasizing child development. An American psychologist, Carl Rogers (1902-1987) emphasized

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unconditional positive regard as a prerequisite to human development. His humanistic psychology influenced my own doctoral dissertation research.

<sup>23</sup> Lenoir 2006, 138-139.

<sup>24</sup> Lenoir 2006, 138-139.

<sup>25</sup> Released in 1944; directed by George Cukor. Plot summary: After the death of her famous opera-singing aunt, Paula (Ingrid Bergman) is sent to study in Italy to become a great opera singer as well. While there, she falls in love with the charming Gregory Anton (Charles Boyer). The two return to London, and Paula begins to notice strange goings-on: missing pictures, strange footsteps in the night and gaslights that dim without being touched. As she fights to retain her sanity, her new husband's intentions come into question.

<https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=gaslight>  
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