

# Sometimes there are Good Reasons to Resist to Educational Reforms

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**Abstract.** The reform of the education introduced in Quebec in the 2000s was at the beginning a reform of the curriculum but became afterward a reform of the teaching methods in which the constructivist pedagogical approaches have been prioritized. The objective of this paper is to show that such a reform was mainly ideological without solid empirical evidence based on research.

**Keywords:** Educational Reform, Constructivism, Teaching, Instructionism.

## 1. Setting the Context

The Quebec education system has been modernized thoroughly in the early 1960s and met the quantitative objectives of accessibility of education for all. Nearly forty years later, however, it had to be reviewed as a whole to better respond to the new needs arising from the contemporary social change. From the accessibility for all, the new objective of the reform initiated in 2000 was to put emphasis on qualitative goals of success for all. This shift was important because of a high rate of failure and dropout among students.

Among all of the measures put forward by the reform, the revision of the curriculum, occupies the central position. The proposed curricular renovation is designed to raise the requirements of reading and writing, to increase the content in certain subjects and to upgrade the cultural content of the curriculum.

There is little to fault with the objectives of the reform. Our purpose is rather to argue that if the reasons and intentions are laudable, on the other hand, the proposed teaching methods seem problematic.

## 2. A Shift In Meaning : From a Curriculum Reform to A pedagogical Reform

If the reform is designed originally as a curriculum reform, it became very early a pedagogical reform. This is one of the major challenges of the educational renewal (Comit -conseil sur les programmes d' tudes, 2007). Curriculum reform is therefore widely more than reorientation of the objectives, adding or withdrawal of disciplinary content or a greater emphasis on the cultural dimension, it basically relates to the methods of teaching.

### 2.1. A New Educational Radicalism: Constructivism

The initial proposal of the reform with emphasis on the content of the curriculum have therefore given way quite quickly to a set of requirements on the "how to teach". It is on this educational dimension that the Ministry of Education has chosen to guide his campaign communication for teachers in the bulletins *Virages*<sup>11</sup>, in information brochures for parents in the various handouts at national meetings organized to implement the reform and finally, in documents distributed to the educational publishers to supervise their activities. In a word, to guarantee the success of all students, as proclaimed in the corporate slogan, the teachers must adopt a new paradigm : they have to shift *from a teaching paradigm to a learning paradigm*. This new learning paradigm is inspired by socio-constructivist theories and it means that teaching activities will most often take the form of team projects by students placed in complex situations of learning by discovery.

Research doesn't have much to say about the finalities and values but has a lot to argue about the best means to attain the objectives. In this perspective, the choice of teaching methods in order to maximize the learning calls directly scientific research. And it shows that teaching methods proposed in the educational reform in Quebec - including discovery learning approaches - are far from having been proven by research. They do not produce the expected effects on the students' learning, and where they have been tested and

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evaluated in a rigorous way, they are considered somewhat disappointing. Indeed, says Stone (1996) in a long comment :

« ...Schools have largely ignored the availability of a number of teaching methodologies that seem capable of producing the kind of achievement outcomes demanded by the public. They are experimentally validated, field tested, and known to produce significant improvements in learning. Instead, the schools have continued to employ a wide variety of untested and unproven practices which are said to be “innovative” (Carnine, 1995; Marshall, 1993). In particular, teaching practices such as mastery learning and Personalized System of Instruction (Bloom, 1976; Guskey & Pigott, 1988; Kulik, Kulik & Bangert-Drowns, 1990), direct instruction (Becker & Carnine, 1980; White, 1987), positive reinforcement (Lysakowski & Walberg, 1980, 1981), cues and feedback (Lysakowski & Walberg, 1982), and the variety of similar practices called “explicit teaching” (Rosenshine, 1986), are largely ignored despite reviews and meta-analyses strongly supportive of their effectiveness (Ellson, 1986; Walberg, 1990, 1992). Yet methodologies such as whole language instruction (Stahl & Miller, 1989), the open classroom (Giacomia & Hedges, 1982; Hetzel, Rasher, Butcher & Walberg, 1980; Madamba, 1981; Peterson, 1980), inquiry learning (El-Nemr, 1980), and a variety of practices purporting to accommodate teaching to student diversity (Boykin, 1986; Dunn, Beaudrey & Klavass, 1989; Shipman & Shipman, 1985; Thompson, Entwistle, Alexander & Sundius, 1992) continue to be employed despite weak or unfavorable findings or simply a lack of empirical trials. » (p. 2)

Even if the idea of learning by discovery is appealing *a priori*, its effectiveness must be validated by empirical research. However, it is not. More importantly, it is not one strategy that seems the most appropriate to work with the students with learning disabilities or at risk, that is particularly those targeted by the reform.

## 2.2. A relativistic Withdrawal

In the wake of criticism that followed the implementation of reform and the prescription of paradigm shift, the Ministry of Education and several reformists submitted a new argument alleging that, ultimately, it is the teacher who decides which educational approach he will use in his classroom. He may choose according to situations, to lecture, to use discovery approach or direct instruction. This fallback position cannot be a better solution than the first one which required the radical paradigm shift. Indeed, how to give credit to this new idea then that all the ministerial statement was intended to disqualify “instructionnists” from the paradigm focused on teaching approaches. More importantly, how to support this argument when it is known that textbooks used by the teachers are approved based on criteria favouring discovery approaches. Finally, this argument suggests that all pedagogical approaches are equal, that they have the same impact on the learning of the students and the teacher simply has to choose depending on the circumstances of the moment. But pedagogical approaches are not equivalent at all and putting them on an equal footing is thus encouraging staff to make choices that can be harmful to students. There is evidence now, and research has shown in many occasions, that systematic instruction, direct, explicit produce better effects on learning, especially for struggling students with learning difficulties.

## 3. Conclusion

Quebec reform of the 2000s is not based on a solid research base even if that the Ministry of Education frequently refers to “research” to justify its paradigm shift. The mentioned “researches” are most often essays, interesting on the intellectual level, but which do not meet the minimum criteria of scientific empirical evidence. As in many reforms the belief has taken front on scientific research with everything that does of risk to children. Was this pedagogical shift really necessary if we consider that the Quebec was, prior to this reform, among the best States in the world in terms of the academic performance of its students to PISA and TEIMS ?[2]

## 4. References

- [1] Comité-conseil sur les programmes d'études (2007). *Avis à la ministre de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport sur le Programme de formation de l'école québécoise, éducation préscolaire, enseignement primaire et enseignement secondaire*. Québec :Gouvernement du Québec.

- [2] Stone, J. E. (1996). Developmentalism: An obscure but pervasive restriction on educational improvement. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 4(8). On line : <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v4n8.html>.
- [3] The *Virage* bulletin is a publication dedicated exclusively to the reform and is intended for the school network. <http://www.MELS.gouv.qc.ca/Renouveau/index.asp?page=Virage>
- [4] The space constraints prevent us from further develop certain points. The reader is invited to consult the following books: Bissonnette, S., Richard, M., Gauthier, C. (2005). *Échec scolaire et réforme éducative. Quand les solutions proposées deviennent la source du problème*. Québec » : Presses de l'Université Laval et Bissonnette, S., Richard, M., Gauthier, C. (2006). *Comment enseigne-t-on dans les écoles efficaces ? Efficacité des écoles et des réformes*. Québec : Presses de l'Université Laval.