TEN CHALLENGES SCHOOLS IN QUEBEC ARE FACING TEN YEARS AFTER THE PARENT REPORT

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ABSTRACT

The creation of the Ministry of Education in 1954 was the founding event of Quebec's modern education system. Its fundamental structures remain the same today. However, this system has not ceased to evolve. The system still faces important challenges, some of which are related to the changes our society has undergone over the last fifty years, some of which are due to its dysfunctions. The following article points to ten specific challenges that concern elementary and secondary education and outlines an equal amount of difficulties, some of which are very complex, that will have to be overcome. Even more challenges could easily be identified at the other levels of instruction, but these ten challenges are substantial enough given that the situations which they concern relate in most instances to difficulties that are found at the structural level. Indeed, these difficulties have their origin in value systems, institutions, practices, and even in interests, all of which have been replicated over time. Nevertheless these problems have to be tackled because of the stakes involved, or in other words because of what is "at stake" here.

The first two challenges we discuss here are of a pedagogical or psychopedagogical nature. The following three concern the organisation of educational services. The other two, the teaching staff. The last three, the organisational structures.

LEARNING TO READ, AN ABSOLUTE PRIORITY

We are well-aware of the problem of teenagers dropping out of high school. This problem is one that has been long in the making. Indeed, dropping out of high school is linked, to a significant extent, to learning difficulties that appear as early as the first year of a child's academic life.

The main difficulty faced by children is learning to read. Yet an individual's abilities in that respect condition more or less their future: their ability or inability to read can predict their future success or failure. Not knowing how to read impedes all other forms of learning. It is a personal and social handicap that reverberates well beyond

the classroom: 16% of French Canadians show a very low literacy level and 34% know barely what is necessary to get by. The stakes here are at once personal, cultural, financial and even political (given that civic participation is linked to a good understanding of social phenomena.)

Detecting reading difficulties early on is hence crucial and remedial instruction measures are thus needed. Unfortunately, not enough services are offered in this respect. Given the major stakes linked to reading difficulties, all concerned stakeholders in the education system have to make the resolution of this problem their number one priority.

GENDERED DIFFERENCES IN SCHOOL SUCCESS

Girls succeed significantly better than boys and this is as true here as it is elsewhere: 82% of girls make it to Secondary 5 against 70% of boys. The others have dropped out. And amongst the ones that finished high school before the age of 20[1], there is an 11% gap in the graduation rate between girls and boys (80% of girls against 69% of boys.) Inevitably, this phenomenon is replicated at the pre-university college level: 73% of girls are accepted in a college program against 53% of boys. And then, 77% of girls graduate whereas only 65% of boys do. This head start for girls opens up more doors to them to limited enrolment programs. Finally, it is 52% of girls that are admitted to undergraduate programs against 57% of boys. The success rate of the former is 70%, whereas it is of 64% for boys[2]. Today, women make up about two thirds of the students admitted in medicine.

Making sense of these gaps is no easy task. The Conseil supérieur de l'éducation has tried to come up with a hypothesis in this regard: girls tend to build their self-confidence by working towards reaching their teachers' expectations more than boys do; boys tend to self-realize through competition with their peers outside of school benches.[3]

The challenge is for schools to create strategies that will be effective in keeping boys focused on their education. But admittedly, reaching this goal will not be simple. Indeed, the gap between the success of girls and boys is evidently at the structural level.

This being said, the stake is great: the unequal society that has been advantageous for men for the longest time is slowly being transformed into an unequal society that will mostly profit women. The latter could obviously have reasons enough to rejoice in such a reversal. But is it really an ideal worth attaining? The most desirable outcome would be that everyone, regardless of their gender and their chosen schooling path, could be academically successful. In this respect, Quebec still has a long way to go.[4]

VALUING VOCATIONAL TRAINING OF YOUTH

A particular phenomenon has occurred in the 1980s: young Quebeckers have massively moved away from vocational training. After reaching a peak in 1976-77 (unless I am mistaken, I believe there were 80,000 young people pursuing vocational studies at that time), the number of students has dropped of 61% between 1976-77 and 1986-87[5]. In 2011-12, there was less than 20,000 youths, including those under 20 years of age, that were pursuing vocational training. In fact, 83% of people registered at a vocational training center were aged 20 years or older.

To a certain extent, this can be explained by heightened requirements. Indeed, 10% of people in vocational programs already have a high school diploma, which is most desirable. In order to get a vocational school diploma, it is necessary to have at least passed core courses such as French, English as a second language (or vice-versa in the case of English schools) and Secondary 5 math. It is possible to complete these courses while taking vocational classes if the student has successfully completed Secondary 3. It should be noted that 21.4% of boys against 12.9% girls (of the 20 years or less age group) are enrolled in a vocational school. In short, this schooling option is now mainly the affair of adults and mostly of men. For the greatest part, vocation training is often the result of the decision to go back to school, which is often due to a loss of employment.

This phenomenon is not without its own set of difficulties. Indeed, the aspirations of those younger than 20 and of their older counterparts are not the same. Adults are much more in a hurry to complete their education. On the other hand, the majority of youths have not yet completed their core courses which they are following simultaneously to their vocational training. This also raises problems relating to pedagogical management and class management.

The main challenge is thus to interest youth in vocational training and to make sure that they receive

services adapted to their specific needs. The long term issue is socio-economic in nature: could there eventually be a shortage of trade workers in Quebec? At the moment, the campaigns promoting vocational training amongst youth have not yielded the hoped-for results.[6]

RECONCILING EQUAL ACCESS TO SERVICES AND THE DIVERSITY OF TALENTS

Our education system has progressively moved away from the equal opportunities ideal that the Parent report promoted. This can be explained by looking at history. Fifty years ago, high school and college education was strongly characterized by its elitist objectives. Up to that moment, the "natural" hierarchy of social classes was a socially accepted reality. Hence, most private institutions, which were created throughout the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th, were built upon and formed by those cultural ideals. Many of these institutions have remained in operation after the birth of the comprehensive schools at the end of the 1960s in order to supply an unprecedentedly sharp population growth. The extraordinary influx of students in high schools rendered this new experience quite vulnerable. Furthermore, in the early 1970s, the public high school system went through a serious confidence crisis. The bad reputation that was given to those big composite schools comes from that era, although it has subsided for a number of years now.

Ever since then, private school attendance has kept on growing as birth rates have kept on dropping. This birth decline has rapidly affected school enrolment. However, at the same time, private schools kept on getting more enrolments. So, as if propelled by a survival instinct, public schools started embracing what kept private school successfully full: they started selecting students for special elitist programs, starting with the international school program. Today, there are numerous types of these programs.

Starting in 1974, and intensifying in 1982, the successive economic crises have heightened parents' ambitions, especially those of the middle class, of equipping their children with the tools that will enable them to retain their competitiveness on the labour market. Thus, the motto of "working towards the success of all in consideration of the potential of every individual" has been replaced by a sense of survival of the fittest. Students are brought to compete for a place at school, be it in private or in public schools. Successfully passing an entry exam became considered as an indicator of a child's probable success in the real world.

The challenged faced by Quebec's education system is thus making all students succeed in consideration of their specific and varied abilities. A substantial part of these difficulties still has its origin in socio-economic disparities and poverty. This is thus as much a social as it is a pedagogical challenge. This double-pronged challenge, despite the many efforts put in by some during the last fifty years, has not been satisfactorily met. While it is not an unsurmountable difficulty, efforts in overcoming it have been slowed by social structures that are strongly established against it. This democratic ideal of an equal society still remains to be attained.

THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF TEACHERS

Fifty years ago, the Parent report recommended that teaching should become professionalized. That was to happen through the liberties and autonomy given to teachers, and through their right to be consulted in pedagogical matters. But that also has to be done by establishing requirements, such as requiring teachers to be university educated, that their knowledge should continuously undergo updates, that they establish a dialogue with parents and work collaboratively with them, and that an officially recognized code of ethics should be adopted (which would be defined and managed by the teachers themselves.)

Many of these elements are now well-established practices: the Education Act officially recognises the autonomy of teachers. Teachers in every school have certain powers of initiative; they can choose the textbooks their students will work with, they can also chose to implement new pedagogical methods, they can decide on the criteria their students will be evaluated on. They collaborate with parents on the school boards and they elaborate the propositions that will be considered in accord with the parents. They play a part, even if it is a small one, in the development of departmental programs. And since 1968, teaching has become a university-certified occupation.

However, up to this day, teachers refuse to become officially recognized as professionals. In the 1960s, they have opted to join the prevailing trend towards unionisation. In 1970, the Centrale des enseignants du

Quebec rejected the code of ethics that the teachers had drawn up. In the 1990s, teachers were heavily opposed to establishing a professional order. As for the Conseil supérieur en éducation, it proposed that teachers take a first step in that direction in 2004. Without really speaking of the methods to achieve that goal, it wrote: "Teachers have to be able to have a role in defining and managing the measures applied to their profession because they are in the best position to assess their relevance in light of their mandate and the requirements of their profession."[7] This opinion did not gather much support.

However, problematic situations still remain. Thus, teachers have relatively no say in the development of programs since that responsibility is entirely taken up by the Ministry of Education. Teachers still accept that the unethical behaviour that might be committed by one of their peers should be managed by the Ministry of Education rather than them. Assessments and professional development (which will be addressed below) are still problematic. There still exists no code of ethics that parents or students could rely on against in the case of unprofessional behaviour.

These shortcomings raise two major issues. The first one is about the value teaching has in the eyes of those practicing this profession. What is paradoxical is that teachers seem to feel that society has a negative opinion of them, which is not the case.[8] The second issue concerns the quality of the education being provided. Teachers should be able, through mechanisms that they would develop themselves, to assess by themselves the quality of the instruction they provide. Up to now teachers have seem to be satisfied with their employer/employee relationship. But is this beneficial for the quality of the education they provide?

ASSESSMENTS AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In connection with the professionalization of teaching is the sensitive issue of evaluating teachers' performances[9], an idea to which teachers are generally opposed to because of the fear that abusive measures might be taken by their employers. Some teachers are even reluctant to the notion of their pedagogical activities being monitored.[10] These types of evaluations are however routinely performed in most professions. They are necessary in order to ensure skill competency. In this respect, Quebec already has, since 2001, an official competency guide for the initial training of future teachers. This guide could also be a valid tool to ascertain the competency of existing teachers. This tool could and should be used precisely to evaluate each member in this profession, and could be used by individuals themselves for their own self-evaluations.

Similarly, professional development is necessarily linked to the assessment of competencies. However, despite the fact that the law asks teachers to "take appropriate measures in order to attain and maintain a high degree of professional competency," no formal requirement is imposed on them in that respect, neither individually nor collectively.

The challenge, which has not been met as of yet, primarily concerns teachers themselves: it is their duty, individually and collectively, to come to the conclusion that assessments as much as ongoing training have to be institutionalized and that attaining this objective is primarily up to them. This stake is double-pronged; first of all, the quality of educational services should be improved; then, this profession should become better valued in the eyes of those that practice it and the society that benefits from it.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

In the early 1980s, Dr Laurin, then Minister of Education, proposed that public schools undergo an important reform in his white paper called *Une école communautaire et responsable*. His ideas were based on the ideology of civic participation which marked the reforms public institutions had been undergoing since the 1960s. The Parent report was clearly inspired by this ideology; for the first time, the rights of parents to participate in the schools their children attend by becoming part of school committees was recognized.

This movement continued to mold the evolution of how public schools were managed. Thus, after 1980, parents became increasingly involved, first with the schools' orientation committees. However, teachers' unions, which were marked by a Marxist ideology in those years, boycotted them. It is from 1998 that the involvement of parents grew substantially when school committees were created where they could meet with teachers and other professionals. These boards gave considerable power to

all parties involved in order to oversee collaboratively and with respect to the professional competencies of teachers the direction the school was to take.

But these mechanisms and the ideology that has inspired them are threatened by an opposing ideology that has been prevailing recently: consumer ideology. Thus this project of building "responsible and community-oriented" schools is greatly weakened as long as parental individualistic tendencies are overpowering. The clearest indication of this reality is how little parents attend school boards meetings when comes the time to elect their representatives. Parents have also the right to collectively decide to have a "Parent Participation Organisation" in their schools, but many schools do not have those organisations. Admittedly, our lifestyles nowadays do not allow much time for such endeavours. Thus, the relationship that evolves between parents and schools, especially in the case of high schools, is one where the parent is a customer and the school is a service counter, albeit a slightly more sophisticated one.

The challenge is obviously to turn this tendency around and to build schools based on the involvement of the members of society that benefits from them. This is the democratic ideal we have to work to rehabilitate. Everyone is simultaneously an individual and a social being. Being only one or the other leads to the impoverishment of all. This is the fundamental social challenge that has to be undertaken.

SAVING SCHOOLS IN UNDERPRIVILEGED NEIGHBOURHOODS

The relationship between poverty and academic achievement started becoming clear during the mid-1960s, an awareness that first grew in the United States. Five years later, the Montreal Catholic School Board launched *Opération Renouveau*. Its failure was noted a few years later; despite important investments academic results in underprivileged neighbourhoods had not been substantially altered. Since, the program *Agir autrement*, which targets all of Quebec's students (in combination with the *Programme de soutien à l'école montréalaise*), has replaced it. However, results remain uneven.

Education leads without a doubt to wealth. Over the last fifty years, education has enabled most Quebecers to improve their overall socio-economic situation. But experience also shows that actions taken only in the academic field are not enough. Poverty has to be addressed on all levels. Hence citizens have to make political, socio-economic and cultural decisions that they believe are the most likely to create wealth, and above all, to redistribute this wealth in a just and fair manner. And the political arena is inevitably a sphere for ideological debates and political confrontations which range from the libertarian right to the totalitarian left.

The challenge faced by society and schools is to build an environment which gives every individual an inalienable liberty, but that also posits equality as a social goal that also is inalienable. And what cements liberty and equality is fraternity and solidarity between all. Schools can work towards achieving this goal by being built on those values. The objective is thus for schools to become the creators of a more just society.

REINFORCE THE AUTONOMY OF SCHOOLS

Following the Estates General on education that took place in the mid-1980s, it was agree upon that more autonomy should be granted to elementary and secondary public schools. Schools boards were thus created to that end in 1988. The professional autonomy of teachers was also reinforced and the powers and duties of schools boards were defined.

Unfortunately, the different governments which followed from 1990 have progressively imposed constraints on schools. Schools were thus forced to map out their plans for success. In 2008, the division of powers between the Ministry of Education, school boards and schools was substantially remodeled. In a "top-bottom" perspective, all were forced to sign so-called partnership and management contracts in order for the Ministry's strategic plan to be applied. On a lower level, each school was asked to come up with a plan aimed at preventing and fighting violence and intimidation. But that law also lists the elements that have to be included in the plan. A school director is obliged to give an account of all the actions that are undertaken in response to every complaint to the general director of the school board. The words "intimidation and violence" come up 45 times in that law!

Yet, none of these hasty measures were applied to private schools. They were trusted to achieve the same underlying objectives that were imposed through strict measures on public schools.

The challenge that Quebecois legislators thus face is to finally trust public schools by granting them the autonomy they need to attain their main objective, which is the academic success of all of its students. As international research has shown, student success is to be attained through a greater autonomy for schools.[11]

REINVIGORATING SCHOOL DEMOCRACY

As soon as 1829, Lower Canada's Legislative Assembly considered that the education of children should be the responsibility of local communities. It is only in 1855 that a central authority was created in order to manage the educational services offered in all the one-room schools and town schools throughout the country.

Moreover, up to the 1960s, local democracy was very uneven: on the one hand, only landowners had the right to vote, and on the other hand, in Montreal and Quebec, commissioners were nominated by municipal, church and government authorities. It is only in 1973 that universal suffrage came into force. In addition, a certain lack of interest in political matters was deliberately ideologized and has marked education up to the creation of the Ministry of Education in 1964.

Also, since 1973, voter turnout has been decreasing constantly and has reached an anemic rate of almost 10% in 2007. Furthermore, 65% of officials were elected by acclamation. In addition, since 1988, only 70 school boards are still in function, some of which are in charge of very large territories. The electing citizens are thus increasingly far removed from these governments that have since become more regional. Incidentally, this is another reason to grant more autonomy to these institutions.

This widespread lack of interest towards school boards leads to a loss of their legitimacy in the public's opinion and thus to their weakening. And this is where concerns about the need for their existence are stemming from. The challenge is to get out of this political low point. The Federation of Quebec's School Boards has fortunately come up with an action plan, the results of which will only be known in the Fall elections of 2014. But the stakes are high. Indeed, school boards and school democracy will stake their future with this election.

NOTES

1 For reasons that are not specified, MELS official statistics on high school graduation are based on individuals that are 19 years of age, not 16 years of age (16 marks the end of compulsory schooling.) They thus are taking into account individuals that have continued their schooling in Adult Learning Centers.

2 Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, Indicateurs de l'éducation, Édition 2012. [online] http://www.mels.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/site_web/documents/publications/SICA/DRSI/Indicateurs_educ_2012_webP.pdf. We rounded up to the nearest whole number.

3 *Pour une meilleure réussite scolaire des garçons et des filles*, Quebec, 1999.

4 High school graduation rates climb up to 99.3% for girls and 94.6% for boys if we take into account youths and all adults (including those 20 years and older.) From a strictly statistical point of view, this is great; it is better to graduate late than never, but from a social and economic perspective, this situation is rather problematic.

5 Conseil supérieur de l'éducation (2004), *L'éducation à la vie professionnelle*: valoriser toutes les avenues. Quebec.

6 A Léger Marketing survey conducted for the Fondation Lucie et André Chagnon in September 2013 showed that 42% of Quebecers would "agree completely" if their teenager "wanted to follow vocational training in high school"; however, 44% would "somewhat agree" et 11% would be against the idea. Léger Marketing (October 18th, 2013), *Sondage de la Fondation Lucie et André Chagnon sur la valorisation de l'éducation et de la persévérance scolaire*. Dossier: 12989-022.

7 *Un nouveau souffle pour la profession enseignante* (2004). Quebec.

8 Paradoxically, in Canada as well as in other countries, 95% of citizens consider teachers (as well as doctors, nurses, firefighters and police officers) to be trustworthy. See www.opineduq.ca.

9 See our article: *"Évaluation des enseignants - Pour sortir du cul-de-sac créé par François Legault,"* *Le Devoir,* 14 septembre 2011. [online] http://www.ledevoir.com/societe/education/331338/evaluation-des-enseignants-pour-sortir-du-cul-de-sac-cree-par-francois-legault.

10 Read about how the Alliance des professeurs interpret pedagogical supervision in their collective agreement. [online] http://alliancedesprofs.qc.ca/fileadmin/user_upload/APPM/Information/Publications/Fiches_syndicales/Supervision_pedagogique.pdf.

11 OCDE (2009), "Autonomie et responsabilisation des établissements d'enseignement: quel impact sur la performance des élèves," *dans Pisa à la loupe*, 9 (octobre 2011), 1-4. [online] http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/54/0/48989573.pdf.