



# WHAT IS "ACCEPTABLE"?

Guidelines used by the  
Protestant Committee in approving  
teaching materials from moral and  
religious points of view

E3S9  
C66  
Q4  
1976  
A  
QCSE

Superior Council of Education  
Protestant Committee

Québec, 1976



E3S9

C66

Q4

1976

H

QCCE

# 994571

Doc. 1275

Protestant Committee  
Superior Council of Education

## WHAT IS "ACCEPTABLE"?

Guidelines used by the Protestant Committee  
in approving materials from moral  
and religious points of view



## BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE DU QUÉBEC

### Éléments de catalogage avant publication

Québec (Province) Conseil supérieur de l'éducation. Comité protestant.

What is «acceptable»? : Guidelines used by the Protestant Committee in approving materials from moral and religious points of view / Protestant Committee, Superior Council of Education. — Québec, Service général des communications, ministère de l'Éducation,

Publié séparément en français sous le titre: Que veut dire «acceptable»? : Critères utilisés par le Comité protestant pour l'approbation du matériel éducatif.

1. Éducation sexuelle — Québec (Province). I. Titre. II. Guidelines used by the Protestant Committee in approving materials from moral and religious points of view. E3S9A2A.

# WHAT IS “ACCEPTABLE”?

## 1. Purpose

The Education Act and The Superior Council Act confer on the confessional committees of the Council the duty and authority “to approve from the point of view of religion and morals the curricula, textbooks and teaching material” in their respective confessional educational institutions. The present guidelines are published by the Protestant Committee to inform parents, teachers, education administrators and publishers regarding the criteria used by the Committee in approving teaching instruments. It is hoped thereby to promote better understanding and communication within the approval process.

## 2. School and society

Three factors distinguish the school from society in general, with regard to audio-visual and printed material:

- The school is supported by public funds and has legal responsibilities as substitute parent conferred on it by the public;
- Attendance is compulsory, making the school population, to varying degrees, a captive audience;
- The Protestant school is religiously and morally pluralistic, which increases the possibility of conscientious objection to teaching instruments with its attendant administrative problems. Furthermore, “Not to pay sufficient regard to, say, the deeply held religious views of some members of the audience implies a lack of regard for them as individuals.”<sup>1</sup>

By contrast with the school, society at large uses commercial audio-visual and printed material as a free option to which one can apply the dictum “buyer beware”. It follows that the moral and religious norms for school teaching materials must be more stringent than those for similar materials outside the school.

1. “Taste and Standards in BBC Programmes” Study, 1973



### 3. Mud puddles

It may be objected that to impose different standards on schools than on society is unrealistic or hypocritical — children today are inevitably aware of the “seamier” side of life, and the school cannot maintain a ghetto stance toward it. In reply, one must distinguish between awareness and approval, and between various levels of awareness as a function of parental and social conditioning. Also, to use the “mud puddle” analogy — children may be splashed with mud on the streets or in school; they may even play in the mud in or out of school, but this does not justify their being sprinkled with mud by the staff in the classroom, however artfully concocted the mud may be. This of course begs the question of what is mud, but the principle is clear enough.

## 4. Where's the mud?

The operative words of the Protestant Committee's mandate are "religious and moral", which cover the spiritual and social nature of man. Certain critical areas can be identified which are concerned primarily with human relationships — those of individuals or groups. Most current problems of acceptability have to do with sex, violence, religious or group prejudice — in fact with problems of "values".



## 5. Yes, but . . .

The guidelines at the end of this paper are very brief, and require interpretation and adaptation. The present section indicates some of the modifying factors which are applied.

### **5.1 Optionality**

Various levels of optionality exist in school activities. For example, a film may be offered by the ciné-club after school hours, or it may be shown in a regular literature class. A book may be prescribed reading for all students, or it may be one of a list for optional reading or project resource material. A broader standard can be accepted in optional uses than in compulsory ones. In such cases, approval presumes that the school recognizes its legal status of substitute parent and hence its responsibility toward the moral character of all school activities.

### **5.2 Sophistication**

There are some teaching materials whose acceptability depends on the age and cultural development of the students for whom it is used. The majority of students should not *first* learn of some area of human misconduct through a school text or AV. Also certain texts or AV portraying rather contrived moral situations, which may stimulate useful moral thinking in senior students, would only confuse or alienate younger ones.

### **5.3 Attitude**

Subliminal messages are transmitted by other media than commercial TV. Occasionally a book or film may transmit, unexplicitly but nonetheless effectively, an attitude of intolerance toward groups having different practices, beliefs, colour or culture. An example is the Committee's recent rejection of a book which seemed to denigrate certain uncivilized or unsanitary customs of an African tribe with little explanation of their origin or motivation. Documentary studies of religions, races, and cultures should be chosen for their insight and for the understanding they convey.

#### **5.4. Identification and Suspense**

There is good psychological evidence that these two factors greatly affect the impact of portrayals of violent or otherwise improper conduct. Children can accept seeing the coyote, in pursuit of the roadrunner, being squashed by a boulder; these same children may be traumatized by the sight or description of a man with a knife sneaking up on a child. Thus implicit references to criminal acts or sexual misbehaviour are preferable to explicit ones with which the student may identify.

#### **5.5 Purpose and Message**

The acceptability of critical subject matter in a teaching instrument often depends on the overall purpose or message of the presentation. One could accept, for example, very "nasty" scenes or language in a novel or in a documentary study of drugs or juvenile delinquency, provided its overall purpose was to show the value of different, better standards. The grisly details of a Nazi death camp might be justifiably portrayed in a film on tolerance. Acceptance thus depends on the essentiality of the scene in question to the overall purpose of the document. The gratuitous insertion of ghastly or scabrous scenes in commercial films, ostensibly for realism, but really for publicity is familiar.

Occasionally one encounters the converse situation — a teaching instrument, particularly a novel, whose scenes are fairly unobjectionable but whose overall message is such as to present a serious distortion of values. A novel was rejected on these grounds which seemed to idolize sordid commercialism and vengeance-seeking, while ridiculing the daily routine of the ordinary home. Another was similarly rejected because it deliberately encouraged dubious moral conclusions on the basis of a highly contrived moral situation.

### **5.6 Moral and Spiritual Context**

Occasionally the acceptability of teaching material depends on the context in which it is presented. For example, a film or text on premarital or deviant sexual relations would be unacceptable unless, within or with such material, the student is encouraged to consider the open moral and ultimate questions which underly human behaviour, and to discuss them in class. Purely "clinical" presentations are often an incitation to the types of conduct they portray. Furthermore, they often constitute indoctrination with the message that moral or spiritual factors are irrelevant or expendable.

### **5.7 Artistic Quality**

Clearly the name of a famous author/producer does not guarantee acceptance. It is believed that artistic quality should be decidedly secondary to M and R factors, since it is always possible to find pedagogically similar materials which combine both M and R acceptability and artistic excellence.

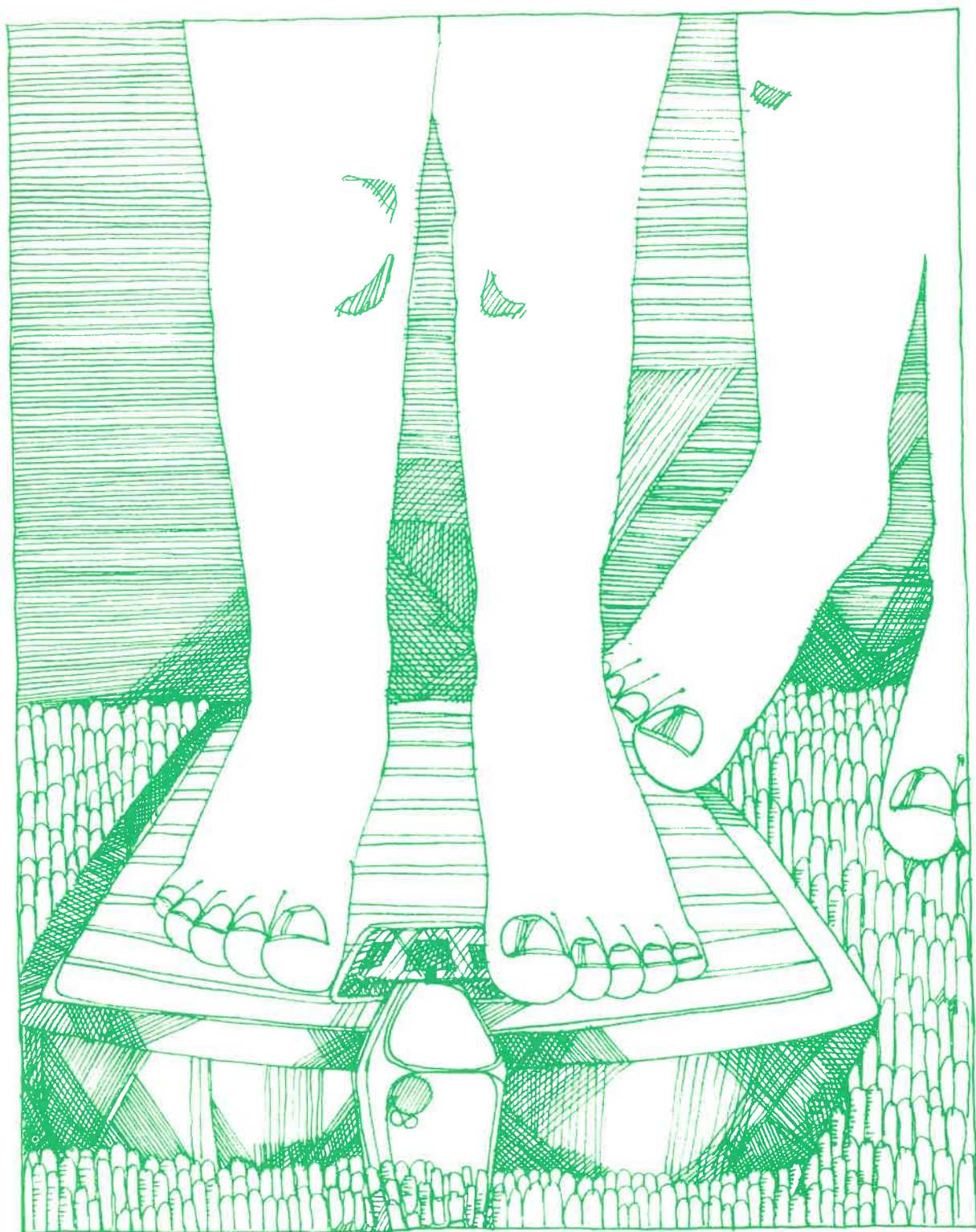
### **5.8 Balanced Use of Data**

This question arises in documentary or historical works. As the BBC study cited in section 2 put it, "there is a form of inaccuracy which lies in over-inflating an item of relative unimportance". Such unbalanced emphasis or selection of data is evident in the "historical" works of certain political writers and in editorials of political newspapers.

Clearly, all historical reporting is subjective. However the Committee may reject an historical or documentary work on moral grounds where there appears to be clear evidence of deliberate intention to distort the facts, *and* where such distortions involve serious offence to or indoctrination by any group or individual.

Another valid means of achieving a balanced presentation at the classroom level is to study two documents biased in opposite directions, for example, the Communist Manifesto versus the Case for Capitalism. For this reason the Committee's refusals on this point are very infrequent.





### **5.9 Audio-visual Sources**

One can often judge acceptability of an AV by its source, since the output of certain firms or organizations is uniformly acceptable. This is true of most educational films produced by commercial companies to portray uses of their products or for public relations purposes. One might cite films by Bell Canada or Shell Oil (and many others). Certain companies such as Novalis and Moreland-Latchford have produced AV materials specifically for M and R courses, which are acceptable. Children's films by government agencies such as National Film Board or various Ministries are likewise recommendable.

## 6. Choose!

### 6.1 Positive Guidelines

Teaching instruments should be chosen to encourage the following positive M and R values:

- a) Growth in knowledge and appreciation of the diverse moral and religious traditions of mankind.
- b) Development of autonomous personal moral standards based on a growing understanding of the social and ethical factors involved.
- c) Free and serious consideration of ultimate questions of human spirituality and destiny, both for oneself and for society.

### 6.2 Negative Guidelines

These are functionally more applicable than the positive ones, since the rejection rate of materials submitted to the Committee is less than two percent.

- a) Explicit portrayal of various types of human misbehaviour without apparent useful purpose, especially where such behaviour is likely to be unfamiliar to the majority of students at the class/age level concerned.
- b) Material likely to be offensive to, or create prejudice toward, racial, cultural or religious groups.
- c) Material which seeks to indoctrinate students with specific racial, cultural, or religious views.
- d) Extensive and apparently intentional distortion of factual data creating offense, prejudice or indoctrination. With regard to teaching materials for courses in morals or religion, any major distortion of fact justifies refusal.
- e) Advocacy of systems of values judged to be harmful to the normal development of students at the class/age levels concerned.
- f) Omission of moral and spiritual considerations from studies of human behaviour where such questions would normally arise, particularly where such omission could be construed as implying that these questions are unimportant.

It is evident that many teaching instruments are in fact neutral toward both the positive and negative criteria given above, and that much depends on the classroom atmosphere and the teacher's personal example.

It is also evident that the above criteria are full of subjective terminology. This is inevitable, since value judgements are intrinsic to the approval process. Ultimately, the only protection against misuse of this process lies in the broad representativity of the membership of the Protestant Committee and in the fundamental good sense of the milieu it seeks to serve.





CONSEIL SUPÉRIEUR DE L'ÉDUCATION



QCSE003684