

THE 2006 CURRICULUM CONTROVERSY IN QUÉBEC

Olivier Lemieux, Anne Abdoulaye, and Isabelle Bélanger studied the influence of the media on policy-making by focusing on the 2006 controversy concerning the Québec High School History and Citizenship curriculum, underscoring the media's role in the “amplification” of the controversy, as well as the media's “direct impact on the decision to review the program by the Government of Québec.”¹ They reference the 1994 Corbo Group as well as the 1997 Inchauspé Group (see research brief #23), summarizing Inchauspé's work as committed to cultivating students' “greater interest in culture.”² The 2001 elementary curriculum reform had focused on “competencies”; it too was ridiculed by the media, sparking debate in the National Assembly, “forcing” the Ministry to revise the reform.³

The 2006 curriculum reform - “History and Citizenship Education.” designed to encourage students' “historical thinking,” – had not attracted the attention of the media until April 27.⁴ On that day appeared an article in *Le Devoir*⁵ by the journalist Antoine Robitaille criticizing the program, an article that provoked a “major controversy,” precipitating “many interventions” by those invested, including historians and teachers, and finally forcing the Minister (Jacques Fournier) to request a revision of the document, one released on June 15, 2006, a revision that did not, however, end debate.⁶

Robitaille's newspaper article initiated what Lemieux, Abdoulaye, and Bélanger term the first phase of the controversy, one they characterize as one of “awareness-conscientization,” and from which followed a second phase, one of “mobilization,” reflected in efforts to “interrogate, critique and even stop the program.”⁷ On September 20, a third phase that can be said to have started with the establishment of a Coalition for History to contest the curriculum through news releases, articles, surveys and reports.⁸ This “vast movement of contestation,” Lemieux, Abdoulaye, and Bélanger continue, heard “its echo” when the Parti Québécois was elected in 2012; after taking power, the Parti put in place a committee - directed by Jacques Bauchemin (someone close to the Coalition for History group) and Nadia Fahmy-Eid – that issued a report titled *The Meaning of History*.⁹ From this report a revised curriculum - *History of Québec and Canada* – was released, one in which is registered the principles of the Coalition of History group.¹⁰ Thus concluded the controversy.

Lemieux, Abdoulaye, and Bélanger identify five “dimensions” of the curriculum and the accompanying controversy: (1) the introduction of “competence” as an organizing concept, (2) the installation of a “socioconstructivist” pedagogy, (3) the so-called submergence of the Québécois nation in a “pluralist paradigm,” (4) the “aggregation” of citizenship education; and (5) the replacement of a “content-oriented” curriculum with one organized around “great national moments and great historical

characters.”¹¹ As “antihumanist,” the curriculum, critics alleged, repudiated Québec’s “cultural and humanist heritage”; additionally, critics complained that it was neoliberal, marred by an exclusively utilitarian and economic logic.¹² Critics also decried a curriculum that, in their view, failed to preserve the primacy of the Québec nation, instead affirming pluralism.¹³

There were other contentious issues as well, including a “tension” between “liberalism and conservatism,” the former endorsing a “progressivist” orientation to the future while the latter counselled “caution.”¹⁴ Another issue was the alleged distinction between national and social history; in the revised curriculum nationalism – and the Francophone-Anglophone conflict that had given rise to it – was muted. Moreover, in the revised curriculum memorization had been replaced by “reflexivity” and “interpretation.”¹⁵ That last tension Lemieux, Abdoulaye, and Bélanger identify as a pedagogical one between a “teacher-focused” conception, privileging the transmission of “content,” and a student-focused conception, one in which “the teacher supports the student in their learning with the use of active and interactive methods.”¹⁶

What was achieved? Lemieux, Abdoulaye, and Bélanger find that the controversy had little effect on the humanism/utilitarianism controversy, the latter registered in the emphasis on competencies.¹⁷ The nationalism/multiculturalism controversy also seemed unresolved, as both the first and second versions the curriculum were neutral toward nationalism, favourable to multiculturalism. Lemieux, Abdoulaye, and Bélanger did notice, however, that certain words, even paragraphs, in the first version had been modified or even eliminated in the second. This apparent effect of the first phase of the controversy on the second version of the curriculum was especially visible in the section “Dynamics of Disciplinary Competencies,” wherein the earlier attention paid to plurality was replaced by focused on the linguistic question,¹⁸ and the third competence - “Constructing One’s Civic Awareness with the Help of History”- had been modified to read: “Exerting One’s Citizenship.” This modification, Lemieux, Abdoulaye, and Bélanger suggest, reflects an effort to “appease” those who were “offended,” as “exerting one’s citizenship appears less menacing than developing awareness/consciousness.”¹⁹

The controversy seemed not to resolve the social/national history debate either, as the second version repeated the first version’s aversion to the latter,²⁰ although “The Conquest” [of New-France by the English] commands 15 minutes (up from 5 in the first version), suggesting that “the controversy had an impact on the content and the form of the document.”²¹ That impact was not noticeable, however, on the conceptions of pedagogy endorsed in the second revision. While the controversy tilted toward hostility to student-centeredness and neutrality on the issue of teacher-centered pedagogy, the second version reaffirmed its student-centered orientation, even adding “unfavorable references to teacher-led pedagogy.”²²

Lemieux, Abdoulaye, and Bélanger conclude that the 2006 controversy had the effect of “softening up the angles” of the most contested dimensions of the new curriculum, e.g. an effort at appeasement to end the controversy.²³ Substantive shifts in the revised document were not evident; in fact earlier elements were reinforced. Overall, modifications were “slight” – increasing the frequency of the term “conquest” for instance, or altering a paragraph on multiculturalism by emphasizing the question of language – and, again, apparently aimed at ending the public controversy.²⁴ While the media played a “key role” in the controversy, their influence seemed limited to how the Ministry moved in public: “the consultation of key individuals and interest groups is now a compulsory step,” as curriculum revision “in isolation” is “no longer possible.”²⁵ If that is the case, curriculum consultation risks being a strategic, rather than substantive, undertaking.

COMMENTARY

The curriculum question – what knowledge is of most worth? – is surely a public question; we register that fact on the Curriculum Studies in Canada website by hosting an ongoing online public forum. Here, however, the curriculum as a public question blurs with curriculum as a political football, as Lemieux, Abdoulaye, and Bélanger make clear that while paramount, the question of which history of Québec is to be taught was fraught with emotion, intensified by issues of identity: who can be Québécois and what can the term mean? That question was aggravated by issues of pluralism, questions of teacher-centeredness vs. student-centeredness, and a rejection of memorization. In that sense, the controversy was convoluted, making its satisfactory resolution almost impossible. Indeed, it seems the Ministry merely appeased the loudest critics while strong-arming its own preferences. I wonder: Has there been a curriculum controversy comparably intense anywhere in Anglophone Canada? Perhaps our research will answer that question. Certainly, there have been, continue to be, public controversies over curriculum in the United States, most famously over the teaching of evolution. “The *Scopes* trial,” Zimmerman (2002, 9) reports, “would cast a pall over American schools into the 1960s, sharply restricting instruction about the theory of evolution.” Does the 2006 controversy continue to cast a pall over the Quebec history curriculum?

REFERENCES

- Lemieux, Olivier, Abdoulaye, Anne, & Bélanger, Isabelle. 2017. L'analyse du contenu, une voie d'or pour l'analyse des politiques éducatives? Étude de cas du programme d'histoire et éducation à la citoyenneté et de sa controverse. *Canadian Journal of Education/Revue Canadienne de l'Éducation*. 40(3), 302-328. <http://journals.sfu.ca/cje/index.php/cje-rce/article/view/2552>
- Zimmerman, Jonathan. 2002. *Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

ENDNOTES

-
- ¹ Lemieux, Abdoulaye, and Bélanger 2017, 302.
- ² Lemieux, Abdoulaye, and Bélanger 2017, 305.
- ³ Lemieux, Abdoulaye, and Bélanger 2017, 305
- ⁴ Lemieux, Abdoulaye, and Bélanger 2017, 305. They note that this program reinscribes “competencies.”
- ⁵ *Le Devoir* they characterize as an independent newspaper with a nationalist and progressivist orientation, well-known by well-educated readers; also involved were the Gesca newspapers, a subsidiary of the major Canadian Power Corporation, owned by the Desmarais family and known for its federalist and (neo)liberal allegiances (2017, 313).
- ⁶ Lemieux, Abdoulaye, and Bélanger 2017, 305-306.
- ⁷ Lemieux, Abdoulaye, and Bélanger 2017, 306.
- ⁸ Lemieux, Abdoulaye, and Bélanger 2017, 306.
- ⁹ Lemieux, Abdoulaye, and Bélanger 2017, 306.
- ¹⁰ Lemieux, Abdoulaye, and Bélanger 2017, 306.
- ¹¹ Lemieux, Abdoulaye, and Bélanger 2017, 310.
- ¹² Lemieux, Abdoulaye, and Bélanger 2017, 311.
- ¹³ Lemieux, Abdoulaye, and Bélanger 2017, 311.
- ¹⁴ Lemieux, Abdoulaye, and Bélanger 2017, 311-312.
- ¹⁵ Lemieux, Abdoulaye, and Bélanger 2017, 312.
- ¹⁶ Lemieux, Abdoulaye, and Bélanger 2017, 312.
- ¹⁷ Lemieux, Abdoulaye, and Bélanger 2017, 316.
- ¹⁸ Lemieux, Abdoulaye, and Bélanger 2017, 317-318.
- ¹⁹ Lemieux, Abdoulaye, and Bélanger 2017, 318-319.
- ²⁰ Lemieux, Abdoulaye, and Bélanger 2017, 318-319.
- ²¹ Lemieux, Abdoulaye, and Bélanger 2017, 320.

²² Lemieux, Abdoulaye, and Bélanger 2017, 320.

²³ Lemieux, Abdoulaye, and Bélanger 2017, 321.

²⁴ Lemieux, Abdoulaye, and Bélanger 2017, 321.

²⁵ Lemieux, Abdoulaye, and Bélanger 2017, 323-324.