

Quality of Continuing Education: a Quebec Example in Teacher Education

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Abstract

Confronted with the diverse problems that university continuing education is facing, our presentation focuses on the continuing education of primary and secondary school teachers which indeed, is experiencing two problems: a decrease in government funding, and a decline in numbers, for university continuing education seems irrelevant for teachers who register in it. We choose to broach the question of the quality of higher education by dealing precisely with its relevance, a criterion which appears to be ahead of quality. Our reflection, encouraged by a recent government programme aimed at supporting the development of higher education for teaching personnel, leads us to consider partnership between the school environment and the university at three levels as being essential for the attainment of the relevance sought. A promising path is situated in teacher education teams regrouping university professors and professional personnel in the school environment, thus contributing towards solving the funding problems.

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The University of Sherbrooke, following the example of several other Quebec and Canadian universities, proceeded during recent years towards a “quality” shift. Indeed, in 2008, it endowed itself with a framework policy on the quality of higher education which led to clarify the educational aims of all programmes, baccalaureate (1st cycle), master’s (2nd cycle), and doctoral (3rd cycle). They were to orient the development of new programmes and the revision of those it dispenses. Despite efforts consented to for almost a decade, efforts that this policy bears witness to, the question of quality is posed in a particular way in the case of some programmes. We shall deal more specifically here with the continuing education of primary and secondary school teachers. Our presentation, based on teaching practices at the Faculty of Education, is registered in the axis of “Quality of teaching at the institutional level”, focusing on the “Organizational changes induced by involvement in quality teaching projects”. We shall first present the context concerning the education of teaching personnel in Quebec, and then expose some elements of the

problem experienced at the Faculty of Education of our institution. Lastly, we shall present paths likely to orient the organization of university continuing education for primary and secondary school teachers, credited by the Faculty.

1. The case of education of primary and secondary school teachers in Quebec

In Canada, the preservice education of teachers is the concern of each of the provinces. In Quebec, universities have been responsible for the preservice education of teachers since 1964. Parallel to the reform of the Quebec school system, since 2000, preservice education of teachers has undergone multiple revisions, notably at preschool, primary and high school levels. In 2001, the Ministry of Education of Quebec (MEQ) (Government of Quebec, 2001) published a profile of 12 professional competencies, which all Quebec teacher education programmes at preschool, primary and high school levels must now rely upon.

The profile of competencies proposed by the MEQ in this movement of professionalization of teaching focuses on one competency, particularly important for the development of a professionalism linked to continuing learning : “ To engage oneself in an individual and collective process of professional development “ (Government of Quebec, 2001b, p. 125).

Thus, this profile of competencies, which led to the reform of preservice teacher education programmes, reaffirms the need for continuing education, the essential commitment of teaching personnel, and even specifies the competencies to be acquired, in close linkage with professional development throughout the career.

However, despite the importance of the continuing education of teaching personnel, and the prescriptive character of this framework, continuing education in the university environment is confronted with difficulties. If several authors deplore its ineffectiveness (Cohen & Hill, 2000), for our part, we shall turn our attention more particularly here to the relevance of these programmes as perceived by the teaching personnel, a problem which appears as important as that of effectiveness.

2. The problem of the continuing education of teachers

The statutory framework in which the preservice education of teachers is inscribed in Quebec states several conditions in terms of professionalism which should lead towards the pursuit of a university continuing education programme.

Nevertheless, as the continuing education plan developed at the Faculty of Education of our university (Beauchesne, 2009¹) indicates, it is a decline in numbers of students in 2nd cycle programmes that is observed, notably because of the low interest of in-service teachers for accredited education seen as too demanding, and it is the relevance of this education as they perceive it, that they call into question.

This decline in numbers has, as a consequence, the slowing down of activities in some programmes, brought on because of the difficulty to gather a sufficient number of persons to form groups, and even the closing of programmes. This decline in numbers is all the more problematic for the university environment which, in a parallel fashion, has suffered a decrease in government grants for the 2nd cycle programmes (a decline of 30% since 2006). Lastly, the analysis of the situation of higher education also illuminates the fact that rules and management modalities of university programmes are revealed as being little adapted to the particularities of the adult student body that must reconcile work with studies and family.

Moreover, these observations must be examined in the light of an evolution of the teaching task and the working agreements that govern it. For example, for over fifteen years, the collective agreement governing the work of Quebec teachers has no longer been providing an increase in salary for additional years of scholarship obtained, as was previously the case.

3. A government solution : a new funding programme supporting continuing education

Faced with difficulties related to continuing education programmes met by many faculties of education in Quebec, the Ministry of Education, in March of 2009, launched a major funding programme aimed at the conception, deployment, and assessment of structuring university continuing education programmes in partnership with the school environment - projects leading, for example, to transferable models or to lasting education projects. Thus, this funding programme constitutes a powerful lever to improve the quality of continuing education for teachers, dispensed by the University.

This programme, therefore, naturally leads towards exploiting relations between school and university environments that have increased over the course of recent years, mainly for practicum purposes during pre-service teacher education, and for research needs.

Relations between researchers and environments of practice have been encouraged during recent years by methods fostering partnership, such as action-research and collaborative research. In

¹ Unpublished rapport.

addition, during the same period of time, there were numerous incentives so that activities for the transfer of knowledge, viewed as the final step in the research cycle, could be realized by researchers.

Since the launching of the government funding programme, i.e. only five months ago, some 10 continuing education projects have emerged. However, these first actions to submit projects are already giving rise to new challenges. The main one lies in a change of posture and framework. Professors, encouraged by the relations they entertain with the environments of practice in a context of research, develop continuing education projects by referring implicitly to a framework which is that of research, namely individual or team activities where their freedom as a researcher is much wider, by respecting a set of institutional rules linked to research. Hence, the framework governing continuing education projects is of another nature. These projects must be inscribed in institutional programmes in accordance with the rules of funding. If the research projects are mainly linked to the professor responsible for submitting them, continuing education projects have a faculty framework: they therefore cannot be multiplied *ad infinitum*, as is the case for research projects. This change in posture and framework therefore requires an agreement and coordination within the university institution, while working in partnership with the environments of practice as prescribed by the government, in order to assure the relevance of the continuing teacher education programmes being developed. The section that follows takes into consideration these elements of the problem.

4. Paths for relevant university continuing education programmes

In an organizational perspective, the following section proposes paths likely to foster the development of university continuing education programmes of quality by first emphasizing their relevance.

4.1 Continuing education supported by research

Several studies have focused on the characteristics of effective continuing education programmes, meaning to say those that lead to a change in practice to improve pupil achievement. In the current proposal, we are relying on a study by Garet *et al.*, (2001) conducted in the United States with a national probability sample of 1,027 teachers that provides interesting information with regard to the relevance of teacher education. This study is also retained inasmuch as the results produced are in coherence with those presented by numerous authors². According to this study, professional development programmes that lead to changes in classroom

² See, as an example, the synthesis of Deaudelin, Brodeur & Dussault (2001)

practice are those that include three core features. These programmes focus on pedagogical content knowledges (Schulman, 1987) and promote opportunities for active learning, such as the possibility of observing colleagues and being observed, the planning of learning activities, assessing pupils' work, and discussing orally and in writing. A 3rd core feature concerns the coherence of continuing education activities. These activities are considered coherent if:

- they build on other learning activities that teachers have already participated in;
- they are aligned with national and regional standards with regard to content and pedagogy;
- they foster ongoing communication with other teachers who are trying to change their teaching in similar ways.

This 3rd feature takes on a great deal of importance with regard to our reflection on the relevance of activities, for it also concerns the organization of continuing education and the manner in which it inscribes itself in the context of teachers participating in it. Moreover, to these core features, structural ones are added. The most positive effects are associated with activities pertaining to duration that include a more significant number of hours of education.

These characteristics of effective continuing teacher education programmes provide us with a strong sense of awareness of the importance of partnership.

4.2 A need for partnership

The close links between university continuing education activities and the professional activities of teachers are good indicators of the need for partnership between the teacher education environment and the environment of practice: education during work-time, teacher education in the work-place (in the environment of practice), as well as the concern for coherence previously mentioned, require a close partnership. For us, this partnership must be situated at three levels, namely at the macro, meso and micro level, registered in different temporal frameworks (see table below).

At the macro level, partnership is at the institutional level, namely between the University and the Ministry of Education, in order to sustain the development and maintenance of continuing education programmes in the environment of practice: the current funding programme constitutes a good example in this sense. It goes without saying that this partnership is inscribed in the long term and takes place prior to teacher education, notably for the development of programmes and policies, and after teacher education, for their revision.

At the meso level, organization at a more local level is taken into consideration: at the level of the Faculty as well as that of the school and of the school board. What is of concern here is to reaffirm the mission of the Faculty of Education with regard to the continuing education of teaching personnel as well as to upgrade the importance as professor-researcher to engage in it. In

addition, the Faculty has a role of information and coordination. Enlightened by the need for this change in posture evoked previously, the Faculty must assure that professors approach the development of continuing education projects and focus well on education projects, supported by appropriate frameworks. It should also be vigilant in coordinating activities being developed, so that the offer by the Faculty remains realistic on both the organizational and financial plans, a point that we shall touch upon in the conclusion. For the school board and the school, it is important to establish rules that sustain the participation of the teaching personnel in university continuing education, that upgrade it through their organizational culture and provide modalities in the work schedule that facilitate the realization of teacher education, strictly speaking. The school and the school board should also coordinate actions of analysis of needs to enlighten the university on the development of continuing teacher education programmes. As for the temporal framework, this partnership inscribes itself in the medium term, by counting more on actions taken prior to the implementation of the programme.

The micro level refers to the partnership between the professor and the educator in the environment of practice, who is the professional responsible for teacher education in the work-place. It is assuredly the level that presents the most important challenge: it is from this partnership that innovative teacher education modalities may emerge, judiciously taking advantage of the competencies of persons from each of the environments, realizing themselves in mixed teacher education teams (the university environment and the environment of practice).

	University environment	Environment of practice
Macro	University leaders Policy of continuing education that allows all the flexibility required	Ministry of Education leaders Programme sustaining the development of continuing education programmes
Meso	Faculty leaders and professors Policy and regulation allowing to adequately recognize continuing education in the school environment (upgrading) Agreement of all professors-researchers leading to some continuing education faculty programmes	School and school board leaders Identification of some teacher education targets Support for the school team
Micro	Professor-researcher Posture of professor-researcher taking advantage of knowledges emanating from research Openness with regard to activities taking place in the environment of practice	Professional in the environment of practice Openness to teacher education relying on research results

↔ Partnership

5. To conclude: the inevitable question of funding

Confronted with diverse problems that university continuing education has to face, we presented a reflection focusing on the continuing education of teaching personnel. We chose to approach the question of quality of teacher education by dealing with its relevance, a criterion

which appears ahead of quality. Our reflection has led us to consider a partnership at three levels as essential to attain the relevance we are looking for. Other than this effect of relevance, it also contributes towards solving funding problems.

Indeed, in an organizational perspective, a reflection on the continuing education of teaching personnel in a university environment cannot occult the question of funding. In Quebec, funding is essentially established in accordance with the number of students registered on the basis of a student following 450 hours of courses per year. This type of education is said to be credited, which means that universities receive funding for it, and students, a diploma. Needless to say, university continuing education, within a non-credited framework, should be supported by the school environment that the teaching personnel come from.

Yet, if the partnership proposed earlier at the meso and micro levels already contributes positively towards an increased relevance of university continuing education, the teacher education teams proposed at the micro level allow for an alliance of the financial resources of the University, by means of the teacher education credited, with those that the school environment would necessarily inject into the continuing education of its teaching personnel.

This financial partnership therefore constitutes a path of solution for the dual decline evoked in the problem, a decline in numbers of students and a decrease in funding. It therefore greatly contributes towards the feasibility of university continuing education of teaching personnel.

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