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PROGRESSIVE RHETORIC AND CURRICULUM

**CONTESTED VISIONS OF PUBLIC EDUCATION
IN INTERWAR ONTARIO**

Theodore Michael Christou



Progressive Rhetoric and Curriculum

Progressive Rhetoric and Curriculum: Contested Visions of Public Education in Interwar Ontario considers the ways that progressivist ideas and rhetoric shaped early curriculum and structural changes to Ontario's public schools. Through a series of case studies, conceptual analyses, and personal reflections from the field, this volume shows how post-WWI era debates around progressive education were firmly situated within political, economic, social, and intellectual evolutions in the province and beyond. By framing contemporary educational rhetoric in light of historical concepts and arguments, *Progressive Rhetoric* adds to the ongoing historical examination of the meaning of progressive education in the modern age.

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Progressive Rhetoric and Curriculum

Contested Visions of Public Education in Interwar Ontario

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It is, then, the responsibility of educators of every grade and rank, from the primary school to the university, to acquaint themselves with the facts of the present day world, and if possible, to determine a philosophy adequate for the construction of that new society which may emerge from the present chaos.

Joseph McCulley, "Education in a Changing Society,"
The Canadian School Journal (January, 1932), p. 60



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It is a privilege to devote a life to educational pursuits. I am hopeful that this is of use to students and researchers wondering how things ended up as they have and imagining how they might be.

Αγαπήσω σε, Κύριε, ἡ ἰσχὺς μου. Κύριος στερέωμά μου καὶ καταφυγή μου καὶ
ρύστης μου. Ὁ Θεός μου βοηθός μου, ἐλπιδὴ ἐπ' αὐτόν, ὑπερασπιστής μου καὶ κέρας
σωτηρίας μου καὶ ἀντιλήπτωρ μου.



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Introduction

Who Is Not a Progressive Reformer, Anyway?

The meaning of progressive education, as the term is used in recent educational writings, is not easy to define. It is in the nature of the word that the types of educational activity to which it is applied should continually vary.¹

Progressive education as a historical subject evokes Meno's paradox.² In Plato's celebrated dialogue, *Meno*, the title character approaches Socrates and asks him a series of questions regarding virtue. Can it be taught? If it cannot be taught, can it be acquired by practice? If neither, is it an aspect of human nature inherent to us? Socrates, being Socrates, does not answer any of the three questions and, instead, engages Meno with a series of challenges of his own devise. First, he challenges his young interlocutor to define virtue. Meno responds by listing a series of virtues appropriate for men, women, and children. Socrates balks at the response. It is as if I asked you to define the nature of a bee and, instead, you listed the various types of bees that exist, chides the philosopher. Socrates persists in systematically unraveling the young man's a priori assumptions and presumptions regarding the subject at hand, virtue. The standard fare for Plato's dialogues, in other words.

Meno is flummoxed as he confronts a dilemma. Socrates believes that he knows nothing, so he questions everything. Even if Meno is able to define virtue accurately, Socrates will still question this definition. Herein lies the paradox: if one knows the answer to a question, there is no need to ask. If one does not know the answer to a question, and if one questions everything, the answer will never be wholly recognized as it will be perpetually subjected to inquiry. Knowledge is always partial, at best, or intermediary.

Progressive education, then, is something akin to virtue (which is not to say that it is virtuous). We have tried to define it. We have framed it historically and, somewhat more begrudgingly, contemporaneously, we have projected it into the future, normatively imagining the world to come. We have, like Meno, listed its types and its kinds. Still, we wrestle with its very nature.

Previously, I have argued that progressive education could be understood in terms of three core beliefs: a) the individual student is more important than

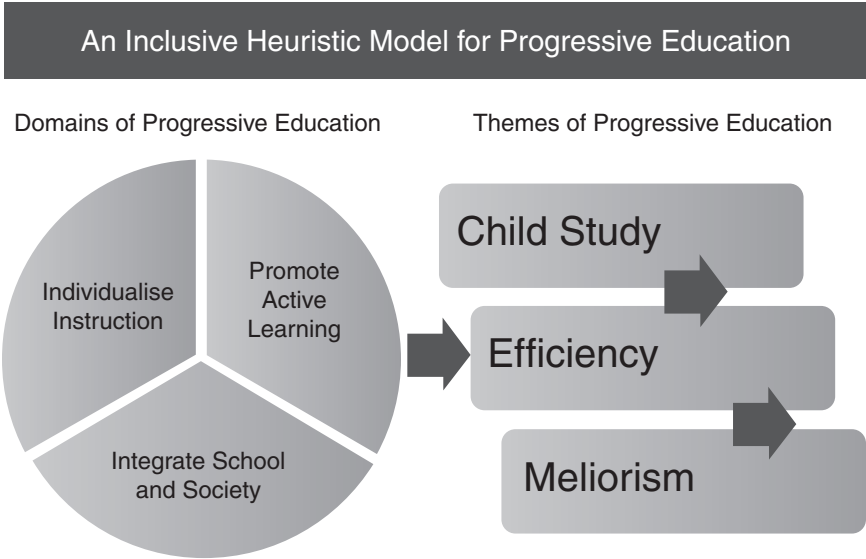
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any other factor; b) learning is an active process; and c) schools ought to reflect contemporary society. This definition followed from John Dewey's critique of progressives, who he cautioned not to define themselves merely in opposition.³ Tell us who you are, not who you aren't, Dewey stated. Examining educational journals and various other historical sources within the province of Ontario, I found that progressives did a lot of telling others and themselves what they disliked. They railed against the traditional curriculum and subject matter that was taught to all students regardless of who they were and what they wanted. They bemoaned the seemingly passive forms of learning that involved reading, memorizing, and regurgitating responses on tests and uniform examinations. They grumbled that society had changed and that schools remained fixed in the same epoch in which they had been established. These three complaints led to my own, tripartite definition, which restated in positive terms the concerns of Ontario's progressivists.

I termed the three core beliefs *domains* to signify that these were the common ground that all progressives treaded. Distinct from these domains were three *themes*: a) child study/developmental psychology; b) social efficiency; and c) social meliorism. These interests were borrowed from Herbert Kliebard's seminal work, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum*.⁴ Kliebard, seeing how historians and educationists continued to wrestle with the subject of what *progressive* meant and means, decided that the term itself was useless and troublesome. Instead, he argued that there were competing interests, each with their own set of protagonists and perspectives, vying for control over the curriculum, which he represented using the metaphor of a giant battlefield.

Enthralled with Kliebard's work, I set out to test his model on the Canadian context, concentrating on my home province of Ontario. What I found, was that these interest groups, while real, were all merely themes of educational progressivism. They were akin to the various *types* of virtues that Meno listed off when he struggled to understand Socrates' request for a definition of virtue. All progressives believed that education had to be, as noted above, focused on the individual, active in its implementation, and nested in contemporary life. Yet, there was no consensus regarding what this actually meant. Thus, I concentrated on the three domains of progressivist education while demonstrating how each of the three interests variously understood or interpreted what it meant to be progressive. As a model, this approach was inclusive of common beliefs as well as disputed perceptions.

I was fairly certain that I had solved the problem of progressive education, at least within the context under examination. Then, whilst on sabbatical from my work at Queen's University, I decided to tackle the Herculean task of making sense of my filing cabinets. The state of these was—and, sadly, remains—horrendous, crammed to the extent that there was no room for the odd piece of correspondence or thank you card to fit. I uncovered a series of stuffed, hanging folders titled *The School* and *The Canadian School Journal*.



These were the two primary sources used extensively in my previous study, both professional journals published throughout the interwar period in Ontario during the school year (September to June). The photocopied pages were dog eared, scribbled upon, highlighted, and dressed with neon sticky notes. Flipping through the sources, I noted that I had gathered a great deal more data than I had used. This is ever the case, as all historians and scholars know too well. I should do something with this one day, I thought.

More recently, preparing to teach a doctoral course titled *Contemporary Curriculum Theory*, I began the beguiling task of developing a reading list. This task, obviously, involves a great deal of reading. I began with Plato, because there is nothing so contemporary as classical philosophy. When I reached the *Meno*, I was dumbfounded.

Back to my filing cabinet. Back to *The School*. Back to *The Canadian School Journal*. Back to interwar Ontario. Back to progressive education. This time, I have toppled the structure that framed my 2012 work. Rather than begin with the common domains of progressivist thinking, I begin with the themes—those interest groups that interpret and define the terrain. I think about progressivism writ large more broadly, and I consider progressivist ideas as they are framed today within the popular parlance of the twenty-first century.

Once again, I situate myself as a former public school teacher, who in the midst of my career in Canada's largest school board, needed historical help to make sense of real problems of instruction. I was awash in novelty. Throughout my first year of teaching, many things did appear new and

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novel. But by my third year I began to have serious doubts. How much of what was touted with much fanfare by educationists was just old wine in new skins? Was I, in the microcosm of a third-grade classroom, the product of an evolving and improving system of schooling? Were we, teachers and educationists, regressing, progressing, or doing nothing of the sort. Even if I were to assume the progress part of this equation, I could not see the direction in which this progress proceeded. I heard a curmudgeon tell me that he had seen it all before, and was not interested in seeing it anew, once more. Alfred North Whitehead famously demarked that history was a footnote to Plato, signifying his indebtedness to the past. Cantankerously, I suppose, he could have told us to stick our heads in the sand instead, since naught was new and our intimations of progress in scholarship were frail.

I had completed a 2-year teacher education program at a time when such programs were 8 months long and, not once, did I encounter a course in the history or in the philosophy of education.⁵ Why not? I asked this at the time and I have asked it again in retrospect, having received no answer. Yet this question, which began burrowing in me as a graduate student, thoroughly harassed me as a teacher with tenure and all the security for which I could ask. I turned to history. And, again, I turn to the theme of progressive education as a force that transformed public schooling in Ontario and as a remarkably underexplored subject considering our proclivity for pendulums and for the swinging between modernity and tradition in Canadian educational thought.

“Education,” Joel Spring noted, “like democracy, is something everyone in America says they support, but exactly what they mean by education is never clearly stated.”⁶ Historically, the meanings of progressive education—of schooling writ large, we might say—are just as problematic. While the two World Wars represent historical breaking points that dramatically altered the socio-political character of the context examined here, the Great Depression of the 1930s, which nurtured the belief that educational reform could bring about economic and social change, features rather largely.⁷ What is more, by the early 1930s, the dominant educational discourse in all the provinces was beginning to be influenced by progressive ideas of democracy and education.⁸ By the end of the First World War, the social and economic effects of a sudden, dramatic increase in immigration and urbanization had taken hold across Canada. The Second World War provoked great change across the country, influencing notions of citizenship and the role of education in shaping a polity.⁹

Progressive education, because it embraces multiple, often contradictory, movements, has been difficult to define clearly. The various manifestations of progressive education are bound together by the oppositional stance that they take to traditional and to conservative pedagogical practices, including rote memorization of academic content that is neither differentiated nor explicitly related to the actual lives or future ambitions of students.¹⁰ I have remained particularly interested in the discourses surrounding the different manifestations of progressive education. Historically, there has been a gap between expressed aims or objectives and actual policy changes and

classroom practice.¹¹ Various historians have used that reality to disregard the language surrounding educational affairs and concentrate on schooling as experienced and as enacted. I, conversely, focus not on policy and practice, but on the rhetoric of schooling, which shapes our popular imaginary. In many instances, John Dewey hides as a specter, which is relatively commonplace when we imagine the landscape of twentieth-century educational reform.¹²

I look here at the Canadian province of Ontario, yet it is important to acknowledge the multifaceted and international scope of progressive education. As a movement, it is tied to a larger wave of progressivism sweeping across society in the final decades of the nineteenth century and in the first half of the twentieth century.¹³ Progressive education, then, is an idea imported into the Ontario context. It is in no way autochthonous to this space. Yet, its own development, trajectory, and relentless pendulum swinging is a case in point.

Progressivism and Progressive Education

What does progressivism writ-large mean in relation to the Canadian context? What was the *progressive era*? James T. Kloppenberg represents progressivism as a “body of ideas cut loose from its moorings in the liberal tradition.”¹⁴ This entailed the renouncing of “atomistic empiricism, psychological hedonism, and utilitarian ethics” along with greedy individualism.¹⁵ Progressive visions of a welfare state, Kloppenberg argues, were intimately linked to the conception of a socialized individual “whose values are shaped by personal choices and cultural conditions.”¹⁶

So-called progressives were not of one sort. New Liberalism, which was influenced by evolutionary theory, Social Darwinism, and the unclenching of religious authority, was not the only impetus for the rise of progressivist thought.¹⁷ This was not an entirely secular movement, despite its Darwinian tones. Bruno-Jofré analyzed how social gospelers embraced progressive education and, in part, John Dewey’s pedagogical themes to develop their educational conceptions.¹⁸ She demonstrated that the confluence of the social gospel and progressive educational thought nourished regenerative and redemptionist views of education that were moved to the missionary realm.¹⁹ Bruno-Jofré’s work rejuvenated themes explored by an influential American religious educator and a follower of Dewey, George Coe. Coe, whose work was used in both U.S. and Canadian seminaries, integrated Deweyan educational theory with themes that are related to the social gospel movement.²⁰ Daniel Tröhler, examining the linkages between Dewey’s pragmatism and the Protestant mentality, argued that the provocations of modernity were negotiated in terms that were not entirely secular.²¹ The social gospel, also preoccupied with the notion of a socialized individual, “sought to apply the Christian message of salvation to society as well as to the individual in an urban, industrial age.”²²

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The picture that emerges of the progressive period is one “populated by hybrid discourses” constellated and interacting in multiple spaces.²³ Dewey, a popular, although not imaginary, figurehead of the progressive era in education, put forward a theory of education that could deal with the devastation wrought upon society by industrial capitalism.²⁴ His seminal influence on pedagogy can, in large measure, be attributed to his theories’ ability to *encompass the terrific diversity* of the progressive movement. Dewey’s ideas, consequently, appealed to and were adopted by many groups, enabling their interaction with multiple and often divergent interests, contexts, and motivations.²⁵ Interpretations of Deweyan educational theory, then, like interpretations of progressivism writ large, were reformulated, reframed, and reconstructed continuously as they are mediating between values of modernity and of tradition.”²⁶

The largely reconstructionist and regenerative tides in education were not unilaterally modernist or, even, progressive. This is because the very general sense of modernity implied more than the “replacement of Victorian society—agrarian, religious, adhering to a rigid set of philosophical and moral codes—with the modern age: industrial, secular, and anti-philosophical.”²⁷ Modernization, encompassing socio-economic, educational, and political reforms, encompassed ideological and philosophical changes. These represented a value system “more attuned to a secular and materialist society. It involves the subsuming of the moral and ‘humane’ values of former times and the emergence of new attitudes and values consistent with an industrial, technological and consumer society.”²⁸ Bluntly put, the old order and traditions of education did not roll over and die. Its critiques of modernity, while evident in the interwar period, become increasingly pronounced and prominent in the decades following the Second World War.²⁹

Like the progressives, the anti-modernists, anti-progressives, and humanists were not a monolithic entity. Principally, they were academics and public intellectuals, “devoted to their individual intellectual specializations. As a result, they were eclectic and sometimes even haphazard in their considerations of the ramifications of modernity.”³⁰ So even as the tide of progress swept over and subsumed the traditional academic curriculum, the classics, and the canon, defenses of a liberal arts education steeped in the humanities opposed the swell of modernity. This opposition, largely representative of the classical or Arnoldian conception of education, was largely established and modeled in Ontario’s universities. In the words of A. B. McKillop, “the culture of utility gained a secure foothold in the institutions of higher education in the province . . . but it was not yet a dominant one.”³¹ As McKillop demonstrated, the humanities “remained the formal base of the scholarly pyramid.”³²

The sources reveal that here, amongst academics, raged the debates surrounding the necessity of Greek and Latin in the schools, as well as the content and place of Departmental examinations as prerequisites for university study. With respect to the elementary schools in Ontario, the sources reveal

an increasing humanist concentration on public and school libraries. Arguments for the inclusion of libraries in schools emphasize the significance of the classics, the canon of best books, and the enjoyment of life in leisure. A liberal education could still be pursued by the general public, with some degree of solitude and a modicum of free time to read and reflect, could still be pursued in the public libraries, which were championed even as the classics were in retreat within the school curricula.

The humanists, these advocates of a liberal education steeped in good literature, like the progressivists, were not of one sort. What seemed to bound them was a belief that progressive education led to rampant individualism, a decline in the mastery of content knowledge, disregard for authority and tradition—the decline of literary authority is not inextricable for authority as we might understand it on a larger scale—weakened family structure, disrespectful questioning of authority, a lack of discipline, and a decline in patriotism and respect for national icons.³³ This, juxtaposed with the rhetoric promoting progressive educational reform because it would save schools from conformity, bureaucracy, impersonal approaches to teaching and learning, and the oppressive demands of a rigidly academic curriculum represents quite a conundrum for historians. This conundrum is also particularly contemporary.

“On its educational side,” Herbert Kliebard explains, humanism—which he termed the educational lobby that challenged the various lobbies advocating for progressivist curriculum reforms—“has come to be associated with a set of subjects, a segment of the school curriculum, believed to have the power to stir the imagination, enhance the appreciation of beauty, and disclose motives that actuate human behaviour.”³⁴ This explanation appears to confirm John Dewey’s remark that “humanism is a portmanteau word.”³⁵ Kliebard interpreted this term as signifying a term that “packs together a variety of meanings,” drawing from the study of Latin and Greek, language, literature, and the arts.³⁶ Humanism in this context seemed as amorphous as progressivism.

Faculty Psychology and Mental Discipline

The underpinnings of the curriculum theory espoused by humanists lay in a belief that individuals had particular intellectual faculties, which could be exercised and disciplined through educational activity. Faculty psychology was based on the understanding that humans had “various faculties of the mind, such as memory, imagination, and reasoning.”³⁷ In a corresponding sense, mental discipline argued that “certain subjects of study had the power to invigorate the various faculties,” all of which needed to be harmoniously developed.³⁸ Different parts of the mind, like muscles in the body, required conditioning, testing, and stretching to build overall strength in reasoning.

The traditional curriculum, humanists argued, strengthened the mind. In the words of L. J. Crocker, this gave individuals “power to interpret our

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own society.”³⁹ “The chief emphasis, although not the only emphasis of the school should be on intellectual development,” posited Dr. R. B. Liddy, Professor of Psychology at the University of Western Ontario, “and we must continue to emphasize the fact that the primary scholastic function is intellectual education. W. H. Fyfe, Classicist and Principal of Queen’s University, put the matter boldly, noting that modern school reforms were: “Largely inspired by the false motive of producing factory-fodder.”⁴⁰ Fyfe argued that education that concerns itself primarily with directly training, rather than broadly educating, is myopic. As late as 1930, in a speech to incoming students, he noted “the function of a university . . . [was] to aid human beings in the growth of character, in the healthy development of all their faculties, physical, mental, moral, aesthetic, and spiritual.”⁴¹

As noted above, progressivist reforms challenged many of the structural aspects of schooling, transforming curricula, consolidating schools, loosening examination standards, reducing the emphasis upon textbooks, and introducing new subjects of study such as health and social studies. The development of auxiliary education, an antecedent to special education programs, which manifest an increased concern with mental (intelligence) testing, inclusion, and differentiated programs of instruction, further challenged the underpinning philosophy of faculty psychology.⁴² By the mid-1920s, mental testing was acknowledged as the most important factor in educational reform, altering the ways that administrators and educationists thought of the purposes of schooling with respect to individuals of differing abilities.⁴³

Yet faculty psychology had deep roots; the training of mental faculties persisted as an educational aim. Disciplines of study served, in an almost literal sense, as training ground for the various faculties of mind. The mind could, in an almost literal sense, be disciplined by the various disciplines of study. History, for instance, served a vital role in the curriculum, “developing the logical faculties,” as well as memory and imagination.⁴⁴

Further, humanists argued that school curricula had a seminal role to play in the preservation of the cultural heritage of Western civilization. As Herbert Kliebard notes, this conception took “its cue not from the vagaries of children’s interests, nor their spontaneous impulses, but from the great resources of civilization.”⁴⁵ In their 1947 text, *The Humanities in Canada*, Watson Kirkconnell and A.S.P. Woodhouse outlined a comprehensive vision of liberal education, which was one that related to every citizen.⁴⁶ The humanities were at the root of Western culture, and thus were relevant to all people within that culture. They were conceptualized as preserving the very best aspects of literary, linguistic, artistic, historical, religious, and philosophical tradition. The world was forever evolving, and these traditions were a firmament that steadied the mind and soul.

Greek and Latin, for example, were seminal influences on modern English language and literature. As A. B. McKillop demonstrates, scholars of the Classics and the Humanities such as University of Toronto Professor Maurice Hutton “viewed their students as the spiritual heirs of Greece and Rome

and sent them to examine the foundations of their common culture.”⁴⁷ In line with this, a *Group of Classical Graduates*, which was thought to include Maurice Hutton, expressed the following statement in a 1929 publication for which University of Toronto president Sir Robert Falconer wrote the foreword:

The fundamental unity of Greco-Roman culture is accepted as a starting-point. The Greeks are important as the discoverers of the main forms of European thought and expression; the Romans, as the first of a long series of European peoples whose lives have been enriched by the reception of Greek culture, and also as the architects of that institutional framework within which Greek culture was preserved and perpetuated; both together as the *fons et origo* of much that is still current and vital in the life of Europe and the West.⁴⁸

The traditional curriculum and its philosophical basis, in other words, were vital to a healthy, balanced, and enriching life. The Group of Classical Graduates thumbed their noses at critics who argued that the classical languages had to demonstrate their usefulness within a modern and progressive context of schooling: “utility simply consists in the fact that it provides a balanced development of the mind.”⁴⁹

E. D. MacPhee, a Psychologist at the University of Toronto, used the educational journal *The School* to argue that the traditional curriculum was rooted in the Enlightenment tradition, noting John Locke, whose

general educational theory has been described by the term ‘disciplinary.’ Locke conceived of education . . . as being properly discipline, whether of the body or mind. He was aided, in so far as mental factors go, by a ‘faculty’ psychology.⁵⁰

Mind, for example, was a term describing entities such as attention and memory. Each functioned more or less independently of the other, and each could be trained, or disciplined, with appropriate mental exercises. McPhee does not trace the idea of mental discipline to its actual roots in classical Greek and Roman ideas about exercise and discipline; these were derived in their own right from a way of thinking about physical exercise and the strengthening of bodies.

Fyfe corroborated the belief that classical ideas and sources were vital dimensions to education and schooling:

Without some knowledge of Greek and Roman history and literature, it is inevitably difficult to appreciate fully our own literature and our own history. Despite the distance in time and space, the influence of Athens and of Rome is still effective in our thought, our language, our legal and political institutions.⁵¹