

A B R I D G E D V E R S I O N

CYCLE-BASED INSTRUCTION IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS: SUPPORTING THE IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

BRIEF TO THE MINISTER OF EDUCATION

November 2002

ABRIDGED VERSION

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The raison d'être of schools is learning; all the rest is just the means to the end. Cycles of instruction are only useful if they place more students, more often, in conditions more conducive to learning.

Perrenoud

A cycle of instruction is a pedagogical unit that respects students' individual learning rates.

In this brief, the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation (referred to here as the Conseil) sets out its views on cycles of instruction at the elementary level, a measure introduced by the legislative and regulatory provisions governing the reform of the education system. However, cycle-based instruction is a new concept, and no validated models exist either in Québec or elsewhere in the world to guide the implementation process in elementary schools. Since it is clear that, to meet the needs of individual schools, the reform must be adjusted to local conditions, the Conseil has decided to examine whether educators at the elementary level are sufficiently well prepared to implement this pedagogical model. The Conseil has also analyzed the conditions in which the new model of school organization is currently being implemented, and clarified the underlying concept of cycles of instruction.

As early as 1991, the Conseil stated that elementary schools had to adjust the way they were organized to reflect the psychology and learning patterns of their students, and that a system based on three two-year cycles could make their pedagogical actions more effective. In various briefs dealing with the current reform, the Conseil has addressed this issue again, reiterating the justification for cycles of instruction spanning more than one school year. The Québec government, in the new *Basic school regulation for preschool, elementary and secondary education*, decided that elementary education would be based on three two-year cycles, and the multi-year instructional cycle has become one of the key features of the education reform.

Responsibility for this new educational undertaking has now been passed on to the school system, which must implement it in individual schools. Given the lack of any conclusive scientific surveys of cycle-based instruction, the Conseil has based its examination mainly on discussions with specialists and practising teachers, and on a comparison with the situation existing elsewhere. This brief is therefore exploratory in nature.

UNDERSTANDING CYCLES OF INSTRUCTION

Children arrive in the school system with many notable differences in terms of personal rhythms, cognitive ability, aptitude, social and cultural background, etc. Their ability to benefit from a standardized pattern of teaching also varies greatly. *Every student already has a life story.* Schools must take all this diversity into consideration, and offer each student a learning environment that will allow him or her to progress towards educational success.

To take advantage of the rich potential that this diversity represents, schools must be organized in a way that allows the students to be seen from various pedagogical viewpoints. It is clear that by regarding individual students in a variety of ways, teachers are in a better position to construct a dynamic environment in which the full range of attitudes to knowledge, learning styles and developmental rhythms can be taken into account, leading to a more flexible type of school organization. Cycle-based instruction provides the framework needed to establish multiple viewpoints. It represents a major shift for the school and depends directly on the staff who work with the children on a daily basis.

Cycle-based instruction is a new and continually evolving phenomenon, involving characteristics and concepts that have not yet stabilized. The Conseil intends to contribute to the debate by establishing links with the objective of educational success, and with previous experiences in Québec and elsewhere, in the context of the reform that began in the elementary system several years ago.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FROM WRITTEN SOURCES AND DISCUSSIONS

For a little over a century, the same organizational model has prevailed in Western countries. In elementary schools, children are grouped into classes at successive levels, with a single teacher providing all the instruction. This type of organization was once considered highly progressive, and was an effective way to define teaching tasks uniformly. However, over the years, it became apparent that, in the classroom, no single instructional approach could apply. A program based on objectives set for a one-year period, scheduled in the same way for all the students at a given level, could not be made to match the range of children in each class, their different ways of learning and their individual rates of development.

Teaching in schools where the students have an increasingly wide range of educational needs requires new pedagogical approaches, and a more flexible type of school organization. Most of the major reforms undertaken over the last fifteen years have tended to introduce models that remove the year-end constraint, and the resulting cycle-based instruction can be organized in a variety of ways.

For example, schools in France now have three cycles of instruction for children aged two to eleven. In the Swiss canton of Geneva, each cycle lasts four years. In French-speaking Belgium, compulsory schooling is an educational continuum based on a three-stage structure. Other jurisdictions, including Kentucky, Oregon and British Columbia, have introduced "nongraded" primary schools.

The number of years per cycle seems to vary from system to system. Apparently, this is because, in most cases, the decision to establish cycles of two or, at most, three years is made at the political level, based on pedagogical approaches and the prevailing culture. Although cycle-based instruction offers a range of possible forms and can be applied in many different ways, in all Western countries it is a structure that places students at the heart of the educational process.

There are four main ways to organize cycle-based instruction:

- traditional classes, made up of students of the same age group
- classes made up of a stable group of students who remain with the same teacher for more than one year (known in Québec as *looping*).
- classes with different teachers for different subjects
- classes where the students can be divided into subgroups, based on their needs and interests, sometimes combined with subgroups from other classes

(Rey et al.; translation)

What exactly is a cycle of instruction? Education specialists and researchers have explored various meanings of this concept. In Québec, the definition is found in the *Basic school regulation*: "A cycle is a period of learning during which students acquire competencies in each subject area and cross-curricular competencies which prepare them for further studies."

The government decided to opt for cycle-based instruction for several reasons. First, grade repetition had been shown to be an ineffective measure by many different studies, and action had to be taken to lower the dropout rate and reduce social inequality. Second, cycle-based instruction, by making teaching practices more flexible, was seen as a way of taking student diversity into

account. Third, the Québec Education Program was itself based on the development of competencies over a two-year period, and used the passage of time as a pedagogical tool. Fourth, there was a need to encourage teachers to work as members of a team, and to go beyond the circumscribed duties to which they were accustomed in order to present a unified strategy, drawing largely on their energy, dedication and professional competency.

KEY POINTS

Cycle-based instruction can be used as a tool to meet the challenge of educational success, because it provides a framework for differentiated pedagogy. If cycles of instructions are to be implemented effectively, though, and to be something other than a subject of discussion and debate, the elementary school community must adopt the idea that educational success must be based on the acceptance of several different academic pathways, rather than on compartmentalization.

All forms of cycle-based instruction are based on the following objectives and underlying principles:

- teaching practices must take into account the differences between students
- student groups must be formed on the basis of a range of models
- classes must be decompartmentalized
- student learning paths and teaching activities must be organized by teams of teachers
- evaluation procedures must be modified
(Allal, 1995; translation)

As part of its effort to reduce the dropout rate, Québec first began to apply this organizational model by stipulating that grade repetition was a measure that was basically incompatible with the education reform and would apply only in exceptional cases. In 1999-2000, for example, the cumulative effect of grade repetitions meant that 22.5% of all students in Québec, in other words roughly two students out of every nine, were already academically delayed. The school community cannot afford to ignore this situation, given that research findings show clearly that students who repeat a grade at the elementary level are more likely to drop out later.

Although cycle-based instruction has emerged in Western countries partly as a way to counter the problems created by grade repetition, it is also intended to make it easier to monitor the progress of each student and facilitate professional cooperation between teachers. The notion of "cycle of instruction" seems to involve, initially, an extension of the ordinary notion of "class." The popularity of this type of structure, although it has not yet been

rigorously analyzed or linked clearly to educational success, is probably based on the fact that cycles of instructions provide an opening for greater pedagogical inventiveness. The age and level of the students, the relative stability of each grouping, the length of the learning process, the number of teachers involved with the same group, and so on, can all become factors. This switch from a teaching approach confined within an annual schedule to an approach where the students are the focus of the educational model offers a seductive alternative, but it necessarily involves differentiated pedagogy.

According to Gillig, "Without differentiated pedagogy, the cycle-based approach remains a mirage, and learning rhythms become a simple matter of observation [translation]." Combining differentiated pedagogy and cycle-based instruction is essentially a way to gain maximum advantage from the inevitably heterogeneous makeup of individual classes.

To differentiate means to organize interactions and activities in a way that allows each student always, or almost always, to be placed in the type of learning situation that will be most profitable for him or her. (Perrenoud; translation)

To meet the need to create more complex learning situations, the Québec Education Program sets out a competency-based approach and does not allow learning to be subdivided. It requires schools to use time differently in providing for learning and the transfer of learning. "Since a competency is cumulative, students should be given enough time to learn and to develop the competency. Moreover, we cannot say categorically that someone either has or has not acquired a competency, since it is possible to identify different levels of competency." However, there is no point in focusing on the time taken by students to master knowledge, often related to the learning cycle, unless teachers also vary the type and quality of the instruction they provide. From this point of view, the teacher's task is made more difficult since he or she must, among other things, plan and evaluate complex learning situations, apply a range of pedagogical approaches with different subgroups of students, take action to prevent grade repetition, make decisions concerning promotion from one cycle to another and keep parents informed. A collective approach to dealing with all this work appears advantageous, and the idea of working alongside fellow-teachers becomes more attractive. However attractive it is, though, it is unrealistic if each teacher remains isolated in his or her classroom. A freer, more flexible approach takes on new meaning when the objective is to implement a competency-based approach, apply differentiated pedagogy, and manage student groups on a shared basis.

This way of working together is at the heart of the curriculum reform, and it is bringing about a major change in Québec's elementary schools. It even appears fair to describe it as a pedagogical shift, given that the Québec Education Program is, in itself, innovative in the way it groups subjects, links curriculum content to the learnings and competencies that are considered essential, and opens the way to differentiated pedagogy. A new type of work organization is also involved, since teachers are asked to work as part of a team rather than alone, as presently.

The challenge posed by cycles of instruction is not so much their implementation throughout the school system, but rather the major shift that they represent, especially for teachers and principals:

- a pedagogical shift from the transmission of learnings to the construction of knowledges
- an organizational shift from a culture of individualism to a culture of cooperation

ISSUES RAISED

In Québec, a "cycle of instruction" is defined by regulation in a way that focuses on the learning acquired by students but remains silent as to the pedagogical implications. Can this definition be considered sufficient, given that several players in the school system do not know exactly what a cycle of instruction is? The Conseil considers that supplementary texts should clarify and enrich the basic definition and give players at the local level guidelines for the implementation of this new way of organizing instruction.

It is too soon to rule on the relative effectiveness of the new organizational model, since it can take many forms and no scientific studies have as yet been carried out in this area. In addition, cycle-based instruction is not a magic spell that will make all the existing difficulties in the school disappear. How can its pedagogical effects be measured? It appears essential, as the cycles of instruction are being implemented, to launch studies of the pedagogical and organizational practices they engender, and to assess their effects on student success. In this "pedagogical maelstrom," it is important to identify the tactics that prove the most effective in reaching the objective of guiding as many young people as possible towards educational success.

DEFINING THE ROLES OF THE PLAYERS

Cycle-based instruction is a legal and administrative reality, but remains an abstract notion for most elementary schools in Québec. Given the lack of any conclusive scientific study of the new approach, the Conseil has initiated discussions with various specialists, and with teachers and parents, in order to broaden its understanding of the field, identify possible pitfalls and foresee the difficulties that must be overcome if the new educational structure is to be a success.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FROM WRITTEN SOURCES AND DISCUSSIONS

The statistics on the dropout rate in Québec were perhaps the initial cause for alarm. Solutions to the problem had to be found, and major changes had to be made to the educational system. In the policy statement *Québec Schools on Course*, cycle-based instruction was seen as a more flexible way of organizing teaching, better adapted to current findings in the field of child psychology and child development, and more likely to safeguard the autonomy of institutions and teachers.

The Conseil has met with people directly involved in the change, who have been willing to share their experience and give their opinion on the implementation of cycles of instruction at the elementary level. Teachers, the first group contacted, were unanimous in stating that their jobs had become more complex, among other things because they now have to be familiar with the competency-based curriculum, apply the principle of differentiated pedagogy and work more closely with their colleagues. The fact that they have to concentrate on these major changes to their teaching practices probably explains why they said nothing about the requirements of working within a cycle-based system, despite the fact that this has become a legal and administrative reality. Nor did they feel the need to identify the difficulties they encounter in planning learning strategies over a two-year period, or to discuss the place of at-risk students in the new structure.

School principals have been assigned leadership; in other words, they must encourage all players to participate by remaining attentive and supportive, developing an inspiring view of change, promoting cooperation and teamwork and sharing power with their staff, while making all the necessary decisions.

Resource teachers have seen their role change from being specialists in learning difficulties, working in isolation, to being full members of the cycle team; they consider that it is their responsibility to support teachers as they transform their teaching practices, and to assist at-risk students.

Teachers who are specialists in specific subjects appear to have been neglected in the switch to cycle-based instruction. The challenge for these teachers is to earn a place in the cycle teams as partners rather than as *providers of free periods* for other teachers.

A cycle team is made up of teachers and professionals who are collectively responsible for students' learning for the duration of a cycle.

The authorities responsible for implementing the reform see themselves mainly as providers of support. Their role is to find ways to smooth the transition and to assist initiatives taken at the local level. They consider that the main difficulties are related to the need to develop a shared vision of learning, to see learning as an overall, rather than a segmented, process, to use varied rather than standardized models for evaluation, to gradually reduce dependency on instructional materials, and so on. Several stated that personnel movements do nothing to promote teamwork.

Parents consider that educational success for their children is the prime objective, regardless of how schools are organized. They have adopted a "wait and see" attitude with respect to the new structure, which is designed to involve students intellectually by having them play an active role in the development of their own competencies and thus no longer allows them to hide behind the group. Students must participate actively, and take responsibility for their work and for their relationship with their teachers. In this new setting, the students *must work*, and parents, who hold prime responsibility for their children's attitudes concerning effort, must encourage their children to participate and persevere in their schoolwork.

KEY POINTS

All the comments made reflect both the dynamic attitude of the people working in the field and their commitment to implementing cycle-based instruction, since they believe, in general, that it is a valid approach for their students. However, they also reveal the chaotic conditions in which the schools must make the changes. In the view of the individuals surveyed, too little information is reaching the schools. Teachers, in particular, are unable to give a clear statement of the objectives of cycle-based instruction, let alone the conditions required for its implementation. Within the schools, the legal texts that refer to cycles of instruction are often unknown. When questioned about cycles of instruction, most of the respondents speak about the reform as a whole. **Schools state that they are currently introducing the new organizational approach, but they do not seem to**

have access to the essential elements needed to make the change effective. A few schools, which had already begun to address the issue before the reform, have a plan of action. An even smaller number of schools are currently in a research-action phase, and are preparing a plan. Given this fact, it comes as no surprise to observe that cycle-based instruction is currently an abstract, rather than a practical, notion.

Since this is the case for the teachers, it is clear that the various dimensions of the current shift and their complementary nature have not been understood by educators in general. The implementation of the reform is only just beginning. Even though the comments made show that the teachers we encountered are not yet conversant with the conditions that would facilitate the establishment of cycles of instruction, the Conseil notes that various groups have ideas on ways to facilitate the implementation of the reform as a whole and, probably, the cycles of instruction.

In short, a consensus has emerged on one fact: that the new cycle-based instruction will require all players in the school system to take on new professional roles.

Cycle-based instruction requires teachers to break with a long-held view of teaching, since they must now come to terms with a competency-based curriculum, manage competency development, plan complex learning situations, evaluate competencies together, and apply differentiated pedagogy to take into account the diversity of their students. This job description shows the scope of the changes to be made, in both pedagogical and organizational terms. Professionally speaking, teachers must switch from an individual to a collective approach, which requires them to lead their colleagues who have a more technical view of teaching.

School principals must keep the whole process on course and make sure that everyone is working in the direction set out by the reform. The Conseil has noted that school administrators, even though they are overwhelmed by the task at hand, never mention the governing board as one of the players responsible for the implementation of cycles of instruction; nor does the educational project appear to play any part in the working plan used for implementation. Schools have only just begun to reflect on the question of cycles of instruction, which are generally considered as part of the more general concerns of the reform. Probably, the projects under way in the schools are not sufficiently developed to be tabled with the governing board for approval, in the manner set out in the basic school regulation.

As noted above, cycles of instruction do not just affect teachers—they also require joint action on the part of all professional staff, and they clear the way for interdisciplinary projects centred on a shared concern. This kind of joint action is still a long way off. The cycles of instruction are beginning to take shape around the teachers. Nothing has so far been done to encourage other players in the school system to play a realistic part in the life of each cycle team or to develop a true educational community in each school.

Considerable changes have been made to the role of teachers, who have identified several elements that will facilitate the implementation of cycles of instruction:

- time, since they will work with the same students over a two-year period and will only have to explain their class management rules once every two years
- opportunities for the development of team spirit and discussions with colleagues to develop a shared understanding of the learning process
- help from change agents to support the establishment of the cycles of instruction
- a reduced student/teacher ratio, especially in disadvantaged areas
- the introduction of descriptive scales of competency levels to chart students' progress

Despite all the upheaval in the roles of staff members, some schools have concentrated their efforts and now work within a cycle-based system of instruction. These schools have changed: there are more projects, the relationships between the teachers are more dynamic, and the students are more interested in school. People speak to each other, and discuss teaching methods. These promising results should be more widely disseminated and discussed. They have the advantage of giving an integrated view of the reform, of differentiated pedagogy, teamwork, cycle-based instruction, and so on. It is clear that a methodical, sustained approach to publicizing the innovations, the changes under way and the new knowledge developed would be to everyone's advantage.

ISSUES RAISED

The teachers were asked several questions concerning cycles of instruction, most of which remained unanswered. The Conseil is left wondering who is responsible for ensuring that the legal and regulatory dimensions of the education reform in the elementary system are properly understood.

The people working to introduce cycles of instructions have seen considerable changes in their working context. To what extent does the implementation of cycle-based instruction include a training continuum comprising feedback from practical experiences and based on a pooling of knowledge? Who is responsible? Who is concerned?

A BASIS FOR ACTION

The successful implementation of cycle-based instruction clearly poses some major challenges, in particular for teachers and school principals. To ensure progress, continuity and coherence in an approach that reflects the fact that different students have different rhythms, special work methods and procedures must be introduced.

The Conseil considers that, to gain further knowledge of the various facets of this change, the concerns raised by teachers concerning cycle-based instruction should be examined in order to identify conditions for success in the experiments currently under way. It also considers that another challenging aspect of the transformation of the traditional classroom should be studied: *the new sharing of power*.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FROM WRITTEN SOURCES AND DISCUSSIONS

The need for differentiated pedagogy and for cooperation within the cycle team is a key challenge for elementary schools. Three concerns are mentioned spontaneously by teachers. How can teachers organize their schedules to make time for planning, working with other teachers, and learning? What pedagogical measures must be designed to replace grade repetition? How can teachers evaluate competencies when they have always evaluated learnings? These questions can only be answered through action, and some answers have already been found by various players in the school community.

Experiments have been developed here and elsewhere, and although it is too early to draw conclusions from the first results, they can nevertheless shed some light. In Belgium, for example, where a wide range of organizational models are applied, the most frequently encountered models are those in which teachers work with the same group of students for more than one year, and where classes are based on needs, level or interests. In Geneva, in light of current knowledge, the mechanisms for differentiated pedagogy seem to be only loosely connected with the effectiveness of learning. The establishment of cycles has become the focus of the teachers' work, sometimes to the detriment of actual discussion of learning methods.

Cycle-based instruction requires teamwork as the main type of collaborative effort. It should be noted that research findings raise doubts about the effects of a type of collaboration that does not necessarily focus on students in difficulty although a reduction in the dropout rate was the prime reason for reorganizing the school system. In nongraded schools in the United States, positive effects on basic learning have been noted where several forms of differentiated pedagogy coexist with periods of direct teaching. In Québec, where cycles of instruction are currently being introduced, it is too early for research results, but the first experiences can already provide some data on the various approaches used to implement cycles of instruction.

One particular text describes the experience of a school in a low-income neighbourhood that has introduced cycles of instruction, and describes the foundations and essential characteristics of a cycle and the conditions needed for its implementation. The description defines a cycle of instruction as a flexible time-space under the responsibility of a team of teachers, which allows them to take collective responsibility for their students. According to a group of teachers at the school, regular cycle meetings allow them to organize and regulate the work of each teacher and the operations of the cycle team. The cycle gives the teachers joint power over their work and the way it is organized, and allows them to express their training needs. Finally, it leads to the development of a true shared pedagogical and didactic culture. This experiment defines three essential conditions for successful implementation: the teachers must be given time, they must reduce their traditional isolation and they must be open to the idea working together. This is where the school administration can play a key role. The teachers must develop the competencies needed to work as a team and manage the time available effectively. The experiment gives details on the guidance process, the management of learning, and the people providing guidance, and stresses the importance of support and guidance without which it is hard to envisage a true transformation of teaching practices.

KEY POINTS

The Conseil notes that a change is currently under way. Cycles of instruction will become a reality in Québec schools when a critical mass of individuals are able to take action to implement the goals sought in functional and operational terms. Currently, cycle-based instruction is being supported by a courageous few, and they need assistance.

In schools in Québec where cycles of instruction are now being introduced, the key players generally agree that the following actions create favourable conditions for implementation:

- the change must be given legitimacy

- a working plan must be prepared to spell out the steps that each school must take
- each cycle team must be able to operate autonomously, and must be allocated a budget where necessary
- a change agent must be identified to provide support for the cycle teams, where needed
- a culture of professional development must be developed, based on a range of adapted formulas
- time must be set aside time for discussion and working together
- the school administration must support the new model of school organization

Cycle-based instruction gives school staff an opportunity to take on a leadership role, but changes the exercise of their profession. Although a consensus exists about learning together, working together raises the question of power sharing, which is a major challenge in the implementation of cycles of instruction. As the Conseil stated in 1995, "No change is possible without power and ... the difficulty of any attempt at change lies in the fact that change involves a modification of power relationships or the location of power, and sometimes introduces a new power dynamic [translation]." In schools, power relationships are related, according to Gather Thurler, to an essential component in professional life: the autonomy of each individual, meaning what he or she can do on their own initiative, without asking for authorization and without reporting back. This is the individualistic culture that currently characterizes relationships of power in the schools.

At first sight, teachers who work within the individualistic culture enjoy great freedom of action, but the freedom is partly an illusion since the teachers must plan and organize teaching/learning activities on their own. In an individualistic approach to teaching, the need to plan activities quickly imposes its own limit, simply because the teachers are alone in dealing with a group of students with a wide range of needs. Since they cannot always, working alone, take into account the range of student profiles by proposing a range of strategies based on differentiated pedagogy, they have to fall back on tutorial teaching methods and sanction a failure to keep up by making the student concerned repeat the grade. From this point of view, teachers' autonomy is, in practice, severely limited.

After listening to the comments made by school staff, it is easy to understand why they are worried about taking on new roles in the cycle teams. This is the most obvious obstacle faced by schools when implementing cycles of instruction.

The implementation of cycle-based instruction is currently an ongoing process—there is no overview that allows us to report on the various ways in which the new relationships of power are being exercised. According to Gather Thurler, the establishment of cycle teams should lead to increased dialogue. The members of each team will have more exposure to fellow teachers, and this will necessarily lead to increased friction. However, once professional cooperation has become an established process, once a common culture has emerged and the social pressure has dropped, it is possible to observe that the members of the group become aware that they have a new power over their work, which takes on more value in their eyes and thus raises their own value. Even though no guarantees exist that the new approach will be a success, the Conseil notes the willingness of those involved to change their schools to better meet the needs of their students. In short, the Conseil believes that the establishment of cycle teams should lead to the sharing of power, rather than to a standoff between *old* and *new* ways of thinking.

ISSUES RAISED

New ways of sharing power often create passive resistance, depending on the extent of the change, especially since in many professions power is a taboo subject, considered with suspicion. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why cycle-based instruction has only recently been attempted.

In schools in Québec, the emergence of a critical mass of people who embody, in their actions, the objectives of the new approach and translate them into functional and operational terms has allowed the change to be made in certain schools. In concrete terms, in the field, the first cycle teams have been formed. Will the education system devote the resources necessary to ensure that this lead will be followed quickly?

Although there are currently no scientific studies demonstrating the effectiveness of cycle-based instruction in promoting educational success, scientific examinations of cognitive phenomena have revealed enough about the learning process to illustrate the importance of experimenting with more flexible pedagogical models in pursuit of the goal of educational success. The Conseil considers that now is the time to take action. Here, it presents its guidelines for the implementation of cycles of instruction and identifies some of the challenges that must be met to make it successful.

This document also contains recommendations to the Minister of Education and other members of the school network.

ORIENTATIONS AND CHALLENGES

After examining current experiences in Québec and elsewhere, and after meeting with experts and listening to teachers who have already made a commitment to change, the Conseil has identified several types of action likely to facilitate the implementation of cycles of instruction. It has also set out the main points in a program that can be used by those responsible for the education reform and by school staff to support their discussions and plan their process of change.

ORIENTATIONS

To assist in the implementation of cycle-based instruction, the Conseil proposes the four following orientations.

- Take advantage of the rich diversity of every group of children.

If differences are to be seen as an advantage, children must be given both the right to be the same and the right to be different. The right to be the same means that every child, regardless of skin colour, social background and academic aptitude or difficulties, is entitled to learn about himself or herself and about the world in which he or she lives; the right to be different means that all students must be able to benefit from each other while respecting each other's differences. The way in which instruction is dispensed must give each student the best possible opportunity to successfully acquire learning and social skills and become a member of a community.

A teacher who is aware of the range of possible relationships to knowledge, ways of learning, and developmental rhythms should also be willing to view children through several different lenses and to share his or her views. The teacher must focus on children's overall development and openness to the world, and consider that both are more important than the mere accumulation of knowledges. The development of each student's potential is a central element in this approach.

- Recognize the key importance of leadership from the school administration in the new organizational model.

Without a genuine commitment from the school principal, the major changes discussed in this brief will not occur. The twin pedagogical and administrative function of the school principal has been recognized, following the decentralization of powers to schools and governing boards, and concrete measures must be taken to provide support for

principals. Changes are needed to ensure that principals receive genuine support at the administrative level, and training models must be provided to help them examine pedagogical options. This assistance must match the principals' needs as pedagogical leaders and administrative decision makers.

- Evaluate learning in a way that serves students.

Evaluation is primarily a way to let students know about their strengths and weaknesses and to show how they have progressed. The commitment made by teachers in a cycle team is to ensure that all students make genuine progress, rather than just keep up with the group. In keeping with this approach, promotion from one cycle to another, or from elementary to secondary school, is a step that must be negotiated to ensure continuity in the learnings acquired.

- Encourage cycle teams to move from private teaching to public teaching.

It is hoped that cycle teams will share their pedagogical approaches and explore, assess and study research and research findings to apply them in their teaching. This must not, however, be a one-way flow, since the cycle teams must also make sure that their pedagogical experiences are used to nourish theoretical approaches. This means that the cycle teams must agree to observation of their teaching practices by outside observers. If the cycle teams want to move from private teaching to public teaching, they must see and be seen. This requirement is both scientific and strategic. It is scientific insofar as pedagogical knowledge cannot be identified unless the daily activities of student groups are examined, and unless the teaching methods used with those groups are compared; it is strategic in the sense that the validity of the methods cannot be recognized unless it is possible to reproduce them. As Gauthier points out, to conduct research, one needs to see, and to professionalize, one needs to be seen.

CHALLENGES

The implementation of these orientations will depend on input from on all players in elementary education and, more specifically, school administrations and cycle teams. Here, the Conseil specifies three challenges to be met by all educators to ensure that the cycles of instruction become more than just an administrative measure and that they in fact represent a new organizational model for schools.

- Implementing differentiated pedagogy.

Without differentiated pedagogy, cycle-based instruction loses its underlying rationale. Pedagogical differentiation allows each teacher to reflect on how he or she teaches, to understand the metacognitive strategies of the students, to give students choices, and to make time for reflection and regulation to allow students to gain a true understanding of what they have accomplished. Why should there be any hesitation about adopting this approach? Probably because teachers must switch from a role involving the transmission of knowledge to a role involving the provision of guidance and support, and this switch is destabilizing. Up to now, teachers have been mainly responsible for pedagogical methods; with the introduction of differentiated pedagogy, they also become responsible for the pedagogical process, giving each student an opportunity to find the best way to learn. How can teachers themselves learn? In the same way as students, by taking action; in other words, becoming familiar with differentiated pedagogy by applying it in the classroom.

- Learning professional cooperation

Cycle teams must develop professional communication skills, learn to manage time in a new way, and ensure conditions that are favourable to reflexive teaching. On the basis of the Conseil's readings, interviews and analysis, the advantages of cycle-based instruction begin to appear only when the cycle teams have mastered the difficulties of professional cooperation and learned, as a team, to plan their teaching and the paths followed by the students over a two-year period.

This challenge cannot be ignored. There is no consensus on the techniques or science of teaching, nor on its values or ways of thinking and doing things, and so it is a profession in which cooperative work is a practical, rather than an idealistic, choice. Schools must invent and develop a genuine form of collective responsibility. The implementation of cycles of instruction provides an opportunity to require cooperation among teachers in order to reduce the dropout rate. The advantage of two-year cycles is that they allow more time and space for instruction, while encouraging a team of teachers to create effective tools for differentiated pedagogy to meet the needs of a greater number of students. In this sense, the cooperation is professional cooperation.

- Using time as a pedagogical resource

The time dimension in cycle-based instruction involves, above all, the space and time used by students for academic tasks, the time devoted to learning, and the time needed to master a competency.

If it is accepted that the time devoted by students to mastering a competency is a key element in mastery of that competency, then the students must be placed in a situation in which they can make the best use of that time on the basis of their individual needs. The Conseil has already stated that "the challenge lies in viewing school time not as a constraint, but as a pedagogical tool—a resource to be used in the best interests of students." This is the starting-point for cycle-based instruction.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering that cycle-based instruction

- is a little-documented pedagogical innovation, and that experience of cycles of instruction in Switzerland, France, Oregon and elsewhere is still too recent to be able to define one or more models for the future
- nevertheless offers promise for the future, on the basis of the first experiments under way in Québec
- is a legal and regulatory requirement that must be addressed by each governing board with regard to the way in which the application of the basic school regulation will affect the leadership of the school administration and the participation of the school staff
- is based on research findings concerning the learning process that show that students are more likely to succeed if they are offered significant content consistent with their learning styles and rhythms
- creates conditions conducive to a pedagogy centred on the needs of students
- involves a pedagogical shift and a change of culture for which most educators currently working with students are not well prepared
- constitutes a challenge that teachers will be able to meet only if school administrations demonstrate leadership, with effective support from other players in the school system
- requires school administrations to share power with the cycle teams
- is not fully compatible with some of the rules for school organization contained in the collective agreements

the Conseil recommends

that the Minister of Education

- provide financial support to help school boards establish effective communication systems to:
 - share information relating to cycle-based instruction
 - disseminate models of school organization in a methodical, sustained manner
 - publicize work currently under way to implement change
 - provide links between all players affected by the changes
- explain, in the policy on the evaluation of learning or another official document, the meaning of section 15 of the Basic school regulation for preschool, elementary and secondary education, so as to stress the progressive, differentiated nature of learning and the cooperative approach to managing learning

- work with school boards and unions to ensure that the rules of provincial and local collective agreements facilitate cycle-based instruction

that school boards

- provide effective support for school administrations in order to allow them to demonstrate leadership in the implementation of cycles of instruction and the related reorganization of services in their schools
- offer a range of professional development possibilities for their personnel, based on
 - joint action with teachers
 - a continuum of both theoretical and experiential knowledge
- form partnerships immediately with private schools and universities in order to conduct research to
 - sum up current innovations in pedagogical practices
 - identify the practices made possible by a cycle-based organization of instruction
 - assess the effects of the practices in terms of student success

that governing boards

- ensure that cycle-based instruction is integrated into the school's educational project
- ensure that information on students' results is made accessible and clearly set out for parents and the community as a whole
- ensure that collective, shared responsibility for the new organization is taken by all the players in the school

that parent participation organizations

- take steps to inform all parents, regularly and systematically, about the changes under way and their objectives

that school principals

- provide a time and place at the school for pedagogical discussions focusing on the education reform and the implementation of cycles of instruction
- establish a participatory management system to allow all members of the school staff to exercise their professional responsibilities
- organize a professional network of school principals to provide information, training and support in connection with the change of culture resulting from the new approach to school organization

that school teams

- establish their own professional development plan in light of the change of culture, specifying various sources of training, including
 - training by peers, cycle teams and specialists
 - experimental findings from Québec and elsewhere
 - action research
 - feedback on practices
 - experimental internships
- apply pedagogical models experimentally in order to integrate specialist teachers and other professional staff into the cycle teams

that cycle teams

- design and use discussion mechanisms to:
 - encourage discussion and interaction among peers
 - discuss pedagogical methods
 - share information on pedagogical differentiation strategies
 - develop active and reflexive methods
- experimentally apply organizational models that ensure collective responsibility for teaching and evaluation

that universities and schools

- develop joint research programs to publicize and make available the pedagogical knowledge developed from practical experience with cycle-based instruction at the elementary level

CONCLUSION

In its examination of cycles of instruction, the Conseil has attempted to determine what stage the implementation of this new form of organization for elementary schools has reached. In addition to legislative and regulatory requirements and the administrative aspects, it has also scrutinized the pedagogical dimensions of cycles of instruction, which constitute the source of and rationale for this innovation. It would be wrong to see the process simply as a form of administrative organization. The Conseil feels this view is a cause for concern.

The consultations and observations undertaken to prepare this brief have highlighted the fact that elementary schools are currently attempting to come to terms with the reform without grasping all its pedagogical effects, except in a few cases. The educators working directly with students have not yet clearly identified the specific contribution that cycles of instruction will make to students' progress. This situation is understandable, given that there are few studies of the new approach and that experience with the application of cycles of instruction in Switzerland, France, Oregon and elsewhere is still too recent to allow any models for the future to be defined. In other words, Québec's school are not just undertaking a far-reaching pedagogical shift, they are also doing so as pioneers in the field. To move forward, they must have access to research findings on the learning process, which show that student learn more effectively if their work has meaning for them and if their individual learning styles and rhythms are respected. The cycle of instruction is designed to provide a form of organization that promotes pedagogy centred on student needs.

The Conseil has made this statement several times during the last decade. It is aware that the change it has proposed and the reform that is now official will involve a long and obstacle-ridden journey. This brief is intended to facilitate the process. It sets out a number of orientations that are essential if the change is to allow as many students as possible to achieve success in their elementary studies. The Conseil sets out the essential aspects of cycle-based instruction, the conditions that facilitate its implementation, and the challenges that the new form of school organization raises for the various players in the school system.

Cycle-based instruction allows a team of teachers to observe the students under its responsibility in order to select a series of activities that are significant to the students and that will help them develop the competencies targeted in the program over a period of two years. The team of teachers monitors each student's work, evaluates his or her progress and communicates the

evaluation, first to the student and then to the student's parents. With this focus on the continuous progress made by each student, reliance on the mechanical measure of grade repetition should disappear. Normally, a student who, after two years, has not developed all the competencies set out in the program will continue on from the point he or she has reached, at his or her own rhythm. The student will not have to repeat learning he or she has already completed. The school will have to find appropriate solutions to the student's needs.

This approach will require teachers, including specialists and remedial teachers, to become accustomed to planning learning activities as part of a team, over a two-year period, intervening in various ways with students, and monitoring and evaluating them collaboratively. This will involve learning to teach collaboratively, to apply differentiated pedagogy, and to use time as a pedagogical resource. This is a new approach, and teachers have received no preparation. They need training, and time to discuss their experiences and methods and the range of their students' learning styles and rhythms. The Conseil notes that the teachers who have learned to use the new model would be unwilling to return to the old situation, where they were alone in having to meet the needs of their students. The change from the current organizational model to cycle-based instruction is a challenge that teachers will be able to meet, provided the school administration demonstrates its leadership and the governing board approves the process as part of the school's educational project and reports on its implementation in the annual report it files with the school board.

The Conseil stresses the fact that school administrations will be able to play this new role, one that is added to all the new tasks assigned to schools by the reform, only if all the players in the school system, depending on their various responsibilities, give them adequate support. It also highlights the importance for school administrations of using participatory management methods based on a shared understanding of the meaning of the change, on effective mechanisms for discussion and on the autonomy of the cycle team.

To support teachers and school principals as they make the change, the Conseil calls on the Minister of Education, the school boards, the unions and the governing boards to facilitate the implementation of cycles of instruction in Québec's elementary schools. It also gives the various players in the school system suggestions for action, in order to help them manage the change. The Conseil is aware that the implementation of cycle-based instruction can be seen as an important component and an indicator, even a key indicator, of the success of the implementation of the reform in elementary schools.

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